

# CASE STUDY 8

## Ochre Aboriginal Art Gallery



### **INDUSTRY:** Arts

**THE PROJECT:** The project aimed to establish a social venture that would provide business and cultural promotion opportunities to local Indigenous women and their communities.

### **THE BACKGROUND:**

At the beginning of the 1990s, Jennifer undertook an extended trip to remote parts of north-west Australia. Prior to this, she had been actively involved in community development projects in Australia's capital, Canberra (see Bio for further details). For a long time, Jennifer had a compelling urge to travel to the Kimberley, in Western Australia.

Jennifer viewed situations she encountered with a strong social justice philosophy, so when she arrived in the Kimberley she was shocked to realise that the Aboriginal art market was seemingly only accessible to recognised male artists – the big dollar people – ones whose art was lucrative for the sellers. Women did not get a look in.

Jennifer did not act on that knowledge initially, aware that she could have got it wrong. It was not until she later returned to the Kimberley to attend an Aboriginal art conference that her suspicions were confirmed. There was only one female Aboriginal artist present at that conference, and Jennifer began to ask questions: Why had the women's artwork not been purchased by commercial buyers when their work was of a high quality? Why was there only one woman present at this conference? The answers to these questions were given as follows:

- the women's work was not profitable, as the men's work was easier to sell, and the women's work was not sought after
- the woman present at the conference had accompanied her husband, a known artist, as she accompanied him everywhere.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

The objectives of this project were to establish an Aboriginal art gallery in the Kimberley to be a venue for women to create artworks and for their art to be promoted, thus providing them with access to the market. The gallery would be a place that respectfully supported local Aboriginal women's development and cultural expression.

### **THE ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN:**

The first thing that needed to be done was to establish a relationship with the Indigenous elders (initially, the women elders) who the gallery would support. Jennifer also needed to ask for guidance as to who could act as an ongoing advisor to her to ensure that the development of the gallery was culturally appropriate and that it would provide the best outcomes for the people it was meant to support.

The outcome of this was that the elders took an active role in the development of the gallery. They also, in a sense, took ownership of it and decided to launch the gallery with a cultural celebration that they planned and delivered themselves. Including the elders in planning and activities to facilitate their objectives became a normal part of the gallery operation.

The gallery operated as a type of community agency whose purpose was to find ways to strengthen the women. It achieved this in a number of ways, including:

- finding funding for one of the women to attend the World Women's Conference in Beijing (a first for the community)
- working in partnership with the school to facilitate the elders coming to the art classes to teach the kids about their culture (this was as a result of the guidance provided by elders such as Queenie McKenzie)
- curating exhibitions that provided a platform for the women to speak, such as an exhibition that the community took to the International Year of the Family Conference in South Australia, where the elders performed a cultural celebration for the conference delegates.

The purpose of the Gallery was to be a social and cultural venture, which took the approach of questioning how people and culture could be strengthened through business. One of the most significant exhibitions emerged from a relationship facilitated by the Gallery, where the elders were invited into the school during the art classes, giving them a focussed opportunity to teach their young people about their stories and land. The elders had expressed their concern of how difficult it was to do that within the fraught community setting. This resulted in an exhibition 'Maintaining Family Tradition' during the International Year of the Family. Jennifer approached the National Conference Committee and strongly urged them to invite the Warmun families to bring their exhibition to the conference. The Conference Committee agreed, but would not fund it. The Gallery funded the travel and Warmun opened the conference with a moving cultural performance.

### CHALLENGES:

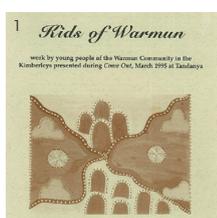
As a community development professional, Jennifer found it was extremely challenging to establish a private enterprise that was based on a community agency model more than 15 years ago. Back then 'social venture' was not a common term. Having to wear the business hat while operating the gallery, and the 'community support' hat when working with the artists and their families, proved to be extremely challenging.

### OUTCOMES:

The dual aims of the project proved a difficult challenge. Having to practically manage a crisis centre that appeared to be an arts enterprise was difficult; the normal networks and support mechanisms for the crisis sector were not available to a 'gallery'. Conversely, managing a commercial enterprise that supported community people through all sorts of crises: having children taken away; facing poverty and a lack of food to feed the kids; having artworks stolen; and coping with the insidious Aboriginal art industry learning about cultural genocide through artists stories, such as major massacres, in which the communities lost so many of their families. Despite the challenges the women began painting, which meant they were telling their stories. When the gallery began, there were two women painting in the community it supported. Today, as a result of that early encouragement and support, there are more than a dozen women painting, as well as the young people. All the artists are now selling their artworks through many galleries.

The community now has their own art centre, which is flourishing. This art centre was initiated as a result of the success of Ochre Gallery and the development of the women, such as Shirley Purdie, who became successful artists.

To learn more visit the community's existing art centre [www.warmunart.com](http://www.warmunart.com)



1. Youth Come Out Festival (young artists from Ochre Gallery) Exhibition. 2. Elders teaching in the school art class, their work became the exhibition "Kids of Warmun". 3. Inside the Ochre Gallery. Cultural Mapping Pty Ltd © Copyright 2010

