



L-R: Fiona Dix & Lia McDonald

Community Engagement

Ever had a problem with council but were unsure who to approach? Surprisingly, there's a swag of people dedicated to giving the community a voice, and as **JANESSA EKERT** discovers it's easier to have your say than some would believe. She gets serious with two council representatives, Fiona Dix and Lia McDonald, who are the driving force behind this. Photography by Brad Newton.

It may be a job for both Lia and Fiona, however no one would dispute that these two go above and beyond to bring local grass roots issues to council through the community engagement group. And while Fiona, who's official title is public consultation and communications officer for the works and services department and Lia, who is communications and education officer for water waste management, admit they can't be something to everybody but certainly try their best. "It's our job to make sure the community has a say in what's happening in their local area and that their opinions are heard," Lia explains.

Commencing in 2005, the group was formed after a community survey highlighted to council a lack of communication concerning changes in the community. "We've found if we get out there and let people know what's going on, they don't mind as much if it causes a bit of a disturbance," Fiona adds. "It's all about creating a better government, if you know there's a problem before anything happens there's a better chance you can rectify it."

Articulate and friendly, it comes as no surprise both women are blessed with the gift of the gab considering

a major part of their workday consists of dealing with the issues affecting local residents. "There's an art to being able to talk to anyone about anything," Fiona laughs. "I never knew getting in trouble at school for talking could be a life skill." A life skill often put to the test, especially when the women are organising one of their well-known 'street talks', where the two offer information relevant to that particular region in a friendly and relaxed environment. "There's a certain sense of 'us' and 'them' when it comes to dealing with the public," Lia admits. "But it's our job to break that barrier."

And street talks are merely the tip of the iceberg, as both women strive to overcome a number of challenges they face every day. As well as organising street talks, Fiona and Lia are responsible for media events and local campaigns, as well as being the public's first point of call. "You learn to be prepared for absolutely anything," Lia laughs. "From national entities wanting to organise a media event in our peak wet season to ensuring Cairns is prepared for the possible truckers strike. And for everything we organise, we need to have contingency plans in place in case it doesn't come off."

Neither are strangers when it comes to dealing with an angry customer, however they take it all in their stride. "We deal with a lot of emotions and sometimes we can't rectify a situation, but we never take anything personally," Fiona explains. "But it's great to see how passionate people are about their local area. We don't want a complacent community." And, they admit, it's not without its funny side either. "I was once dealing with a guy who had uncontrollable flatulence," Fiona laughs. "You just have to maintain a straight face."

As a former journalist and engineering student Fiona is right at home in the engineering department, and while Lia boasts a colourful and extensive resume, which has taken her all over the globe, she maintains there is nowhere quite like Cairns. And regardless of the stigma often attached with working for the council, and the day-to-day challenges each face, both maintain they couldn't be happier. "We receive a lot of positive feedback as well. Locals like to know what's going on, and they appreciate being a part of the decision making process," Fiona smiles. "It's very rewarding being able to affect change and knowing the community is taking what we are doing onboard. It just proves we are on the right track." CL