Diamonds, pearls and Kimberley girls

Without shame in the north-west

Ellie Rennie, with Jason Potts

A DISTINCT Australian identity is developing in the west. It comes from the Pilbara as a product of the mining industry, along with iron ore and our ‘comparative advantage’. By propping up Australia’s economy in hard times, the mining industry is shaping notions of what this land is good for. It’s a strong and masculine image: almost half the population of the Pilbara is employed in mining and construction, and 85 per cent of the workforce is male. That new romantic image of the west was depicted in the cinema success of 2011, partly funded by mining royalties: Red Dog without a master, a wanderer and a loyal mate to homesick miners, misfits and those trying to make an honest buck. This is an Australia where the land is gutted by big machines, where sweat and red dirt paint white men a violent colour. Politicians tell us that this is how Australia survives – it’s what keeps us strong while Europe and America teeter on the precipice of financial collapse. The mining companies tell the Traditional Owners that this is the best hope for Indigenous advancement, as though it’s this or nothing.

When you head north of the Pilbara there is a different rhythm. The Kimberley spans 420,000 square kilometres, most of it strikingly beautiful. Even the mining industry there has a distinctly feminine orientation. Kimberley miners dig for the ingredients of jewellery, not steel – around nine-tenths of the world’s pink diamonds come from Kimberley rocks. Pearls are farmed in its oceans, and the land is now turning fragrant. After forty years of unprofitable crop experimentation Kununurra growers discovered sandalwood, which produces a precious base oil used for perfume and incense. Locals joke that a bushfire would kill every mozzie in the Kimberley with the scent. Diamonds, pearls, sandalwood and the supporting industries constitute more than half of the Kimberley’s economy. The national narrative is of dirty fuels and brute strength, but the Kimberley thrives on sweetness, beauty and decoration.
ON A HOT October night under a blanket of stars twelve Aboriginal girls strut down a raised catwalk in Broome, vying to claim the title of Kimberley Girl. Behind them a big ‘KG’ sign flashes, and they move to the beat of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry. Local retailers sponsored the resort wear and evening dresses (there are no swimsuits in this parade). The girls have spent hours in hair and makeup, and two days rehearsing the choreography. The first walk is shaky: a wrong turn, a misstep, visible shyness, occasional tugging at a hem. The next time the girls find their stride: smiles, a sway of the hip, an elegant wave of the arm. A girl blows a kiss to a young fan. Even when the music stops suddenly due to an electrical problem, they do not falter.

Close to a thousand people have turned up to watch the Kimberley Girl final. At the front are young kids, little girls dressed in their best clothes. Some families have come from communities far away to see their daughters, sisters, mothers or aunts on stage. They are there to show support and to celebrate, enjoying the hype of an event they can call their own. Prior to the final there were three heats, in Fitzroy Crossing, Broome and Kununurra, but a third of the finalists are from much smaller communities.

In the packed VIP section, sponsors from Virgin Australia and Leighton Contractors sip beers and enjoy the show. Channel Seven executives, guests of supporter Kerry Stokes, fill a large table, while the event’s patron, the designer Liz Davenport, circulates in an electric-blue gown. The mining companies are there too.

Midway through the event a multimedia presentation fills the stage, with stylish black and white portraits of the girls, and their pre-recorded voice-overs: ‘I am from Halls Creek. I like fishing and swimming and hanging out with friends. If I win KG I want to be a role model to other young girls and teach them to get over the shame factor…’ The crowd cheers each snapshot of personality and ambition.

It looks like a beauty pageant but there’s more going on. Since 2004 Aboriginal women aged between sixteen and twenty-five have signed up for Kimberley Girl, a leadership program that culminates in the catwalk parade and modelling shoot. Kimberley Girl teaches job readiness – not just grooming, but confidence and public speaking, a chance to experiment with identity and imagine a different life. It is run by a Broome Aboriginal media organisation, Goolarri (the Yawuru word for west coast, ‘where the red earth meets the blue sea’). As the Goolarri CEO, Jodie Bell, says, ‘Kimberley Girl doesn’t change lives; it does enable girls to see choices.’

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Kimberley Girl while researching Indigenous media in Broome in 2009. Goolarri’s directors were convinced of the program’s success. The evidence was in audience numbers, and the stories facilitators reported – tales of personal transformation, strong family networks and support systems. The only problem was that it seemed too brash, too unreal, for external agencies to take
seriously. ‘You should go out to the heats and see it for yourself,’ the Goolarri directors told me. Jason Potts, an economist, volunteered to undertake a cost-benefit analysis and to review the organisational aspects of the program. I was allowed to observe the workshops and interview the participants, while Jason was not.

By the end of the 2011 competition we could see that Kimberley Girl was producing striking outcomes. A back-of-the-envelope calculation showed that for every participant who enters the program at a cost of $5000 (from public and private sources), the government can expect to gain $37,000 in reduced welfare and increased tax revenue over a lifetime. Of the past participants we surveyed, nine in every ten said they benefitted from the program, with increased confidence, better choices and jobs. The program is also popular: in its target demographic, Kimberley Girl is proportionally bigger than Australian Idol.

By contrast, according to the 2011 biennial Productivity Commission report Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, existing funding and service delivery models have failed to close the gap, with a shockingly poor return on investment. Nearly three and a half billion dollars is being spent annually and most indicators of Indigenous disadvantage remain unchanged, or have gone backwards. The report found, for example, that in ‘both 2002 and 2008, around 40% of Indigenous people aged 18 to 24 years were neither employed nor studying, compared to 10% of non-Indigenous people’. A young person who is not studying, undertaking training or participating in the workforce is at serious risk of long-term disadvantage.

The Productivity Commission chairman, Gary Banks, said the ‘latest data still reveal considerable disparities in outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians’, and that a majority of quantitative indicators showed ‘no improvement or actually deteriorated’. A Department of Finance review found that modest improvements in some areas have been offset by static or worsening indications in others, concluding: ‘past approaches to remedying Indigenous disadvantage have clearly failed.’

Because of this systemic and costly program failure, there is increasing recognition that new approaches and methods need to be considered. The commission report highlights a scattering of ‘things that work’, activities and programs that appear to make a difference, often at community level and accompanied by private sector involvement. These bright spots typically have at least four ‘success factors’: co-operative approaches between Indigenous people and government, often with the not-for-profit and private sectors; community involvement in program design and decision-making; good governance at all levels; and ongoing government support. Without these success factors, programs are more likely to fail. Kimberley Girl has all but the last of them.

Kimberley Girl is not mentioned in the Productivity Commission report. In important respects, it does not conform to the standard policy model. It is an
emergent community initiative, not something foisted by outside experts; it is fun and glamorous, not furrowed-brow intervention of the utmost seriousness; and it is fostering a competitive instinct, with manifestly commercial overtones.

The program appeared to us to be a novel approach to social innovation that raised some tricky research issues. A standard way of examining Kimberley Girl would be to determine whether or not it offers a model for other Indigenous development programs. But framing it as a means of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is problematic. Why should a successful Indigenous event be judged by ambitious social goals that similar non-Indigenous events are not expected to achieve? Moreover, if the only criterion for participation is to be a young Indigenous woman, not necessarily a disadvantaged young woman, would we be casting Aboriginality as a disadvantage?

When government funding is considered, the question of how to treat Kimberley Girl’s social dimension becomes even more complex. The targets and measures required to administer the Closing the Gap policies can influence, and possibly distort, how the Indigenous not-for-profit sector behaves and is depicted. With such a large and intricate policy area, spanning so many areas of government, it is easy for people to look for predetermined indicators, rather than the whole picture. It is easy to walk into ‘the gap’, when it might be better to go around or above it.

Social outcomes should not be ignored, although it is worth acknowledging that they sometimes are part of a mixed bag of outcomes, including private benefits. We still need to ask where public funds will do the most good or yield the greatest return on investment. Sometimes, as in the case of Kimberley Girl, enterprise and entertainment might be more successful than the standard approaches.

NO GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT could ever have come up with Kimberley Girl. The event was the brainchild of Kira Fong, Goolarri’s event manager at the time (now its chief operations officer), who pitched the idea at a Friday afternoon ideas session. A former model, Kira had noticed young Indigenous girls on the streets lacking confidence. Although she knew that modelling can have a negative side, she figured if things were done right it could showcase Indigenous beauty, and give girls an opportunity for self-promotion and experimentation. Kimberley Girl was unlike Goolarri’s usual business, but nevertheless it worked. The inaugural 2004 Kimberley Girl was run without a budget. Staff donated clothes. Eighty people – most of them family of the contestants – turned up to watch. On the second night there were three hundred. Although there was no formal program for personal development in the early years, Kira realised that the girls needed to be coached to think positively about themselves, be confident in a public setting, even to get on stage. A local woman, who had donated a day spa package as a prize, put Kira in touch with her sister who worked in professional development. By 2007 this was formally incorporated into the program: personal and professional development modules.
Kimberley Girl underwent a two-heat replication in the Pilbara in 2010, which was separately badged ‘Pilbara Girl’ in 2011 and attracted more than $100,000 in local sponsorship. A cadetship program was also added in 2010, providing Certificate III training to a group of twelve former participants to become program facilitators. Two hundred and nineteen girls have participated in Kimberley Girl so far.

DAY ONE OF a regional Kimberley Girl 2011 heat. The temperature is in the high thirties in an oddly pretty town, where the bright pink bougainvillea contrasts with the bare, swollen figures of the boab trees. Beth (not her real name), twenty-one, is at the venue – an educational institution – before anyone else. She is wearing a tight white T-shirt and office skirt, and is trying to hide her nervousness. Beth works two jobs: life in remote Western Australia is expensive since the mining boom. Her work colleagues encouraged her to do Kimberley Girl, telling her she’d go far. Later, she told the group: ‘I was really nervous about coming here – that I am not pretty enough and there will be all these girls I don’t know – but I came anyway.’ Her words surprised me, as she didn’t seem shy. That first morning she waited hours for the other participants to arrive.

By late morning eleven girls have turned up. Some come in pairs; some with a teacher or cultural worker. A young liaison officer from the school, Angela, sits with three sixteen-year-olds. The participants have diverse lives: some come from stable homes and work, or attend boarding school in the city, while others have fallen out of the education system and are experiencing significant hardship. Roberta is living at a youth hostel, as she ‘didn’t get along’ with her mother. She is pleased that at the hostel they make her do her homework and go to school: ‘If I wasn’t living there I’d be on the streets at night,’ she told me. Her older sister had been in Kimberley Girl the previous year and encouraged her to sign up.

Daphne is twenty-three years old; her grandmother had been telling her to do Kimberley Girl for years, but this is the first time she had the courage. She has a baby, and after a rough couple of years is back on her feet and in a traineeship (teen pregnancy is four times higher among Aboriginal teenagers than among all Australian teenagers). She spoke so softly she was barely audible, covering her smile with her hand.

Jessica, a lithe girl in basketball shorts, with long hair and deep dark eyes, is the shyest. She is in Kimberley Girl because she was ‘told to’ attend by a social worker.

Facilitator Kartika Eades and event co-ordinator Nommie Wade run through some activities to relax the girls. Kartika, a former Kimberley Girl participant, has since worked in the fashion industry as a makeup artist. It is the first time Nommie has been involved, although she attended every year to ‘support family members in the show, or other girls I know, and because it’s a good evening’. Both are big personalities – talkative women who find it easy to fill the silence in the room. The
participants play name games and draw outlines of themselves, which they decorate, and say positive things about themselves (‘Hey, I’m okay!’). They are encouraged to compliment each other’s life-sized posters (‘Your hair is deadly’, ‘I like your skirt’), and are taught how to accept and repay a compliment. The personal development program centres on positive thinking techniques – ‘don’t sweat the small stuff’; don’t let your family or others ‘run you down’. Components on eating well and deportment are delivered as life lessons rather than beauty tips. Kartika tells the girls that posture matters when they go for a job and that they will be judged if they walk around without shoes.

‘Shame’ is the word that comes up most frequently. It is short for ‘ashamed’ – shyness, lack of confidence and fear of moving outside of your comfort zone – and most of the girls use it to describe themselves. Older Indigenous women have told me that ‘feeling shame’ is not part of traditional culture, in which everyone knows their place and role.

Not all the girls stay the course. One had been drinking; another decided she could not commit, as she has small children, but says she will try again next year. A late arrival was told she had to leave because she was over twenty-five, but was encouraged to be a mentor. Towards the end of the day one of the shyest girls asks how many of them will go through to the finals. There is a moment of silence as they all look at each other and weigh up their chances.

On day two the girls work on their voice-overs, diligently writing in exercise books. Kartika warns them not to talk about world peace and encourages them to be original, to be themselves. It takes them a long time to write a few sentences: few have thought about where they will be in five years or the difference they might make in the world. Once the scripts are finished they are forced out of their shyness, to become heard, to rehearse their lines in front of the group.

When the girl who had been ‘told’ to be there didn’t arrive, Nommie went to find her and offer her a lift. According to Nommie, the house was in a state of disrepair, with smashed windows and burnt-out cars, older people drinking. Later in the week she collected her from a different house in a similar situation.

Angela, the 23-year-old mentor for the three sixteen-year-olds, is still participating, leading by example. In her voice-over she says she hopes to complete her degree and to work in international development.

In the next two days two former Kimberley Girls pop in to help with hair and makeup. They are confident and talkative, and get the shyer girls to participate. By then the three girls from the school access program have left – they had an opportunity to go on an excursion to the city in the week of the Broome finals.

Angela decides to stay and compete. She said she would not have joined of her own accord, because she doesn’t like the idea of ‘being judged for how I look’
and wouldn’t want to be judged against girls who have had a different life to her. She changed her mind because of the personal development activities, which were helping girls to ‘get over the shame factor’, something she is finding useful herself.

The final six girls select their dresses for the photo shoot, while the facilitators and former Kimberley Girls do their hair and makeup. This is a chance to try out a different pathway by physical transformation. Shelly doesn’t seem to suffer from the shame thing. She is a sporty and confident sixteen-year-old, the only girl in a family of boys. Shelly has wanted to do Kimberley Girl ‘since I was little’, and this is her first chance to overcome her tomboy image and do something different.

On the fifth day the final six participants meet the facilitators. The repetitive rehearsal of catwalk choreography is performed without complaint, aside from the occasional eye roll. Jessica, who came into the program through a social worker, has stayed the course. ‘You are the only one who’s allowed to cross your legs when you walk,’ Kartika told her. ‘You have an amazing walk.’

The girls take it very seriously. Some are intent on winning, while others are more philosophical, saying that it is the experience that matters. Beth says, ‘Honestly, I want to win, but in terms of winning being important it’s not that important – it’s just the experience. But secretly I want to win.’ Another comments that the competition keeps her motivated: ‘You back down from it but you have to get yourself back up and push yourself to do it.’ They are all nervous about forgetting a move or tripping over.

After a full day of rehearsals and preparation, the judges, from local businesses and Aboriginal organisations, arrive and sit at the side of the stage. The hall fills up, and the girls who have dropped out reappear to watch. The Goolarri crew has interviewed the girls and prepares to film the show, which will eventually be screened on GTV, its Broome station.

Beth, who arrived early on the first day, is troubled because her shoe is broken. She gets a call from her mother who tells her that she won’t be there because she is going to go out and ‘get charged’ (drunk) instead. The show begins. I am genuinely nervous for the girls, but particularly for Beth. Shelly, the tomboy, walks like she’s been modelling for years and Daphne, the shy one with the kid, is stunningly graceful and confident. Beth struggles through the show and is not selected by the judges.

Four of the six girls go through to the Broome finals; the judges have selected Shelly, Angela and Daphne, and the facilitators chose one ‘wildcard’ based on participation. I am thrilled that Beth is their choice. Some girls will come back to try again next year (three of the participants across the 2011 Kimberley Girl heats were repeating the program).
Kanithia Griffiths, one of those helping with this heat, never got through to the finals, but is now doing Goolarr’s Certificate III level cadetship, which will qualify her to be a facilitator in future years. She has no doubt of the value: ‘These programs help young girls, especially the ones that are shamed. I can tell which ones are really shamed, but I also know I will see a change.’ She cannot tolerate girls bringing each other down and says that the Kimberley Girls have to make sure that doesn’t happen. ‘I want to bring people up to my level,’ she says, ‘not bring them down and talk them down. That’s what most people do when they get up to the top. In our world they say, “you think you’re this and you think you’re that”, but I want to give them the thought of “think where you are heading”.’

DEPORTMENT AND GROOMING classes for Aboriginal girls, as well as pageants, are not a new thing. Historically, these have been assimilation techniques, common in many colonial nations, to make indigenous women acceptable. Beauty pageants also grate with feminist thinking. These did not seem to be major concerns for the Kimberley Girl audience or participants, though they kept the non-Indigenous Broome population at an uneasy distance.

A closer parallel might be the Aboriginal debutante ball, held in 1968 at Sydney’s Town Hall, and organised by Charles Perkins and the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. In Passionate Histories (ANU Press, 2010) the historian Anna Cole quotes Perkins explaining that the idea was to ‘stimulate a sense of pride and dignity’ and ‘to become part of the community in a way that we think is acceptable’. Although the FAA saw the event as a political statement, a kind of ‘coming out’ for Aboriginal people following the 1967 referendum, Cole writes that for the young women who took part it was not so much a civil rights statement as a big night out: ‘having a ball, neither fighting nor “resisting” but being proud of who you are, dancing and enjoying a night was the greatest freedom of all.’ Cole writes that she abandoned her analysis of the colonising aspects of the debutante format, and instead listened to how it was remembered by those who took part – women who, on that night more than ever, saw themselves as ‘more than the sum of their oppressions’.

FOR THE PARTICIPANTS in Kimberley Girl, the beauty school aspects of the program can mean identity experimentation, a means to break free from peer pressure and dress a certain way. A girl in the Broome heat was doing Kimberley Girl for the second time. She told me that before Kimberley Girl she used to dress like a boy, in basketball shorts and T-shirts. When I asked her why she used to dress that way, she said that girls from remote communities cover up ‘out of respect to our father and brothers’. Kimberley Girl made her realise that she can look stylish while still being respectful, and that dressing well doesn’t mean wearing revealing clothes. It is also way for families to express pride in their girls. It has a natural recruitment strategy, using networks and tapping into family aspirations. And it is
widely recognised by Aboriginal families throughout the region, but particularly in Broome, where it has been operating the longest. A survey of contestants revealed that three-quarters heard about Kimberley Girl through friends and family. Many better-funded and more ‘serious’ youth development programs don’t have that level of community buy-in.

Former Kimberley Girls play a big role in this informal recruitment. At the Broome heat, a girl told me that a relative had taken part in Kimberley Girl before her and ‘was telling everyone to go and do it’. Another arrived with her sister and revealed that two of their nieces had participated in the past. ‘They were the ones that kept pushing [my sister] and me to do it – we finally got up the courage,’ she said. Four out of five entrants knew former Kimberley Girls and thought that they had changed for the better as a result of the program.

Almost half of 2011 Kimberley Girl participants had been told by family to sign up; some discovered that a family member had submitted entry forms without their knowledge. One was the 2011 winner, Lavinia Ketchell from One Arm Point, a remote community two hundred kilometres north of Broome: ‘I was surprised. And I was nervous about going on stage but they said give it a shot and see what happens.’ Another girl said she was ‘pressured a lot from my mates to do Kimberley Girl – they say they won’t even talk to me if I don’t do this’. These young women felt compelled to participate so as not to disappoint their friends, elders and work colleagues. The high proportion of nominations indicates that community and industry alike consider Kimberley Girl a positive and important opportunity.

It is also a competition, which doesn’t fit with the typical model of youth development, where everyone is a winner. Yet the more controversial aspects of the program, competition and glamour, also produce the most compelling public benefits. Overwhelmingly, the participants said the competition increased their motivation: nine out of ten stated that it made them try harder.

Without the event, the pressure, the competition and the dressing up, the workshop would be less interesting. There was a clear process of change during the heat – more than pretty clothes and lip gloss. Stepping out in front of an audience required courage: parading ambition, or at least the ability to fake it.

Angela, who had been wary about competing with girls less fortunate than herself, decided that the benefits outweighed the competitive aspects. ‘After all’, she said, ‘everything’s a competition in a small town.’

KIMBERLEY GIRL IS one of many good things happening in a region where Indigenous enterprise is not uncommon and where Aboriginal culture – traditional and contemporary – has centre stage. The value of Kimberley Girl is revealed during the informal moments when the girls are getting ready or waiting for their shoot. That is often when life’s hardships are revealed – self-harm, abusive relationships, drinking, racism at work – and where ways of coping can be explored.
I asked the facilitators to identify the obstacles that the girls faced. They reported on 157 of the girls who have participated against my list of possible ‘disadvantage factors’, which included growing up in a very remote community; neither parent/guardian working (or low-income family); low literacy and numeracy; young mother; and significant life trauma. A third had experienced five of the seven disadvantage factors, nearly half had experienced four or more, and two-thirds had experienced at least three. While the program can’t address them, it points to other pathways. Importantly, the format of the program appeals to strength rather than victimhood. Girls from all walks of life participate: all are equal on the catwalk.

At the start of the article I posed the question about why an Indigenous program should be judged by social criteria that other similar programs do not have to face. Kimberley Girl achieves social outcomes with only small derivations from the normal pageant format because it taps into otherwise unmet needs. It is essentially what economists call a status game, which is not a zero-sum game (where for every girl who goes up another must fall). Status games generate potentially significant spillover benefits to others not involved, including family, friends, community and employers. Local firms may benefit by identifying potential employees; the community may benefit through the leadership developed. The 2009 Kimberley Girl winner, Amy Howard, advised the 2011 finalists to put Kimberley Girl on their résumé – ‘employers recognise it’. Kimberley Girls have demonstrated that they are prepared to show up, work hard and stand out from the crowd.

Mainstream beauty pageants, on the other hand, will only ever reorder the labour market rank of their participants. Some will rise as others fall, but the overall participation rate and human capital will remain more or less unchanged. Such programs can be a sorting mechanism, enabling efficient display of innate properties that are otherwise difficult to observe or evaluate – yet they won’t fundamentally change the capabilities of the girls themselves. Kimberley Girl is a positive-sum game: each girl who benefits does not displace another, and may actually benefit others too.

DESPITE THE PROGRAM’S success, the future of Kimberley Girl is uncertain. Goolarri spends a lot of time on it – including staff time that should be spent running round-the-clock radio and television stations. Without this cross-subsidisation Kimberley Girl could not continue, but there is a valid concern among the board and management that Kimberley Girl ‘is taking over the place’. In 2011 a two-year federal grant to Goolarri from FaHCSIA was running out. Without it, the number of heats will have to be reduced, but the organisers would like to take Kimberley Girl to more towns, bring in more girls from remote communities by sending out ‘scouts’, and provide follow-up with those that don’t get through, to make sure the positives are not lost in disappointment.
Despite the billions of dollars going into Closing the Gap, this novel, successful and low-budget program does not have ongoing support from government. A certain hard-nosed Treasury-style logic says that if the private and community sector is able to achieve this outcome, there is no need for government funding. But that misunderstands what Kira, Jodie and the Goolarri team have done. As self-financing venture capitalists conducting a curious experiment in social innovation, they have developed a model and proven it works. The local communities and businesses will continue to benefit from the success of this program, and can be expected to contribute in proportion to those gains, but there are wider gains that extend beyond the Kimberley, to the nation. It happens each time one of the Kimberley Girl speaks confidently; acts positively, with ebullience and leadership; and banishes the debilitating ‘shame factor’, that complex mixture of shyness and peer pressure that is the opposite of pride.

Diamonds, pearls and sandalwood are mined or farmed and then sent away to have value added. Kimberley Girl shows that Australia can successfully direct our energy and wealth into a different future. With a crazy-brave act of social innovation, an already stretched local community media organisation has stumbled upon a little-noticed alluvial seam of raw diamonds, and is making them shine.

Except for the winner, Levinia Ketchell, the names of all 2011 Kimberley Girl participants have been changed for privacy reasons.

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