

3rd National Youth Justice Forum Learnings

“Deep Listening”

Overall Reflections:

I feel incredibly fortunate to have attended the National Youth Justice Forum in Meanjin (Brisbane), on Turrbal and Yuggera Country. As one of the youngest employees at Ninti, I am grateful for the opportunity to represent our organisation and be part of these critical conversations. Many people working in this space, and in the broader community, are deeply concerned about the recent changes to youth justice laws in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Victoria. It's a shared worry for the future of our country.

One of the most powerful parts of the forum was hearing directly from young people who have experienced the youth justice system and are now mentoring others or advocating for change and are formidable leaders. Across the presentations and panel discussions, there was a common thread: relationships. Whether the focus was on challenges or solutions, it always came back to connection, the lack of community and the absence of safe and trusting relationships.

No two stories were the same, but they followed a similar pattern. Home wasn't always a safe or stable place, whether because of neglect, abuse, or simply due to broader challenges like food insecurity or limited access to healthcare. These difficulties often led young people to avoid being at home. The struggles then showed up at school as 'bad behaviour', which frequently resulted in suspension, expulsion, or being sent back to those difficult environments. From there, things often escalated, with systems that were meant to support and protect them instead pushing them further away.

Again and again, I heard the same heartbreaking truths:

“I wish someone took the time to listen to me.”

“I wish someone cared.”

“The community hated me, so I wanted to watch it burn.”

These words hit hard. They are a reflection of pain, but also of deep insight. Young people do have the answers. They are the ones best placed to guide us toward better outcomes. But time and time again, we fail to accept their leadership. We keep circling the same practices and expecting different results.

In our work, we need to do more to back young people and elevate them into positions of real influence. We are all members of communities, and we all carry a responsibility in the lives of young people. That means committing to deep listening - not just hearing them but truly listening with the intent to act. They are not just the future. They are the leaders we need right now.

Strength Shown in Communities:

Ngurra Buru (Night Space)

In the Kimberley region, many young people are on the streets after school or at night. These are times when they are vulnerable, but more importantly, they are not resting in a space that is safe and supportive. The community had been calling for something to change. “The safe space isn’t in the back of a police car or in the police station.”

Aalia Cox-Tanaka, the Project Coordinator at West Kimberley Futures Empowered Communities, is an inspiring young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman who played a significant role in the success of Ngurra Buru. Aalia spoke about the importance of early community consultations, which began long before the safe night space even had a name. These included more than 430 participants across the community, and most importantly, culturally safe consultations took place with young people.

Aalia emphasised how vital youth leadership is and the need to empower all young people. She shared that young people’s contributions must be recognised as valuable and not treated as a transaction or extracted without care. Through consultation, a Design Committee was formed. It was led and run by young people who worked together to develop their own set of agreed principles. This process led to the establishment of the Empowered Young Leaders, a youth-led group shaped by this work. Aalia and the team recognised that language is key to getting honest, meaningful responses and is the most important part of achieving strong outcomes.

We also heard from Fiona Hart, the Program Manager of Ngurra Buru, another inspiring Aboriginal woman from Kullarri Regional Communities Indigenous Corporation. Fiona shared why it was crucial to build everything from the ground up. This included designing a space that felt welcoming and like home, and recruiting people already seen as leaders within the community. That meant hiring people who may not have formal qualifications but who had the life experience, skills, and kindness to truly support young people. The program then worked to support staff to gain formal qualifications over time.

Fiona also spoke about the importance of clear communication. The team developed standard FAQ sheets and briefing templates to keep messaging consistent. “We don’t need to overcomplicate our mission,” she said, “otherwise ten different people will all come to ten different conclusions about the program.”

Since Ngurra Buru launched in May 2024, over 4,000 young people have come into contact with the service. Its success has inspired further momentum across Western Australia, with the Kununurra Night Space Co-Design Project now underway and aiming to open its doors next year.

Links:

- [Ngurra Buru \(Night Space\) Program — West Kimberley Futures - Empowered Communities](#)
- [Highly successful Aboriginal-led Kimberley youth pr... | National Indigenous Times](#)
- [Broome's Immediate Response Night Space welcomes 150 youths in early weeks of pilot program - ABC News](#)

Bunjilwarra Aboriginal Youth Healing

Bunjilwarra is a residential alcohol and drug healing service for Aboriginal young people aged 16 to 25. Located on Country in Hastings, the 12-bed facility is more than just a place for recovery. It is a safe space built by community, for community. At its core, Bunjilwarra is about healing through culture, connection and care.

Young people come to Bunjilwarra voluntarily, where they are supported by a strong team of Aboriginal staff and clinicians. The program takes a holistic approach to wellbeing, combining group and individual therapy with culture, education, vocational activities and healing practices. It is a space where young people are encouraged to rediscover who they are, build life skills, develop resilience and plan for their future.

Culture is embedded in every part of the service, from how the space was designed, to how programs are delivered, and how care is planned with each young person and their family. The team values respect, healing and community, recognising that true recovery means reconnecting with self, family and culture. Young people are supported to set their own goals and move through their healing journey at their own pace.

Bunjilwarra also works closely with families, Elders and local services. This helps ensure that young people are not only supported during their stay but also have the right networks and opportunities when they return home, whether that is through housing, education, employment or community connection.

This program reflects what can be achieved when Aboriginal organisations lead with cultural strength, when healing is driven by our values, and when our young people are seen not as problems to fix but as futures to believe in.

Links:

- This is a link to a submission by the young people staying at Bunjilwarra to the Yoorrok Justice Commission:
<https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/document-library/submission-bunjilwarra-male-youth-group/>

- <https://ysas.org.au/locations/bunjilwarra/#:~:text=Bunjilwarra%20is%20a%2012%20bed,hectare%20site%20in%20Hastings%2C%20Victoria.>

Youth Engagement Program

The Youth Engagement Program (YEP) run by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia is about meeting young people where they are at and walking alongside them. It provides support for Aboriginal young people going through the Children's Courts in Perth, Broome, Derby, Kununurra, Wyndham and Halls Creek. But it's not just about court outcomes. It's about building trust, finding connection, and supporting young people to strengthen all parts of their lives.

YEP Diversion Officers help young people with the things that matter. That might be help with finding accommodation, re-engaging in education or training, accessing health care or Centrelink, sorting out ID, getting to appointments, or support around family and community. YEP is grounded in the belief that young people deserve care and respect, and that healing happens when people feel safe and seen.

Sacha Greenoff, the State Lead and an inspiring Aboriginal woman, spoke about the ripple effect this work has in communities. She told a story about a group of boys being taken on Country, where Elders taught them how to catch cherabin (prawns). The boys got to take buckets of food home for their families. One young man said he was proud because he could finally provide for his family. When they dropped him off, his grandmother called everyone out of the house to help bring the food in and get the fire going. She was beaming with pride, saying how happy she was that her grandson had been out on Country and how much their whole family had learned from him since he became part of the YEP program.

These moments show the real heart of YEP. It's not just a service. It's a reminder that young people have value, that they have strengths, and that when they are supported in the right way, they begin to see that too.

Links:

- [Services - Aboriginal Legal Service](#)
- [Aboriginal-led fix 'must follow' WA youth diversion... | National Indigenous Times](#)
- [New initiative to divert children away from criminal justice system | Western Australian Government](#)

Final Reflections:

One of the biggest things I took away from the forum is that the answers already exist. They're in community, in culture, and in young people themselves. Real change is happening where people are trusted to lead and where support is built from the ground

up. It's not about overcomplicating things. It's about listening properly, backing people in, and doing things with care.

The stories I heard weren't just inspiring. They were a reminder of what's possible when we shift power and walk alongside young people instead of trying to "fix" them. It made me reflect on how this applies not just here, but across all the spaces we work in - whether that's remote Australia, the Pacific or any community where voices, especially those of young people, have been unheard for too long.

When we lead with deep listening, we show respect. We make space for truth, for lived experience, and for solutions that work. Culture, connection and care aren't soft add-ons. They're the foundation. If we keep showing up with that in mind, act on what young people share, and give them the power to lead the solutions, we will see different results.