

# Growing Up In Your Own Community

## **Bev Budden**

*who is a co-ordinator in the Moving Ahead Program based in Atherton, describes the journey made by a young man from school pupil to young adult, and provides insights into the cultural sensitivities that are needed when working within an indigenous culture and community.*

The Moving Ahead Program provides transition support, for a period of up to two years, to young people who have complex support needs resulting from their disability. The program supports young people who are aged eighteen and leaving the school system, and is specifically targeted to those who have no other support options such as pre-vocational training or employment. Young people who are supported in this way are assisted by a co-ordinator to develop, along with their families, a vision and goal for this stage of their lives. Young people and their families choose local community supports and services that will assist them in achieving these goals and help with their transition from school life to adult life in their community.

I first started supporting one young man from the indigenous community when he was aged about sixteen. For this young man, life was pretty miserable – he had just been expelled from school and he wanted to forget the bad experiences of his schooling. He is now aged twenty and lives with his mother, and prior to that, they had both lived with members of their extended family. He has many aunts, uncles and cousins who have always looked out for him. His education had been very limited with the result that he has extremely low literacy and numeracy skills. This has greatly impacted on his day-to-day activities such as money management, reading and writing. When he left school there was little or no support to help him make the transition from school to community,

although his mother and extended family have been a constant support in his life.

After meeting with the young man and his mother a few times, a number of goals were identified and we went about putting together a support plan for him. At that stage of his life he was not yet receiving support from the Moving Ahead Program, but receiving four hours of

paid support from our community-based organisation. This arrangement gave the young man and his parent some insight into what kind of support was offered and also gave them the opportunity to decide if they wanted support from our organisation. As I continued with the support of the young man I talked to him and his mother about the Moving Ahead Program. Once they were clear about the purpose of the program, they applied for program funding, and a plan was developed around the various interests that the young man wanted to pursue.

The first part of the Moving Ahead Program was focused on vegetable farming and we set up support through a local farm that is owned and run by a local indigenous organisation. At that time, the farm was managed by an uncle and aunt of the young man and this was an extra bonus because his mother was happy for him to stay at the farm four nights each week. This meant that he was also starting to establish his independence. He was involved in all aspects of the farm enterprise such as planting, picking, sorting, packing and making deliveries, as well as general maintenance such as gardening and lawn-mowing. Other workers saw him as a

valued member of his community for the first time in his life.

The second part of his Moving Ahead Program was focused around his interest in woodwork. As luck would have it we received an application from a skilled carpenter who was interested in doing some work with a person who had a disability. When talking about this idea to the young man and his mother she believed that working with an older man would be good for her son as he needed someone who would be a positive role model and they all met in an informal interview. After some thought, they all decided to try this plan and our organisation employed the carpenter as a support worker for the young man and, once again, we developed a plan.

A venue for the carpentry work had to be found and a number of places were checked, but eventually we approached the old primary school in Atherton now used as a community centre for various organisations and activities. We negotiated to use an empty workshop underneath the building that had previously been used for woodwork classes. This venue was used for almost a year by the two men who had their own key so they could come and go as needed. During this time the young man learnt various aspects of woodwork and the use of electrical equipment. With very little difficulty he made bar-stools, teapot stands, boomerangs and didgeridoos. The two men were asked to make sixty frames for the works of local indigenous artists that were to be sold at the shop of the Community Development and Employment Program. Through the support of the older man, this young man has achieved abundant personal development. He now has a large degree of independence and his growing maturity is expressed in his own ideas and interests. His self-esteem and confidence have grown to such an extent that he has begun to think about having his own business.

Unfortunately the support worker had to resign due to his own family commitments and this came as a shock to the young man as their relationship was more than just one of 'client' and 'support worker' because the support worker had helped him through personal issues – he had been a good role model and remains a trusted friend. We now had the task of finding another support worker for the young man and I suggested to him and his mother that they may want to be the ones to find a suitable worker as they knew what they were looking for in such a person. They already had someone in mind – a

trusted family member – who, the mother believes, will have a positive influence on her son and be a good role model as well. We employed this person and have another support plan in place.

Again, we focused on using resources within the indigenous community. The young man chose three areas in which he would like support: living skills, including cooking, budgeting, shopping, and literacy and numeracy skills. The young man's second area of interest is for exposure to an office environment and for this we approached one of the local indigenous organisations where the young man will be supported to experience all aspects of the day-to-day running of an office, learning the use of office equipment, reception skills, typing, filing, mailing, and telephone messages. The third area of interest will involve our organisation with a local shire council, negotiating for the young man to have access to the Indigenous Ranger program. It is hoped that though this program the young man can experience at first-hand, the role of an indigenous ranger in the local area.

In seeking to provide support for a young man who has a growing sense of being a valued part of the local community, we have tried to be as creative as possible and to involve the young man's own community as well as the wider indigenous community. Indigenous people have a different value base from to the non-indigenous community; material possessions are not a high priority. It is important to remember that family and extended family are an important part of an indigenous person's life. It is vital that the family is always consulted, in conjunction with the individual person, when decisions are being made. It is not only parents who have a say about an issue concerning their son or daughter, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, and even older cousins can be involved in such decision making. It is not uncommon for indigenous people to have a shared responsibility for other family members.

When services support a person from the indigenous community, it is essential that indigenous workers be employed, even if that person is a family member, because they understand the lifestyle and the importance of family. Indigenous support workers are in a better position to help the person they are supporting to become more aware of his or her own identity, and more able to help the person to identify with other indigenous people in their community. ■