

KOORIE
ENTREPRENEURS

Cormach Evans

Ngarrimili + Strong Brother Strong Sister

Running two organisations concurrently while remaining a dedicated father and husband, proud Yorta Yorta man Cormach Evans, acutely understands the need for balance. By trusting in his self-worth, and prioritising his mental and physical health, Cormach – founder of Strong Brother Strong Sister (a profit-with-purpose mentorship organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth) and co-founder of Ngarrimili (a non-profit that supports and nurtures Indigenous entrepreneurship and business) – is able to be of value to those in his professional and personal life. Accrediting much of his success to being supported by strong, inspirational women, Cormach provides guidance to young Aboriginal people, offers insight to Aboriginal business-owners, and lives a life he once thought was out of reach.



Tell us a little bit about yourself, Cormach.

My name is Cormach Evans and I'm a proud Yorta Yorta man. I live, and I've grown up, on Wathaurong Country. I live on the coastline and the ocean has provided a lot of opportunities. It's one of the reasons I am standing where I am today.

I am 30 years old and I've got a beautiful family. They have given me a lot of passion, pride, compassion and support. My partner Coco and me, we have our son Waari who is two-and-a-half years old, and then we've got beautiful Winni who's just turned six months old.


I have been super-lucky. I've always been surrounded by women since a young age. I've had so many matriarchs who have supported me. As a kid, I was one of those geeky kids in school that was super-quiet. I went to a school in Geelong, where I was the only Aboriginal kid in that school. Transitioning from primary school to secondary school, it was a big change. In Year 7 I found high school sucked. But looking back now, I really wished I hadn't left school in Year 10. Looking back, I wish I would have completed it.

If you were to go back now, knowing what your passions are, what subjects would you go back to do?

I think I would go back, just to do it. I run a mentoring program called Strong Brother Strong Sister (SBSS) and I talk to our kids a lot about finishing school. They're always like, "You didn't finish school." I say, "No, I didn't, but learn from my lessons." For me, school sucked. On a daily basis I faced racism and discrimination. I remember coming home from school when I was in Year 10 and there was 'Coon Evans' on the bus station outside our house. Stuff like that really broke my spirit as a young Aboriginal man. There were a lot of other things that happened. School wasn't a fun or safe place for me, so I chose to leave.

I worked in family and friends' businesses for quite some time, from when I left at 16 to 21. That's when I decided I wanted to start my own business.

“You have 80 thousand years of excellence instilled in you. Dream as big as you want because everything is possible.”



Now I run an organisation called Strong Brother Strong Sister, which supports young Aboriginal people across Victoria. And also, Ngarrimili which supports Aboriginal businesses across Australia now. Which is really cool.

You were introduced to business and what it's like to run a business from quite a young age.

I always thought it was cool, but at the same time – when I was a teenager – I didn't think I was capable of achieving that. I think that was due to my experience with school and a few other things. I thought having a business was really cool, but out of my depth.

I have surfed all my life. I worked for this bakery café and the owner was a family friend. He used to come in and say g'day, do a bit of work, and then shoot off to go surfing. Every now and again, if I was doing really well, he'd come in and grab me and say, "You're coming with us." I thought that was rad; so cool to be able to leave work during the day to go surfing. But at that age I just thought it was way out of my depth.

When did that change for you?

It's still surreal. But my mindset has completely changed.

I surfed for a long time and got to do some amazing things with it. I got to travel to Papua New Guinea and make a traditional canoe with Traditional Owners, and then paddle back from Papua New Guinea to Australia. It was mad. It was the coolest thing I've ever done. We had to hunt and gather. We teamed up with the Red Bull TV series for that. I got to do all these amazing things.

Then there was a period of time in my early 20s where I went down a dark path. I turned to drugs and alcohol. I wasn't dealing with my trauma. The weight of not dealing my trauma as a child had a huge role in that dark time, and I encourage anyone that has experience any type of trauma to know it's OK to reach out for help. As an adult and a father now, I have a greater understanding of transgenerational trauma, grief and loss. Understanding that has helped me heal and ensure we bring this understanding and education into both organisations too.

But back in my early 20s, I didn't have the right supports in place and I went through a period of time where I thought I had to learn on my own, which was not the case. And then I was really lucky to have someone pull me up and get me the help I needed. That was when I started on the path towards my own business. I worked in community for a long time and saw so many barriers in place in terms of health and wellbeing, opportunities, ensuring youth voices are heard and respected and simply ensuring young people can live their greatest dreams – for all Aboriginal kids especially our kids in out of home care, youth justice, facing homelessness and difficult times. That's when the spark came. There was two years of wanting to do something, but not actually knowing what to do or where to start.

And that's when you started Strong Brother Strong Sister?

Yep. We started that three years ago. When I was working in community, I was a men's Aboriginal health practitioner which is like a nurse. I saw a lot of Aboriginal men suffering

from chronic disease or mental health and a lot of other awful circumstances that were all preventable. Everything was preventable. I was trying to understand how to create solutions. I left that role and started working with kids in care, which was incredible but again the same thing happened: I saw a lot of barriers. I continued to go to my boss and say, "Hey, I've got a solution. Let's fix this." But sometimes it can feel like people within these systems are not wanting to find solutions, especially in terms of healing trauma and supporting community for the long term sustainable future generations to come.

So, you were seeing all this pain and had ideas about how to address it. You were going to management, but not being heard. Was it this frustration that led you to doing your own thing?

Totally. I remember the day. Coco was three months pregnant with Waari. A thing popped up at work and it really could have been fixed, I saw a child removed from their family and it truly broke me. And I was told we couldn't do anything about it. I quit on the spot. I said, "I'm done, that's not good enough." Strong Brother Strong Sister kicked off the next day. We just had a strategy session the next day. Coco has really shown me what I am capable of. Within a week we set up the business and had 20 kids in the program receiving mentoring. That young person was the first young person to be supported with their family, and I got them back home to their family. Still to this day, that young person is still a part of Strong Brother Strong Sister and is a part of my family in many ways.

You quit your job, strategy session the next day, and within a week it was set up?

I had 15 young people receiving one-on-one mentoring who were living in out of home care and two young people in youth justice within the first week. About a month later, we got \$30 thousand in funding to run a youth group in the City of Greater Geelong, which was crazy I thought. And then two part time staff employed. And now... we have 10 employees including full-time staff, part-time staff and some casual school students working with us on our youth groups.

Amazing. Coco is an entrepreneur as well, right? You have a very entrepreneurial family?

Totally. That's what is so cool about it. I think if I hadn't met her, I would have been stuck in a job. Probably doing the same thing I was doing at the time. Probably be miserable, probably be really angry and probably a really different person to who I am today. I don't think I would have taken that leap. Again, super-lucky to be around incredible, strong women.

You said you would have been angry if you stayed in those jobs, and you don't seem like an angry person. We often ask young people what they want to be when they grow up, but we don't always ask what environment they want to work in, or what's going to make them feel heard or valued or happy. When you think about yourself in those jobs that didn't feel right, versus the work you do now, how does it feel different?

I look forward to the next day. I am excited. I remember when I was working for someone else, it was always like, "Ah, I've got to go to work tomorrow" or I heard the alarm in the morning, and I would sleep for another 20 minutes. I never felt truly valued nor thought

I had a true purpose in life. Even though I had some amazing jobs, there was still those moments where you were like... no.

Looking at the work I do now with both Ngarrimili and Strong Brother Strong Sister I feel truly privileged to be able to work with so many incredible and inspiring people. Both organisations have true purpose, true value, true meaning and most importantly are have really important impact for incredible people that need that guidance, support or even just reassurance or encouragement.

All my staff are part of my family. Waari calls everyone Aunty or Uncle and for me knowing my children are surrounding by so many beautiful people brings me pure joy.

There are moments where we do deal with awful and difficult circumstances that can really challenge and upset you, because you're seeing community hurt and people hurt. But to have that team around you; we look out for one another. We make each other stronger. And most importantly we are there for those through those times to support them to come out healthier, happier, stronger and most importantly connected to our family and our team.

You're known to have a great management style. You hire people you believe in, you create space for them, and hand over power. Is that something you do strategically or is it just the way you naturally engage with people?

I don't think I've ever been told that, so, thanks. I don't see it as management, I think management is such a Western culture thing. It's a Western word and system. You look at Aboriginal Elders; they've paved the way for us. They've knocked down barriers, fought, gone to rallies and screamed at the top of their lungs to allow us to stand here to be strong and proud, safely. Being able to look at the work they've done and to reflect on how Aboriginal people have lived and ran communities, for thousands and thousands of years, with agriculture and trade. You look at how we lived and still live today: everything was or is equal, there was never a bigger house or hut, etc. That's how I look at everything as well. A CEO or founder, or whatever you want to call it, there are times where you need to be that leader. But you can still work with the belief that everyone is equal.

“Know your worth. Know that whatever you want to do, you can do it.”





We don't actually have a set job title for anyone. We ask, "Hey, what do you want your future to look like? What are your passions, your strengths and your vision?" And then you actually listen, hear what that staff member or family member has told you. I see everyone as family. Then we look at how we can create a role that suits what they want to achieve. By doing this you're going to get 10 times more out of a person and that person is going to be happy. I benefit, the business benefits, the worker, a young person benefits and the community benefits as well. The wider community benefits because they get to see young Aboriginal people in roles of excellence. It's not planned, it's just how I was taught. My mum is such a strong woman and she raised me with these values. And it's been demonstrated by our leaders in community.

That's such a great description of Aboriginal management styles. We're trained to work together, collaboratively.

I think the wider community has a lot to learn from that. To bring that into all businesses, there would be happier people and less conflict. There would be less awful circumstances. The ecosystem and everything else, the climate. I think that there's just so much to benefit from it. We are the oldest living culture, and we've survived for so long and there is a reason why. Hopefully people will start to admire and learn from it.

Tell us about the business structures of Strong Brother Strong Sister and Ngarrimili. Are they not-for-profit, social enterprises or profit-with-purpose organisations?

Strong Brother Strong Sister is profit-with-purpose; it's set up as a company. We did it this way to ensure sustainability, so we aren't reliant on grants. Our work is fee-for-service.

All the money that we make goes back into the programs to support young people and employee young people. We've got 10 employees now and we're about to set up another Strong Brother Strong Sister in Footscray to then on a statewide level with the aim to be national in the next five years. Ngarrimili is a not-for-profit, I set it up this way to provide opportunities for all Indigenous businesses.

Did you start businesses to get rich?

[laughs] Ah, if I started them to get rich, I probably would live in a really lovely, beautiful house, I'd have a real flash car and a lot of other things. I think that's a really cool thing to look at: you're allowed to be successful, Aboriginal people are allowed to be successful and have all of those things. I just never wanted them, it's not really attractive to me. But I think for any young person, they should know that you're actually allowed to be successful. If you want a flash car, you can have a flash car. If you want a flash house, you can have a flash house.

Ngarrimili is focused on supporting Aboriginal entrepreneurship and business growth. What took you down that path?

Coco found a grant to attend a business enhance program. It was a weekend retreat, it was in Red Hill at this beautiful property and it looked really amazing. At the company looked really cool. We applied for it, not thinking that we would get it because it seemed like such a huge thing. Got a call from a fella who's now a really good friend of mine, and he was like, "I'd love for you to come along and to hear more about what you do." Waari was only four weeks old at the time and I had to go away for three nights – I couldn't take the family or anything. I was freaking out about leaving Coco home with Waari. But I went and took that risk. I was the only Aboriginal person there. I was actually the only Aboriginal person that applied for it as well. I got so much out of the program. Within two weeks I had employed another staff member and it created this amazing period of growth. I got talking with the guys and was asking, "Why wasn't there any other Aboriginal people that applied for it? I know there are Aboriginal businesses out there, so why didn't they apply?" We decided to partner up and create a program like the one I went through, but for Aboriginal businesses. We literally designed the program and two days later the LaunchVic grant round came out. We got that funding and Ngarrimili was launched.

You've got a habit of this.

We were thinking, "Should we go for it?" We were two small organisations. Impact Co had only started six months before I met them, we were thinking, "What chances have we got?" I was like, "If you're going to do something, you have got to do it to the best of your ability." The total grant was half of a million dollars. Never in my life had I seen so much money, I thought that would be impossible. But I thought, "You know what we're going to try and give it a go."

That was only a few years ago and the business sector has grown so much since then.

It's massive! I never thought I'd see something activate so quickly. You create opportunities but it's also about being good people, being known to have good merit in community.

There's an idea about what a businessperson looks like. How often do you wear a suit?

Never. I think weddings; funerals sometimes. That's it. Usually I wear no shoes, some comfortable jeans and a nice size baggy tee, I really like to feel comfortable but also express my own identity. And wearing a suit isn't something that's a part of me. Don't get me wrong I do love to dress up in nice fancy clothes.

Tell us what a day in your life looks like. What do you wear, where do you go? What time do you start and finish?

My ideal day is: get up super-early, go for a surf – I live really close to the beach. So, make a coffee, go for a surf, take the kids for a walk. By about 9:30AM, get ready for work. If the surf's no good, I go for a paddle – I love being in the ocean, it's where I recharge. Or spend time with the kids (Waari loves going to the mountain bike track) and then start work. The first hour of my day is checking in with the team. Communication is such an important thing. Also making sure the team knows that I'm there and I really care. Especially now with COVID, some of our team are working from home, some are in Geelong still at the office. Just checking in and letting them know I'm here is really important to me. Usually there's a couple of meetings. I don't like to do too many meetings. I've learnt over the years, meetings suck and they are really draining. When I was doing six meetings a day, it just wasn't sustainable. I'd be like a zombie at the end of the day and I wasn't able to give the attention I wanted to Coco or Waari. So pretty much, I get to work, check in with everyone, have team meetings, suss out what the plan is for the day or the week. I still love being with young people; I still do a lot of mentoring. And then with Ngarrimili, checking in with our businesses and providing time. Having chats to see where people are at and seeing how we can best support them. I spend most of my days just having conversations – I guess being open. I'm so lucky to have incredible staff to do the not-so-fun stuff.

I'm sure it's fun for them, some people love administrative work.

Exactly. I have things I love doing and things I hate doing. They have things they love and hate doing too. Spreadsheets aren't my thing. My days are just fun days.

“You think of any category and there will be an Aboriginal person leading in that space.”



But you also work really hard. When you have your own business, your work becomes so much a part of your life, boundaries can get very blurred. There are no clear lines between personal life, work life, social life, community life. You have to be careful to not end up working the whole time.

Yeah, totally. I used to. I just had a couple of weeks off, spending time with the family, hanging out and reflecting a lot. I never had boundaries. I was doing a lot of work outside of hours; on the phone at random times. Since returning from leave, I have been trying to create some structure and sustainability. Burnout is such a huge thing and we don't talk about it enough. If I had continued the way I was going, I wouldn't be available to the team, family and community. I try to turn off by 4PM. That's my aim. Because I know something is always going to pop up. There's always going to be something at 4:30-5PM.

So, you are able to design your days, aren't you? Surfing is important to you, so you get up early enough to fit that in. You are able to structure your workday around what works for your family. You wear what you want, you choose your office location. Clock on and off when you want, spend time with the people you pick, in an environment you created.

I think it is so cool. With surfing, the tide has to be right and the wind has to be perfect, so I can look at the surf forecast on the internet and see at 2PM today the surf is going to be amazing. I can actually block out 2PM in my calendar. Because doing that makes me a better person. Spending time with kids makes me a better person. These are things that I know help me and make me stronger. And that helps me give back to the work that I do, the community and my family.

Being well is such an integral part of running a successful business. Things that might seem indulgent (like a 2PM surf) can have a direct connection to productivity. When you realise that, you start to view self-care differently.

It's so important. Self-care or even putting your hand up for help is still sort of looked down on for some reason. Every time I have taken the time to do those things I love, I've gotten so much out of it and then others get so much more from me. Because I've been happier, I've been more available, and I can actually really listen to a conversation.

Is there anything you would like to say to Aboriginal high school students about starting a business or working in an Aboriginal business?

Starting Aboriginal businesses, you create a Black economy. You can have staff, contractors, buy off other Aboriginal businesses. At Ngarrimili, we work with all these amazing people who aren't employees but are sub-contractors who have their own Aboriginal businesses.

With Strong Brother Strong Sister, we did a lot of work in the education sector supporting Aboriginal kids in Years 7 to 12. It might not be everywhere, but what we saw was teachers, schools and peers having very low expectations of Aboriginal students. I think that's poor; it's not cool. There's Aboriginal young people who are future leaders, and future Elders for the community. You have 80 thousand years of excellence instilled in you. You have

incredible bloodlines to the oldest living culture. You have Elders and ancestors that have fought incredible fights to ensure that you stand here today – to ensure we can achieve our greatest dreams, goals and aspirations. Dream big. If I was talking to my younger self, I'd say, "Dream as big as you want because everything is possible." I never thought that I'd be doing what I am doing today. Know your worth. Know that whatever you want to do, you can do it. There are so many leaders within the Aboriginal community – whether it be in community services, media, marketing and comms, accounting, or lawyers, musicians, artists. You think of any category and there will be an Aboriginal person leading in that space. There's so many people to call upon who will support you and ensure that you can achieve your dreams and goals, because they were you once. That'd be my advice.

