

regular feature:

Territory

TALL POPPY

The Yolngu Entrepreneur

It was a glittering evening with some of Australia's A-list celebrities and high profile businesspeople in attendance to celebrate an education initiative aimed at Indigenous children.

Sponsoring thousand dollar plus tables at the One Lap Top per Child gala event at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art were members of the ASX Top 50 executives, sporting identities Ian Thorpe and Nova Peris, as well as then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. While the evening's speakers voiced their support for the project, one speaker nailed it.

Timmy 'Djawa' Burarrwanga, 40, a Yolngu man, coming all the way from Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory, made the corporate audience take notice. Speaking in English, his 14th language (because no one in the room spoke any of the 13 Aboriginal dialects he speaks), Burarrwanga urged them to work with Aboriginal people to form a 'common unity' and reconciliation with the goal of closing the gap between the health and education of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The One Lap Top per Child project was a significant first step for major sponsors like the Commonwealth Bank, News Limited and Telstra to make. More corporate cooperation is needed.

Timmy Burarrwanga knows about corporate Australia. For the past five years he has operated a tourism venture on his ancestral land at Bawaka in East Arnhem Land. The pristine coastal retreat has become a favoured destination for corporate Australia to send their executives in an effort to increase their cultural awareness. "Sometimes people say they have been all over the world and never saw a place as beautiful as this," recalls Burarrwanga. "To me, the place is beautiful because it has significant stories connected with it. The story makes the land beautiful and natural. Full of joy and tears. From the songlines sung by old people and the old ladies cry over the land."

One of those inspired by the deep cultural presence at Bawaka was Commonwealth Bank Chief Information Officer Michael Harte. A strong supporter of One Lap Top project, Harte also leads an Indigenous banking team that works directly with Aboriginal leaders to build skills in financial literacy and enterprise development. Harte was so taken with his visit to Bawaka that he asked celebrity chef Tony Bilson ("the Godfather of Australian Cuisine") to design the menu for the Sydney event modelled on the bush food he'd tasted at Bawaka—with dishes featuring magpie goose and stingray. Bilson called it Dinner at Djawa's Place, named in honour of Burarrwanga and the work he has done to close the gap of Indigenous disadvantage.

While Burarrwanga is today the operator of a flourishing tourist venture and a board member on a range of community organisations, it was not an easy road to success. As a young Gumatj man growing up on his homeland, he became interested in business, strongly influenced by his father-in-law the Reverend Doctor Djiniyini Gondarra (OAM), the CEO for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Churches and his mother-in-law, Carol Gelung Gondarra, a prolific writer of poetry. "They were important role models for me," remembers Burarrwanga. "I wanted to have a business too, but my English was bad and I thought, 'how can I be in business if my English is so bad?'"

He recognised that if he wanted to live his dream, he would need to improve his education. He told his family of his plans to start a business and went about "overcoming hurdles" by improving his English and completing certificates in resource management, tourism and business. A Tourism Australia Workshop was held in Darwin in 2005. He went and listened and it helped him to understand what he had to do.

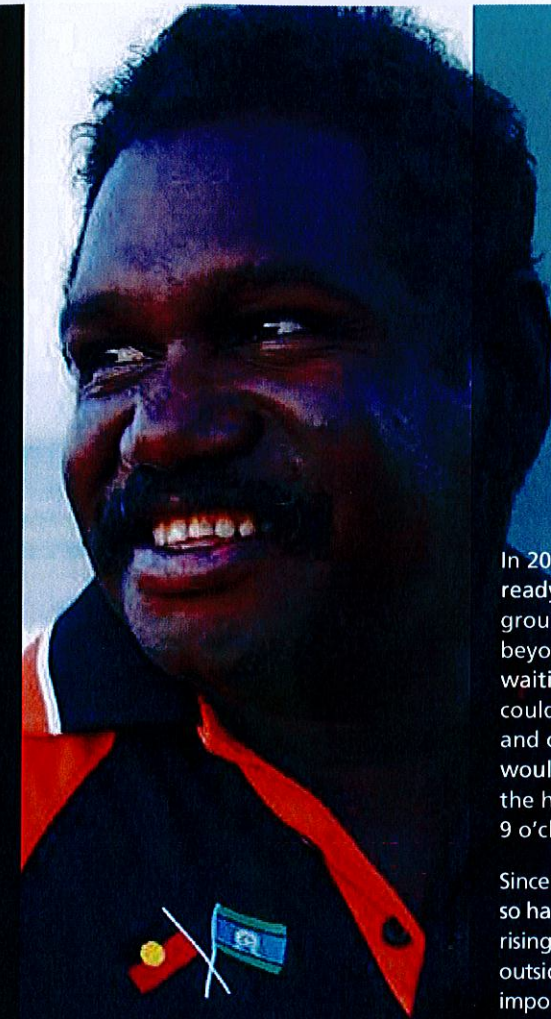
Burarrwanga began to see tourism as a culturally appropriate way of Aboriginal people earning a living on their traditional lands. "With tourism, people can make money from their land while they are protecting the land. There is a story and significance to our land. We can make opportunities by managing the land," he says.

In 2006 Burarrwanga and his family were ready for their first day tour. A Swiss group was booked and Burarrwanga was beyond nervous. "We stayed up all night waiting for the first tour," he recalls. "We couldn't sleep. So I went out in the dark and cut the trees along the road so they wouldn't scrape the cars and I filled in the holes in the road. When they come at 9 o'clock, I was really tired."

Since then the business has grown and so has the businessman. His confidence rising with his continuing interaction with outsiders, Burarrwanga has become an important leader among the Yolngu. He is chairman of the Yirrkala Dhanbul Aboriginal Corporation, a community development organisation that has developed projects and businesses aimed at assisting Indigenous employment and alleviating Indigenous disadvantage. The organisation initiated the Buku Larrngay Mulka Yirrkala Art Centre, an internationally renowned fine art operation that has delivered significant earnings to artists in remote homelands where few other economic opportunities exist.

Burarrwanga remains the director of the Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation, an organisation dedicated to alleviating Indigenous health problems. He is director of the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation, which provides natural resource management employment to Indigenous people as Dhimurru Rangers.

He is currently working to develop the Lirrwi Yolngu Tourism Aboriginal Corporation, which aims to open doors for Indigenous people to participate in the tourism industry. "My vision and dream is to create businesses in the remote homelands," says Burarrwanga. "They want me to tell them how to do it, and I reckon that's a real good economy for our people."



Timmy 'Djawa' Burarrwanga