

# RiverTracks

## **Jeremy Melder** 00:03

Hello, my name is Jeremy Melder, and I'm the presenter from Beaming Green. Before we start, I would like to acknowledge that this podcast is being held on the traditional lands of the Bundjalung people and paying our respects to elders both past, present, and emerging. The Beaming Green podcast is a podcast that will help you take out some of the stress and confusion about how to live your life more sustainably. We do this by introducing you to inspiring people with first-hand experience and expertise who cover aspects of sustainability, from human interest to environmental perspectives, helping you to thrive and enhance your life and the lives of your friends and family. Today, I'm introducing Roland Fraval, who works with a newly formed organization called RiverTracks, and it's in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. Welcome, Roland. Thanks. How are you? I'm really good. Thank you. Thank you for joining us. And this is kind of been brewing for a while this RiverTracks project, hasn't it? It's been talked about, there's been films about it and things like that. And Surprise, surprise, I find out that, you know, for those listeners that don't know, I know Roland Personally, I didn't even know he was part of this. He's kept it very sneakily quiet. I got to say, sneaky cheeky. Yeah. So, tell us a little bit about some RiverTracks.

## **Roland Fraval** 01:53

Yeah, so I guess the origin, the origin of RiverTracks really starts down in Armidale. There is a program down there is a there's a character by the name of Bernie Shakeshaft would you believe and he's a bit of a, you know, he's kind of history, he's a bit of a cowboy really used to kind of go to do the whole rodeo thing? Really? I know. Yeah. And, you know, it's been a lot of time in Northern Territory, working with different Aboriginal mobs up there as well. And basically, he started this program called Backtracks. And it's a bit of an unorthodox program to really support young people that are really at risk, either on the age of or already in the juvenile justice system. Okay. So, he had an interesting program. And it really came out of what he was doing locally. So, they made this beautiful movie, which really has helped to spread the message throughout Australia. And it tells the story of working with young people with dogs specifically, okay, so what they do, what Bernie's done is he gets young people into his program, and they trained dogs, so they're working with these dogs every day, they're training them, they're feeding them, they're looking after them. And then on the weekends, you know, Friday, Saturday nights, usually time not much to do as a young person hanging out getting to trouble around town, instead of that, they go off to these regional shows, and do these dogs jumping, like demonstrations. Wow. So not only are they kind of getting out of a situation where they're in there also, and, you know, a place where they're very likely to get into trouble again, on Friday, Saturday nights, they're also going and having all these wonderful experiences that are really, you know, positive and reinforcing that, you know, they actually can do things and they can, you know, step up in front of people and, and demonstrate their kind of self-worth and their value, you know, to the community. So, it's a beautiful program. I mean, the stats are quite amazing that have come out of it, you know, they've, in their recent annual report, you know, they talk about severe psychological distress has halved in young people, while you know, suicide ideation reduced by 40%. There's a 70% drop in school

suspensions in the local area. school attendance is up 66%. And there's a reduction in illicit drug use by 25%. So, it has been, you know, people from all around Australia, seeing what you know, Bernie and his team are doing Yeah. And, yeah, so, really, the origin of RiverTracks came from Backtracks I local legend by the name of Ahri Tallon. So, he's a youth worker. He works in residential care with young people. And this year, this young fella talked about his experience of being at RiverTracks. And he said literally, that was, you know, that was the best place that he had ever been this young guy who's been in and out of assisted care, you know, he's had a just a, you know, a hard run and just spoke about this place with you know, almost awe you know, and so led Ahri to go? or hang on? What's that? looked it up, it's like, hey, we need that here. So, it's been brewing now for or maybe six, eight months, you know, he showed the Backtrack film, he, we've had a bunch of workshops, and really, he's been leading the charge. But since then, a bunch of people have jumped on board. And the idea is to create a program similar in the Murwillumbah area. So, it's really going to be targeting young people that, again, they're disengaged from school, they're maybe on the edge of already involved in the juvenile justice system. And, you know, the statistics. If, as a young person, if you get into the juvenile justice system, you know, it's a slippery slope down. And, and if we can work to prevent that first, you know, engagement with the juvenile justice system, you know, there's massive difference in outcomes for young people's lives if we can get to them early. So that's what we're trying to do. I set up a program, that's, yeah, it's really going to support young people who, you know, maybe school just doesn't work for them. Maybe even tech school and TAFE doesn't work for them. You know, it's an alternative, using techniques that may be a little bit unorthodox, a little bit left of Centre, to really support them to find their own path in life

**Jeremy Melder** 06:17

That sounds exciting. So, you have got a background in youth work. So, it is Ahri, are there other people involved in your organization?

**Roland Fraval** 06:25

Absolutely. I mean, there's, there's a really quite a fantastic, and eclectic mix of people in the organization. You know, there's myself as you know, I work with young people, I'm a youth worker Ahri. There's another couple of youth workers involved. But there's also you know, there's one of our main team Glennis, you know, she sits on the board of equine therapy. So, you know, horse therapy. So, she's coming at it from that background, because obviously, like Bernie down in Armadale, we want to engage animals, because we see the really the potential for healing when you know, young people are engaging with animals. So yeah, the team is really, you know, there's young people, there's, you know, semi-retired people, everyone in between people from business background, people, we've got teachers, you know, representatives from local organizations, everyone, really the Murwillumbah community, and the Tweed community has said yes, and they've kind of voted with their feet so far. So, it's amazing to see.

**Jeremy Melder** 07:23

So, in terms of the program, you've already mentioned, a differentiation in what you're doing from the Armidale crew. What are the some of the essential things that you're going to be doing in this program in in this local area?

**Roland Fraval 07:36**

Yeah, I guess the first thing to say is that we haven't started running the programs yet. Sure. So, what the programs look like, it's going to be important for, you know, our participants, the young people in them to have a say what that looks like, right? So, we have some ideas, but nothing is fixed, because we want you know, we want it to represent what they need. Having said that, we're going to start three days a week, and we're going to aim to have about, you know, 10, eight to 10, maybe up to 12 young people. And we're going to be doing a whole range of things, because it's really, you know, again, like I said, it's to help them find their path in life and really start making steps toward that. So, we've already got a whole bunch of organizations on board, so the Scouts have given us the hole to use as our base to begin with the Rural Fire Service and the Surf Lifesaving clubs in the area have said yes, to coming on board and providing training, you know, cadetships, and first aid training and all that kind of stuff. We've got the Murwillumbah bike shop, they're on board, they're going to be running

**Jeremy Melder 08:40**

you've got help from the bike shop as well.

**Roland Fraval 08:42**

Yeah, yeah, it's great, right, because this is Rail Trail, there's going to be building the area Yeah, which is a great new project. And so, they're going to help every I think it's every fortnight there'll be miking doing workshops with young people. So, teaching them how to, you know, make bikes, and not make how to, you know, service and repair and all that kind of thing. And, you know, a big thing that we want to do, and we want to work towards is creating social enterprise within this program so that the young people themselves we can give them the training that they need. For example, with the bikes, maybe you know, this new rail trail, there's an opportunity to, you know, set up bike maintenance thing there, or whatever it may be. We want to follow the interests of the group provide the training by partnering with organizations in the local area, so that it can then turn into a real world, you know, opportunity for them to actually make money, you know, and again, this is the model that Backtracks down in Armidale have created you know, they've created a really sustainable social enterprise out of you know, the work they do with their young people. And it's something that we want to emulate. Again, exactly what that is that's going to come from the young people that are in the program. Fantastic.

**Jeremy Melder 09:57**

Now, I know you gave me some statistics, and there from Armidale. But have you got to the point where it might be early days still, in terms of what is the current situation in our local area in terms of attendance at schools and so on? Have you started down that path has yet to look at that?

**Roland Fraval 10:16**

You look, we have, and we're working with the local schools is super on board with that we've just in the process, we've got this big access to this big kind of pool of data, where all that kind of information is there. And we're kind of sifting through it to see, you know, what, the realities, I guess, you know, we are aware that nationally, the statistics are pretty, I find them a little bit shocking. And just to run through a few of them, you know, one in four, young people are dealing with mental health issue. So, one out of every four, I find that I had kind of blows my mind, you know, one in five are disengaged from school in some way. And 28,000 young people are sleeping rough or, you know, experiencing homelessness is

so shocking, 28,000 young people and that, you know, I get the tingles every time I say that, because I guess for me, in those statistics, what I see is a failure of our system and our communities to support the young, I totally agree with you.

**Jeremy Melder 11:19**

Look, I totally agree with you. I know that just walking around, because we're both local, walking around even Knox Park, you can see young girls and young boys that are still knocking around at night. And you just worry about their safety, you know, and how they're going to survive. Yeah. And I've spoken to a few people, and some of them end up in juvenile detention. But it doesn't really fix, you know, you can put someone in juvenile detention, but doesn't really fix them, does it? There's nothing there. So, what you're offering is, hopefully, something that'll bridge that gap.

**Roland Fraval 11:54**

Yeah. And that's, and as I said, as soon as someone's engaged in the, you know, the juvenile justice system, the chance of more interventions down the road, you know, spikes massively. So, we want to prevent that from happening. And, you know, we want to provide an option that, like, we get that the schooling system can't meet everyone's needs, you know, like the scale of, you know, the system, it kind of dictates that it must function in a certain kind of way. And that's just the way it is right now. Yeah, so we need programs like RiverTracks to come in around the edges and work with those people that just don't fit in that mold. And give them an opportunity to, again, kind of connect with their, you know, what is it that makes them their unique self? And what is their pathway to really living a fulfilling, and, a life that contributes, you know, to the community around them, instead of, you know, potentially becoming a burden on the community around them, you know, and again, we want to do that by connecting them with mentors by connecting them, we want to really ground this project in community, you know, we've got local businesspeople. We've got local, you know, tradies and businesspeople that have already said, yes, I will be a mentor, I'm here to support them. You know, as I said, all the organizations we've got on board already. So, again, the community is saying, yes, yeah.

**Jeremy Melder 13:13**

And it's beautiful to see. And it's an important thing, if you feel supported as a young person, you can achieve a lot more than if you're feeling unsupported. Kind of makes sense. But, you know, you just go well, why isn't it happening? Yeah, well, anyway, it's a great thing that you guys are starting that now what sort of age group and gender groups are you targeting at this moment?

**Roland Fraval 13:37**

So, I guess we're looking at the early teenage years. So, you know, kind of starting with that 13 to 16. age range, again, because we're hoping to, you know, support these young people and step in before, you know, they get too far off track. In terms of gender, again, at this point, we're kind of we're targeting young men. Yeah, you know, boys, but majority, because, you know, the anecdotal evidence from the area, like you mentioned, is that the, that boys are disengaging and are a bit more risk than that, then the girls, having said that, you know, we totally understand that whoever presents, you know, whoever gets referred to our program is going to be who turns up. So, you know, if it's, if it's a mixed gender thing, if some are slightly younger than 13, maybe slightly older than 16. You know, we'll take you know, if they fit into what we're offering, and it's going to benefit them, then again, we'll work with that.

**Jeremy Melder** 14:35

That's great. Now, in terms of you said, you've got the Scout Hall, that now is at a temporary situation. So, you're really looking for a permanent situation. So, what sort of things do you need so that the community might be able to if they hear this podcast? Come and help you?

**Roland Fraval** 14:52

Yeah, look, the Scouts are awesome. And but as a shared space, it probably is a temporary, you know, a place to begin and then grow from there. I guess Ideally, we'd love to have a space that is our own, you know, that we can do the training, we can, you know, get stuck into, you know, doing technical and building stuff. So, you know, our dream would be to have a workshop of some kind, you know, or at least access to a workshop a couple days a week, whether it's woodwork, metalwork, you know, anything in between. Because, again, you know, all the evidence from backtracking, and a lot of other programs that are doing similar things is like, if we can get these young people engaged and doing and learning and creating kind of tangible outcomes, creating things that they can point to, and go, oh, bloody hell, I did that. You know, the, the outcomes get good, very quick. So yes, we would love to have workshop space, so we could call our own. You know, and, and again, in the future, we, we want to work towards a place where we can have a schooling alternative. So, you know, running an education program that's in line with the, you know, national curriculum. But, again, is delivered in a way that makes the young people's needs and doesn't, you know, force them to kind of conform to that general school model.

**Jeremy Melder** 16:17

Because you need to be adaptable and flexible for everyone's needs, don't you? Exactly, which is where school sometimes fails in that regard.

**Roland Fraval** 16:24

Yeah. And again, you know, they're doing the best they can to the scale of, of young people that are in there. Right. So yeah, we want to come in around the fringes and support that.

**Jeremy Melder** 16:34

Yep. When do you hope to be up and running?

**Roland Fraval** 16:36

Yes. The short answer is hopefully within the next few months. So, you know, by August, July, August, this year 2021. Yeah, we're in fundraising mode now to support that. So, we have a crowdsourcing campaign that has launched a few days ago, and we've already had, I think, \$13,000

**Jeremy Melder** 16:54

Wow, already, that's fantastic!

**Roland Fraval** 16:58

We are incredibly lucky that we have a donor that is matching dollar for dollar, every cent that is raised. And, I mean, that's just so that,

**Jeremy Melder 17:10**

Is there a limit to that?

**Roland Fraval 17:12**

I think up to \$20,000. So, if, you know, the community gives \$20,000 that turns into \$40,000. And that's, I mean, yeah, it's, it's beautiful to see this, you know, we haven't even really started promoting it, we've sent emails and done some social media stuff, but it's really, again, the community just keep saying yes, and I guess what the reason we're fundraising is to buy equipment, you know, because we want to go out into the bush. So, you know, swags, and camping gear we want, we need to buy, you know, work clothing, and tools, and all that kind of stuff. Because again, we want them to get experience and real-world work experience. You know, we're also going to have to cover costs of training, and so on so forth with the other organizations that are on board. And, you know, we also need to pay the people that are working with young people, because, you know, they're really on the front line, you know, the youth workers. You know, it's a beautiful and challenging job. And it is, you know, it's important that we have the right people in there with the right skills and the experience. Again, you know, having spoken a lot with the Backtrack crew down in Armidale seeing the dedication they have, yeah, it's important that we get the right people in there. And the beautiful thing, just while I think of it is that so many of the participants of Backtrack, are now employed by that organization. So, they have well and truly, you know, gotten back on track. I think there's, there's, like 12 or 15 previous participants are either now employed or kind of in training to be employed as youth workers and mentors in the program, which I mean to me, what could be more perfect and beautiful, then, you know,

**Jeremy Melder 19:02**

it's a testament to the program

**Roland Fraval 19:04**

really isn't exactly young men and women that love it so much and meant so much to them that all they want to do is give back to that. It's beautiful. So that's wonderful, wonderful to hear. That's really heartwarming, actually, to be honest, when you were mentioning, you were saying that you need things like swags and things like that, but there's people that might be able to donate those things too, you know, by the manufacturers that have stopped that's been you know, we've been in a pandemic, you know, and maybe they'll say, Oh, well, we can donate these to you troop guys, you know, so what other things do you need? So just give us your wish list. Give us your wish list. Well, we'd love like a troopie (Toyota Landcruiser). I know what are you guys doing? That would be great. Yeah, transports a real thing. Because, you know, obviously, you know, in a rural or semi-rural area, like it's hard for young people to get around. That's one of the big things we hear from young people. It's hard to get around, you know, and if you've got stuff on at home and you folks can't give you lifts here and there, it can be a real thing. So, transport so we can get people to and from programs. As I said, camping gear. tools and work clothing. Absolutely, again, a space, if anyone's got a space that we can use on a semi-permanent basis would be amazing. You know, obviously, if you can donate financially, then, you know, do that. But again, I guess what we've found so far is we've just had a lot of people coming to us saying, I want to help what can I do? Yeah. And you know, chances are, there's something you know, you've got something to offer, even if, as I said, we've had people saying, I want to be a mentor, I've

heard people say, I want to run yoga classes for them. I've had, you know, people offering all kinds of things. So, you know, we don't know what it is that the next person might come and offer, but we hope that you do.

**Jeremy Melder 20:55**

Yeah. Now that sounds wonderful. Because you do need a community behind you. And it feels like just looking at your current balance of what you've achieved, that you are getting support from the community. It's a definite yes, absolutely. And you know, from the Beaming Green side, there were a definite yes, as well, to support you guys. and wanting to see these, you know, get out not just into Murwillumbah, but the whole Tweed region. And even if it can go to Byron, that'd be great as well. There's, there's not a community that's within our Coodee of here that doesn't need help. Absolutely, you know, there in terms of training people that want to be part of this. Have you thought about or thinking about some sort of training regimes for people to, to get involved, how they can get involved? What are the prerequisites, you know, apart from a willingness to help?

**Roland Fraval 21:48**

Yeah, that's the first thing. A willingness to help is number one. Look, again, it's not just youth workers that we need, obviously, we need all kinds of people. So, you know, if your skill is in, you know, grant writing, for example, hey, great, come along, and help us write some grant applications, you know, but in terms of bringing people on board year, where we have a, I guess, we're developing in have processes, to bring people into work with the young people. Because, again, it's important that the people that are directly engaging with young people, really, I guess, they Firstly, they know what they're stepping into. And they have at least a basic set of tools to kind of deal with the situations that might come up. So, one thing that we've done is we've worked with an organization called Youth Flourish. And they're doing a training that for it's a two-day training happening at the end of July or middle of July. And it focuses on working with young people that have experienced trauma, specifically in an outdoor setting. And so, it's really, it's interesting training and really fascinating. And I think, you know, something that, you know, youth workers or psychologists or all kinds of people could benefit from doing that training. But that's one thing that we've chosen of yet, this is something we want all our staff to have in their tool bag. And that's going to be a that workshop is open to the public as well. So, you can find details on the RiverTracks website, rivertracks.org, of course. So yeah, I guess there's a whole bunch of other training and skilling up that we would have for volunteers, and then also for the paid staff as well, because there'll be a distinction between the kind of level of engagement, you know, that we have, whether you're a volunteer or a paid youth worker,

**Jeremy Melder 23:38**

fantastic. Now, in terms of your organization's setup, is that a not for profit? tax deductibility for people that are donating all those sorts of things?

**Roland Fraval 23:48**

It is we just recently got chAhritable status, which means any money you give us you just completely tax deductible, which is great. So yeah, we're set up as a registered chAhritable organization.

**Jeremy Melder 24:01**

Okay. And if there are three things that you'd like people to think about, in helping you, you know, what, what would you need

**Roland Fraval** 24:13

three things that we would like help with. I think the first thing is kind of bodies on the ground support. So whether you willing to be a mentor or volunteer to, you know, cook a meal for when we go camping, or, you know, be there to help, you know, do a reading session with you know, some of the young people whatever it might be, I think, again, we want this grounded in community and as you've said, the community has said yes, every step of the way I guess we're hoping that continues. So yeah, the first thing is if you feel you know, listening to this and you feel something, saying yes, within you just jump on the RiverTracks websites. It's an email and say, hey, I want to help. I don't know, you might not even know how to say, say hello. I guess the second thing, obviously, is money makes the world go round. So, this crowdsourcing crowdfunding campaign that we have now, jump online. If you don't have cash to donate. Great, that's cool. Share it, you know, on the socials or, you know, email, you know, all those rich friends you have. You know, so that that would be the second thing. And then the final thing is, yeah, important. Are the partnerships with local organizations, local businesses? So, if you are one, again, reach out, if you no one say, hey, have you heard of this project? I think there could be a cool crossover there. You know, whether it's a hardware store, a camping store, you know, the local IGA who knows, you know, we need, you know, young people, I don't know if you know, this, but young people get a little bit hungry sometimes.

**Jeremy Melder** 25:58

I think they need food all the time.

**Roland Fraval** 26:00

Maybe we can start a partnership with the farmers market or something. But yeah, so I think there are three things we need bodies on the ground, we need cash to get started. And we need partnerships with local organizations.

**Jeremy Melder** 26:12

You mentioned schools, how are you feeling? The engagement is with all the schools in this area? Great. Okay. So, they're all on board.

**Roland Fraval** 26:18

They're in them into it? They have? So again, from day one? Yes, we support you. Wonderful, we need to work with them within the bounds of it. But the schools have already said, look, when you guys are up and running, we're going to refer students to you and already can think of half a dozen that would benefit from something like this. So, it's, you know, it's been good. You know, Murwillumbah high. And Columbine high, especially Sathya, Sai, the Caldera School, especially, they've all been incredibly helpful, and just yet they just waiting for us to get going.

**Jeremy Melder** 26:50

What about some of the private schools like Mount St Patrick's

**Roland Fraval** 26:53

and Yahalom, we've been talking to them as well. Again, we haven't had a nod from anyone

**Jeremy Melder** 26:57

that's fantastic Roland, cool. It's cool. Okay, well, I really want to thank you for joining us on Beaming Green, you're welcome. Do you have any last things you'd like to tell our listeners?

**Roland Fraval** 27:09

Any last things? Well, firstly, I just want to say it's nice to like to be talking. I'm a longtime listener, first time talker.

**Jeremy Melder** 27:17

Oh, thank you.

**Roland Fraval** 27:20

The last thing I want to tell people is just open your hearts to the young people in our area. And they need our support, and they need our love. And that's what we're going to give them.

**Jeremy Melder** 27:32

Good on. Thank you, Roland. Thank you for listening to this episode of Beaming Green. If you got something out of this episode, we'd love to hear what your biggest takeaway was. There are several ways you can do this; you can leave a review on Apple podcast. Or if you have a Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn social media page, you can leave a review there. Now don't forget to tag us so we can thank you personally. Lastly, go to [beaminggreen.com](https://beaminggreen.com) and subscribe to our newsletter and receive a free how to be green guide. At Beaming Green, we are committed to providing you with a thought provoking and insightful program that inspires you to live your life in accordance with your true nature and purpose. We do this by shAhring stories from people that are walking their talk and are committed to living their lives sustainably with their mind, body, and soul. So, you can share this with your friends and family and leave the planet in a better place. The music for this podcast was created by Dave Weir