Megan Aponte-Payne:

Hello everyone. Before we get started with this podcast, we'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, which for us are the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. We pay our respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and to the region. We'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody joining this podcast is listening from.

Leslie Richardson:

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Megan Aponte-Payne:

Welcome to Public Sector Unearthed, a Work with Purpose spinoff series about people who drive grassroots change in Australia's public sector. My name is Megan Aponte-Payne, And on Public Sector Unearthed, we're putting people and their stories front and centre. Our guests talk about their journeys in public service and how they're making a difference. This could be through mentoring, through communities of practice and effectively promoting the values and the purpose of the public sector.

Right at the start, you heard the voices of Leslie Richardson and Terese Christophe-Smith. Leslie's the director of Connected Beginnings and in the Northern Territory Government Department of Education, and Terese is now at the Department of Social Services, but was previously assistant director of Connected Beginnings at the Australian Department of Education. Connected Beginnings is a project close to their hearts set up as a grants program. It currently supports over 40 sites in Australia to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the best start in life. Up until a few weeks ago, Terese works from Canberra to support the program and she says it's one of the best things she's ever done in her public service career.

Leslie is part of the backbone team at Angurugu that is driving change on the ground, and she's a wealth of lived and professional experience in the role. These are two truly inspiring people who make a significant contribution to the public services goals of putting people at the Centre of Policy and Services. So let's hear from them now.

Welcome to you both. It's great to have you with us today. Terese, can you tell us a bit about how you came to the Connected Beginnings program?

Terese Christoff-Smith:

Thanks very much for having us today, and it's really a pleasure to be here. I came to the Connected Beginnings program because I really wanted to make a difference in what I wanted to do and what I wanted to work on as a public servant. I wanted to be able to really make a difference to people's lives. So having the opportunity to come into the program and to be able to work with people on the ground that can drive change so that First Nations children can have the best start in life was something that I was really passionate about. So I've been there since, basically it began. I was involved in the design of the program since October, 2015, and I stayed for eight years because it was an amazing program to be involved with and definitely evolved and improved over time.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

That's fantastic. You must be such a rich source of knowledge for the program. And Leslie, can you tell us a bit about your journey to this point and how that journey has served you in this current role?

Leslie Richardson:

Right. It's quite a big story. So I started my public service career in Queensland in Department of Education as an indigenous teacher aide. From there, I went over to Department of Families. So in the primary school it was all literacy, numeracy. In the high school it was behavioural problems, so this is all working with aboriginal children in the Department of Education.

As a teacher aide, I couldn't go into the home and help children, so that's when I applied for Department of Families. So I had quite a long and extensive career with Department of Families in Queensland and the name because, machinery government changes, we got mogged several times, but was Child Safety and then Department of Communities. So I worked in the frontline in the funding area, in HR, also in indigenous policy, and then worked on the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry.

So it's given me a good steed in relation to systems and how government departments operate because I've worked in a lot of different areas along the way. I was lucky to receive a scholarship by my department and went on to complete a Bachelor of Human Services degree, which was conferred in 2009. From then when I completed my degree, I did go over and do a stint in child protection over there and worked up in the Pilbara, which gave me an opportunity to work in a remote aboriginal community. From there, I went back to the Queensland Public Service, and then when Campbell Newman came in the government, there was lots of changes and a lot of public servants were shown the door.

So from then I moved up to the Northern Territory and I've been in the Northern Territory for the last 10 years. Firstly, I worked for a non-government organisation that was funded by Department of Health and Ageing, which was the... Well, they're the primary health networks now. So I was the principal program officer for Closing the Gap in Aboriginal Health and then went back into the NT public service with territory families and back into child protection.

And from there, so I've worked in Frontline, I've worked in, I managed remote family support and I was the Aboriginal Practice advisor. So then into a senior role in the Northern Territory public service. After that, the opportunity came up to apply for the Connected Beginnings position. So I started that in February, 2021.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

Fantastic. Sounds like you were very well qualified for that role. And Terese, turning to the Connected Beginnings program, in a few short points, how does the program work and what does it do for communities on the ground?

Terese Christoff-Smith:

So the program funds backbone teams in each community. So we fund an organisation and that team then brings together and joins up the local services, so early childhood education, health, family support services that are in the community to really provide wraparound support to families and children. The backbone teams can usually also have a community connector role so that those connector roles provide outreach to hard to reach families and children. There might be some young moms in communities that don't attend any services and really are not engaged, and that could be for various reasons, but a lot of the time where we see across the program is that some services are not culturally safe. So really supporting those moms and dads to really engage with services and really ensure that the children are getting the care and their health checks that they need so that they can make that successful transition to school.

And those connector roles are also really important to really ensure that the cultural safety as well, and also that they've got the transport that they need, especially in remote communities, where that really is a barrier to families and children being able to attend services. And so then they engage with community leaders and elders about really what is a priority for each community, and they will establish a collective table or a leadership table to really undertake that action.

And in the department, in our team, we provided data dashboards and collected that data, so that really could help them with their decision-making and support them to prioritise their work on the ground. Yeah, so that's basically the main, how the program, the backbone teams work. And we've engaged SNAKE, the national voice of our children, as the community partner to also support those backbone teams because there's now 40 and they're expanding out to 50 around the country. And so having SNAKE as there to support that work as well and to provide a community of practice, so that the teams can share good practice across the country.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

Well, that sounds fantastic, and so great to hear it's growing to almost 50. I mean, that's a fantastic sign. And so Leslie, from your perspective, Terese's just mentioned the backbone organisations. What does that look like on the ground in Angurugu?

Leslie Richardson:

So when I started in the role, we had two community connectors, and yes, we worked mainly in Angurugu. And when I came into the role, I observed what was happening, how the practice was going. We started with, for our baseline measurement is to map the children in their commu2nity, but we were also mapping the children in the other communities. So in Groote Island itself, there's three communities. So there's Angurugu, Umbakumba, and the mining town of [inaudible 00:11:06]. And then our sister island is Bickerton, so the four communities… Milyakburra… make up the Groote Archipelago, and then there's also outstations.

So what we did, yes, because of our children, they're transient, the population and the parents that we mapped all of the children zero to eight across the archipelago, and we did a traffic like system. So the green light was for children that were enrolled and engaged and attending early years services. So in Groote, or Angurugu and Umbakumba, we do have a Families as First teachers program, and that program is about the parent and child attending the early year services. So it's also building parenting capacity in the community. And then we have a creation on Umbakumba, and then in [inaudible 00:12:19] there's a seagrass, and then at the community schools on Umbakumba and Angurugu, the Families Are First teachers program.

And the preschool, they're all in together. So what we did was we did a specific campaign to have a standalone preschool also in Angurugu. And with that standalone preschool, obviously the backbone team are the main supporters in that. Since I've been in the position, our community connectors in our backbone team have grown to 10 community connectors across three communities. We have one in Umbakumba, six in Angurugu, and three in [inaudible 00:13:14].

I myself am an aboriginal person, and we also have a community engagement leader in our team that supports the backbone team. And we also have manager integrated services lead. So we've got quite a big team and we've expanded, but we all bring it back to community. So we're trying to build our team to be more... And they were in the past, we used to have an elder in the team when Angurugu first got the funding, which has... She's since passed before I got into the role, but now we have two of her granddaughters working within the team.

And without the community connectors, we couldn't be progressing and doing the work that we are currently doing. So with our preschool campaign, we went from eight, I think in 2022, to we now have 18 preschoolers in Angurugu. So we are looking at also closing the gap targets, and that's really important, a preschool program and a equality preschool program so that not only teaching the children in two ways, Anindilyakwa and English, but we're tracking them on their child development utilising the ASQ track tool as well.

And obviously two of our community connectors, they work in the preschool. So yeah, the program has grown since I've been in the role, but it's the whole team collaboration and also the support that we have had from Department of Education, Commonwealth and also Department of Education, Northern Territory.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

So Leslie, if the program's growing, is it fair to say that kids and parents are responding well to the program?

Leslie Richardson:

Yes. So in the last 12 months as well... When I talked about the ASQ track tool, we partnered with the University of Melbourne, and that's a tool to see that aboriginal children are developmentally on track across the five domains. So it's gross motor, fine motor communication, problem solving, and personal and social. And so that tool's was used from zero to four years, and now it's expanded up to zero to five years and 10 of the local ladies, community connectors, plus also our partner agencies... Because Connected Beginnings is also a service integration model, so with Department of Health, we've partnered and other early years providers.

So on group we have 54 reasons. So we offered the training to their staff as well. So having 10 local Anindilyakwa ladies going out and utilising the ASQ track assessment tool. In the last 12 months, we did 83. And from that cohort of the 83 children, we're finding that most of the children are developmentally on track. And then if they're not meeting the domains or are below par, that we're in the first instance providing strategies for the parents. Like with gross motor in Aboriginal communities, a lot of the babies are held instead of being put on the ground with mat time. So we're encouraging mat time for the babies. And we're also encouraging parents to attend Families Are First teachers programs.

So we're finding that yes, we're having more children engaging in early years, and obviously the parents, we've got an increased uptake in preschool, and now we'll have a cohort of children that we will be able to screen in. We'll have the numbers in Angurugu for the ADC assessment for next year in transition.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

Fantastic. Sounds like you're getting some really good early signs. And Terese, you told us that the program is one of the best things you've ever worked on as a public servant. I'm keen to hear if you've got any personal takeaways that you've learned from working on the program.

Terese Christoff-Smith:

Thanks, yeah. Being able to see the impact of the community voice leading the work and how the program has evolved over time to really shift the power. So putting that power back into the community, empowering those communities to lead the work and seeing what can be achieved when they are the decision makers on the ground. That's been pretty amazing and special to be a part of.

And also from the Commonwealth point of view about how we've actually enabled the flexibility and innovation, so that really enabling those communities to be successful in providing them with tools and resources to do the work.

And Leslie was talking about the ASQ track, and that's something that we've been supporting and really trying to expand across the program where communities see that that would work well for them, just enabling them to make the decision makers, but also how the program has been embedding the Closing the Gap priority reforms over time. And we just recently had an evaluation that has found that the program's making a significant difference in closing the gap. So that's really exciting.

And I know that as it expands, it'll continue to do that important work. And by providing them with the data that's so critical, sharing that data back to communities because they own the data. So we've really been pushing in the program for that data to be provided to the communities as much as possible. And we've worked across the commonwealth and across state governments, collected that data and sharing it back to the community so that they can use it. And the partnership with Snake and other stakeholders has been critical as well to the success of the program. So I think it has been, it's a great successful program and I've just been really glad to be a part of it.

Megan Aponte-Payne:

It sounds like a real privilege. Terese, Leslie, thank you very much for joining us on Unearthed today.

I think what really stood out for me was just how multifaceted the space that you're working in is and how you are bringing all of these different pieces together, whether it be social services or health, to make sure that these kids get the best start in life and are ready for learning. And it just makes me reflect on how much goes into just getting kids ready for school. So thank you very much for sharing your stories. It's been a real honour to listen to you and particularly to hear about the differences that you're making in the communities that you serve.

Listeners, we hope you enjoyed hearing from Leslie and Terese today. What did you enjoy about this story? Let us know by leaving a comment on our social media channels or even better by writing a review. We're on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, and many other podcast platforms.

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