

## Building The Future Through Enterprise – Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

Alice Springs, Northern Territory

### KUNGKA'S CAN COOK

*Kungka's Can Cook* was envisioned as a catering business showcasing Indigenous produce by friends Rayleen Brown and Gina Smith over “*a cuppa*” in 2000. Five years on, Kungka's Can Cook has developed into a successful business that has found these women feeding up to 1400 people at a time! These Kunga's (means ‘women’ in Pintjatjarra) employ up to 12 as they criss – cross the Northern Territory, feeding participants at a wide range of Aboriginal and non – Aboriginal events. Not only are Rayleen and Gina successful business women, they are also passionate about educating others on the diverse and versatile products native to Australia.



*Gina Smith and Rayleen Brown –photo curtesy of NT Dept. Primary Industry, Fishing & Mining*

### The Story So Far . . .

Smith and Brown Outback Catering, trading as *Kungka's Can Cook*, began with a conversation between two mothers with seven children between them. Both Gina and Rayleen could see the need for a catering service that better met the needs of Indigenous people and felt there was potential to create a successful enterprise. Too often they would attend catered functions only to be presented with unhealthy processed foods. Both women had directly experienced the health issues in Indigenous communities and understood the role diet plays in building healthy lifestyles.

## BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

The philosophy behind *Kungka's Can Cook* has been one of conscience - *'We don't want to produce inferior or unhealthy food just to make money, we want to provide healthy options for the community.'*

Rayleen had previously operated a café in Alice Springs, where she took the stance of being a role model in the community by providing food that was healthy – low in fat, sugar and salt. The nature of her business meant she also had unhealthy foods – but it was the healthy options people loved – and paid for! This discovery gave her the confidence to know that if *Kungka's Can Cook* could provide healthy food it would have a certain market – and she was right.

The business did not start over night. Much of the first 12 months was spent talking about and developing the business concept - its direction, market, and potential hurdles. Under the ATSI program entitled *'Is it a Good Idea, or a Good Business'*, the women spent six months developing their business plan and using facilitators at ATSI as a sounding board for advice. Rayleen and Gina both spent considerable time developing the business, fitting it in around full time work and family.

The women were successful in securing the tender for the catering of the 2001 Yeperenye Dreaming Festival in Alice Springs. Their catering at this event has become one of their achievement milestones, even though at the time the women didn't even own a fork! They had to hire (gather, beg and borrow!) all of their equipment including a large warmer brought to Alice Springs from Sydney. This function put the women to the test - over four days they fed 1400 people and it proved to be a baptism by fire! Despite some tears and nearly murdering their husbands, in the glow of their success they knew in their words *'We could do bloody anything!'*

*Kungka's Can Cook* has grown from having a couple of small groups and a government agency as regular customers to having customers throughout Alice Springs and the surrounding communities. They now have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous customers. They still enjoy the look of surprise when a customer discovers two Indigenous

## Building The Future Through Enterprise – Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

women in control! The nature of the catering industry means functions can be diverse – ranging from community meetings to art festivals. Larger events *Kungka's Can Cook* have catered include –

- Alice Springs Croc Festival 2003, 2004, 2005
- Year of the Outback Alice Springs Festival 2001
- Yeperenye Dreaming Festival 2001
- Indigenous Land and Sea Conference – Central Land Council 2005
- Indigenous Health Summit 2004
- *'The Alice'* television program, 2005 ongoing

In the process of creating and operating their business - *'They have learned how to run an office and budgets, calculate supplies for many days on the road, set up a full outback kitchen and drive a long-haul truck.'*

(2002, SBS The Food Lovers Guide to Australia, Series 4: EPISODE 1)

## The Impact

*Kungka's Can Cook* has achieved steady growth since its inception and all of the targets outlined in the original business plan have been met. The business has evolved to become more iconic than either of the women thought. Their brand and reputation results in regular approaches to open shops and restaurants.



*Rayleen Brown and Gina Smith*

## BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

These opportunities are setting the focus of the future direction for the business, but as Rayleen explains - *'We need to create time to work on the business, not just in the business- we're the only ones that can do that.'* The future will involve Rayleen and Gina taking a more managerial role and focusing on the business strategies, planning and direction. Roger Green from the Enterprise Development Centre in South Australia is working with the women on a development plan that will help take the business to the next level.

Employment numbers vary according to function size and catering demands, but up to 12 staff are often required. Rayleen and Gina have a commitment to hiring Indigenous staff. Employment options for Indigenous young people are limited in Alice Springs, and *Kungka's Can Cook* will play an increasingly important role in their options, training and experience. Complementing this is their commitment to other Indigenous businesses and service people.

Whether they expected it or not, Gina and Rayleen have become role models, particularly for young Indigenous women. Gina and Rayleen often give talks at schools encouraging young people (especially young women) to stay in school and to keep their dreams alive. They want young women to realise that even if they have left school or had children, it is never too late to follow your passions. Gina explains their commitment to other Indigenous females - *'The momentum has begun for us - we are hoping we are going to roll and pick up other Indigenous women along the way.'*

Rayleen and Gina are immensely proud of their contribution to highlighting bush products and flavours. Their use of native ingredients is creating awareness and allowing the wider public to experience, appreciate and *'not be frightened'* of the distinctive Aussie tastes. Gina and Rayleen promote Australian foods and recipes by producing recipes, tastings at public events and promoting places that sell native ingredients. In 2002, they featured on SBS's *'The Food Lovers Guide to Australia'*, showcasing their talent, business and the diversity of Australian flavours.

## Success Factors

Gina and Rayleen detail six factors critical to their success.

### *Good Partnership*

Rayleen and Gina both attribute their success to their strong personal friendship and partnership. Decisions regarding business are made together. Having a partnership provides continuous back up. Neither of them ever has to be backed into making a quick decision, as they can always say they have to consult their partner first! They both know that if something goes wrong, neither is blamed, they accept the learning curve and move on together.

Essential to maintaining that partnership has been communication. Business can be volatile - it has its ups and its downs and can be emotional. Continually communicating means both partners understand the other and they work on problems and directions honestly together. Effective communication is not about avoiding debate and disagreement, but sharing and resolving issues.

Their partnership is unique. As Roger Green states, *'Rayleen and Gina break every rule that exists in business, the first rule is avoid partnerships! I have never seen such a frank and open partnership. It is paramount to their success. Their determination is really quite staggering.'*

### *Belief in your Business and your Capacity*

Gina Smith explains - *'Believing in your business gives you the determination to make it work.'* Knowing you have a great product, a market and belief in your capabilities allows you to continue, despite hurdles or negativity from others. Surprisingly, the more the women have believed

#### SUCCESS FACTORS

- Good Partnership
- Belief in Your Business and Your Capacity
- Sacrifice
- Balance in Life
- Accepting the Unpredictable
- Unique Product

## BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE

### Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

in their business, the more they have loved it. They have built their reputation and increased their own skills and confidence.

It has taken great courage for Rayleen and Gina to take the risk and start a business. They have had to compete against the *"tall poppy syndrome"* from within their own Indigenous community, and negative stereotyping from the wider community. These things have only made them more determined to demonstrate their success. At times, they have questioned their own ability, but at no time did they *'experience shame'*. Instead they have continually improved their own skills in business by doing small business and accounting courses to allow them to have confidence in their control of the business. Rayleen and Gina are in the business for themselves and their family, a critical factor that has contributed to their success. According to Roger Green from the Enterprise Development Centre - *'Many Indigenous community enterprises fail because the responsibility of many is put onto the shoulders of a few. Control and direction is constantly tested, due to input by elders and extended family. Rayleen and Gina have stayed focused on what they want to achieve. They have remained immune to the demands of extended family that often arise within close cultural communities.'*



*Discussing the day ahead*

### Balance in Life

Balancing life, business and family is a priority. Especially being women, the responsibility and challenges can be far greater. Rayleen explains - *'It is important to not be angry*

### Sacrifice

Owning your own business is a continual challenge and immensely time consuming. The early stages of *Kungka's Can Cook* required a sacrifice of income, standard of living and free time.

*about having all of the responsibilities, instead it is about balancing tasks and giving all areas of your life the attention they deserve.'*

## **Accepting the Unpredictable**

In Gina's words – *'As with life, business is not a perfect formula and you can't plan for everything that is going to happen – you have to take it and roll with it.'*

## **Unique Product**

Rayleen and Gina have differentiated themselves from any other catering business in Alice Springs. They have been able to form their own niche market, while remaining accessible to others looking for a healthy, Australian and unique alternative. Rayleen and Gina are confident about the products they use - they have made a point of showcasing their full potential without shying away from the unique Australian flavours.



*Ready for the day ahead*

## **Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option**

Both women believe that - *'You have to start with something you already know, build on that. You have to have motivation and believe in yourself. There's no use doing something to please other people- do it for yourself.'*

## For Further Information

Rayleen Brown and Gina Smith

Owners

Kungka's Can Cook

Postal: PO Box 2364

Alice Springs, NT 0871

Phone (08) 8952 3102

Fax (08) 8953 7318

Email [kungkascancook@bipond.com](mailto:kungkascancook@bipond.com)

Website [www.kungkascancook.com](http://www.kungkascancook.com)