

Robert Riley

Indigenous Concepts and Networking (ICaN) Dubbo NSW



Now the co-owner of a nursery, Robert Riley left school after Year 10 to be an apprentice motorcycle mechanic — but he only secured the job because a friend vouched for him, something that's always in the back of his mind.

“The employer wasn't really confident in employing an Aboriginal person, but I got the job because a mate who worked there backed me.”

Now 48, the Dubbo local later went on to own a motorcycle franchise.

However, Rob's world came crashing down when he went through a divorce. “I lost everything and was actually lost myself. I just thought ‘What do I really want to do with my life?’”

“Being a mechanic and selling bikes was a good lifestyle, but it wasn't fulfilling anything inside me. So I took 12 months off and then worked for the Department of Education and a Job Service Provider.”

Nothing's changed

“I did a project management job, travelling around western New South Wales — New Careers for Aboriginal People. It was a good reality check in what's happening out there in communities.



AgriFutures Australia

Diversity in decision-making in rural industries

“I think being in that business world I was in, I’d lost touch with my own upbringing too. When I started to work out in community, I saw people were still experiencing those same things – lack of opportunity and racism – from when I was a kid.

“I’ve achieved what I have because I was given the opportunity — by my grandparents, my dad and my mate.”

Creating opportunity

Driven by these experiences, in February 2012 Rob and his brother James established Indigenous Concepts and Networking (ICaN), an organisation that focuses on training, skills development and long-term employment for Indigenous people. The *Diversity in decision-making in rural industries* report found that Indigenous Australians are the most under-represented group, comprising just one per cent of the agricultural workforce and two per cent of forestry. However, it also found several effective mechanisms to increase the number of Indigenous people in rural industry decision-making roles, including business-graduate internships and traineeships.

In a nutshell, ICaN is all about giving Indigenous people opportunities.

In 2014, ICaN took over a native retail nursery in Dubbo, with the profits funding many programs including landscaping, aboriginal culture and disability programs. Rob’s decisions to create new programs are based on the needs he sees in the community and where he thinks he can be of use. Encouraged by his own experiences and desire to make a difference, Rob finds nothing challenging about his work.

Opportunity for diversity

Rob sees a lot more opportunity for diversity in rural industries.

“I honestly don’t think there is diversity in decision-making in agriculture. From what I have seen from selling four-wheelers and bikes to farmers across NSW, and now the work with Landcare groups and government departments in agriculture or horticulture, I don’t see a lot of decision-makers who are Indigenous.

“We did a work for the dole program two years ago. It was one of the most successful — not just in Dubbo, but overall. The participants did horticulture — planting trees and propagating. We then sourced additional funding so they could all do a Certificate II in Horticulture.”

Differences work

While he finds immense satisfaction in seeing participants turn their lives around with opportunities via ICaN, Rob also finds a satisfaction when people realise he has valuable advice to offer.

“When I sit amongst business people, many look at my skin colour and don’t give me credit for having a brain. My brother James is light skinned, and in meetings the attention’s given to him. But I’m outcome driven, so when I do open my mouth, people think ‘hang on, we’ll give this guy some time’. That gives me satisfaction, because I’m a believer that your skin colour shouldn’t matter, we should all be given a chance.

“I don’t sit in a silo and think about one thing. I’m going to knock the silo down and ask why. And if someone has a better way, I’ll change — and that’s why our programs are so successful.”

Guided by principles

Rob is driven to give people opportunities, but his decisions at the nursery are also guided by profit.

“The nursery is commercial, and its profits allow us to run other programs, so my decisions are based on how something will affect my client base. Then I look at what is best for the participant. If I can reach your targets and we’ve both got the best interests of the participants at heart, I’m all in.”

“We need to have the opportunity to see something different. You need to be aware that people are different. No one’s right. No one’s wrong. But maybe someone will offer up something better. Everyone is worth listening to and deserves an opportunity.”

“Maybe that one person who you didn’t give a chance to could have ended up being your best employee, your best asset, or the person who found simple solutions to increase productivity and save money.”

