

The Founder.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

When Redspear Safety launched in Western Australia in 2015, it became the first Aboriginal-owned business in the engineering safety sector. Today, it's morphed into a "super logistics business" supplying thousands of products. The company's three founders talk about its continuing evolution.

By Jessica Mudditt
Photography Ross Swanborough

Redspear Safety was born out of a mining tragedy in Western Australia. At the time, co-founder and managing director Barry McGuire was a consultant for several mining companies where he was employed to bring an understanding of Aboriginal Cultural Safety. "I was flying to a mine site one morning where we encountered a fatality – a young fella lost his life. As I landed, the whole mine was brought to a halt," he says. "I didn't really sleep much afterwards. I was so disturbed that this young fellow had passed and wondered why he wasn't harnessed while working at height."

McGuire and his wife, Liza, teamed up with Francois Witbooi, who became Redspear Safety's general manager when the company launched in 2015. "I first met Barry and Liza when I was working at Many Rivers Microfinance and helped them set up a T-shirt business," Witbooi says. "Barry said to me, 'I've got a feeling we're going to do something together.' I said to him, 'You're out of your mind – there's no way I'm selling T-shirts.'

The three come from highly artistic backgrounds, which they agree adds a different perspective to their work. McGuire is a fine artist and serves on the board of Reconciliation WA, as well as being a cultural ambassador for St Catherine's College. Liza is the co-founder of Jinnali Productions, which produced the first Aboriginal women's calendar. She is also the founding director of Aboriginal Choice, which seeks to preserve Indigenous culture. Witbooi initially trained as a concert pianist in South Africa before becoming a Fulbright Scholar in 2002. He graduated in arts and media management from Columbia University in New York and currently serves on the board of the Black Swan State Theatre Company.

"The arts creates an ability to think outside the ordinary and see the possibilities – to find creative solutions to problems," says Witbooi.

Safety factor

The trio resolved to contribute to improving safety at Australian mining sites, but opted to stay well away from the more obvious choice of the personal protective equipment (PPE) industry. "We don't do PPE because I have a lot of family members in the industry and don't want to be competing with them for contracts," says McGuire. Instead, Redspear Safety carved out a place for itself as the first Aboriginal-owned company

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Liza McGuire

in the engineering safety sector. McGuire says that Redspear often refers its clients to PPE businesses to "help spread the standing of what else is out there within the world of Aboriginal businesses."

"Our strategy has been not to cannibalise, but to complement," echoes Liza, Redspear's operations manager. "It's about collaborating and building a stronger Aboriginal business sector."

The trio took part in Chevron's West Pilbara Business Support Program, which provided support and guidance with developing the initial business strategy and cash-flow modelling, among other things. "We analysed the ins and outs of existing products in the market for a good two years," says McGuire.

While the crux of the business has always been about getting people home from work safely, Redspear substantially refined its offering in the early days in response to market conditions. The company made its debut with height-safety products at the same time that the mining industry fell into decline.

"Mining companies weren't spending a lot of money on big-cap expenses. Our business plan was out the window by the time we had our first meeting with a potential client," says Liza.

But from disappointment came greater opportunities. The trio decided to broaden their target market to the oil and gas and construction sectors, as well as marine offshore supply centres. They also travelled to Singapore with a prospective client, who introduced them to world-class suppliers. Today, the company has suppliers across Australia, Singapore, the UK and US – and soon, possibly China. "We've evolved to the point of showing our clients we can move product and have acquired some great contracts. We started out with maybe 100 products and now it's around 2000," says McGuire.

Redspear Safety has developed an online catalogue it expects will increase order volumes. "We move things really well – that's our strength," agrees Witbooi. "We are a super-logistics business with access to best-in-class technical support through a broad range of partners. We realised that to get to the next phase of growth, we'd have to either bring on more people, or automate, or both. We invested a lot of the cash we had built up in the first two years in automating our systems."

Ultimately, Redspear Safety is creating a legacy for future generations. "We're building something for our children to take over one day and be proud of," says Liza. ■



Barry and Liza McGuire, Francois Witbooi (from left)