AbSec
NSW Child, Family & Community
Peak Aboriginal Corporation

Aunty Debra Swan: A Proud Gomeroi Matriarch Elder

Raised to Lead – A Staunch Advocate

December 2025

Aunty Deb active at another protest as part of GMAR.

Acknowledgement of Country

AbSec acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout New South Wales and their continuing connections to land, waters, and communities. Our head office is located on the land of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, in Redfern, and AbSec operates statewide.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of all lands and waters across New South Wales, honouring Elders past, present, and future.

We recognise and respect their enduring connection to Country, their ongoing care for community, and the preservation and practice of their culture for generations uncounted.

We acknowledge the Elders, leaders and advocates within our sector and pay our respects to them as knowledge holders within this space and every space.

AbSec also acknowledge the Stolen Generations who never came home and the ongoing impact of government policy and practice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following study report may contain images of deceased persons.

AbSec

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Peak Aboriginal Corporation

AbSec is the peak organisation advocating for the rights, safety, and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families, and communities in New South Wales.

As an Aboriginal-led organisation, we champion self-determination and work towards a child and family system that is culturally safe, community-driven, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

AbSec leads policy reform, strengthens the capacity of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain connected to family, community, and culture. We are a key member of the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO) and the primary organisation responsible for Target 12 under Closing the Gap.

Through advocacy, research, and sector leadership, AbSec works to address the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and promote holistic, community-led approaches to child and family wellbeing. Our commitment is to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up strong in culture, identity, and connection.

Our vision is that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are looked after in safe, thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, raised strong in spirit and identity, with every opportunity for lifelong wellbeing and connection to culture, and surrounded by holistic supports.

In working towards this vision, we are guided by these principles:

- Acknowledging and respecting the diversity and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Acting with professionalism and integrity in striving for quality, culturally responsive services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- Underpinning the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop our own processes and systems for our communities, particularly in meeting the needs of our children, young people, families and carers.
- Being holistic, integrated and solutions-focused through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control in delivering outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities.
- Committing to a future that empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, representing our communities, and the agencies there to serve them, with transparency and drive.

Deadly Practice case study

Executive summary

This Deadly Practice paper profiles Aunty Debra Swan, a proud Gomeroi Elder and Matriarch whose life has been shaped by culture, kinship and a commitment to justice. Growing up between Moree's *Top Camp* and the mission, she learnt traditional ways of caring, responsibility and leadership from her family. Her achievements in sport and education opened up opportunities, and she later built a strong career in Aboriginal services, health and education.

After 13 years as an Aboriginal caseworker, Aunty Deb confronted the systemic failures of child protection and co-founded Grandmothers Against Removal NSW (GMAR NSW). GMAR has since become a powerful statewide advocate for restoration, self-determination and cultural authority. Today, Aunty Deb continues to lead, teach Dadirri, and fight for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to remain connected to family, community and Country.

Aunty Deb at one of her first protests of many as GMAR Co-Founder.

Additional content

Data privacy and protection

We are committed to protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individuals involved in our studies and consultations. Any personal data included in this report has been used with consent and in accordance with applicable privacy laws.

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Glossary

Mission	Government or church-run settlement where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were required to live under assimilation policies.
GMAR (Grandmothers Against Removal)	A grassroots movement founded to prevent unjust removals of Aboriginal children and advocate for restoration.
Dadirri	A cultural practice of deep listening and still awareness, supporting healing and understanding.

Introduction

Background – Growing Up in Culture and Colonialism

Aunty Deb was brought up on the Top Camp located on the East side of Moree, living in a tin hut with dirt floors. She was the eldest of five children. Aunty Deb grew up close to her family. Her dad's family, living in the surrounding tin huts, were neighbours while her mother's family lived on "the mission", on the West side of Moree.

Aunty Deb as 2-year-old Jarjum child.

A family photo of Aunty Deb (far right) with her siblings and parents.

Surrounded by Love and Culture - Kinship and Family Ties

Due to having a wide space between her home and her uncle's home, the family cooked on a bonfire for everyone, as food was shared most nights, while the kids played in trees and ran around the tin huts and open spaces. Fresh water was purchased in 44-gallon drums to use for drinking, while bath water came from the river and was boiled for sanitation.

On weekends, Aunty Deb would visit her mum's family on the mission. She had two aunties and an uncle who were around the same age, so they would run around and play together with the rest of the children. Everyone would gather to cook and share a 'feed', which also took took place out on the mission.

Aunty Deb attended the mission primary school called 'Wiradjuri' school on Gomeroi Country. A bus used to pick the Aboriginal kids up from the Top Camp and take them to the mission primary school daily.

Aunty Deb's maternal grandmother had eleven children of her own and raised other children as well. Everyone looked after each other, family meant everything - it was her culture. Traditional language (Aboriginal language) was partially used for naming things and places at home, but it was not as fluently used, due to colonial policies of assimilation which taught the English way at school.

Aunty Deb was brought up in a time where segregation was practised, which meant Aboriginal and white people did not interact. Most of her time was spent at Top Camp and on the mission as a child. Aunty Deb did not go into town until she reached high school age.

5 generations of Aunty Deb's family: Aunty Deb's grandmother (left), her mother holding her grand daughter, Aunty Deb, and her daughter (right). 2001.

Aunty Deb's Roles And Responsibilities As She Grew Up

Being the oldest child in her family, Aunty Deb's mother guided her on how to become a caring and responsible Matriarch. She learnt this through listening, observing and doing, not by reading out of a textbook. We talk about this now as "Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing"; learning in the traditional way that we are taught how to do things. This taught Aunty Deb to be responsible and to lead within her family. She became a role model to her younger brothers and sisters, exactly how her mother was to her. She learnt how to look after children and take care of them; learning how to cook and provide as a Matriarch (like her mother). Eventually she was able to pass this on to her own children.

School, Sports and Opportunities

The first sports Aunty Deb played at the mission school were netball and athletics. She went on to thrive throughout high school playing softball, netball, and basketball, eventually providing her the opportunities to travel away from Moree to play sports regionally, and in Sydney. In adult life, her love for sports continued as Aunty Deb became captain of Wallsend Touch Football Team. They went on to win the State Cup in Port Macquarie, playing in two Koori Knockouts, one of them at age 47.

Aunty Deb completed her Year 10 High School Certificate, and was the only Aboriginal student in the top class of her school, a reflection of her intelligence and determination to succeed. Due to her success in sports and academia, Aunty Deb was offered a place at boarding school. Although completing year 12 was not generally an option for Aboriginal students, her family preferred her not to leave their home and the mission.

Aunty Deb recalls that the education system only required "students to receive your year 10 Certificate for the purposes of gaining employment". However, in that era, Aboriginal people were rarely, if ever, employed except by Aboriginal services like the Pius X Medical Service. This is where her mother worked, first as a cleaner, then eventually as a health worker, until she retired at the age of 70. Aunty Deb remembers that her mother used to encourage other mums to get their children vaccinated, and that's how her mum became well known and well respected. During this period, Pius X Medical Service was managed by the Christian nuns before it came under Aboriginal management. Now it is known as Pius Aboriginal Corporation, reflecting across the course of a lifetime, the growth of the Aboriginal Community-Controlled sector across New South Wales.

Going into a Working-Class World

Married at 18 years old, Aunty Deb went to TAFE after her third child was born, to do bookkeeping and a secretarial course. Following this, she worked in various services including the Moree Aboriginal Children's Services, Moree Family Support Service and in Newcastle at Awabakal. Aunty Deb also acquired an *Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Education* at the Australian Catholic University, a Diploma in Health Sciences/Aboriginal Health and Community Development at University of Sydney, and a Masters of Indigenous Studies/Wellbeing at Lismore University. At Lismore University, she was introduced to "Dadirri" through the lectures of Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson, and speaks about this time, passing on the learnings of "Dadirri" through workshops.

Aunty Deb with her husband and three kids.

Aunty Deb, her mum and her daughter.

Deadly Practice case study

Where it All Began

Working for Child Protection Services

In 2001, Aunty Deb started working as an Aboriginal caseworker with the Department of Community Services (DoCS), an opportunity that meant a good income for her and her family. Aunty Deb was determined to be a voice on the inside of the system that was causing harm to communities, creating change for families even if it meant working for the government. Aunty Deb advocated case-by-case to keep families together and was educating her colleagues to try and prioritise keeping children with their families, consistent with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles.

After 13 long years, Aunty Deb eventually realised the ongoing ethical dilemma of keeping children separated from families that continued to happen within the child protection system. The Department dismissed and devalued families and kinship ties, which became evident to Aunty Deb when multiple families put their hands up in an attempt to keep children in the care of family, community and Country in line with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles. These families were safe, with Matriarchs like Grandmothers and Aunts being more than willing to look after children, but they weren't even considered, or they were denied caring for children that were removed.

Aunty Deb was appalled with what was happening, as there was no accountability for child protection services to prioritise Aboriginal Child Placement Principles and there was no understanding of the importance of Aboriginal children staying connected to families.

Grandmothers Against Removal (GMAR) – Hitting the Streets to Protest

In early 2014, Aunty Deb resigned from the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and went on to co-found Grandmother's Against Removal, an Aboriginal activist group that travelled across the state to empower communities and support families who had children removed from them. After several protests and rallies the GMAR movement grew stronger, and child protection services invited GMAR to the table to discuss the issues concerning Aboriginal communities across the state. With the help of the NSW Ombudsman, GMAR NSW wrote a paper: Guiding Principles for Strengthening the Participation of Local Aboriginal Community in Child Protection Decision-Making.

However, working with Government wasn't always straightforward. Aunty Deb recalls times where the DCJ challenged the advocacy of GMAR, saying that it was a breach of the families' confidentiality to have a grandmother in the room. This couldn't stop them, and as a result GMAR NSW pushed back as families provided consent for GMAR to advocate for them and their cases. They made use of social media to advertise GMAR support and were receiving phone calls from all over the country. So GMAR decided they could only do this work in New South Wales as the caseload became enormous.

GMAR opened up opportunities statewide for advocacy on social justice and human rights issues, with a focus on the youth justice system. This included encouraging legal services and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to advocate and uphold and fight for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

> *"We need to fight for the rights of our people"*
>
> *– Aunty Deb*

Advocacy Priorities

GMAR NSW is developing new strategies to ensure DCJ and the NSW Government listen to and act on advice given by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

GMAR are obliged and committed to informing our people of their rights, and reminding legal practitioners, ACCOs, NGOs, DCJ and the Courts of their responsibilities to uphold those rights and deliver social justice.

GMAR will continue working with allies to hold practitioners, and the systems they operate in, accountable when they work with our children and communities. Their advocacy focuses on three key areas:

Restoration

GMAR NSW is still fighting for restoration of our children and will continue to push DCJ and the Minister to comply with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles. This continues to be a slow process, but there is now support from ACCOs and NGOs towards restoration, especially as Aunty Deb now also works with an NGO that facilitates family meetings and supports ongoing contact between children and their birth families. As a part of their restoration work, GMAR has also advocated for the establishment of the Aboriginal Authority for Restoring Children, which responds directly to the urgent need for Aboriginal community-led restoration services, identified through the *Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home* research, as well as landmark Aboriginal-led system review reports like *Family Is Culture*.

Self-Determination

GMAR NSW believe that self-determination is about empowering families to make decisions about and for their children, and the recognition of collective human rights and social justice. is the north star for GMAR NSW, and they work tirelessly to ensure that this is the ongoing goal for all practitioners and service providers.

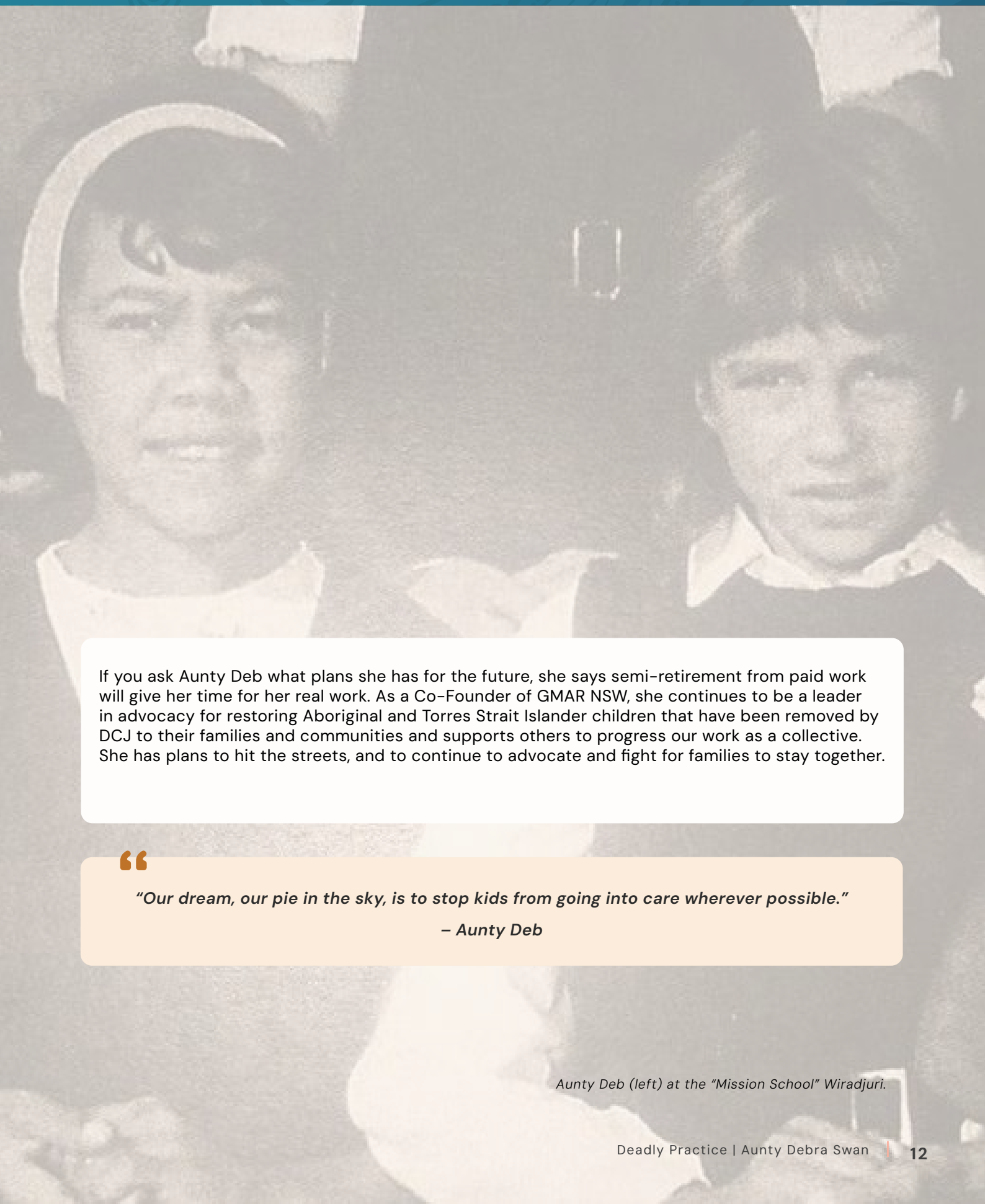
> *"As a part of self-determination, we want to advocate for business our way, with more cultural practices and culturally appropriate services for our people, including cultural healing services and cultural programs within communities that create better outcomes for our children and families. Where government has no control over the services and forces us to do business as usual when it comes to children and families." – GMAR NSW*

Dadirri

Alongside her advocacy work, Aunty Deb now presents on the learning of Dadirri, continuing to progress the practice which she learnt about through Judy Atkinson[1]. Dadirri is based on practice and writing from Aunty Miriam Rose Ungerrmer Bauham from the Daly River in the Northern Territory. Dadirri is deep listening and quiet, still awareness – a form of cultural practice – that also teaches us about spirituality. When using this practice, it teaches us self-reflection and to recognise the significance of culture. Dadirri helps us to listen to families and understand what they are saying.

1 Dadirri, a course in deep listening taught by Emeritus Professor Aunt Judy Atkinson through her powerful life stories and Indigenous healing practices for mindfulness and trauma integration.

Where To From Here



If you ask Aunty Deb what plans she has for the future, she says semi-retirement from paid work will give her time for her real work. As a Co-Founder of GMAR NSW, she continues to be a leader in advocacy for restoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that have been removed by DCJ to their families and communities and supports others to progress our work as a collective. She has plans to hit the streets, and to continue to advocate and fight for families to stay together.

> ***"Our dream, our pie in the sky, is to stop kids from going into care wherever possible."***
>
> ***– Aunty Deb***

Aunty Deb (left) at the "Mission School" Wiradjuri.

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