

## **Perseverance and partnership pay for Gympie job seeker**

Since October last year, lovers of rail looking to experience something new have flocked to Gympie for the chance to relive a vital part of Queensland's rail history courtesy of the not-for-profit organisation, Mary Valley Rattler. In just six months, thousands of passengers have already traversed the route from Gympie to Amamoor on lovingly restored heritage trains through the picturesque Mary Valley.

Sparked by this revival of the local rail heritage, 54-year-old Gympie resident, Gary Banks, seized the opportunity to learn new skills when he joined Energy Skills Queensland's (ESQ) Career Start Rail Skills program, completing the Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure with Registered Training Organisation, Centre for Excellence in Rail Training, on-site at Mary Valley Rattler. Only a few months down the track, he is now an integral part of the Rattler's rail maintenance team.

"Gary went through the first round of ESQ's Gympie rail training program with us at the Rattler. His resilience, persistence and willingness to learn have always made him a pleasure to work with. Gary had previously worked on a Work for the Dole project with us and showed really great commitment. He continued to volunteer with us after that project, and when the Gympie Rail program came up with ESQ, we strongly encouraged him to apply," says the Rattler's Safety and Training Manager, Julia Avis.

Gary was successful in his application to the ESQ program, and continued to demonstrate his determination and eagerness to learn. As one of the program's older participants, he demonstrated not only his willingness to work as part of a team, but also his aptitude for leadership, taking many of the younger participants under his wing. He supported participants with low levels of literacy and numeracy through the various online components and inductions in the program, helping overall participant retention and success, Julia says.

No work was available immediately on completion of the program in December 2018, but Gary continued to volunteer with the Rattler.

"He's definitely one of those people who like to see work through to completion. He kept on with the same rail restoration work he had started in training," Julia says.

"Before coming on board with us, Gary didn't have a fantastic work history, but he has a lot of lifeskills. Sometimes the younger ones who end up in unemployment have a lot of issues. Gary guided them through the correct techniques he'd learned through training and volunteering with us."

"He's also lived in Gympie his whole life. He's very much settled here, with all his family and friends nearby. Work is not easy to find in and around Gympie by any means. There's not a whole lot of local jobs, and a lot of people need to travel for work. We were eager to employ our own track worker instead of hiring contractors. By then, Gary was a really integral member of the track work crew. We don't have new track here which means the skills needed are a bit different. Gary already had these."

“So after four months, when we finally had the opportunity to put someone on, we encouraged Gary to apply. He’s shown us that if you put your mind to something, that you can achieve it by going the extra mile. He’s got the tenacity and the right personality,” Julia says.

ESQ’s Gympie Rail Project Coordinator, Chandel Sears, said the ongoing partnership with Mary Valley Rattler has been integral to Gary’s success, particularly in a region where good jobs are hard to find.

“It’s been a fantastic outcome for us at ESQ, the team at the Rattler and for others involved in the program as well,” Chandel said.

“Gary loves it. He’s really excited about this outcome because it’s something that he wanted to achieve. Staying local near family and friends is really important to him. His community is here, and Gympie is currently a very hard region to find work. There’s only a couple of industries doing well, so this is a happy outcome for all of us,” Chandel said.



*Gary Banks (third from the left, with the long beard) at work along the Mary Valley Rattler tracks*

## **Re-training brings new lease on life for Gympie job seeker**

Every day, people working in frontline service professions touch the lives of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged community members. But for the often unsung heroes at the coalface, this work can take a terrible toll.

Gympie resident, Paul Smith, had worked as a career social worker, extending support to people in the courts experiencing drug and alcohol problems. Years of this work contributed to a significant breakdown that robbed Paul of his confidence, leaving in its place anxiety, depression, confusion, and a sense of hopelessness.

A community-based training initiative coordinated by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) and funded through the Queensland Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative helped Paul to rebuild his life, find work, and gain a new sense of purpose, says ESQ Project Coordinator, Chandel Sears.

"Paul first approached us in a pretty bad state. His breakdown had left him unsure of what he could do. His previous career had been quite taxing and he was pretty out of sorts. Just approaching us and getting back into a group environment was extremely challenging for him," Chandel recalls.

"In the beginning at the information session and the induction, we talked about what the program would entail, and the supports that were available to him. I came to understand the effects of his earlier experiences, and learned that he did indeed want to do something positive with his life, but would need a lot of wrap around support."

ESQ's SolarQ Renewables Project was preparing participants for work in the renewal energy sector, teaching them the safe work practices and basic technical skills to assist in the build of solar farms around Queensland.

"We had a fantastic trainer in the program who we worked closely with to provide the right support to Paul and the other participants," says Chandel. "Paul's confidence quickly started to grow. I went to see participants during each week to have individual chats with everyone to see how they were doing, how they were progressing through the training, and to see what support they needed. It was really group-based, practical training, and they all interacted really well with each other. The trainer made sure that everyone was included in all the learning activities, and I could see the confidence growing across the room every time I visited."

As Paul's anxiety diminished, he bonded with the group and really enjoyed the training. After a few weeks, ESQ helped Paul with an application to Gympie Regional Council. He secured an interview and successfully gained work as a Council Maintenance Worker before the completion of ESQ's program.

"For Paul to get a full-time job with the local Council was a tremendous outcome for him and his family," Chandel says. "The only thing he was unhappy about was that Council wanted him to start immediately, so he couldn't finish the course with his newfound friends and classmates. But our

program, support and the new job have given him that confidence back again. Paul is now in a hands-on role where he's not feeling that emotional pressure anymore. He couldn't be happier."



## **Group dynamic key to railway success in Ipswich\***

Working on the railway often means time spent a long way from home, and when you're out in the field, your mates are all you've got.

The example of a Rail Infrastructure project coordinated by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in 2017-18 demonstrates how steps taken to build a genuine team ethos between participants during training can contribute to sustainable employment outcomes. The practical training embedded in this Community Work Skills program set the wheel in motion for camaraderie to develop that proved the difference when program graduates entered the workforce.

"ESQ's Rail Infrastructure programs are unique in that they include a heavy practical workplace-based learning component, even before participants take to the tracks," said Sebastian Ross-Hagebaum, ESQ's Workforce Skilling Manager.

"The simulated work environment at The Workshops Rail Museum in Ipswich not only allowed participants to develop the skills needed to work on track repairs with concrete or wooden sleepers, competently and safely using the tools of the trade, but also helped build a camaraderie and rapport among them that has transferred to their post-program work environment. They bonded really well together, and by the end of the program, were already working as a team," he said.

Industry linkages and partnerships embedded in the program's delivery model further strengthened participants' commitment to each other and the program since they knew, with perseverance, that a job was there waiting for them.

"The program actively engaged rail construction and infrastructure maintenance company, CR Rail, and labour hire firm, CQ Resources, who serve as major sources of labour to some of the biggest actors in the rail industry. Guest speakers from these companies presented to participants, who were then supported to complete registration and on-boarding processes with them. Through this process, these and other companies knew that they were dealing with skilled and ready applicants who met industry standards and possessed the required qualifications to commence employment upon completion of the program. These real employer connections provided a big confidence boost for participants," Sebastian said.

Importantly, the sense of commitment participants had developed towards each other carried into their employment, and now, almost a year later, sees graduates from this project make up some of CQ Resources' most experienced and reliable long-term labourers.

"Once employed by CQ Resources, graduates would typically have to drive to the depot in Yatala where they would then board a bus destined for work sites across South-East, South-West and Central Queensland. The relationships between graduates that had developed during ESQ's program quickly emerged as a strength in this new context," Sebastian said.

"On the bus, you'd find these same guys bonding again, playing cards, listening to music, talking, singing – turning the travel days into a real social affair. If you have workers in the rail industry that get along really well, they typically share a room together. So when you have examples of people sharing accommodation and then working in the same crew out on the track, it's really good. We've seen these relationships come to the fore within our programs, and our industry partners tell us this is a boon for retention," he said.

“Most of those guys from this program started with CQ Resources in May 2018. They’ve since been out on the track in oppressive conditions – hot, humid and cold. There have been occasional issues and challenges, but because they have that underlying trust and respect for each other, they’ve been able to work through these. Those guys have truly proven themselves. They’re reliable, they turn up, and they’re continuing to make their mark.”

\*Note: The MT02350 project had 40 participants, of which 39 completed the Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure and 24 successfully secured employment. Across a total of seven completed Rail Infrastructure Community Work Skills projects, ESQ has to date achieved a full-qualification training completion rate of 96.0% and employment outcomes for 68.8% of participants.

## **Ipswich rail project helps keep history alive**

It's a bright Ipswich morning, and a thirteen strong rail gang are keeping busy under a mild autumn sun.

Fasteners are first removed from suspect sleepers and the supporting ballast dug out with pelican picks, a tool engineered especially for the task at hand. The old sleepers are grabbed at one end by a worker with purpose-built forceps designed to guide their removal. At the other end, a worker drives the worn out sleeper from beneath the tracks with a sledge hammer. The team then measures and marks up the new sleeper, each weighing well over 100kg, and sees to its insertion to fill the vacant space. The sleeper is jimmied up by one worker, while another drills in the new fasteners – two enormous alloy screws offset from each other at an angle. Once completed, the ballast is replaced between the tracks.

It's time for the next sleeper. The supervisor, Dallas Crowe, is happy with the team's work – known as 'boodling' in rail jargon – and mostly there for quality control. He also likes reminding everyone to keep hydrated. The team look like they've been doing this all their lives.

It's hard to believe then that the members of this well-oiled machine are newcomers to the game – participants in a Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure course delivered by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in partnership with from Centre for Excellence in Rail Training (CERT). Dallas is their trainer and under his supervision, participants labour on a stretch of rail extending from the historic Swanbank Railway Station, which is the home of the Queensland Pioneer Steam Railway (QPSR), a not-for-profit volunteer-based organisation dedicated to keeping the region's rich rail heritage alive through guided weekend steam train tours.

The arrangement is a win-win scenario, says Dallas.

"After covering the theory and doing some initial practical training at The Workshops Rail Museum in Ipswich, we had the golden opportunity to come out here. It's just great, serving different purposes at once. The Pioneer Railway relies on volunteer workers for everything you see here today. Maintaining an operation like this without funding is extremely difficult. And then you look at what we've got for our training participants – it's real work. It makes perfect sense. These guys are gaining brilliant experience. This is an absolute bonus doing this," Dallas says.

Rob Shearer, Chairman of the Queensland Pioneer Steam Railway agrees.

"We only survive on the money that comes in through the train trips. It's only about six thousand dollars a run. If you look at the sleepers we're replacing here today, they go at \$77 a sleeper. It all costs, and it's only our volunteers that keep us going," says Rob.

"So having these students here makes life a bit easier because our other volunteers can keep working on the steam engines while the track keeps going thanks to these guys. And they're learning on the job while they're training. It's mutually beneficial. The students have been great, they're just good hard workers. It's been really good. And they're mostly living just nearby in Ipswich, so there's a real local connection there as well," he says.

The future of the Pioneer Railway is not the only history the ESQ program has a shot of preserving. For several participants, the story of railway in Queensland already courses through their veins.

Ammon Rose stands to join the fourth generation of family members steeped in the railway industry, commencing with his great grandmother in Southwest Queensland. But it was the story of his grandmother who followed in her mother's footsteps that sparked off a proud family tradition.

"She really joined Queensland Rail out of necessity after my grandfather died. Back then, the policy of Queensland Rail was that a widow had to be offered a job. So she was offered a position as a Station Mistress as they were called back in those days. My grandmother was a widow with eight children, which was a tough spot, especially back in those days. So that's how she got a job," Ammon says.

"And then my uncle and aunt, since they were the youngest of the eight siblings, basically when they weren't at school, they'd have to be with my grandmother, so they'd naturally be at the station with her. She taught them a lot of what they needed to know about the railway. At times they even found themselves in a classroom environment taught by QR officials about how to run stations, about what to do in the case of emergency, and all that. So they just grew up around that as well."

Ammon rattles off more than a dozen family members who have occupied roles ranging from signal conductors and engineers, to guards, drivers and station masters, and in places ranging from Bundamba to Mackay to Stanthorpe and everywhere in between. His brother has just recently joined QR's ranks.

"I've obviously been exposed to the influence of all that, and by my mother and older brother as well. They've all been an inspiration to me," Ammon says.

Indigenous participant, Krystle Ghee, is also a proud descendant of Queensland Rail workers. She recently left a productive career in administration to build on this legacy.

"It's very physical, but it's good. I didn't think I'd get into this course because I'm from an admin background. But I was getting tired of what I was doing, and thought I'd love to give this a go. When they called and said I was in, I was so happy. It's been really enjoyable. And I like working in the outdoors. It's really good," Krystle says.

Her commitment to the course is obvious, including a two-hour round trip with her brother-in-law each day, who is also participating in the program.

"The drive is a big commitment, but it shows I can actually do this kind of stuff. You don't think you have it in you when you have a nine-to-five desk job, but when you actually get out here and do it, you realise it's in you. You get physically stronger, you get used to the tools, you get used to the work. They say there's a lot of opportunity in rail, so it's pretty exciting for me right now," she says.

But the story of program trainer, Dallas Crowe, takes the cake. As the great grandson of a Queensland Rail worker, Dallas has knocked up six generations, and says the history of the railway has some valuable lessons to teach this new generation of workers.

"In its day, Queensland Rail employed 17,000 people. Biggest employer in the state, it was. If you looked at any of the towns further out from the city, they were real rail towns. Those towns couldn't have survived if they didn't have the rail, because the roads were pretty average in those days. A lot of the blokes back in those days, they left school when they were twelve or thirteen, they had to get jobs to support their families," Dallas says.



“As long as they could swing a pick and do a day’s work, the rail had a job for them. If you showed aptitude in the field, they’d look after you. They’d educate you, they’d teach you, they taught you how to read and write and how to do things. And a lot of the blokes you look at now where they are, working in higher management and so on, they really started out like these guys learning on the job here today, not knowing much, some of them not knowing how to read or write, but they worked their way up.”

“I tell these guys here, all of them here, there’s always someone watching what you’re doing. And if you show initiative and keep working and look after your team, people take note of that, and they’ll keep you on board. There’s nothing more important that I try to instil in them than teamwork. Nobody who’s at the top of their game in anything ever got to where they are on their own. They get there because other good people have had their backs.”

“And these guys are already there. They’re a good crew, honestly, I cannot say that enough. They rally around each other, work hard, and look after each other’s backs.”



*Participants in Intake 2 of MT03431 Career Start Rail Skills – Ipswich along the QPSR tracks, 2 April 2019*

## **From the inside out - Damien Cobbo's story of training success**

At the heart of challenges faced by long-term incarcerated persons on return to the community is an elusive answer to a simple question: "How will I fit in?" A study of Queensland prisoners published by Monash University in 2014 revealed more than half of former inmates find themselves homeless and unemployed six months following their release. A recent study of criminal recidivism in Australia revealed that 45% of people released from prison in 2014-15 were back behind bars less than two years later. Indigenous Australians fare significantly worse against these same measures. The obstacles to societal and economic integration are enormous.

Approaching his 30th birthday, prison life was the only life Damien Cobbo knew as he finally walked free from the four walls that had enclosed him since his teens. His earlier life had been marred by violence, family chaos, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and transience. Captive to past hurts and a drug-hazed mind, he committed a number of terrible crimes and paid a heavy price.

The odds of finding a life of purpose on the outside were stacked against him.

But only months later, Damien is now a prime candidate for vacancies in the lucrative rail industry after gaining a Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure following a 7-week Townsville-based project delivered by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in partnership with Centre for Excellence in Rail Training with funding from the Queensland Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative. Damien and others were also supported through a range of contractor inductions with major rail operators Aurizon, ARTC and John Holland and other industry-required certifications to obtain the Rail Industry Worker Card.

It was the timeless kind of time of life on the inside that first got Damien dreaming of a better future. "I think it was just being in prison and seeing what was around me, and the behaviour of others in prison, that got me thinking. Seeing so many Indigenous people in there was upsetting. It was like seeing all my brothers stuck in the darkness, like they couldn't see the light, or anything better," Damien said.

"When I started to think more positively, I really started to believe I could do something with my life. I used the time inside to study, gain an education, learn some new skills and build up my literacy and numeracy. I started to feel like I owe it to myself. I started in there when I was 18, and I knew I wouldn't be out till nearly 30. I started to feel I was wasting my whole life. I'd hurt people in the community. I'd hurt my family. And while I'm stuck in here, they're suffering too. They don't get to see me. I realised I can't get around inflicting pain on everyone. I realised I'm a man now, a young man. If people are going to respect me, I have to change. They're not just going to respect me like that, I have to earn it."

On release, Damien worked with his employment services provider and parole officer to explore opportunities for industry training. ESQ's Townsville Career Start Rail Skills project was open for applications at the time. Damien attended the information session and initial interview screening hosted by Jeff McIlroy, ESQ's Project Coordinator.

With forty aspiring candidates and only 12 places available, the project team had a challenging selection process ahead of them. In addition, Jeff said that a life of violence and incarceration had left visible marks on Damien that he was unable to overlook.

“Damien has been in the lock up for the last ten years. Ten years of his life gone. He’s on probation at the moment, and wearing an ankle bracelet. I noticed his prison tats. I asked him to tell me where he’s at now. He told me his story, and how he was determined to turn his life around. He’d met and fallen in love with a new girl who has two kids. He wants to make it work,” Jeff said.

Jeff said that Damien’s sincerity and openness from their first encounter had left a strong impression, but owing to the nature of his offending and ongoing parole conditions, genuine concerns for the safety for the project team and participants remained.

“We had to jump a lot of hurdles to get him on the course. I’m still talking weekly to his probation officer. I had to send the names and date of births of all other participants to Corrections (as Damien’s parole conditions do not permit him to associate with particular people). I also had to convince the trainer and the RTO that they’d be safe working with him. We agreed that the trainer had the right of veto in the first week of the program if there were any warning signs.”

The trainer now has nothing but great things to say about Damien, according to Jeff.

“Damien has been incredibly reliable. He’s turned up everyday, week in, week out. He’s always been on time, and has applied himself brilliantly. He’s formed strong connections with the other participants, helps them out when he can, and has taken some of the younger ones under his wing and really looked after them.”

Damien and the other participants successfully graduated in late March 2019.

“We’re now all working with Damien and the others to help them find employment,” Jeff said. “It’s been rewarding for all of us working with Damien. When you work with someone to help them change their life in such a big way, that’s a rarity. Until recently, he’d been an inmate his whole life. For him to come out, shed the facade, and work with us and others to start walking a new path, that takes a lot of courage.”



*Jeff McIlroy, Damien Cobbo and Probation Officer, Emma Burke, at the Program Graduation*