

## What makes us different? The role of Rumbalara Football and Netball Club in promoting Indigenous wellbeing

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*The Rumbalara Football and Netball Club has competed in regional football and netball leagues since 1997, continuing a tradition that began with the Cummergunja football teams of the 1890s. The Club is an important contributor to cultural identity for Aboriginal people in the Goulburn-Murray Rivers region of northern Victoria. It is a place where Aboriginal people can (re)connect with community, language, and stories of culture and history. It is also a vehicle for building relationships with mainstream Australia. Through competing in regional football and netball leagues, the Club brings Aboriginal community into mainstream society, working towards and demanding recognition, equality, and respect for Aboriginal people. The Club's hosting of visiting players and supporters enables mainstream visitors to accept reciprocity from the Aboriginal community. These characteristics of participation make up part of 'being healthy' for Aboriginal people. Because they drive engagement of Aboriginal people with the Club, they are foundational to the Club's programs and activities that fit with a more conventional definition of 'health promotion', including programs to increase physical activity and improve diet, promote engagement of young people in education, and facilitate employment opportunities. The Club also engages in research which seeks to describe the breadth, strategies, and effectiveness of this health promotion activity*

The Rumbalara Football and Netball Club (RFNC) was accepted into the Goulburn Valley Football League for the 1997 football and netball season. Since this acceptance into a mainstream<sup>1</sup> league, the Club has won a total of 20 premierships between the 4 football and 8 netball divisions. In 1999, the Goulburn Valley Football League second division split from the league, forming the Central Goulburn Football League (CGFL). Rumbalara's first-division football team won the CGFL's first premiership, won again in 2002, and was the runner-up in 2003 and 2004. The netball teams have been even more impressive, with the A-grade winning premiership in three consecutive years from 2001 to 2003 and then again in 2008. Since the first grand final victory in 1998 (exactly 100 years after the first premiership won by the Cummeragunja team to which RFNC traces its ancestry), the Club has defied all the

odds.

Sport was the original activity that brought Aboriginal people to RFNC in 1997. This was due to a determination to strengthen cultural connections with other community members, their interest in and love of football, the opportunity to display talents and challenge the individuals' skills. The cultural connection provided the platform for Indigenous players, supporters, family, and community to come together in a setting they could call their own. Prior to the establishment of RFNC, these connections, for many people, were focused on attendance at funerals as the most frequent community event – as in other parts of Australia, the Aboriginal communities of the Goulburn-Murray Rivers Region experience high rates of premature morbidity and mortality. The establishment of RFNC began a journey that allowed Indigenous people to strengthen spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing,

through sport, connecting with the culture and sharing good lifestyle choices. Throughout this paper we refer to ‘culture’ and ‘cultural identity’. Our definitions focus on the relationships between people, and the unique ways in which Aboriginal people relate to each other and to their environment. Although football is arguably not a ‘traditional’ activity, and RFNC competes in a mainstream league, it nevertheless provides a safe space in which Aboriginal culture can be expressed in ways not possible in the wider society. We also refer to ‘assimilation’, which we define as the process of weakening these cultural ways of relating and connecting.

In addition to sport, RFNC offers programs to address other leadership skills. It offers career advice, work readiness, and employment access, financial literacy, healthy lifestyle choices through canteen policies and fitness programs, education, diabetes awareness, as well as research and reconciliation opportunities. The Club is a family-friendly place for the teams, family members, and community, and supports cultural values and identity. It allows Indigenous people the freedom to express their culture. The Club engages with the wider community to break down cultural barriers by helping them to understand the local Indigenous people.

In this paper our objective is to describe the role that Rumbalara Football Netball Club plays in promoting health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people in the Goulburn-Murray Rivers Region of northern Victoria. We discuss the history of RFNC, Indigenous understandings of health and wellbeing, Club programs, cultural identity, and RFNC’s role in healing and ‘closing the gap’. This paper is written from a community-based, ‘insider’ perspective. To complement the first author’s narrative, information from the research literature, RFNC program reports, and other sources is presented in boxes throughout the manuscript.

### **History of RFNC**

To understand RFNC, we will need to reflect back into the local Indigenous history, a topic not many people want to hear or talk about due to the lack of understanding of its importance to wellbeing today. The abrupt interruption to Indigenous culture, the loss of the land and its tribal connections could have been described as genocide. Aboriginal people were forced from their traditional lands, often violently, to make way for white settlement and agriculture. RFNC exists to provide opportunities for community members to strengthen cultural connectedness and to heal the damaging and unresolved effects of this earlier history.

Cummeragunja reserve on the banks of the Dhungalla (the Murray River’s traditional name) is where the history of football began for the Indigenous people. By the late 1800s, Cummeragunja had a professional football team competing in the Nathalia and District League, taking its first premierships in 1898 and 1899 winning 6 Picola League premierships in 11 seasons during the 1920s and ’30s. The team’s strength stirred discontent within the League and in 1932 an arbitrary new rule set the maximum age for any player at 25 years, excluding many of Cummeragunja’s star players. This rejection set the stage for the many challenges the Indigenous community would face with the forming of the RFNC.

This region has a history of producing strong, nationally, and internationally prominent leaders like William Cooper and Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls, involved in the struggles for citizenship, social justice, human rights, and respect for Aboriginal people. This struggle has now been taken up by current leaders of the Yorta Yorta Clans including RFNC President Mr Paul Briggs who has challenged his leadership skills to take on the local football league for the wellbeing of the Indigenous community. Contemporary community leaders saw a need to bring community members together more closely and worked to establish the Club as a means to

do this. There was a long struggle to enter an established football league, due to opposition from other clubs based on purported inadequacy of facilities, perceptions that Aboriginal players were ‘bullies’, and other negative racial stereotypes promoted by mainstream media.

Today, the vision of RFNC is “to be nationally recognised as the leading

Aboriginal Sporting Club, for its success on and off the sporting arena, strong cultural identity, expression and celebration, and contribution to equal life opportunities for all Australians.” The Club provides a welcoming gateway to social inclusion for all Indigenous people and its visitors (see Box 1).

The Club’s journey has had many positive and negative moments. Our challenge is trying

**Box 1 – Community Engagement**

The RFNC had about 300 registered players in 2011, about half of them women (Figure 1a). This represents a steady increase in women’s participation since 1997, and is part of a trend to increasing total player registrations. The Club currently fields four football teams and nine netball teams. In addition, the Club had almost 250 social members by 2011, including a large proportion of non-Indigenous social members (Figure 1b).

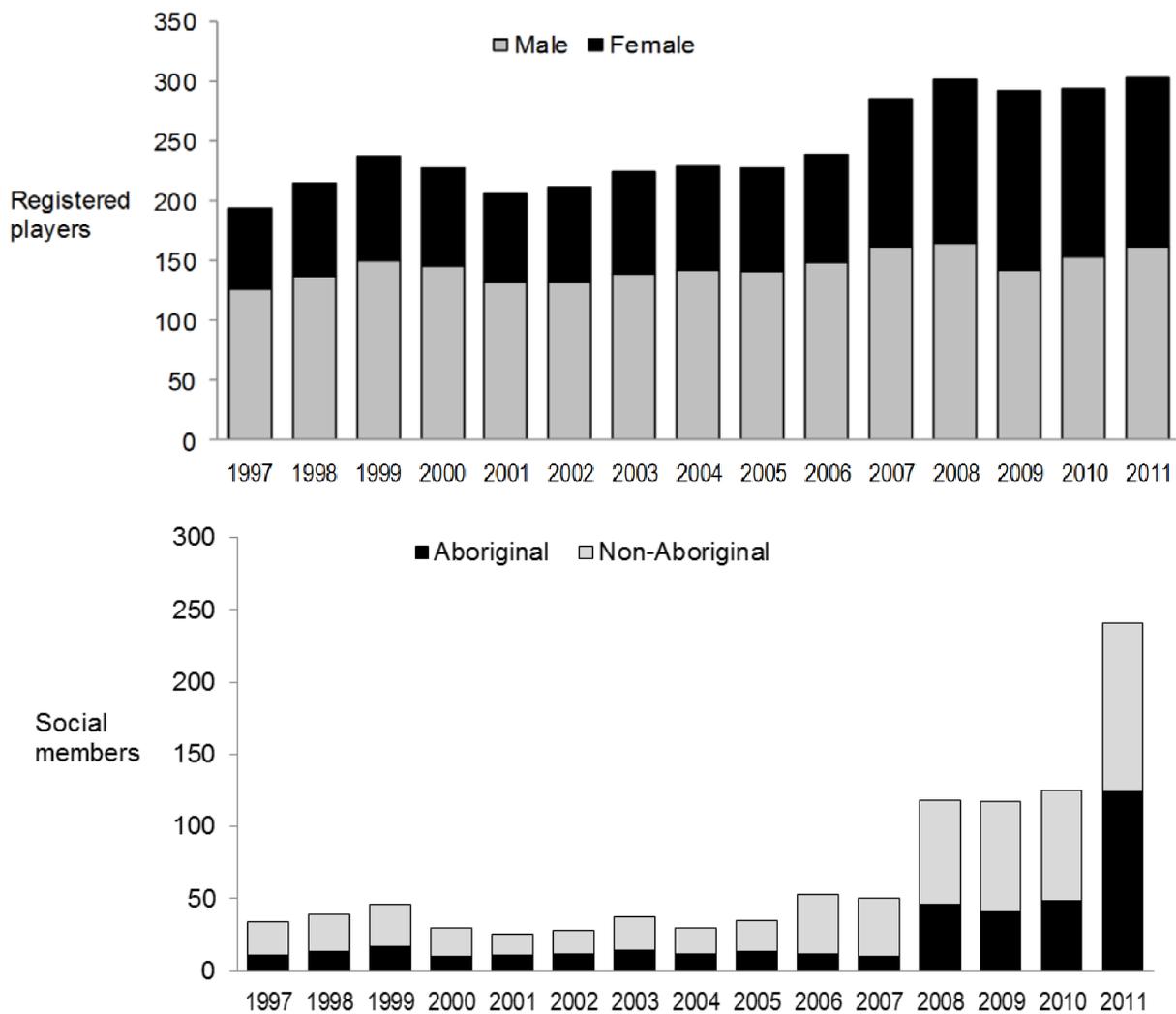


Figure 1: Trends in a) player registrations and b) social membership at RFNC, 1997-2011.

to present enough information about some of the positive impacts on Aboriginal and mainstream communities, to provide a good sense of who we are, and what community gains from the presence and the strength of cultural identity from the RFNC. For example, one of the Club's successes has been the reversal of attitudes of League representatives, from opposition to RFNC entering the competition at all (as recently as 2009) to RFNC being considered for hosting a grand final. This event was significant because it represented a change in attitude towards Aboriginal people, from negative stereotypes to acknowledgement of the skills within the Aboriginal community. For this brief moment, the basic cause of the health disparity for Aboriginal people, that is, discrimination, was overcome.

### **Health and Wellbeing within the RFNC**

Typical definitions of health define it as the absence of illness or injury. Indigenous definitions are more complex. The National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) Working Party (1989) definition states that:

Aboriginal health means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their Community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life. (p. x)

When we talk about the term 'health and wellbeing', it could mean many things but as an Indigenous person living in the shadow of assimilation it becomes quite clear what health and wellbeing should look like. This involves every person being able to make decisions and have access to what they choose (under the law), without restrictions or racial discrimination and

ramifications, in a country to which they are spiritually connected. Most of all, being well requires respect, healthy thinking, and access to basic living needs, education, employment, and housing.

The RFNC can promote the health and wellbeing of its community through participating in games, by members being part of the Club's activities, and through bringing families out of their homes and into the Club. While it is seen by the wider community and government bodies as just a football and netball club competing in a league, for Aboriginal people it is more significant than just a sporting venue. RFNC is a place where Aboriginal wellbeing surrounds people, nurturing them with cultural strength, identity, pride, and beliefs.

### **RFNC Programs**

RFNC's programs engage the Indigenous community and provide a meeting space that allows individuals, families, and young people to participate in the wider Goulburn Valley community without losing their cultural identity. These programs address wellbeing as defined by our earlier research which identified determinants of health and wellbeing for local Aboriginal people, with five key themes emerging: 1) history; 2) relationship with mainstream community; 3) having a sense of control; 4) connectedness; and 5) threats to wellbeing. This work subsequently formed the basis of designing programs at RFNC (Reilly, Doyle, Firebrace, Morgan-Bulled, Cargo, & Rowley, 2008).

The RFNC provides not just a platform, but a path that engages the wider community to participate in a strong cultural identity through sport and social inclusion. Aboriginal peoples' roots and history are bedded in the earth of this amazing landscape as far back 80,000 years. RFNC and its programs are a part of this continuous history, designed and delivered in a way that recognises and builds on this history, and are therefore designed to strengthen Indigenous culture and wellbeing, not promote

assimilation. Programs include healthy lifestyles – discussion of healthy food choices, water intake, and the effect of dehydration. The Club provides healthy meals for players, supporters and families once a week. It provides junior players with fresh fruit before practice twice a week. Other supporting programs provide mentoring in the schools and in the Club and engagement with mainstream business in providing players and community the opportunity for employment through the Rumba Ripples Program. This program seems to be very successful and well received by the community; a success that could be due to the fact that each Koori young person taking on a job has total support from the Club and doesn't feel so isolated and afraid. Junior development at RFNC is discussed in Box 2.

Current Club programs targeting youth and other sections of community all seek to more closely engage community members in the Club and with each other. This extends to engaging positively with mainstream community, including the annual Unity Cup between RFNC and Congupna Football Club with the support of the Murray Football League. The Unity Cup started in 2008 and has become an annual event with the focus on respect and leadership and provides the potential to overcome divisions in the community. The RFNC provides Indigenous and non-Indigenous people the opportunity to display leadership in a cultural setting, and strives to be recognised not just as a sports club but also for the role it has taken on to protect and provide the spiritual needs for the local Indigenous community.

### **Box 2 – Junior Development**

Senior RFNC players who have played in elite junior or senior squads (including the Australian Football League [AFL]) are more aware of nutrition and how it affects fitness and performance. They have often received detailed menus on what to eat when and exercise diaries to monitor prescribed exercise routines as part of their training regimes, although it is not always possible to follow instructions depending on what is available to eat at home. Players with this training tend to find it easier to keep off excess weight than do other players. This type of education was seen as a gap for junior players at the Club and nutrition education was included as part of the *Hungry for Victory* program in 2006 to address this issue (Reilly, Doyle, & Rowley, 2007).

The Academy of Sport, Health, and Education (ASHE) is a partnership between RFNC and The University of Melbourne to re-engage young people in formal education by offering Certificate level courses in fitness, sport, health, personal development. ASHE has been a major influence on Bradley Firebrace. He originally only attended because it was a football club initiative and was encouraged to go by the club President. There were only five students in the first cohort, and plenty of teething problems. He remained studying at ASHE because he developed strong interest in the courses on offer and saw the value of gaining qualifications (in his case, Certificate Level III in Fitness and Certificate Level IV in Community Development). The learning environment is flexible, with a lot of support for students academically and personally. Having a group of students working there together was an attraction, as opposed to an individual approach where students are expected to go away and learn on their own. He felt it was a safe place to speak up – whereas he lacked confidence to answer questions or contribute in a mainstream setting for fear of getting answers wrong, at ASHE he felt supported to contribute and not afraid to make mistakes. Importantly, although ASHE was originally established with the idea of using sport as the hook to re-engage students who had dropped out of education, it has also recruited many young people who do not play sport at RFNC but who do wish to re-enter the education system, as well as people who have finished school and are working but who wish to gain extra qualifications. ASHE also undertakes programs with primary and secondary school students such as ASHEletics and Indigenous sport carnivals. ASHE also now has students from interstate as well as local people.

**Box 3 – RFNC Programs and Partnerships**

Figure 2 summarises programs conducted by RFNC in 2011. Programs in healthy lifestyles have included a range of activities and strategies to help people make healthy choices in diet and exercise. In addition to the junior development activities noted below, the program has included: discussion of healthy food choices, water intake, and the effect of dehydration; the provision of healthy meals for players, supporters and families once a week at training; provision of fresh fruit for junior players before practice twice weekly; and a healthy canteen policy (Reilly et al., 2011). The Club has partnered with other organisations to design and run a strength training program for Elders with or at risk of diabetes, and other programs to increase physical activity and healthy diet.

In recognition of the importance of socioeconomic determinants of health, the Club has engaged in programs for education (see below), financial literacy (B. Briggs & Reilly, 2010), and employment (*Rumba Ripples*, which has placed over 120 people into employment in local businesses). ASHE is a major program conducted in partnership with The University of Melbourne, which re-engages youth in education through Certificate-level and short courses (see Figure 2). In addition to its own teaching, ASHE facilitates the Club's outreach programs to local schools – *Munarra Youth Futures* supports students in the upper primary and high school environment, with the aim of increasing attendance at and commitment to both education and in the sports club setting; *Dream, Learn, Achieve* targets students in Years 8 and 9 who are disengaged from school, with the aim of encouraging them to remain in school and supporting the Koori Student Education Officers' role; and providing accredited modules in cultural studies, community development, sport, and information technology. Certificate V level ASHE students acted as mentors for program participants. Most programs are conducted in partnership with other organisations. Major partners include Visy and the Pratt Foundation, Doxa Youth Foundation, Essendon Football Club and the AFL, Netball Victoria and the Melbourne Vixens, The University of Melbourne, Goulburn Ovens TAFE, The City of Greater Shepparton, VicHealth, and State and Commonwealth Government Departments.

Details of RFNC programs are shown in Box 3.

**Supporting Cultural Identity**

Involvement with the Club has taken the first author Joyce Doyle on a journey of excitement, pride and sometimes heartache with many struggles that are difficult to share with others. For Joyce, being involved in the Club has strengthened her spirit, nurtured cultural identity, and provided a pride that is difficult to describe. Without the Club, Joyce would be locked into the assimilation policy of the mainstream that assumes there are no 'real Aborigines' in Victoria (P. Briggs, 2006), and that it is not okay to identify as different from mainstream Australia. Thus, the Indigenous people in Victoria have another struggle, regarding their identity. We don't have a problem with identity; it is the rest of society who have a problem with *our* identity. We, Koori people of Victoria, are put in the box of 'assimilation' where we are expected to behave just as the white Australians do.

The term cultural identity is so often used but never really thought about in terms of Indigenous people and their sport. RFNC is all about Aboriginal cultural identity but it also engages in dialogue with mainstream society and recognises its cultural identity too. The Club provides an environment that showcases an Indigenous football and netball team, in colours that represent the people's identity – blue for the river, yellow for the sun, black for the people, and red for the earth. In the Club's social rooms, photographs of past and present players are displayed, including important community leaders and elite athletes like the late Pastor Sir Douglas Nichols. These images provide a cultural connection for families and a sense of pride in the Club's journey involving the achievements of community members who have overcome all barriers to excel in their chosen fields.

RFNC provides the cultural connection between identity and respect. It allows

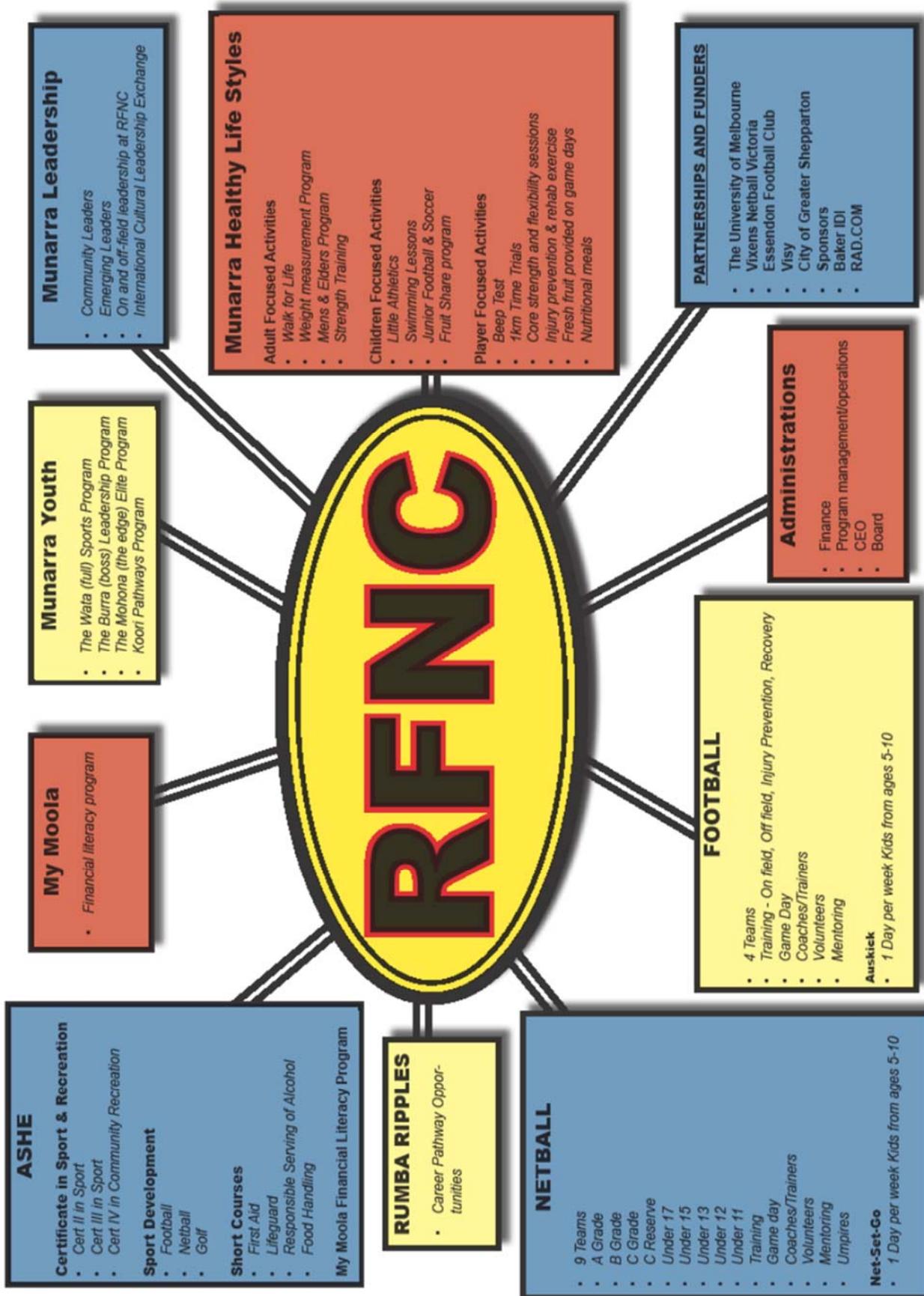


Figure 2. Summary of RFNC program areas, 2011.

Aboriginal people to identify with their culture in a setting that displays respect for and pride in Aboriginal culture. It allows engagement with mainstream community in a way that promotes mutual respect. It promotes togetherness, inclusion, reconciliation, and Aboriginal

leadership in a setting that allows our identity to flow into and be recognised by other sporting clubs and the wider community. This is an essential part of being 'healthy' in mind, body, and spirit for Aboriginal people (see

#### **Box 4 – Further Reflections on Cultural Identity, Sport, and the RFNC from a Psychology Perspective**

Cultural or ethnic identity is an important component of a sense of self. The formation of identity occurs most actively during adolescence and serves as a guiding framework during adulthood. Cultural identity has been linked to various important outcome measures including self-esteem (Umana-Taylor, 2005), an ability to cope with discrimination, academic achievement and reduced risk of suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Luke et al., 2013). However, there is some variation in findings relating to the association between cultural identity and these positive factors. Umana-Taylor (2005), suggests that this variation may be explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that identity develops from both a sense of belonging to a cultural group, as well as an affective component (i.e., how you feel about that sense of group belonging). Therefore, favourable appraisals of group membership will have a positive impact on self-esteem, but situations where group membership is associated with a negative social environment marred by discrimination, prejudice, or exclusion may have a negative impact on self-esteem.

Mainstream, nationalist images of Australian identity stem from colonial times and tend to be white, masculine pioneers, 'diggers' or sportsmen. Aboriginal identity sits outside this stereotype and is, even in modern mainstream discourse, largely defined by outdated racial criteria (Langton, 2013). The 'authenticity' of Aboriginal identity tends to be determined within this discourse by the extent to which Aboriginal people remain uncontaminated – racially and culturally – by Anglo Australia, leading to simplistic judgments being made on the basis of appearance and in binary terms of black and white (e.g., Bolt, 2009). In reality, as is acknowledged by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (United Nations General Assembly, 2008), such racial understandings of Aboriginal identity are unscientific and outdated. However, individuals and communities who fail to fit the stereotype of the 'traditional', dark-skinned Aborigine continue to find their identities as Aboriginal people under scrutiny and attack (Hallinan & Judd, 2007). An alternative view conceptualises Aboriginal identity as fluid, diverse, complex, and arising from interactions between Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal people and other Australians (Langton, 1993; Russell, 2006).

Within this context, like many Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, the RFNC provides a vehicle for the formation and expression of Aboriginal identity in ways that are not necessarily supported in mainstream workplaces, schools, and other settings. The club facilitates interaction between Aboriginal people resulting in a strengthening of identity. As reported in Reilly, Doyle, Bretherton, and Rowley (2008) a Club member explains:

*I think it's just a great club because it's a place where people can connect and through connection there comes empowerment, there comes strength, there comes pride, there comes things like sharing, caring, not that everything's always perfect, relationships aren't perfect between the community and stuff but it's the fact that people can come together because I think if people don't connect that's where a lot of things get lost. Your heritage gets lost, your history gets lost, your sense of identity gets lost, you don't know who you are, possibly. Being around an Aboriginal community strengthens your identity all the time. Consistently it strengthens that or I suppose it reminds you and empowers that thing of well, I belong, I mean something, I'm worth something, that type of thing. (p. 363)*

Also, while a sense of marginalisation is a common experience for Aboriginal people in Shepparton, RFNC works against this by facilitating cross-cultural interaction where:

*...for once it's like Aboriginal people can host the wider community instead of us always going to their*

**Box 4 continued**

*place. We can say ok this is our place and come and play. . .we want to play the host. It just gives people an opportunity to mix with and meet Aboriginal people where possibly they would never have had the chance to or had a reason to but now they have a reason to so it's just opening up all those types of doors. . .So when non-Aboriginal people come to the club, it's a feeling of acceptance. So you're accepting us, you're coming to our place, and it's that reciprocity. We're offering you something and you're accepting it.* (Reilly, Doyle et al., 2008, p. 361)

As such, RFNC is a place where Aboriginal identity is defined by Aboriginal people. This allows non-Aboriginal people to experience Aboriginal identity in a way that challenges stereotypes, works against binary, racial categorising and is non-confrontational. In relation to Aboriginal organisations in the Goulburn Murray, including RFNC, Reilly, Doyle et al. (2008) conclude that by providing a safe place for cultural expression, these organisations are inherently health-promoting as they strengthen community cohesion and identity.

It is widely accepted that participation in sport is associated with a number of physical and social benefits. A number of developmental benefits relevant to healthy identity development and self-esteem on an individual and social level arise from sport participation (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011). These include making friends, learning about teamwork and improved academic performance, as well as developing emotional control, confidence and self-discipline. For Aboriginal children, participation in sport has been shown to facilitate a positive collective identity and positive interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers (Kickett-Tucker, 2008). The physical benefits of sport stem from engaging in physical activity, but also from increased motivation to engage in positive health behaviours such as eating well and avoiding drugs and alcohol (Holt et al., 2011). At RFNC, the potential for sport to support the wellbeing of young members by strengthening a sense of belonging to the Aboriginal community, as well as supporting an identity built around taking care of oneself physically in order to play sport and support their team is exemplified by the 'Hungry for Victory' Program, described by Reilly et al. (2007).

This is one of many health promotion programs that have been implemented at RFNC that are significant because of their ecological approach to supporting wellbeing (Reilly et al., 2011). An ecological approach acknowledges that the health of an individual is influenced by the physical and social environment. That is, a person's health cannot be considered in isolation from their family, community, organisation, or broader society. This is consistent with Holt et al. (2011) who found that for low-income families particularly, a number of environmental factors, such as family environment and financial constraints, acted as barriers to young people sustaining their participation in sport. Such barriers also exist for some young people at RFNC where attrition as young members move into higher age-groups has been documented (O'Brien, Paradies, & Reilly, 2009). By targeting programs aimed at strengthening cultural identity, such as the Munarra Leadership Program, at the age-group which is most at risk of attrition – adolescence – the Club contributes to supporting an identity based on a sense of connectedness, and confident participation in community activities which include but are not limited to sport.

A number of challenges remain. Some community members may not access Club programs because they do not share an interest in sport and consequently feel excluded, despite the Club's efforts to be 'more than just a sporting club.' Even for those who do participate in sport, which for the most part represents an opportunity to experience empowerment, it can also reinforce disempowerment with the experience of loss, failure, or disappointment. Also, experiences of racism remain relatively common in sport in Shepparton, as in all parts of Victoria (Hallinan & Judd, 2007; Reilly, Doyle, Bretherton, et al., 2008). Although overt racism on the field is at least witnessed and penalised, less overt racism, such as the increased surveillance of Aboriginal players, and a tendency to label the whole team or whole club on the basis of one negative incident, can remain a challenge, as documented by Hallinan and Judd (2007). There is also the challenge of translating the positive interactions that occur between players on the field to positive changes in the broader community. There is a danger that positive discourses within the sporting arena can be seen as the exception to the rule in an otherwise dominant discourse of deficit

**Box 4 continued**

(Bamblett, 2011). Lastly, there is the significant challenge of finding the financial resources to keep the Club going in an otherwise resource-poor environment. A reliance on external funding means that Club leaders are required to continually communicate the importance and value of the Club to funding bodies and have no guarantee that funding will continue beyond a particular funding round. These are some of the challenges that RFNC continues to negotiate as it has over the past decade.

Box 4).

their spirits lifted.

**A Healing Place**

For Joyce, it is important to have a place that provides an identity that entitles her to say out loud ‘who I am’ and not be ashamed. RFNC provides many community members with such a place. And what about our white counterparts, the guests we cater for at every home game? There is no resentment – we enjoy talking, showing, presenting, and sharing what has become a ceremonial ground (meeting place) for local Indigenous people of this region. There is a sense of spiritual strength that empowers us to contribute to society in a respectful and fruitful way. We need to share this amazing journey with mainstream, hoping it will enlighten them to look at their clubs and maybe follow our lead.

There has been a change in attitude of visiting players and spectators over the years. We used to hear people talking about stereotypes – kids unsupervised, running wild etcetera. We don’t hear that as often anymore. The Club has been running for 12 years and people have been exposed to Indigenous culture and identity over the years wherein our visiting teams and supporters have seen that we are only people, the same as them in many ways. There is now more interaction, and more friendly interaction, between cultures. This also promotes wellbeing – ‘relationship with mainstream’ is a determinant of health for Aboriginal people (Reilly, Doyle, Bretherton, & Rowley, 2008).

Thus, RFNC is a healing place for individuals and for the relationship between Aboriginal and mainstream Australia. It has been described as grandmother’s kitchen table – a place where anyone can laugh and share stories, be welcomed, fed, and loved, and have

**Relevance to Close The Gap Policy**

The RFNC appears to tick many of the boxes when it comes to prevention in health and overall wellbeing in the Indigenous community. The government’s ‘Closing The Gap’ dollars are an important contribution for organisations that focus on Indigenous wellbeing, but unfortunately Closing The Gap resources are mainly being channelled into crisis intervention through recognised clinical health organisations. Organisations like RFNC make a major contribution to disease prevention and health promotion by supporting identity, respect, and relationships between Indigenous and mainstream Australia, in line with state health promotion policies (see Box 5). The RFNC provides a holistic view of wellbeing, nutrition, and physical activity that incorporates the social determinants of health. Unfortunately, organisations like RFNC are ineligible for much of the funding allocated to closing the health gap, leaving the younger generation at risk of a widening health gap.

**Challenges for RFNC**

RFNC runs many programs in response to community needs and as a result risks being spread too thin. There are many mainstream programs addressing health, employment, etcetera, but Club programs are based on local culture and are run in an environment that supports, not attacks or ignores, Indigenous cultures. As such, community members participate in Club teams and programs even if they have fewer material resources, human resources, and insecure funding.

The RFNC is unable to build the bridge

**Box 5 – RFNC and Health Promotion Policy**

The activities of RFNC closely parallel Victorian State frameworks for Aboriginal health promotion. Programs run at various times in the Club's history have implemented many of the recommendations of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)'s Aboriginal Nutrition and Physical Activity Strategy (Thorpe & Browne, 2009) and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation's Aboriginal health promotion framework (Kelly, 2011).

The VACCHO strategy's recommendations fall within eight areas which include:

*Action Area 1 – Aboriginal nutrition and physical activity workforce capacity.* RFNC staff members have been supported to gain qualifications in diabetes education, nursing, personal training, sports training, first aid, community nutrition, and health program development (Reilly et al., 2001). Partnerships with other organisations, such as Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative and Viney Morgan Aboriginal Medical Service as part of the Heart Health Project (Heart Health Project Steering Committee, 2007) have facilitated capacity exchange in nutrition and other areas.

*Action Area 2 - Food security.* 'Binji Business', a family-based home gardening initiative, addressed local food production (Department of Rural Health, 2001). 'Fruit Share' was probably a major contributor to fruit intake for some Club members (Reilly et al., 2011) and the provision of healthy meals on training nights for players and club members promoted good nutrition in a culturally appropriate setting.

*Action Area 3 – Public policy to support healthy eating and physical activity in key settings.* The Club's Healthy Canteen Policy resulted in a remarkably good nutritional quality of foods supplied through RFNC on match days and at training, particularly in the context of being a sporting club (Reilly et al., 2011). Advocacy to have drinking taps installed around the ground was undertaken. Strategies targeting junior Club members and visiting players included the 'Hungry for Victory' project that incorporated a match-day breakfast program, education and mentoring by senior players (Reilly et al., 2007), and of course the establishment of junior football and netball teams. RFNC's partnership with ASHE facilitates promotion of healthy eating and physical activity for young people enrolled in ASHE courses, and through implementation of the Munarra Youth Futures project in schools.

*Action Area 4 – Interventions to increase healthy eating and physical activity.* RFNC has developed a number of initiatives to facilitate healthy eating and physical activity, both through directly implementing nutrition and exercise programs (Healthy Lifestyles Program, Makin' A Move, Elders' Strength Training, football and netball training), through education, and by financial literacy training (B. Briggs & Reilly, 2010).

*Action Area 8 – Research and evaluation.* RFNC has collaborated with The University of Melbourne and other research institutions to evaluate its programs for many years. For example, The Heart Health Project was a participatory action research project that investigated various aspects of cardiovascular risk, developed implementation, and evaluation protocols for community-based projects, and researched food security issues (Heart Health Project Steering Committee, 2007; Reilly et al., 2007). Current work includes the development of monitoring and evaluation tools for health promotion activities in community organisations.

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation's framework for Aboriginal health promotion identified three priority areas in the broad domains of social determinants of health, risk factors, and access to health services (Kelly, 2011). RFNC programs address the majority of the specific issues within the priority areas. In the social determinants of health (Priority 1), Club programs (see above) have operated in the areas of 'educational attainment'; 'family and community connections' (by being a meeting place for connecting community); 'income, employment, and housing'; 'race-based discrimination' (the annual Unity Cup match with Congupna FC is an important reconciliation event, home games are an opportunity for Aboriginal community to host the mainstream in a positive environment); and 'Land, culture, and identity' (RFNC is a visible expression of Aboriginal culture and identity). Priority 2 of the framework deals with reducing exposure to health-damaging factors and vulnerability to their effects: tobacco; physical activity (in addition to training programs for players, RFNC has supported physical activity for other Club members including the Healthy Lifestyles, Elders' Strength Training and Makin' A Move programs); nutrition and food security (addressed through programs like Fruit Share, Binji Business and other healthy lifestyles programs); and alcohol (RFNC has responsible serving of alcohol policies in place, and a ban on BYO alcohol at home ground matches).

**Box 5 continued**

The third priority area for VicHealth is the reduction of consequences of ill-health as a result of inappropriate access to health care and treatment. To this end, RFNC has partnered with Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative to provide health checks at the ground on training nights, and has run heart health risk factor screening as part of pre-season training programs. This has facilitated access to health checks by young men, a population subgroup that is otherwise difficult to engage. To prevent suicide among local Aboriginal youth the RFNC acts as an agent that engages youth participation, provides a culturally safe environment, provides community attention, cultural affirmation, identity, value for the

to reconciliation without the help of mainstream culture; working together makes anything possible. As a prominent organisation in this space, RFNC members are in the spotlight – Club members have to perform above the level of their non-Indigenous counterparts to avoid public criticism. This requires strong cultural leadership through programs and funding allocation and this can make it difficult for some people to stay engaged with the Club.

The Club is leading the way in prevention in many of the life-threatening diseases surrounding our younger generation, including those arising from lack of physical activity and poor emotional and social wellbeing. However there are challenges in terms of connecting with and addressing issues for the next generation of young people who seem to have different values, priorities, pressures and threats to their wellbeing, which are not clear to older people. Investigation of these issues is required in order for RFNC to be able to respond appropriately.

**What Makes us Different?**

Throughout its 15-year journey, the RFNC has challenged, inspired and changed the concept of the term ‘sporting club’. Like many sporting clubs, RFNC operates on limited human and material resources, and struggles to maintain a secure financial base, to field teams each week as well as deliver health programs in a setting that focuses on being well, not on illness. What makes the Club different is its links to the history of Indigenous struggles to maintain cultural identity and cultural inclusion. The RFNC is a place of uniqueness in the Goulburn Valley and nationally. It is a

place where Indigenous people can display talent in sport, strength in communication, leadership, and cultural identity. The RFNC is a place for community celebration. The football arena is mainly a male space, but women have become more involved through netball, support roles and other Club activities. The venue could very well be called a ‘health retreat’ where one can inhale a large dose of identity, soak up the strength, and engage in social inclusion within the wider community.

The ground has a sense of spiritual guidance that surrounds its boundaries and watches out for the people with unexpected returns in story lines and winning games. This icon (RFNC) reflects the heart and soul of the local Indigenous community but is not usually represented with pride by the wider mainstream community.

**Conclusion**

Within its vision, RFNC aims to provide leadership through transparent characteristics – activities are visible for all members of the Indigenous and mainstream communities to see. Thus, RFNC gives the Indigenous community a glimmer of hope towards a future in which it can engage with all community. It provides an environment where visitors to RFNC can engage with the Indigenous community in a positive way and experience Indigenous culture on Indigenous terms in their own place, as guests of the Indigenous community. Visitors to anywhere are expected to behave in a certain way – respectfully. The Club seeks to ‘raise the bar’

– it takes people out of their homes in ‘suburban’ areas into a place where Indigenous culture and language are visible. It places greater expectations on Indigenous people to contribute to and interact within community as well as being a place where they can interact with mainstream community –but on Indigenous terms and conditions. Thus, RFNC promotes equality and takes all involved on a journey of tolerance and acceptance towards leadership and Indigenous and non-Indigenous healing through the sports arena.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the term “mainstream” refers to the non-Indigenous community.

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## Author biographies

Joyce Doyle is a Yorta Yorta woman from the Goulburn Valley. She started community work in the 1970s as an Aboriginal Educator, worked in the education system until 1984 then studied for a BA(Ed) at Deakin University. She returned to the Goulburn Valley community in 1999, working in Jemuria (an Aboriginal youth education initiative) through the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system for 3 years, and at Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative in Mooroopna as Chief Executive Officer and later as Manager of the medical centre. Joyce has had a number of roles in working in the mainstream sector and ran for local government Council in 1995. For most of her life Joyce has worked in her community and has been with the Rumbalara Football Netball Club since it began in 1997 in a number of roles – Board member, Youth Leadership role, Program Management, Researcher, Volunteer and Canteen Manager.

Bradley Firebrace and Tui Crumpen are also local community members who have contributed background information on RFNC’s junior development activities and community engagement respectively.

Rachel Reilly is of Anglo-Celtic background and contributed contextual information on identity and health from a health psychology perspective.

Kevin Rowley is an Australian of Celtic-Anglo background, born in Melbourne, with academic training and experience in biochemistry, epidemiology and health program evaluation. Both Rachel Reilly and Kevin Rowley have worked with Aboriginal community organisations in the Goulburn Valley for over 10 years on various research projects and been volunteers and occasional players at RFNC.

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