

Report from Supporting First Nations Group (SFN): SWAN AGM September 2022

INTRODUCTION: From September 2021 – August 2022, SFN formally met 6 times (Sept, Nov, Jan, March, May, July), including once via zoom. From January 2022 formal meetings were fixed for every two months, with flexibility for a formal 'special meeting' as required. Many informal meetings also occurred over the 12-month period, involving two or more members, to discuss pressing issues and augment timely action.

In November 2021 a comprehensive **SFN REVIEW** streamlined processes and clarified future actions to support engagement with and advocacy for First Nations Peoples. The review focused on the group's:

(a) Objectives & Terms of Reference

(b) Working Together - Roles, Meetings, Communication Protocols, Code of Conduct

(c) Key Priority Areas

Key Priority Area 1: Engagement & Cultural Awareness

Key Priority Area 2: Learning & Truth-Telling

Key Priority Area 3: Action & Advocacy

We prioritised engagement with local First Nations organisations, advocating for Voice, Treaty and Truth-Telling and for the justice issues important to First Nations people, especially women.

In December: Residents of Morven Manor, some of whom are SFN members, initiated a **Mornington News** article featuring installation of Uluru Statement from the Heart plaque at a Mornington retirement village.

As the year unfolded we continued to be frustrated by **Mornington Peninsula Shire Council's** apparent failure to lead the implementation of its Reconciliation Action Plan - despite our ongoing advocacy on this issue. A comparison undertaken by one SFN member revealed that MPSC is out of step with other Councils in not having at least an Indigenous officer or liaison person. She wrote to Council also about the importance of the budget allocation for Indigenous programs, as well as the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural heritage promotion in new developments like the Peninsula Trail. Recently we received a positive response on the latter at least.

We continue to be appalled at the rising rates of **Aboriginal Deaths in custody**. At the same time, First People's resilience, despite the ravages of colonisation, is to be celebrated, and members of our group joined celebrations at the **Our Songlines Survival Day** event at The Briars on January 26th.

Two **Living Culture walks** led by Lionel Lauch were facilitated by SFN with support from the SWAN Committee, in November 2021 and February 2022. These activities were greatly valued by the 40 participants and helped to broaden their awareness and appreciation of First Nations' culture.

We backed the **Know Your Country** campaign as part of our commitment to elevating all Australian children's understanding and awareness of the Country in which they live and learn. We see the role of education as crucial.

In March an SFN member conducted a mini survey to **research the needs of First Nations women**, especially locally. Some common themes were the need for a broad range of services which address social and economic disadvantage – and which are culturally safe -and for recognition of the legacy of colonisation and the devastating impact it has had on the lives of First Nations people.

First Nations calendar highlights on the Peninsula were supported, not just by SFN members, but by other SWAN members. These included **Womindjeka Balnarring festival** in March at which First Nations Boon Wurrung elder, Carolyn Briggs, addressed the crowd, and the **Reconciliation Week Walk at Willum Warrain** that drew a massive crowd of First Nations people and their allies. SFN members also attended several **NAIDOC Week events, including at Willam Warrain and Nairn Marr Djambana** Aboriginal Gathering Place.

SFN also resourced SWAN with ideas for our NAIDOC meeting speaker and First Nations guests. Driving this is our ongoing support for Victoria's **Yoo-rrook Truth and Justice Commission and Treaty process** and the importance of keeping SWAN members informed of these landmark developments.

Our ongoing advocacy of the ***Uluru Statement from the Heart*** led to several interrelated actions. In April SFN members played a leading role in supporting the SWAN Committee to prepare a ***Position Paper on Indigenous Voice***. This was circulated to SWAN members and posted on the website. In the lead up to the May Federal Election we **informed local candidates** about the SWAN Position Paper and sent them a **survey asking for their views on Voice, Treaty and Truth-telling**. Positive responses were received from all candidates with the notable exception of the Flinders Liberal Party candidate who did not reply. It is hoped that together we can convey our deep concern at the apparent lack of response from (the now elected member of parliament) Zoe McKenzie, to the call from First Nations to 'walk with us'.

The SWAN Position Paper was updated in June to reflect the commitment made by the new Albanese government to implement the ***Uluru Statement from the Heart*** in full and to schedule a Referendum to Enshrine and Indigenous Voice to Parliament in its first term. In July the **Position Paper was hand delivered to local State and Federal politicians, MPSC and FCC Councillors, and sent to local media** asking them to support the key reforms as outlined in the historic Statement. The SWAN Position Paper was also **given to local First Nations organisations and other community agencies** resulting in positive feedback, including from Aboriginal people who thanked SWAN for its proactive support for change.

Throughout the past two years we have encouraged SWAN members to join in the ***From the Heart Campaign*** encouraging them to sign the electronic Uluru Canvass and providing a model letter drafted by The Uluru Dialogue team to help them contact politicians. Encouraged by First Nations leaders of these campaigns, in NAIDOC Week an SFN member co-facilitated a community forum entitled '**Conversations from the Heart**' at Rye Neighbourhood House with another SWAN member.

Our speakers, our letters, and a Co-Design Submission in April 2021 and Position Paper in April 2022 clearly indicate SWAN's unwavering commitment to this cause. In a sign of progress, there was much to celebrate post-election with movement towards implementing the ***Uluru Statement from the Heart*** and the increase in Indigenous members of Parliament.

An issue of special focus relates to the **criminalisation of children as young as ten years old, and the over representation of First Nations children and youth in Victoria's youth justice system**. In June several SFN members supported the SWAN Committee to write to Premier Daniel Andrews and other relevant ministers expressing our deep concern re the government's decision to delay the introduction of vital, long overdue legislation that aims to reduce youth offending and protect the rights and wellbeing of vulnerable First Nations children. We asked for immediate action to raise the age of criminalisation from 10 to at least 14 years in line with the recommendation made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019).

In August some SFN members supported the SWAN Committee to send a **letter to MPSC strongly urging Council to take a leadership role in reviewing Australia Day date and activities**: to augment a unifying voice for healing, and for timely and appropriate coming together in an inclusive celebration of our nation.

One of our main priorities is to help to **keep SWAN members informed** so that we are all enabled to advocate for justice for, and with, First Nations People. We aim to continue contributing articles to SWAN NEWS and providing links to relevant books, resource materials and reports.

And finally, after two and a half years, SFN has decided to move to being a less formal 'Interest Group'. This will enable more flexible participation of SWAN members who are interested in First Nations issues. We will get together quarterly to share information. Those who want to follow up specific issues will also meet to plan actions as the need arises. Our first gathering will be a pre-Xmas get-together in December.

We welcome interested SWAN members to join us!

Contact: Maureen Lucas on 0421 984 416 or Diane McDonald 0404 417485 for further information