



GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 5
Rona Glynn-McDonald

Seth Robinson: Welcome to GameChangers. The show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who've taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season, we're taking some time out to reconnect, exploring the ways our game changers are forming connections in the world by creating new communities, spaces, and technologies,

Rona Glynn-McDonald: First Nations elders have incredible knowledge to share with all of us. And this is an opportunity for young people, for families, for teachers to step into a space where they can really grasp and learn from that knowledge.

Seth Robinson: Today, we're going to the heart of Australia to speak with a guest who has made it her life's work to tell First Nation stories and share Indigenous knowledge that will help us all in the future.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: My name is Rona Glynn-McDonald. I'm a Kaytetye woman from Central Australia, currently calling in from Mparntwe, which is also known as Alice Springs and you can hear the birds in the background tweeting away. I'm actually working out of my brother's backyard today, but in my day-to-day I'm the founding CEO of a not-for-profit called Common Ground, which exists to center First Nations' knowledge, people and cultures by amplifying our stories, our voices, and our knowledge systems.

Seth Robinson: And what a great setting we've caught you in. I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit more about Common Ground? I understand one of the first projects that really led the way there was the First Nations Bedtime Stories. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Yeah. So Common Ground was conceived a while ago, but we launched in 2018 with a humble collection of curated and original articles online. So written content pieces that any Australian could use to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And we got amazing traction on

the website in the first year, but we began to recognize that while there were many adults that were using our open-source platform, we wanted to look at ways that we could ensure that the next generation of Australians could learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and provide opportunities for our communities and our elders to be able to share the incredible knowledge that they hold that has been handed down since time immemorial.

Seth Robinson: So where did the idea for the digital platform come as part of that?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: So it was actually a moment when I was in Melbourne. I'd moved to Melbourne to study at university. And in so many of the conversations I was having with individuals and collective groups of people, they would be constantly asking for book recommendations or places they could read online, or asking questions that I didn't necessarily have the answers for. I'm one person I have my own lived experience, but First Nations communities are incredibly diverse from across Australia. So the idea for Common Ground was born because we really didn't have at that point any spaces online that were driven by First Nations people that could provide a space for open-source learning for any person to jump into. So we began with a collection of curated and original content pieces, and we talked to different volunteers across country to help us bring that together, as well as elders to guide what would go on the platform and really knowing that we couldn't start with everything. And we wanted to launch with a minimum viable product of what Common Ground could become.

So we started with a series of about 20 articles that provided the foundation that any person might need to understand things about First Nations connection to country. Some of the cultural protocols we hold, some of the really key moments in history. And that's where it started, and it's evolved quite significantly from that first space that we began with. And with the First Nations Bedtime Stories, that was really for us a moment where we wanted to bring together elders from across the country in different moments to record our dreaming stories for the next generation.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: That project, each year we work with five traditional owners or elders, and we would record their stories on film and release five short films over a week. Generally it's in June, but we've had to move it to November last year for COVID-19. So those particular stories go all across the country into schools. And we had 80,000 young people take part last year, which was pretty incredible. The stories share lessons that have been handed down since time immemorial, and really provide that glimpse for all young people to recognize that First Nations elders have incredible knowledge to share with all of us. And this is an opportunity for young people, for families, for teachers to step into a space where they can really grasp and learn from that knowledge.

Seth Robinson: It's a really incredible project. And you've mentioned something which I find really interesting there in that storytelling is something we talk about a lot these days in terms of the digital space and in terms of marketing and being

creative online. And it's almost become a buzzword in a lot of ways, but to First Nations people storytelling has a very different meaning.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Hmm, storytelling is the center of everything. It's how we organize knowledge. It's how we share knowledge and it's how we connect. And I think at the center of all of our cultures as First Nations people is relationality and stories are a way to relate to one another. It's a way of communicating. And sometimes those stories evolve over time and they shift based off the different connections that we have, but they're always grounded in truth and honesty and learning for all about people.

Seth Robinson: I believe you recently resigned from this role to focus more on your work with Common Ground, but you were previously a First Nations director at YLab Global, is that correct?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Yeah. So I had been with YLab for about five years. It's an amazing social enterprise, it sits within the The Foundation for Young Australians and exists to bring young people with lived experience together to solve our most complex social problems. And it's a pool of young people from across Australia who are coming together to work with the public sector, private sector, not-for-profits, different spaces to essentially center young people in designing the solutions for our future. And my role there initially was as an associate, I came into in 2016 and worked on big based projects and use my voice and my expertise as a [inaudible] young woman to shape policy design with government, different kind of engagement programs with young people. And from there I was really lucky to get an opportunity to join the team more formally as First Nations director.

And my role was to essentially launch the first First Nations youth led consulting practice that we've seen across the country, which is called YLab First Nations. And that space is really about centering our young mob in creating opportunities and creating those pathways for them to use their voices to shape systems across Australia. Because we know that many of our communities aren't heard, and particularly our young people aren't hurt in designing the future that they want to see. And YLab First Nations is about providing that space for them to come together, as well as get paid to learn about systems thinking and co-design, and really partner with government and different spaces across private industry to create a future that really centers their voices and perspectives.

Seth Robinson: You mentioned working in the gig economy early on in that answer there, and you already hit on something which is important, which is young people getting paid for the work they do, which is unfortunately not always the case we see, particularly in industries that might be more creative or seen as part of that gig economy. I'm curious, as someone who has worked in that space and then who also has spun a few plates working on your own different projects, do you think the way we work, particularly as young people is really changing? Is the nine to five kind of a thing of the past.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: It is completely a thing of the past, I think. For some jobs it still remains as a central pillar of the way that people organize work, but we're seeing more

and more young people engage in flexible work, not necessarily because they want to, but it's just the nature of the New World Order and what the future of automation and globalization and new industry is looking at. There's really interesting research that has come out, particularly in the last year, around the impact of flexible work on young people, particularly the instability that it brings as well during the context of COVID-19, which still continues young people in the flexible economy were hardest hit during the pandemic. And when we look at people who are juggling so many different jobs, I think there is a level at which it's part of the new norm, so people just have to normalize themselves towards it, but also for young people it offers the opportunity to be able to work on things that they're passionate about and be really selective in the skills that they're wanting to develop.

I think when you can get caught in a nine to five job within a specific space or domain with one contract, it actually prevents sometimes that development that you might want from managing your own time, being a freelancer, managing clients. So I did a whole lot of research actually with YLab last year, where we brought together a group of young people from across Australia to start to unpack and deeply understand their perspectives around what flexible work was like for them and why they'd chosen that style of work. And that kept coming up time and time again is actually, for those that choose to opt in, it's this space where we really have the opportunity to have a side hustle or try a completely different thing, rather than just working within one context.

Seth Robinson: You mentioned something there that, "This is the way they're working, but it might not necessarily be the way they want to work." When it came to those discussions in your research, what was the prevailing answer to that? What did young people want to be doing?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: I think it's always different for every young person, but we really recognize that young people wanted more support in the ways that they were organizing work. I think for a lot of young people, until COVID-19 hit they didn't really recognize how many things there were within their context of work that were quite risky, not having the understandings of super or what contract work meant for their safety or their ability to support themselves when times were tough, not having casual leave. So those are really interesting things there around what young people wanted for the future in terms of supports from government, as well as the different companies that they might be contracting with.

Seth Robinson: We've touched on this a little bit. You mentioned that you had to change your shooting and release schedule for Common Ground and obviously the broader sector was affected, but how was your work impacted by COVID 19 in 2020?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Yeah, it was a really interesting year. I think I've talked to a lot of people about how I think COVID-19, this is a very privileged position for me to share, but COVID-19 for me came at a really good moment. I needed to step back and slow down, and I was in Melbourne at the time. I'd been in Melbourne for about six months and I'd been trying to get home back to out

in the country in central Australia in [inaudible] country. And I hadn't had the opportunity. I'd been constantly in workshops or doing speaking gigs and had engagements across the East Coast of Australia. And when the office shut down in Melbourne and we were working at home, I was like, "This is the time to go back to Central Australia." So I packed my bags, I jumped on a flight. I came back to Alice Springs and I have spent most of the last year being back here.

It's been amazing in that I've had more time to connect with community, more time to be on country for me, which is in Central Australia, and more time to hopefully slow down. I think we had to pivot really hard when I was at YLab. All of our workshops, which are always face-to-face engagements had to be done online. So we were in Zooms. We picked up the new software along the way to enable us to connect with the young world from across the country. And surprisingly it worked better than we could have ever imagined. There's something really interesting around access and barriers to access when you look at online engagement. And obviously having internet and some kind of device to get onto that internet is one barrier. But once you have people in a Zoom room and you have a Whiteboard software ready to go, the space to connect with young people online is really strong.

And it provides the opportunity for some young people who want to speak, they can speak. Some young people can write and have their voices heard in different ways. And the dynamic of that means that we can include more and more voices into the work that they're doing. But I guess with the context of the film work we do at Common Ground, we had to push a lot of that back because our communities closed down very quickly in March last year. And that's testament to the incredible leaders that we have, the elders and First Nations people across health organizations and big bodies who shut down access to our communities and really provided a space where we could protect our elders and our vulnerable people from COVID-19.

And within that context we couldn't shoot anything. So we had to push all of our films back. But within the space of being able to work remotely, there's still so much that can be done without being in that face-to-face engagement, which I think is quite surprising, because prior to that there's almost this fearfulness that people hold around engaging online, it has to be face-to-face. But you get access to incredible people when everyone's online. I've met elders from across the country who I would never have had the opportunity to speak to unless Zoom became the thing of 2020.

Seth Robinson: You make a really interesting point around space there. And something that's just occurred to me is, there's something very egalitarian about the Brady Bunch wall of faces we see when we're talking to people in a Zoom gallery, whereas in other spaces when people are physically together, I guess there's always that question of hierarchy and how people are arranged for discussions and those sorts of collaborations.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Yeah, it is really, really interesting, isn't it? And I think quite interestingly, when you think about the older generations on Zoom potentially have a

more challenging time in using that kind of software. So you notice that young people are able to jump in straight away, and those potentially with less experience feel that in that Zoom space they hold some kind of expertise as well around how to communicate and how to use those tools to have conversations that are really fruitful and really egalitarian. It's an interesting concept. And I have definitely seen Zoom spaces where there are people that sit back and acquire in order to let you know people with expertise and deep lived experience or eldership to speak. But it does create that neutral footing, when you put it into gallery view, there's so much amazing connection that can happen.

Seth Robinson: You mentioned that you've been on country for most of the last six months, is that the most time you've spent there since you would've moved to Melbourne to do your studies and the university?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Surprisingly not as much, like I have spent about five to six months every year back in the central desert. But it's generally split up more, so I'd only come up for two weeks or I'd come up for two months. But over the last year I've spent three months at a time up here or four months at a time. And that just really means that I can settle into a rhythm here. And it's just so incredible to be able to move between both spaces. And I think obviously there's been challenges with the borders.

Seth Robinson: Absolutely.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Many, many challenges, but I feel so thankful to have the opportunity to spend more time back home. There is this constant push and pull that I think a lot of young First Nations people experience, particularly those from regional and remote areas where there's so much going on in our cities and there's so many incredible cultural projects and opportunities for young people, but then there's also so much opportunity at home and so much opportunity to connect with our old people and continue learning and becoming First Nations young people that hold language and culture and ceremony and song within us. So it's this tension that we exist within. And I think I'm just constantly trying to find that balance.

Seth Robinson: You've mentioned connections there, and that's really kind of the underlying theme we're trying to keep going through this season of GameChangers or the ways people are reconnecting after what was such a bizarre year last year. And I mean, that's what your work is all about. It's really about educating and creating social change and building those connections. Is it work that you were always drawn to?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Yeah, it's a great question. Not really, to be honest. When I was growing up connection wasn't the central focus in anything that I was doing, but what really was, was the me, and understanding that our world isn't equal. And particularly growing up within the context of Alice Springs you see a colonial frontier that exists here that exists all across Australia, but it's really over. And you see young people and old people who are treated with systemic racism and existing within a world that wasn't built for them. And the lens that I brought to that thinking was wanting to better understand economic

systems and why our economic systems aren't designed to center marginalized communities or First Nations communities in particular.

And that's what led me to head off to Melbourne Uni. And that's what led me to begin trying to learn more about the world. It wasn't actually this idea of storytelling or connection that really drove me towards that journey. But what was deep in my understanding was the power of storytelling. And I come from a family of storytellers, filmmakers from three generations of filmmakers now who all come from Alice Springs, and my Nana was the co-founder of a media association that was the first Aboriginal owned media association called CAAMA. And as co-founder of CAAMA and the work that she did, I saw the power of storytelling, but I didn't recognize that that was what I wanted to do when I finished my studies and went off into the world.

I wanted to think more out of the box and have the opportunity to explore beyond the current economic paradigm, but I definitely did learn the kind of rigor and understanding of the current context that's needed to think about what future systems might look like. I was there for three years and I think what I gained that really has been incredibly to my work has been through the network effect of being connected to people from all across Melbourne and all across international communities who have really unique ways of looking at the world and really unique positionality within everything. And I think those networks and the conversations that I had in the context of my degree have really led to interesting paths that have continued for me, whether it's through Common Ground or through my work. Centering systems change at YLab. It's really been that foundation that I started with that has helped to create that journey.

Seth Robinson: So, so much of your work is future facing. You're thinking about new systems, you're thinking about changing paradigms. I'm curious, are there major challenges or opportunities that you think are going to come to light in the next few years that we should be talking about or thinking about more now?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: I think that there is a really big movement that is going to continue to happen, and we're just starting to see it now, around centering First Nations' knowledges across our systems. And whether that's economic systems, whether that's looking at mental health and wellbeing, or environmental systems, or science or arts, there is so many answers to the world's biggest, most wicked problems held within First Nations knowledge systems. And I think that Australians and the globe more broadly are starting to understand that. And there's a really big opportunity to embrace that knowledge and to center it in all of our lives. And rather than looking at really specific examples, I just think that as we move beyond the kind of colonial world that we currently exist within, we've seen capitalist society and capitalist spaces across the globe failing like never before over the last year. Whereas we've seen First Nations communities being able to organize and protect during COVID-19 in ways that other communities haven't been able to.

And I just think that Australians in particular are starting to realize that. We saw the bush fires last year. We've seen the answers that land management and cultural fire management can have for Australia. And there's just going to continue to be examples I think over the next decade. And my hope is that through those examples, individuals and collectives across the country will begin to realize that 65,000 years of knowledge has value, not just for First Nations communities, but for all of us. And that's something that we can all embrace and all celebrate and center in our work, whether we're working in HR, or we're working on country, or we're working in investment banking. And my hope is that in the next decade we'll start to see more and more people recognize and embrace that.

Seth Robinson: Rona, I have one last question for you, and then we'll let you go. But what's one thing that's not on your resume that helped you get where you are today?

Rona Glynn-McDonald: This is a really great question, I was thinking about this. And I actually just redid my resume and I don't often send a resume because I feel like it's quite an old school thing. Nowadays people just look at your LinkedIn, hey. But I was doing my resume recently and I was looking at it and I was like, "What isn't referenced here?" And I think one thing that isn't referenced on a resume, which in First Nations communities we learned always acknowledge is the ancestors and elders who are guiding our journeys. Without the individuals in our communities that have forged the path, or who've given us the advice or have lifted us up, we wouldn't be where we are today.

To me there are incredible family members, but incredible elders who have been able to give me those pearls of wisdom or provide me with that path and create that path for me, that I wouldn't be able to be where I am without them. And when you look at a CV, it's often just a list of achievements, but I think my greatest achievements are the connections that I have to individuals and communities who are able to support me on this journey and be on this journey in relationship with me. And a CV doesn't talk about that. So that would be my answer, is really the people that exists in relationship with me that have enabled me to get where I am. And they're not all First Nations. There's incredible allies and non-indigenous people who have been individuals in that journey that have made it possible.

Seth Robinson: Rona Glynn-McDonald, thank you so much for joining us on GameChangers.

Rona Glynn-McDonald: Thanks for having me.

Seth Robinson: Australia's First Nations people have a wealth of knowledge ready to share, and as we move forward, it's by listening that we'll be able to take on the challenges ahead of us and build a more inclusive society. After all, we all love telling and hearing each other's stories. That's what this show is all about.

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Wurundjeri land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem, with support from the University of Melbourne.