

Improving Justice relationships with Aboriginal communities

My name is Merv Atkinson and I am the Executive Officer for Grampians RAJAC (Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee) with the Indigenous & Diversity Unit of the Department of Justice in Victoria. I am also an ex member of the Victoria Police Service of almost 25 years.

A component of my duties as Executive Officer is to implement recommendations of the RCIADIC to Justice Agencies and Aboriginal Communities across the Grampians Region; also to assist in the improvement of relationships between both parties.

A way of achieving this was to formulate a program that would consist of teamwork, mutual respect, and cultural exchange. I then began the planning for the Red Cross Murray River Marathon 2003. This involved the participation of three Justice Agencies, Corrections Victoria, Victoria Police, Indigenous & Diversity Unit from Dept of Justice and Aboriginal Communities from across Western Victoria and Loddon Mallee.

The idea was to enter this group of people from diverse backgrounds and have them paddle down the Murray River for a distance of 404km in five days. The group consisted of 50 personnel both male & female, young & old (13 – 55). Approximately 25 paddled and 25 acted as their land crew & logistics team. Together in the kayaks were youth relay teams, adult relay teams of both sexes and open men's teams with Police/Koori, Corrections/Koori and all Police teams. The land crew consisted of kooris, Corrections Staff, Police Staff. They were responsible for setting up camp on a daily basis and manning four checkpoints per day.

All this began with an “ice breaker” cultural awareness session on the first night and was followed by two more during the course of the event. This would assist each person with being able to relate to each other a gain a mutual respect for one another. From a teamwork point of view, this was basically forced upon everyone by nature due to the enormous work that was required to complete the event. Time was not a luxury and therefore one had no time to ponder on any negative thoughts.

Outcomes that were achieved as a result of the event were numerous, some not being able to be measured, but those that come to mind are:

- Better understanding of each other's role in society
- Improved relationships between Justice Agencies
- Improved relationship between Koories and Justice Agencies
- Mutual respect
- Self-belief
- Teamwork
- Leadership skills
- Social interaction
- Time Management skills
- And the list goes on.