



Garma 2023: Djambatj—Yolngu excellence

ECA CEO **Samantha Page** recounts her immersive experience at the Garma Festival, an annual political and musical celebration of culture held in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The festival's 2023 theme was 'Djambatj', which to Yolngu people means 'brilliance, skill, excellence'.

It was an incredible privilege to attend the Garma Festival hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation in North-East Arnhem Land this year (4–7 August 2023).

For those who haven't been to Garma, it is a cultural festival held over four days at Gulkula, the home of Garrtjambal and Ganbulapula people—two of the many clans that make up the Yolngu nation. This festival is a major community gathering that showcases traditional miny'tji (art), ancient storytelling, manikay (song) and bunggul (dance). It is also an important political event, with leaders from federal and state/territory parliaments, business, academia and philanthropic foundations attending to participate in the Key Forum Conference.

I was there as part of a group from the education sector, invited by Reconciliation Australia. Our group included:

- Karen Mundine, CEO, Reconciliation Australia
- Melinda Cilento, Co-Chair, Reconciliation Australia

- Shaz Davis, Education Consultant and Reconciliation Australia Board Member
- Jenny Donovan, CEO, Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)
- Dyonne Anderson, CEO, Stronger Smarter Institute
- Angela Falkenberg, President, Australian Primary Principals Association
- Tessa Keenan, General Manager, Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education at Reconciliation Australia
- Nina Ross, Senior Officer, Reconciliation Australia.

We were very lucky to be hosted by Djapirri Mununggirritj, a Yolngu Elder from Yirrkala with whom we had many in-depth conversations around the campfire and campsite. Our schedule was full every day as we moved between speeches and presentations, youth forum events, dance and cultural events, media events (both NITV and ABC had a strong presence), a corporate dinner and a women's healing workshop. Not to mention the

fabulous galleries and music every night—including highly acclaimed local band King Stingray!

Djapirri took us into Yirrkala to visit the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, which has some of the most beautiful bark paintings and prints I have ever seen.

There is a very serious side to Garma: the Key Forum Conference, which featured speeches by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney, NT Chief Minister Natasha Fyles, Djawa Yunupingu and Denise Bowden from the Yothu Yindi Foundation, Yes Campaign spokesperson Noel Pearson, Australia's inaugural Ambassador for First Nations People Justin Mohamed, and many others.





Across the four days of Garma, many speakers expressed support for the Voice to Parliament and the Yes Campaign. The Yolngu people have been deeply involved in advocacy for constitutional recognition and social empowerment for over a decade, including involvement in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, tracing back to the bark petitions that started in 1963. The Prime Minister expressed his strong support for the Voice, which has support across political parties and across state/territory governments.

While others in my group were taking selfies with Tony Armstrong, I was pleased to be wearing my Yes t-shirt when I had my photo taken with Dean Parkin, who is coordinating the Yes Campaign with 20,000+ volunteers.

At one of the final forum presentations, we met two members of the Firebirds team from the remote Dhupuma Barker School in Gunyangara, who successfully competed at the VEX

Robotics World Championship in Dallas, Texas, earlier this year.

Within our group and with visitors to our camp, we had many conversations over the four days about the value of incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, tradition and knowledge into Australian education, including the early years; the structural changes needed to achieve this; and the appropriate support for teachers, educators and service leaders. These conversations will continue, and I will always be grateful for having had the chance to be part of them, surrounded by the strength and power of the Yolngu people.



If you would like to get involved in the Yes Campaign, you can sign up here: yes23.com.au

The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre has an online shop for anyone in the market for some authentic Arnhem Land art: <https://yirrkala.com>

Read more about the Firebirds' success at the VEX Robotics World Championship: www.indigenous.gov.au/news-and-media/stories/djirikitj-firebirds-home-arnhem-land-after-vex-world-championships-texas

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