

regular feature: TALL POPPY : Karen Sheldon –aiming to make a difference

Territory

Decades of business success have given Territory catering queen Karen Sheldon the freedom to use her hard-won expertise to enhance the lives of others. Sheldon enjoys Territory-wide hospitality notoriety from her award-winning Dolly Pot restaurants in Tennant Creek and Darwin, her plethora of Karen's Kitchen franchises, and her company's special events catering operation. But now, instead of retiring, her greatest satisfaction comes from training Indigenous jobseekers into the industry. "It's the best thing I've ever done," says Sheldon. "I want to focus on Indigenous issues and make a bit of a difference. I want to help close the gap."

Karen Sheldon Enterprises has become an RTO (Registered Training Organisation) with a newly-developed four week pre-employment hospitality and lifeskills program for Indigenous trainees that the company operates out of its base at Kantillas in TIO Stadium. The company is part of the new Australian Government Indigenous Employment Panel and has the opportunity to road test new initiatives in Indigenous training. "McDonalds have been trying to engage Indigenous staff for some years with limited success," explains Sheldon. "But we've had moderate wins at getting Indigenous workers into McDonalds. Now we are also working with Darwin Convention Centre, Darwin Turf Club and SkyCity." The first program included 25 Indigenous trainees, and there are now 88 people on the case list.

Sheldon's interest in Indigenous training is hardly an overnight occurrence. It is an idea that goes back to the day in 1970 when the girl from the Benalla district in Victoria stepped off the bus at the sun-splashed Barrow Creek Roadhouse. She had just landed a cooking job there, 280km north of Alice Springs, even though she had never cooked for anyone before. She had never met an Aboriginal person either, but soon interacted daily with tribal people who lived next to the roadhouse. Five years at Barrow Creek would make a lasting impression on Sheldon's life.

Her cooking education was a sink or swim experience, but she had an unquenchable passion to learn. The roadhouse menu could best be described as 'limited',

so young Sheldon subscribed to Time-Life's *Foods of the World* to encourage variety. That meant every month visitors were treated to food from a different country. Cattle station people from the area showed Sheldon how to choose a killer, make the proper kill, bone out the carcass and hang the meat. A Dutch baker on a road gang taught her to make flourless cakes and make her own yeast out of sourdough. "I had the best apprenticeship that you could possibly have," Sheldon recalls. "None of my apprentices after that—and I've trained more than 100 apprentices—ever got that kind of practical experience."

She married the boss and, after they sold the roadhouse in 1982, the couple moved to greener pastures in Tennant Creek. While her husband opened a diesel generating business, her brother Richard came up from Victoria and together the siblings hatched a bizarre idea for a new business: build a combination squash court and restaurant, because the town needed both.

They went to work building the facility that they named the Dolly Pot, after the mortar and pestle-style mining tool Tennant's miners used to 'dolly-up' samples of ore. The venue became not only a set of squash courts but it also served as the town's community centre where you could take dance or aerobics classes, play 'Dolly Volley'—indoor volleyball—or throw private parties. The restaurant became widely known as the only place along 'the Track' you could get fresh home-cooked food featuring locally grown herbs and salads.



Karen Sheldon

Then providence intervened. A writer for *W* magazine (and a personal friend of Nancy Reagan) in the USA was doing a story about restaurants in Australia. He popped into town in his private aircraft and ordered the Dolly Pot's homemade veal parmigiana. He wrote that the best meal he ate in Australia was in the squash courts in Tennant Creek. "I didn't know anything about it until radio announcers from Adelaide and Sydney started ringing me saying we had just been named the best restaurant in Australia," remembers Sheldon. "I thought it must have been an April Fools joke. But after that we had people coming to the Territory with Kakadu, Ayers Rock and the Dolly Pot on their itinerary."

It was a million dollars worth of advertising and made the Dolly Pot an instant success. A host of gold plate awards and a *Bulletin* magazine award later, the restaurant traded on the adage, 'fresh is king' during the town's boom years. Sheldon, meanwhile, separated from her partner and went into business with her brother, buying the town's BP service station. She decided she needed proper training herself so she did a chef's course at NT University in Darwin through Recognition of Prior Learning.

Fifteen years ago Sheldon and her brother Richard went into business in Tennant Creek with Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation. Together they developed the BP Complex and recently added an extensive fast food complex. "The reason we put the Red Rooster in there is because they are Australian, have a fresh fast food offer, and have such a good training system," Sheldon says. "Our plan is to get the whole place run by local Indigenous staff—not just owned by them. I want to help them build up their own businesses in the region." Training others has always been Karen Sheldon's goal. She uses her businesses as the vehicle to assist people into work.

Moving to Darwin in the 90s, Sheldon opened a second Dolly Pot in Fannie Bay,

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in effect owning two restaurants 1000km apart. With the spatial logistics impossible to manage, Sheldon and her brother sold the Tennant Creek Dolly Pot, which has since been refurbished and reopened as Fernanda’s.

The Darwin Dolly Pot lasted four years before it was sold and Sheldon went into function and airline catering, building a business based at Kantillas Kitchen from 1998. Then two ex-Tennant Creek staff members returned from overseas adventures (Julie Calvert and Sarah Hickey) and they worked together so well with Sheldon that, together with Amanda Swift, a Pommie from Liverpool, they gave birth to Karen Sheldon Catering. The business flourished, both in catering and major events, and in developing 11 Karen’s Kitchens from Darwin to Tennant Creek.

Sheldon, however, was getting more interested in other areas, and went back to school at Charles Darwin University to complete her Certificate in Training and Assessment. “We became involved in an NT Government Business Development program and spent 12 months restructuring our business, deciding that developing a franchise was too hard, especially with forecasts of a tightening economy.”

The group then divested itself of most of the Karen’s Kitchens, to concentrate on upgrading its Speaker’s Corner Café in Parliament House. “We’re going to make Speaker’s Corner our signature café and make it really good. It’ll also have a focus on Indigenous training,” she explains.

Today the Karen Sheldon group is also concentrating its efforts on catering for events and developing the RTO.

The Darwin V8 weekend and the Kimberley Moon Experience Dinner event in Kununurra will still have that Karen Sheldon flair, but more training programs with the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations are on the horizon. “It’s a long-term thing and we have had our share of disappointments,” reflects Sheldon. “But we’re working with disadvantaged people, some of which were long-grassers in Katherine and now they’re productive hamburger flippers at McDonalds, and we’ve got them doing literacy and numeracy. Once you get them into a job, that’s just the start. We want to give them a vision for the future.”



Image above > Karen’s Kitchen operates the new-look Speaker’s Corner Café in Parliament House.