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# From Idea to Reality: The History of Outback Mobile Children's Services in Australia.

By Sue Kingwill, CEO Contact Inc.

**These interconnected stories trace the evolution and impact of Australian Mobile Children's Services in Australia, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the collaborative efforts to address the needs of children and families in remote areas of Australia.**

**The narrative weaves through the foundation, legacy of innovation, community support, and the eventual NSW, then national network and advocacy efforts that shaped the landscape of Mobile Children’s services in Australia.**



“A Mobile Children’s Service provides an itinerant educational and support service for isolated children and families living in isolated communities or disadvantaged localities, or where a stand-alone service is not viable. A vehicle (car, bus, plane, or train) is used to transport staff, equipment, and appropriate materials to these localities as an integral part of the educational programs being provided”. Contact Inc. **1993**

Isolation is evidenced in the rural, urban and city areas as well as in the vast Australian Outback.

Isolation can be caused by so many factors and social circumstances, such as, cultural differences, the inability to speak and read English, distances, not knowing what is available, not having family or friends nearby, a disability or ill health, the unavailability of or inability to access transport as examples.

Over the years there have been many innovative ways developed to combat isolation, provide support for women and their children, and to help them alleviate the concerns associated with child rearing particularly child rearing in isolation.

For Australian women of the outback, the establishment of the Royal Flying Doctor Service in **1928** and the advent of the pedal radio in **1929** provided access not only to health services and information but also to a social network. The galah sessions offered on the Flying Doctor Service radio network each day enabled women in the outback airtime and as such time to talk with each other.

The development of communication networks and modern transport in Australia, also allowed the evolution of a range of new approaches to reach people living in isolated circumstances through mobile programs including health and dental services, preschools, childcare, family, and children support programs, libraries, toy libraries and information vans.

Focusing on the needs of families with children, Mobile Children's Services have a long history in Australia. Mobile Libraries have a long history, then came ....

- 1949** Canberra Mobile Kindergarten
- 1958** New South Wales Kindergarten Union
- 1969** Tasmania Preschool
- 1970** Queensland and Western Australia
- 1971** Victoria
- 1975** South Australia (Remote & Isolated Children's' Exercise- R.I.C.E)
- 1975** Western Australia
- 1980** Queensland
- 1987** Northern Territory

The dates signify the establishment of the first Mobile in each Australian State or Territory.



The Mobile model of Children's Service delivery is now evidenced in many countries in the developed world.

Contact has been privileged to visit Mobile Children's Service programs in locations such as Britain, China, Portugal, The Netherlands, and Scotland as examples and has ongoing links with German Mobile colleagues. These experiences have further reinforced

the importance of this service delivery model as an effective approach to reach isolated children and their families.

### **Contact Mobile Children's Services.**

#### **The Paroo Contact Children's Mobile (PCCM) Journey – northwest NSW and southwest Queensland.**

Originally established by Contact, this Mobile Children 'Service evolved over the years, leaving a lasting impact. Founded in **1987** under the visionary leadership of the Contact Coordinator June Jeremy, the service that became known as Paroo Contact Children's Mobile became an important early childhood and family support service in Outback Australia.



## **A legacy of innovation.**

The needs analysis for the Contact Mobile was surveyed through visits by June travelling the outback roads with the postman on his mail delivery run to the stations and families living along the 'dog fence' in far northwest NSW and areas across the border into Queensland.

Under June Jeremy's guidance, the Contact Children's Mobile emerged with the backing of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (the Hague), enabled Contact to implement a proof testing of a model of service delivery from 1987 to 1994. Through extensive collaboration with families in the proposed service region service, Contact's aim was to develop an innovative model of service delivery that flexibly responded the unique needs of children and families, in some of Australia's most remote areas.

## **Play based sessions and community connection.**

The Contact Children's Mobile team implemented programs in far northwest NSW and southwest Queensland from **1987-1994**. During this time, play-based sessions for children and families, home visits with families, coordinated community activities to complement other visiting child and family programs, child and parenting related information including print and video resources were developed and the Contact with Kids radio program through 2WEB Bourke was offered, making a real difference in the lives of outback children, families, and communities.

## **New directions.**

Committed to facilitating responsive models of community management, Contact worked to secure ongoing Australian Government support for the Wanaaring based Mobile service post philanthropic funding. Contact worked with the community to then establish a regionally based association to manage the service. In **1994** the Service became known as the Paroo Contact Children's Mobile (PCCM) and was handed over to the new association.

## **Recognised for excellence.**

In 1995, the Mobile received the prestigious Oscar Van Leer Award, marking it as an international program of excellence for children and families. A proud moment for Contact, and a representative from the PCCM Mobile that accepted the award in The Hague.

## **The future.**

Operating independently until **2020**, Paroo Contact Children's Mobile and Contact decided to join forces once again. Together, they strived to find a way

to continue the services operations into the future. Despite continuous efforts to secure funding and address community needs, the Paroo Contact Children's Mobile is no longer in operation.

### **The Contact Children's Mobile (CCM) – Central Australia Journey!**

In **2009**, a sobering Australian Government report highlighted that 75% of Indigenous children in Australia lacked access to formal early childhood services. This challenge was further exacerbated in remote areas, leaving Indigenous families without the necessary support. Recognising this gap, Myer Philanthropic Services (MPS) conducted national research, revealing a need for early childhood educational programs in the Northern Territory and Kimberley regions.

### **The solution – A holistic mobile children's services model.**

Under the leadership of Sue Kingwill, Contact CEO, the Yulgilbar Foundation and Tim Fairfax Family Foundation approached Contact (**2010**) to develop a holistic early childhood mobile service in response to the MPS report. Philanthropic funding enabled the creation of the Contact Children's Mobile service (CCMs) in Central Australia from **2010 to 2014**. Australian Government funds then sustained the service from **2014 to 2017**.

### **A legacy of innovation.**

Contact's commitment to respecting Aboriginal self-determination and involving families in every stage of service development was critical in this proposed Mobile's planning, design, and delivery.

Contact's initial efforts focused on identifying areas of need in the Northern Territory, ultimately defining that the Central Australia regions of Ti Tree and Utopia Homelands as potential sites for the Mobile. Extensive consultations with community leaders, agencies, and organisations paved the way for positive discussions and engagement with stakeholders.

### **Play based sessions and community connection.**

The Mobile's flexibility responded to the transient nature of families, and services offered were tailored to parental demand and reflecting parental realities. Child-focused play-based programs remained at the core, supplemented by additional initiatives based on community needs, health, and well-being. From **2012 to 2014**, the Mobile successfully delivered coordinated child and family programs, including early learning, literacy, numeracy, parenting, and health initiatives in Ti Tree and Utopia Homelands regions.

## The future.

From **2014-2017**, Contact secured funding post philanthropy from the Australian Government to continue service delivery to the Utopia Homelands.

Unfortunately, changes in policy and funding guidelines led to the cessation of the CCM operations on January 2018.



**2015** Video about CCCM

[Click here](https://youtu.be/sdNHSqi42-g?si=BobURZfmf4lfChkF) <https://youtu.be/sdNHSqi42-g?si=BobURZfmf4lfChkF>

## Contact Mobile training programs.

NSW rural and remote Mobile Children's Service residential programs.

Initiated by Contact to bring together NSW based rural and remote Mobile Services for a five-day residential program of professional development and networking. Funding from both the Australian and NSW Government supported these events which were conducted at:

- 1991** White Cliffs
- 1992** Walgett
- 1993** Lake Mungo
- 1994** Kiama
- 1995** Leura
- 1996** Yamba
- 1997** Yamba

## National Mobile Musters and the establishment of the National Association of Mobile Children's services.

In **1987** Contact, commenced exploring options to bring remote Mobiles, together recognising the social and professional benefits of networking between all Children's Mobile teams operating in remote contexts throughout Australia.

Supported by Bernard Van Leer Foundation funding, Contact successfully

approached the Australian Government to implement week-long National residential professional gatherings for rural and remote Mobile Children's Services from **1991-2000**. The NSW Government contributed towards the **2000** Sydney event.

The Inaugural National Mobile Service Muster, named, developed, and coordinated by Contact, was held in Birdsville in **1991**. At the Adelaide Mobile Muster in **1992** Contact first raised the potential of establishing a national body for rural and remote area Mobiles. This idea was accepted, and the National Association of Mobile Services (NAMS) for rural and remote children and families Inc was established and in **1996** the Contact President chaired the first NAMS AGM meeting in Townsville Qld.

Contact's Sue Kingwill was elected as the inaugural Chairperson of this Association at this AGM and continued in this role undertaking national advocacy roles on behalf of rural and remote Mobiles, before handing this legacy over to the next rural and remote area, Mobile Children's Service leaders.

The final Sydney National Mobile Muster was conducted in **2000** and the National Association of Mobile Children's Services wound up in **2022-2023**.

NSW Mobile Children's Services, Mobile Resource Services Association (MRSA) – Mobile Children's Services Association (MCSA).

This is a celebration of a legacy that transformed Mobile Children's Services in New South Wales, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of early childhood education and community engagement in this State.

### **Mobiles Children's Services history in NSW included:**

- 1958** New South Wales Kindergarten Union.
- 1975** Magic Yellow Bus (Media and Information van).  
Australian Assistance Plan.
- 1975** Judy Finlason instrumental in setting up Kids Activities Newtown and The Magic Yellow Bus (Marrickville) and these services brought artists and innovative children's activities to inner city children.
- 1976** Riverina Touring Play Centre (Sport and Recreation) .
- 1976** Griffith Mobile Bus Government Grant (FACSA).
- 1978** Canterbury Mobile Play and Information Van (NSW Health).
- 1978** Northern Roads Activity Van (Inverell) (FACSA).
- 1978** Balmain Information Van.

**1979** Forgiven Valley Mobile (FACSA).

Contact assisted several rural and remote communities to set up their own Mobile Children's Services in the **1980's** onwards such as the Bourke Mobile Children's Service, Nyngan and Walgett Goonimoo Mobiles Children's Services as examples.

### **Mobile Meets and the NSW Mobile Association.**

The uniqueness and diversity of Mobile Children's Services led them to seek a way to come together to form their own network and access to training specific to their needs.

- 1978** Judy Finlason in her role as Network of Community activities Coordinator organised gathering of Mobile Services inner Sydney city Mansion House with the Magic Yellow Bus, Griffith Community Mobile (as it was known then) and the Mobile Community Information Centre service attending.
- 1982** Network News introduced 'A Mobiling Along' column and Yvonne Pearsall and Juliet Way (Jo Jo) from Colo Wilderness Mobile took on the role of organising this column, designed specifically for Mobile services, to provide information and ideas or for people perhaps thinking of setting up a Mobile service.
- 1982** Mobile gathering hosted by Newcastle College of Advanced Education.
- 1983** Springwood. Judy Finalson (Network) and June Jeremy (Contact) organised an event and the name Mobile Meet was first coined.
- 1983** Griffith Neighbourhood Centre hosted an in-service for Mobiles, funded by the Department of Education.
- 1984** Yarrowood Mobile Meet organised by Penrith City Council.
- 1985** Yarrowood Mobile Meet – organised by Network and the Magic Yellow Bus.
- 1986** Morpeth Mobile Meet organised by the Hunter Mobiles. A representative from the NSW Government (Meredith Griggs) attended to consult about the proposed review of the NSW Children's Services Regulations. Mobile Children's services were not reflected in the Regulation which caused comment. As a result, the Morpeth attendees discussed the need for a Mobile representative body, and this was supported at this event.



**1986** Fairymeadow Mobile Meet organised by-Illawarra Toy Library. At this Meet the establishment of an Incorporated Mobile Association was endorsed with Northern Roads Activity Van Inc taking on the role of incorporation of the NSW Mobile Resource Services Association Inc. (MRSA). The Mobiles representative body became a reality.

### **Mobile Meets since this time:**

- 1988** Jindabyne Station Resort hosted by the Monaro Mobile Preschool, Cooma.
- 1989** Dubbo RSL Club hosted by Western NSW Mobiles.
- 1990** Gunnedah RSL Club hosted by Ooranga Family Mobile Resource Unit.
- 1991** Parklea - Valentine Sports Centre hosted by Galloping Gumnut &Western Sydney Mobiles.
- 1992** Nelsons Bay RSL Club hosted by Port Stephens Activity Van &Hunter Region Mobiles.
- 1993** Lake Burrendong - Sport &Recreation Centre; hosted by State Executive MRSA (Mobile Resource Services Assoc.).
- 1994** Kiama RSL Club hosted by Kookaburra Kinder Mobile Preschool &Southern Region Mobiles.
- 1995** Kurrajong Heights - Merroo Meadow Conference Centre.

### **Mobile Meets were held annually up with the last Meets being held:**

- 2017** Sydney Rydges World Square. organised by Contact in partnership with MCSA. At this Meet the Australian Government Federally funded Budget Based Mobiles to attending from interstate.
- 2018** Cronulla organised by CELA in partnership with MCSA.
- 2020** Cronulla cancelled due to COVID.

Hilary Fuller Northern Roads Mobile (Inverell) was elected as the Inaugural President I of the Association in **1987**. The Mobile Resource Services Association name was selected to reflect the diversity of Mobiles at the time including Community information Vans and Mobiles providing a wider innovative range of roles with families.

The Association continued as a representative group for Mobile Children's Services (unfunded) voluntary organisation.

Contact provided a Sydney base and transport for the Association to use as required and time limited project MRSA based staffing were based in the Contact Office as required in the early.

**1994** MCSA receives funding to engage a full-time staffing role and the Association sets up an independent base (Lake Macquarie)

A name change occurred to NSW Mobile Children's Services Association to reflect more directly the Mobile 's role at this time. Sue Kingwill (Contact) become the Public Officer for the Association.

### **The Mobile Children's Services Association (MCSA) wound up in 2023.**

The NSW Residential programs, National Mobile Musters, then NAMS played a crucial role in networking and supporting the Children's Mobile teams operating in remote contexts throughout Australia. The Mobile Meets and the NSW Mobile Children's Services Association equally played an important professional and networking and supporting role in NSW.

**<https://www.contactinc.org/history-of-mobiles-in-australia>**









