

Aboriginal business keeps hundreds of staff employed during COVID-19

An interview with Lachlan McPherson - 9 October 2020



Connection Matters Radio (CMR): Over the past several months on Connection Matters Radio, we've spoken to a number of Victorian Aboriginal businesses that have taken COVID well and truly in their stride - to the point where they've discovered ways to actually thrive in this new environment. And I'm pleased to announce that after several weeks of discussions, Connection Matters Radio and the Kinaway Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce have partnered to deliver an ongoing series of stories. And joining me today is Aboriginal man, Lachlan McPherson, the Co-founder of the Thread Group. Lachlan, thanks for coming onto the program today.

Lachlan McPherson: Thanks for having me, Charles. Really happy to have a chat today. It was very nice of you to reach out.

CMR: Tell us about what Thread Group was pre-COVID?

Lachlan: It's an interesting question that I personally get asked a lot. So Thread Group essentially was an idea and you might think we're pretty crazy for setting Thread Group up during COVID. Look, it was just an idea. We had thought about the idea for many years. We have an interesting story.

So Thread Group Australia is set up under the directorship of a clothing, retail boutique VR Clothing Company, and that operates all over Australia. To give you some more

background on Thread Group, it's a uniform manufacturer. So we want to be able to give companies the opportunity to wear Australian made and support Australian made for its many and very benefits.

So it was a crazy idea. Now it came really, and I suppose it accelerated during COVID or prior to COVID because there was a need for PPE, face masks and basically anything due to the fact that supply chains were really disrupted prior to COVID. So I suppose, look, it was more or less just an idea, and six months down the track we're still at the start of our operations, but yeah, it was really just an idea.

CMR: So what happened with the introduction of COVID that triggered the transition from an idea to an actual manufacturing organisation?

Lachlan: It was more or less, as I mentioned just previously, it was more or less the demand for Australian product, I suppose exemplified, due to the fact that companies are really struggling to get product out of exporting countries, ie China. And basically a couple of companies reached out to us looking for PPE. So medical gowns, face masks, and we saw an opportunity to, while we were closed, our retail stores were closed for six months, to really put the feelers out and see whether or not there were more opportunities out there than we knew. So it started off with some hospitals, we started

making some gowns for some aged care companies, and then the introduction of face masks in Victoria, there was a high demand for face masks. So we started manufacturing face masks, and we've had a really, really great response. We're having more and more chats with different companies now about the future and it's looking very optimistic.

CMR: Now, when you say "we", this is the Ark Group, because you were involved with the Ark Group prior to COVID?

Lachlan: Correct. So it's a family business. I'm really lucky and proud to be able to work with both my mother and my father and my brother. So the Ark, my parents are directors of, and it's an Australian manufacturer that sells us in retail landscape. Essentially the Ark's been Australia made for 25 years. It's never gone off shore. We're so passionate about Australian made and I suppose, if you had the chance to speak with my mum, you'd really see that it's shined through me now.

So I'm wanting to do something very similar. We will never go off shore with Thread Group. We think manufacturing here is so important because of the amount of people's lives that you can impact through employment. But also we believe our quality, our style and our fit is second to none as well. And we think we're going to be very competitive going forward, Charles.

CMR: What were some of the first contracts or business partnerships that arose that gave you the ability to start manufacturing with the Thread Group?

Lachlan: Our first couple of contracts, as I mentioned, they were with aged care. So obviously I'm sure a lot of your listeners today, Charles, would be aware of the issues with aged care and getting PPE. So we just work off the philosophy that we were here and now, and we were able to pivot our warehouse and pivot our machinists to produce these gowns that were seriously needed within the aged care landscape. We went on to create plastic gowns for hospitals, for a few different organisations that if their supply chain did get shot, we'd be their backup. And then I suppose when the face masks got introduced in Victoria, it was quite

interesting. I was in London prior to COVID and the face masks was starting to be worn. So I remember having a conversation with my mother, Lynn, who's the director of Thread Group and the Ark Clothing Company, and just mentioning to her, there might be an opportunity down the track in Victoria for the face masks.

So we sort of started looking at prototypes and when they got introduced, we were here and we were now and we started making for many organisations, such as Visy, V-Line, Metro Chains, the list sort of goes on and then working a little bit with the Government as well. So it's been an incredible experience. And as I said, prior to a couple of your first questions, I suppose COVID for us has really accelerated the business and opened up a lot of doors that we're really excited to explore.

CMR: Lachlan, I assume that the staff, those people managing the equipment to create the gowns and the masks, would be the same people who were previously creating fashion for the Ark group?

Lachlan: That's correct, Charles, so we are a beautiful fashion brand, the Ark Clothing Company, and they went from making amazing jackets to very basic prototypes of the gowns and the masks. And look, everyone has been absolutely incredible. We're so lucky to have an amazing team around us. And yeah, I can't fault everyone for just getting through this time and we're really looking forward to the future with our amazing team.

And I'd also probably like to point out, Charles, and for those listening Kinaway have been a fantastic support network. I'm constantly on the phone with Scott McCartney and James and just bouncing ideas off them. They've helped us navigate our way through Government and they've been incredible. So very, very pleased with our partnership with them.

CMR: Now, staying on the staff who are working on creating the gowns and the PPE equipment, how many of those would otherwise possibly have lost their jobs with the introduction of COVID and the slowdown in other business?

Lachlan: Really interesting question. And this is what we want to focus on going forward - continuing to create employment here in Australia. We, to give you an idea have about 250 to 300 makers in our process. And most of them were almost out of work during the closure of manufacturing.

So to be able to be deemed as an essential service and keep them in work during that first initial six week lockdown was absolutely incredible. And something that I personally am so proud to have been able to achieve with them, but also something that I personally going forward really want to focus on. I want to continue to create as many jobs here as possible and with the help of some of those big contracts that hopefully will come back here, we'll be able to do that, Charles.

CMR: So were there any loss of jobs at all on the floor?

Lachlan: No, there wasn't. So to this day we haven't had to put anyone off and I suppose the PPE and the gowns has really helped us in setting us up for hopefully thriving post this COVID world.

CMR: Last question, before I let you go Lachlan, you've mentioned thriving in post COVID world, what plans do you have underway to ensure that you do continue to thrive and grow, as you've alluded to, in a post COVID-19 world?

Lachlan: We're just really, Charles, looking for as many different opportunities as possible. We want to look at longer term contracts that give us assurance for years, not just five or six months. And I think just with hard work, our amazing team around us, the support of the Government, the support of many private organisations all over Australia, we're going to continue to get there. We're going to continue to create jobs and opportunities here and make beautiful garments while we do it. Look, we just really love what we do and we're really, really optimistic about the future.

CMR: Lachlan from Thread Group thanks so much for coming on to Connection Matters Radio and sharing your business success story.

Lachlan: Thanks Charles. Thanks so much for having me and really enjoyed the chat today.

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