

Anti-Carceral and Anti-Colonial Work on the Ground

Keenan Mundine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keenan Mundine is a Biripi and Wakka Wakka man and father. He has lived experience in criminal justice institutions and uses this experience to make change for his community. In 2019, he co-founded Deadly Connections Community and Justice Services with Carly Stanley. Keenan is a national and international advocate for justice for First Nations people. He challenges the carceral system at United Nations forums, the Australian Government's Closing the Gap justice initiative, in parliamentary inquiries and through community organizing. He takes pride in strengthening his community and building supports based on the values of self-determination and decolonization.

CHASING DOWN ABORIGINAL KIDS

The police and the system have stayed the same over the last thirty years since I grew up in Redfern – a strong Aboriginal community. Redfern is in Sydney, Australia and since the 1960s has been one of the most over policed parts of the country. When I look at the experiences of Aboriginal kids today, nothing has really changed. I continue to feel disappointment that society thinks the way to address problems facing children is to chase young children and arrest them, and put them in a cell with no support, no understanding, no access to opportunities. When they come out, they just open the gate and put them back in their community.

For me, that was a big part of my experience and my contact with the police. I am still looking for a police officer who understands our trauma, our community, and our cultural and community needs. I am still hopeful that there is somebody out there with that insight into the way things operate but, for me, it is very distressing to know that people in society think the way to deal with people living at a disadvantage and with poverty is to chase them down and lock them up.

TURNING IT AROUND

I have been able to take my experience in the criminal justice system to learn and make a difference in our community. This has led me to building

Aboriginal programs to make a difference at the grassroots level with my wife Carly Stanley. We established Deadly Connections Community and Justice Services in September 2018 as a specialist Aboriginal-community-led not-for-profit organization. This was in response to direct community concerns around the lack of culturally responsive, community-driven, innovative grassroots solutions to address the over-representation of First Nations people, families, and communities in both the child protection and justice systems. First Nations people of Australia are grossly over-represented in child protection and justice systems. This involvement perpetuates a cycle of intergenerational grief, loss, trauma and disadvantage. True lived experience, culture, healing, self-determination, and a deep community connection must be at the heart and soul of all work with First Nations people and communities.

When we are out on the streets helping the kids, they tell us that they feel safer. We help make the kids feel more confident to be out on the street, to be able to do activities late at night, to be able to walk around their community without being harassed. We have been operating for about two years with zero incidences of violence between participants or intoxication with drugs and alcohol.

Before we started doing this work, there was a localized non-Aboriginal youth centre that shut down one of their programs because they did not know how to work with Aboriginal kids or the community. They did not know how to address their needs. They did not know how to address the underlying causes to why they are undertaking such behaviour.

For me to be out there with the kids, they feel safe, but we are under-resourced, and we can only be out there on a Saturday night. I would love to be out there every night to make sure that they are safe, to make sure that they are fed, to make sure that everything is comfortable for them to go home because I understand most of these homes that the young people come from have been disrupted in some way by the criminal justice system. That is why these kids are out on the street.

BUILDING DEADLY CONNECTIONS: THRIVING AND NOT JUST SURVIVING

The purpose of Deadly Connections is to positively disrupt intergenerational disadvantage, grief, loss, and trauma by providing holistic and culturally

responsive interventions and service to First Nations people and communities – particularly those who have been impacted by the child protection and/or justice systems. We want to break the cycle of imprisoning and traumatizing kids, and putting them in child protection systems or detention.

We know that First Nations people of Australia can thrive and not just survive. Through our work with Deadly Connections, we place culture, healing, true lived experience, deep community connection, and self-determination at the centre of all that we do. We embody and embed holistic, community-based, and decolonizing approaches to connecting First Nations people to their culture and their inner community strength. We advocate and collaborate to disrupt and reduce the harms of justice and child protection systems.

Part of the work that we do is also supporting people coming before the courts when going for sentencing. We support them and give them a voice through Aboriginal reports that enlivens the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendation that imprisonment is the last resort. We show the courts that there are options other than imprisonment. We are trying to change the circumstances for those who share my experience in which I would get arrested and I would see a prison cell before I would have access to any alternatives.

Our approach is a life course approach. We recognize the connections across all stages and domains in life. Intervention and change can occur at any stage of a person's lifespan. We challenge the dominance, values and methods of imposed colonial systems, practises and beliefs. We embed self-determination and culture in all we do. Aboriginal people, families and communities are experts of their own lives. We have solutions to the challenges that we face and are our own agents for change. Healing-centred engagement is a holistic healing model that adopts culture, spirituality, community action and collective healing. This approach was built because of my lived experience, my connection to community, and my first-hand experience of the criminal justice system and child protection.

Incarceration does not make people or communities safer. Typically, people who harm have themselves been harmed, either as children or adults, having been let down by multiple systems who were supposed to protect and support them. We need to radically reconsider who we incarcerate and what we hope to achieve with incarceration. Transformative justice requires us to address harmful behaviours and actions, repair the harm we

have caused, and address the causes and reasons for harm to prevent further harm from being committed. This can only be done through healing. Deadly Connections provides opportunities for healing and interventions that are transformative. Collective action is required to provide the support that is necessary to prevent harm, therefore investing in communities is a sensible investment. If we spent 1% of the money currently invested in the criminal legal system and direct the funds to community led interventions, we would create safer and stronger communities.