

Culture and community

Professors Karen Martin and Lester-Irabinna Rigney stress the need to privilege the voices, experiences and lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Martin 2003) and *Footprints in Time* aims to do this. To date, the wave reports have concentrated on analysis of data provided by respondents, primarily through quantitative data but also through the qualitative data wherever possible. One set of voices which has not been heard as much through these reports are those of the RAOs—the Indigenous officers who interview the families of our children. Their involvement and feedback plays no small part in the development, delivery and interpretation of the data. The following article “Working for a better future” is from Sharon Barnes, who has worked with *Footprints in Time* since 2003. She is *Footprints in Time*’s first and longest serving Indigenous RAO and is responsible for managing the field work across all *Footprints in Time* sites.

Working for a better future

I have had many different roles with *Footprints in Time* for over 10 years; from liaising with our Elders to testing questionnaires, recruiting Indigenous staff, interviewing and training. Now I manage the field work and the Indigenous staff, known as Research Administration Officers (RAOs), who conduct our interviews across Australia.

Our RAOs live and work in broad areas we call sites. The families don’t all live close together so we travel a lot and we usually work alone. We try and visit the same families each time so the families get to know their RAO and we get to know them. The high retention rates for the study are due to the commitment and dedication of all our staff (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and our families.

A lot of people ask me ‘why have you stayed so long in the same job?’ The answer is the challenges that we face every day to provide high quality data. This is so positive changes can be made for our children, our grandchildren and our future children, so they can grow up with better opportunities, be healthier, stronger and free from the disadvantages that so many Indigenous people have faced in the past.

The families play a huge part in me staying: the smiles on the faces of the children, the excitement and the trust and commitment the families have given us to be able to keep the study is not replaceable.

Diversity is another reason. I work across all the sites in the study. I have worked in areas that most public servants would not have the opportunity to work in. I mainly work from a ‘mobile’ office, although I do have desks scattered across Australia. My main office location in Batemans Bay (New South Wales) is a whole-of-government office. So one day I can be looking at the ocean in Batemans Bay, the next I can be working in Galiwin’ku, Northern Territory, or in the middle of Australia.

No day is ever the same. As we work with families we work whenever our families are available—after hours, weekends and public holidays. Most days I am ‘on the road’ to somewhere—I could be going to interview families and this might involve sitting under a tree in 40+ degree heat to flying to other sites in Australia or sitting in meetings in Canberra. I have used nearly every mode of transport over the years—well maybe not camels yet! Obviously planes and cars are the main things we use but we have also used helicopters, barges, ferries and even a dingy! Have you ever heard of a water taxi? Yep we use them too!

This is why I do this, why I have stayed for so long: I believe this study can make a change for the future. I believe our children deserve to grow up stronger, healthier and have better opportunities. I'm not here for the money, glory or my name in lights; I am here to help make positive changes for the future.