

# Leading from the Edge

Aboriginal Educational Leaders Tell Their Story





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Virginia Gill

## Foreword

Education is the greatest tool that any person could have to determine their Dream for a future that gives them the best out of life!

The other tool which is crucial is one's own Culture! This enables the strength from within to bring with it all which is beautiful, through the guidance of all those wonderful role models who have helped guide and shape our world.

Here then lies the last tool that an outstanding experience of an ultimate role modelling, love and guidance can give to one, which forms a pathway to leadership culminating in achievement. It is from here that Dreams are made!

Education and Culture!

Not having these advantages can limit one's world considerably, but combining these tools can ensure Dreams become a reality!

Can you be challenged??

Dr Alice (Alitya) Rigney

## Introduction

Australia needs leaders.

Our country needs skilled, strong and ethical people to embrace the mantle of leadership in all walks of life as we face the challenges of this new century.

The nation's children and youth need positive role models—people who are willing to take up challenges, stir the pot and make a difference to the lives of their generation and the generations to follow.

Arguably, education is Australia's number one priority. Our schools need leaders who are absolutely committed to ensuring that their students achieve their full potential. Leaders must insist upon standards of excellence from their teachers and provide them with the resources and the professional development to fulfil the obligations of their role. Indeed, our school leaders have a moral as well as a professional obligation, a 'noblesse oblige' that goes beyond simply running a school.

Leaders inspire. Leaders dare. Leaders lead by example.

There is no doubt that Australia has many outstanding school leaders, and this is not limited to just principals or 'heads'. Some of the very best leaders are those who set an example to other teachers through their work in the classroom. They share their expertise and support other staff and trainee teachers by providing leadership in curriculum development, sound

pedagogy and explicit and robust assessment and reporting procedures. There are other leaders in a range of positions within our schools, tertiary institutions and kindergartens who are passionate about education, and totally committed to the needs of the young people with whom they work.

To be entrusted with the education of a child is an honour and to lead a school is a privilege. More than ever before, our nation must support its teachers and leaders, for without their commitment and skills, our children's future and indeed the future of our country is in crisis. We need to promote education and teaching as a wonderful profession and we need to encourage and support our emerging school leaders in all jurisdictions and across the public and private sector.

This book is a celebration of eleven individuals who have met and mastered significant challenges to become excellent leaders in their field. They have many differences, but two things bind them as a group. Firstly, they are all Aboriginal. Secondly, they all have a fundamental belief in the vital role that education plays in long term career and life outcomes for young people.

They have some fascinating and inspiring stories to tell, from the perspective of being a student, teacher, leader or all three. Some of their stories are also about racism, adversity, tragedy and triumph. The telling of these stories evolved from conversations, from yarns. Hence editing has been kept to a minimum to maintain the integrity and the spirit of the conversations.

The stories contained herein are the true stories of some exceptional people whose courage and determination have seen them realise their passion for education and leadership. They have successfully honoured and maintained their cultural heritage while working within large

bureaucracies dominated by an Anglo perspective. They are undoubtedly role models to their Aboriginal families and communities, and of equal significance is their positive influence on non-Aboriginal children and young people.

These eleven people are leaders who are prepared to speak out and perhaps most importantly, they promote education as a fulfilling career path and a true 'calling' for those who believe in making a difference. They have demonstrated a determination of spirit and culture that sets an example for others, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

They are leaders who truly know the importance of education.

What could be more important?

Virginia Gill, Leadership Consultant  
South Australian Centre for Leaders in Education  
Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia

# The Stories





.....

**GERALDINE ATKINSON**

A recognised leader in Koori education, Geraldine Atkinson became President of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) in 1999, and has been re-elected every year since. As President of VAEAI Geraldine has been able to contribute her expertise to key policies and strategies that have shaped Koorie education.

Geraldine Atkinson has been instrumental in negotiating and formalising the Yalca strategy, launched in 2001 with the Premier of the day, the Hon. Steve Bracks. Yalca is a formalised partnership in education between the Victorian Government and VAEAI.

Geraldine is the national Indigenous Education Consultative Body (IECB) representative to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

**Geraldine Atkinson** *Education—A Life's Work*

.....

I was born in Leeton in 1952. I'm one of a family of 14 children and we lived in New South Wales. My mother was born on Cumeragunja Mission; my father was born on Warangesda Mission, which is in New South Wales. They're both in New South Wales but Cumeragunja is on the border, closer to Victoria. My father was killed when I was five years old; he was murdered and thrown in a channel. He'd been missing and my mother didn't know where he was, until eventually he was identified by police forensics. I remember vividly that time. I remember, everybody crying and elder sisters fainting, and I remember just crying and crying and crying.

After that, we were fringe dwellers living in shanties on the outskirts of Leeton, and it was the period when children were being taken in the 1950s; being taken and put in homes. So my elder sisters who were working in Victoria came home and packed us all up, because the Welfare were intending to take us from mum because she didn't have a male in the family. So we moved to Victoria, to Mooroopna because my sisters were working in the cannery there, the fruit canneries in the Goulburn Valley, where all the fruit is grown and produced.

And we got a house, an old farmhouse on an orchard, and we lived there. So there was me, my two brothers and a sister that was younger

than me, but we also had my sisters and their children, and they worked and my mum looked after all of us.

When we were school age we used to have to walk three miles to school in Mooroopna. We then moved—we were fortunate enough to get a house on the settlement at Rumbalara, so we lived out of town. The Welfare Board had built houses there to take the people out that were living on the riverbanks and put them in these houses at the Rumbalara. I remember just growing up there and I really loved it. Times were hard, and we suffered all the usual racist things in the community, in the schools and in the shops.

Then I went to Nathalia. My sister actually was married and lived on Cumeragunja and I went to stay with them. The Aborigines Advancement League had opened Molga Hostel in Nathalia for the kids from Cumeragunja to live and go to school. This was in the early 1960s. They asked me if I would like to stay at the hostel, so I stayed there and I went to Nathalia Secondary School. It was really good; we'd go home sometimes at weekends, go to Shepparton or down to Cumeragunja.

We were well looked after; we had really good hostel parents that looked after us. We had support at the school. We had mentors. There was a woman there that made sure that we had uniforms, that we had our books. This was prior to Abstudy. She made sure that the school paid for clothes for us, that we had the same clothes as every other kid going away on camp. She was just a wonderful woman, Mrs Mahood. I always remember her.

Yes, we really needed someone like her. Actually me and my niece, who's the same age stayed at the hostel.

But I left school at Form 5, which is like Year 11. My niece went on and did Form 6 and she ended up going to university, but I left school and

worked, got married and had a family.

Anyway, when my kids were little I wanted to go back to work, and there was this scheme for Aboriginal people working in schools, where you become a teacher aide. I applied for one of the jobs and got it, and I worked there, and I became really interested in it. I loved education anyway, because of my time at Nathalia High School.

What I used to do was visit the parents of the Koori kids at the school. I'd go into classrooms with the Koori kids, look after their welfare, make sure that they were well behaved, and try and do as much as I could. That was just prior to the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) starting, which was then the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (VAECG). So the VAECG was established when I was a teacher aide and getting really interested in what was happening in schools.

These services were dedicated Aboriginal positions and they were looked after by the Education Department because that's where the money came from. They'd bring us together and do resourcing and professional development and then they established the VAECG which was later to become VAEAI.

So I was involved there in Koori education at that stage, working along really well. Over a period of time, I left and had another baby, and then I decided to go back to work. We established a child care centre in Shepparton. I knew, having a baby, we needed a child care centre—it wasn't just me, but it was other young mothers with me and my team that I talked about earlier. So we decided that we'd establish this child care centre in Mooroopna, on the grounds of Rumbalara, that were now turned into a cooperative. It was given back to the Aboriginal community of Shepparton, and so there was a health service there and we started out

just doing playgroup until we got the child care centre. My niece and I shared the position of Children's Services Development Officer, and that involved getting all the information that it took to establish the child care centre.

We also lived together and we shared a little blue Toyota, and I used to drive the Toyota and pick up all these kids, from around Shepparton and drive them over to Rumbalara. We'd have a playgroup session for the day—we did that every day—and then take them home and drop them off. We'd have to do things like dress and feed the kids and all that sort of thing.

So that's how we started our early childhood program in Shepparton, and we got a child care centre and then we became registered. We saw education being the key to everything—the key to solving all problems—because we believed that if you had a good education, you'd get a good job, you'd get a diploma and you'd get a good house and you'd have everything else. So that was our belief. So we believed that if we were going to do the child care centre, we'd reinforce in kids the things about their identity. We believed it was really important that we had to make them feel positive about themselves, have a really positive self-identity; you know, build up their self-esteem about how good they are and instil confidence in them. We really believed that if that happened there, then we were going to get them through school. So we established a school annexe in partnership with other schools in Shepparton, a school within a school, and it was all done in parallel to our children growing.

We'd established a school and we were the first to put our children in there. There were five of us and we started the school with five children and a teacher. It was an Aboriginal annexe called Managa, and it was established about 21 or 20 years ago. We'd take all the Grade 6 Aboriginal

kids across Mooroopna, Shepparton, and we'd have them out in Managa and prepare them for Year 7. But we discovered that at that stage they'd picked up too much baggage and we had all the kids that people wanted to get rid of. So we decided after a couple of years that we just couldn't do that because it wasn't working, and we weren't getting teachers who would teach them because they were just too unruly. So we said, "Okay, we'll rethink," and we went back and we started with five preps. We decided we would increase it each year like a new school, taking preps and end up with Grade 1, Grade 2, and that's what we've got today.

So after 20 years we've got Senior Managa and Junior Managa. We started with one teacher, now we've got two teachers, and we have specialists coming in and helping, and they do the same program. They do similar things to what the other kids do in the school—the curriculum is the same.

However, there are a lot of cultural things that, being Aboriginal, you can't describe to other people but other Aboriginal people know. But we then started our independent kindergarten as well. So we had our child care centre, our kindergarten and our school—that's what we have now after, as I said, about 26 years. In all that time I've been involved in VAEAI. I've been on the VAEAI committee of management, working for VAEAI in an honorary capacity. I've held specialist representative positions on the committee of management. As I said, I worked in child care and in an adult education program with TAFE. While I was working there we established the Koori unit within the TAFE. It was in Goulburn Ovens TAFE and I was the Koori liaison officer there for about ten years.

Because we have a child care centre, we were able to establish the Koori Adult Education program, because what we wanted to do was also run education programs for mums, young mums, and young people. We felt

that, if they had an understanding about education and if they were being educated, then they would have a better opportunity of understanding how best to educate the kids. So that was the idea of our adult education program. Then there was a youth program running at the time, so we collapsed that program into one, and then we developed the curriculum that the TAFE system is still operating today. We've now got people that are doing Certificates I, II, III and IV within the TAFE—that's in the community in Shepparton.

Then I became President of VAEAI in about 1999. During that time, we developed the Wurreeker strategy and that was looking at all TAFEs working towards making sure that the programs throughout Victoria were going to make people trained for employment. We felt that we really needed the TAFE to take on board the idea of getting people trained up so they can participate in community—in mainstream society. We had a lot of people that hadn't completed school or hadn't gone off to university, but the TAFE system suits our people a lot better. If that's where they wanted to be, then what we would do is make sure that they were going to be in appropriate courses that were going to give them something more substantial; you know, at least some training and skills to be able to participate in the workforce. So that was our Wurreeker strategy that we developed and it's still in place today.

We have eight brokers now that are working out in regions, ensuring that that happens; working with the TAFE institutes and with employing bodies and industry. When I became President of VAEAI, we got a new government, a new Labor government here, and they were really good. So we were able to develop with them our Yalca policy document which reinforces that we work with state government in partnership—ensuring that the programs and strategies and policies and everything that are

developed are going to really meet the needs of our Koori students, whether it be from early childhood right through to TAFE. We've launched our new strategy, which is Wannik and that will be a new strategy in education.

So it's been really my life's work—education—and I've really loved the journey.

We've still got a long way to go.

It's a very slow process, but we chip away and we'll eventually make a difference to all those kids out there. At the moment there are about 8,070 kids in Victorian state schools and we want them to be able to achieve what they want out of an education system. They'll have choices to make about what careers they want to go into.

My advice to young Aboriginal people would be, "If you can get an education, if you can do further training, if you had the opportunity at that age to do it, then take it." Yes, that's exactly what I would do—if you have a chance to go to university.



.....

**PAUL BRIDGE** was born in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and grew up in Halls Creek. His father was a Kidja man who was born near Halls Creek. Paul spent his primary school education in Halls Creek and later went to Perth to complete his secondary school education.

Paul spent three years at Mt Lawley WACAE (Edith Cowan University) completing his teaching degree. On graduation he was appointed to One Arm Point Remote Community School (RCS) for three years, during which time he married his wife Donna.

Paul's first principal position was at Bayulu RCS and he then became the substantive principal for the

next three years back at One Arm Point RCS. He took the position of Area Director, Ngaanyatjarra Education Area for two years and then undertook the role of Area Director Goldfields and Principal Consultant. This involved working in remote communities in the Central Desert region of WA. Paul is currently principal of Derby District High School (Level 6) and is enjoying working back in the Kimberley.

## Paul Bridge *The Relationship is the Key*

.....

I was born in the Kimberleys and I went away to secondary schooling in Perth; I went to a private school there. My parents have been really instrumental in where I am today because they could see the importance of education. Mum was actually a teacher.

I suppose I never really decided on teaching until Year 12, which is our last year of schooling in Western Australia. I was fortunate enough to be invited on a camp for Year 12 Aboriginal students to visit the universities. It was a Department of Education, Science and Training funded program, and they still do it now.

It was a fantastic opportunity, because otherwise you didn't know what possibilities were out there. After visiting a teaching institution, I thought, "Well, I like this." So that's how I got into teaching.

After completing my teaching degree I decided I wanted to go back and teach in the communities in the Kimberley. I thought that it was a way to give back to the communities that I'd come from. I now have spent close to 20 years in rural and remote schools, at different levels of leadership. I've never taught in the metropolitan area.

In terms of a career, I've found the rewards have far outweighed the effort I've put into the job, in terms of the working relationships that I've had with students, staff and communities. In my current role I'm mainly

out of schools, but I do miss that daily contact with students.

We get into teaching because we want to educate students and when we're actually pulled out into administration, things change. I've been out now for four years, and I am missing being in a school. I'm looking forward to going back. I think you've got a time span where you need to get back into school otherwise you lose touch.

Working in remote and rural schools has highlighted the importance of good relationships with parents and communities. You live and die by the relationship that a school leader has with their community in terms of the work you are doing there.

Schools can work with their communities in establishing strong school-community partnerships, and the more I see of school leaders, I think some are quite clearly more suitable to a particular context. Most school leaders have got a generic range of skills that they can use across a number of school contexts, but the more I see in working with principals in rural and remote areas, I think some people are just made for those schools, and some people are made for mainstream schools.

School-community partnerships are where we can really make some headway in terms of improving attendance and student achievement. I have yet to have an Aboriginal parent say to me that they don't value education. They do value education, but there are so many other things that impact on the family situation as well.

I've always believed in having high expectations, being very clear that all kids can improve and can really achieve. I think you've got to have that mind-set. If you go into thinking in a deficit model, you're going to operate along those lines.

I've been passionate about making sure that we get the best outcomes that we possibly can for our kids. I've been very much influenced by

my parents, but my wife is an Aboriginal principal as well and I'm very proud of her effort and constantly debating with her about the trials and tribulations of being an Aboriginal principal. It's great that we've got a lot more Aboriginal principals out there, but we still need to build the numbers.

We need to make sure that there's a support structure for principals who are starting out, to make sure that they're supported. Otherwise we're setting people up to fail at the first hurdle.

It's been really beneficial having networks with other colleagues. I also think it's not just Aboriginal principals meeting together; we can learn a lot from non-Aboriginal colleagues who have got great skills and are willing to share. It's all part of that mentoring and support structure. In Western Australia we've got some fantastic school administrators and directors who I admire, who have really had a big impact on my leadership development. I've still got a long way to go but I don't think you ever go into education without continually learning.

In terms of Aboriginal education at the moment—and I'm only speaking from a Western Australian perspective—we have got things that are progressing, but probably not as quickly as we'd want them to. We just need to keep a focus on what the core business is.

I looked up to people in my career, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal principals who I admire. Hopefully one day I'll be a positive role model for some up and coming teachers as well. The kids are inspired to see that there are Aboriginal principals out there, so I think we should never undervalue the role of Aboriginal mentors and role models, and their importance in terms of a school context.



.....

**TIM GOODWIN** is a member of the Yuin Nation, an Aboriginal nation that occupies the south east coast of NSW. He has just graduated with Bachelors Degrees in Arts and Law with Honours from the Australian National University in 2007. Tim is currently working as Associate to Justice Anthony North of the Federal Court of Australia in Melbourne. Tim was a member of the National Youth Roundtable in 2000; a member of the International Youth Parliament in 2000; and a member of the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group from 2001–2002. Also in 2002, Tim was chosen as one of five young people to ask a question at the Inspire Foundation's Audience with the

Dalai Lama, and he was one of two youth members of the Australian Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session on Children in New York. Tim was a facilitator for the Indigenous rights action area, for the International Youth Parliament in 2004. Tim is currently an Indigenous Education Ambassador for the Department of Education, Science and Training and a Dare to Lead Ambassador. In 2004 Tim was also an Ambassador for the Australian Republican Movement. Tim serves on the Board of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). Tim is currently the Deputy Chair of the National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia (NIYMA), and serves on the Movement's Circle and Executive. NIYMA aims to create healthy, strong and free Indigenous communities by working with young Indigenous people and providing safe spaces for young people to share, learn and be proud of their identity.

## Tim Goodwin *Sharing the Dream*

.....

I was born in Adelaide, South Australia, on 24 October 1983, UN Day. My dad is from Adelaide. He's only one of five siblings outside of Adelaide. My grandmother is still there and all of my family is still there; a very South Australian family. My great, great, great, great-grandfather on my grandmother's side came over on a ship with his new wife and two young children, and his sister-in-law which was probably part of the deal, so he could get her married in Australia. He owned a pub in Nairne, SA and died breaking up a fight and getting kicked in the mouth by a horse.

Then my grandfather came from Bridgewater; he had a long background in Bridgewater. Dad was born at Port Adelaide and Port Adelaide is in my blood, so I'm a big Port Adelaide Power fan, and grandma is still at Glenelg and a lot of my family is still at Glenelg where they all grew up.

Dad joined the army when he was 17 and he was based in Sydney for a little while and that's where he met my mum. She's an Aboriginal woman. She grew up at La Perouse, the Aboriginal community in Sydney. My grandfather is a Yuin man, Yuin Nation of the south east coast of New South Wales.

He grew up on a mission at Wallaga Lake and a lot of his parents' generation worked on the mill down there and once that closed down, a lot of them moved up to Sydney and back following work. They'd go back

down the coast for seasonal work, go back to country, and then they'd go up to Sydney for other work up there. That was where my grandfather met my grandmother.

She was a Wiradjuri woman from Narrandera in central New South Wales, where all of her family was from, and mum was born there at Narrandera when they were visiting, but she grew up in Sydney. So, yes, they met in Sydney and had a long-distance relationship while dad was posted back in Adelaide. Then mum joined him and had me in Adelaide, then my sister Cass was born in Victoria when they were stationed down there at Puckapunyal, two and a half years after I was born.

Then we moved back to Adelaide for a year when I was about four years old, and then we moved to the Gold Coast for two years, and that's where I started school. Then we moved to Canberra when I was around about six or seven, and I did the rest of my schooling there.

Dad got out of the army back in '93 because he and my mother didn't want to move my sister and me around. They didn't want us to be the typical army children that had to move every two years and they loved Canberra so they wanted to stay there. All my friends were staying there for university so I had no reason to move. I went to university and studied arts and law. I graduated last year with Honours in Law and a Bachelor of Arts, and now I'm in Melbourne.

I did have some hard times because of my Aboriginality, but I was very lucky for a long time. I think my mother and father cushioned us well against it. We were always in a really welcoming environment and I always appreciated my dad's family for being very supportive of my Aboriginality. You know, mum has said that they were never racist but their son was South Australian and, you know, a very Glenelg family, and the Aboriginal population of Adelaide is not based around Glenelg.

So, you know, one of the younger sons says that he's in love with an Aboriginal woman, it's something to deal with, and mum said that that took a little while for them to get used to. It was never an overt problem. So I was really lucky that I had two sides of the family who were very loving, very supportive, and very proud. My grandparents were proud of their Aboriginality, quite involved in the community, so it was never a problem being Aboriginal when I was growing up. So I don't have early memories of hardship.

I have memories of mum feeling uncomfortable at various times, or being upset but not to the point where I was really questioning things, and plus it was the time when I was growing up—I was nine when the Redfern Park speech was given, reconciliation was happening, the Native Title Act was passed. Mum worked. We had moved to Canberra by that time, so Canberra was a really great place to be. All this exciting stuff was happening in Aboriginal Affairs.

So I grew up thinking it was really an amazingly positive thing; it was a good time. I think the first time racism really hit me was in Year 4. I stuffed up on the soccer field and got picked on because I was black, and I was just devastated. I was really, really, really upset. But my school handled it amazingly well.

There was a particular teacher there called Mrs Maria Voutas who was on duty that day, and then my teacher Mrs Sherri handled it really well as well. What happened was that I talked to Mrs Voutas and she got the two boys with me and she had a bit of a conference with us about it and she said, "Well, what happened?" She asked me, "How did that make you feel?" and the other boys were really devastated about what they'd done and she explained why that was wrong.

She explained that racial discrimination was actually against the law,

and she really clearly explained to the boys why it was wrong and how it made me feel. I think that's better than just simply saying to a kid that it's wrong. You need to explain why or else they're never going to understand.

Racism is like that: you don't learn why it's wrong from the textbooks. You can't read how to not be racist. It's got to be something discussed, and the teacher did that and she was really supportive of me. And my actual classroom teacher did the same and talked to me about how I was feeling and whether I was okay, and she talked to the other two boys as well. And it was not about punishment of those two: they got a stern talking to about it and it was made very clear that it was wrong, but that was the end of the matter.

Once they were sorry about what they did, there was no further retribution against them, and I think that was also important. I ended up becoming very, very close friends with one of the boys in my last two years of primary school. I was lucky, very lucky, and I talk to friends that did not have it that good, and I think it helped because in Canberra it's quite multicultural. I went to a school in the diplomatic district so all of the non-Catholic diplomat kids came to that school. If you were Catholic you went to one of the Catholic ones; if you weren't, you went to Garran Primary.

So it was a really multicultural environment and the school facilitated, celebrated and gave life to that, and we had great supportive teachers. My mum was always involved in school matters and I never remember her not being there. So it was always a good environment.

High school was a bit of a challenge. I went to a Catholic all boys' school and it wasn't always a good experience for me.

It could be particularly homophobic, could be particularly racist, and

we had amazing teachers but they were the exception rather than the rule, unlike at Garran Primary. But I thank God that they were there. I had a really close group of friends that were really supportive, that were really great.

But it was a harder environment. People who were racist against me would do it in a joke sense. It wasn't personal; it was just because they thought it was acceptable. And I got along well with most people anyway; but I was always non-confrontational so I never challenged anyone about it and just took it on the chin.

Bullying wasn't too bad an impact on me but it was hard, and there just wasn't leadership. A principal's leadership isn't the only factor that's important, but it's really central, because we had great teachers and the teachers that did deal with it were fantastic.

I had one teacher who only had 20 year old history textbooks, with the last chapter being about Aborigines and only covering pre-1788 knowledge. They were just archaic and she got rid of them and bought new history books that covered each decade of Australia's history and in each decade what was happening to the Aboriginal population: what was happening in Aboriginal issues at that time.

It's really a hidden history of the country, and she was fantastic. But there just weren't enough of those people there and, you know, it showed. There were a dozen Indigenous students out of 1,200. I remember when I was graduating in Year 12, there was another Indigenous kid in my year and he was really smart, and his younger brother had IQ levels off the charts. He was always in gifted classes, but had behaviour problems.

Their mother was lovely, a wonderful woman but a single mother with boys growing quickly and it was kind of difficult at times. He could have gone to uni really easily, if he was given the space and time. The uni people

from the Jabal Centre at the ANU, the Indigenous support unit, came to school earlier in our final year and said, “Our records show two Indigenous students who might be interested in uni. Can we talk to them?”

The school said, “Oh, talk to Tim but don’t bother with the other student. There’s no point. You know, he’s not going to make it.”

It was those low expectations. You see it all the time and they think they’re doing a good thing, you know.

Regarding aspirations for the future, my job in Melbourne is at least a year, but that’s why I took it—because it was a year. I had a start date and an end date. It’s so hard to plan your career when you’re in uni. There’s so much pressure just to graduate. So I wanted a job that gave me the space to be able to do that and I wanted a job outside Canberra because while I love Canberra I wanted something new—a challenge. I really love research, and I really want to contribute to Indigenous policy, particularly Indigenous legal policy. I’ve really grown to see that the law can be used as a positive tool and I think I want to contribute in some way to that. But whether that’s academia or policy work or something like that, I don’t know yet, but all these areas would be great. I’m drawn to politics as the ultimate policy forum, whether that’s behind the scenes or in front—but that’s something that I’d like to at least try.

I think young people need to surround themselves with good advice. Why are we so willing to take negative advice rather than the positive? We find it so much harder to listen to people who are willing to support us and talk us up and we’re so much more willing to listen to people who are negative. I mean, it just doesn’t make sense, but it’s human nature.

So I’d really say to young people, “You know, there is always at least one teacher, even in a really bad school. There’s always one teacher, I found, that really cared and was committed to social justice and believes

in Aboriginal students and believes in Aboriginal issues, and might not have all the answers, but cares. You know, find that teacher, talk to them and get their advice, rather than bad advice, and understand the difference and surround yourself with good people—friends, family who believe in you—and it might not always be easy to find those people, but once you do, really hold onto that and keep hold of that and be open enough to talk to those people. Don’t be afraid to share your dreams.”

I think you really need to believe in yourself. Anything is possible. I’m not going to say to students, “Look, it’s easy or it’s going to be fine,” or, “There’s not going to be any barriers,” or, “It’s only a simple matter of belief,” but belief is the first step and it’s a bigger step than we give credit for.

You know, it really is half the journey: believing in your ability to do something; having high expectations of yourself before you expect other people to have high expectations of you. It’s not about placing pressure on yourself; it’s about believing in yourself and believing in your ability to do it. Indigenous people have amazing talents and one of those greatest talents is resilience and we’ve shown that in history; the fact that we may have problems but we’ve survived; we’re here when so many people didn’t want us to be. That in itself is a great and lasting victory and young Indigenous people are part of that legacy and it’s something really important to take strength from.



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**EMMA HAY** is currently working as the Aboriginal Education Coordinator for the Department of Education & Children's Services in the Limestone Coast District, South Australia. Emma's career started in education 15 years ago as a school based Aboriginal Education Worker which has led to her being a strong and passionate advocate in Aboriginal Education in particular. Emma's other passion, and the main reason for striving to improve educational and social outcomes for her people, is her three year old daughter Kyah. Having had the opportunity to travel through the UK and parts of Europe, as well as living and working in New South Wales, coming home to her roots in

South Australia and working with and for her community has been the most rewarding experience of all.

## Emma Hay *Living the Change*

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I was born in Adelaide and I was adopted at two weeks of age by non-Aboriginal parents. They'd adopted four other Aboriginal children before me, so I was the fifth and the last of the adopted kids, and we were all from different parts of Australia.

I met my natural family when I was 15. My natural father is Aboriginal. His family is from Point Pearce. They were Narungga mob and they're a very large family. The Graham family is very well known, a very big clan, and my mother is non-Aboriginal and from Elizabeth, and she also comes from a very large family. I went from having a big family anyway to having a huge family, yes. So I've known my natural family since I was 15 but it's taken a long time to build up those relationships and I still haven't met all of the family. That would be impossible. I would think that would take a whole lifetime. I grew up down at Port MacDonnell, or Eight Mile Creek. We had a dairy farm, so I'm a country girl at heart.

Then we moved up to Mount Gambier where I completed my schooling. I got halfway through Year 12 and I'd had some wonderful mentors in the school. There was one in particular, Mary-Jane Tennyson Woods. She was a student counsellor and she worked so hard to keep me in school and on track, providing me with many different opportunities. I was involved in several things, including being on Nunga radio and also doing some peer

mentoring in class. I was working with some students in Year 8 who had learning difficulties, and in my free periods I'd work with these students and support them through whatever they were doing, which was a really rewarding experience. I think it was probably from there that I started to get a sense that this was what I wanted to do, although I wasn't really aware of that then. You know, as a 15 or 16 year old, I had no idea really what I wanted to do, but I just knew that I liked working with people and helping them.

I got halfway through Year 12 and it all got too hard. I was working part-time in a jeans shop and they offered me full-time work, and so I thought, "Mm, all these assignments or full-time paid employment?" You get to that age and boyfriends and socialising is pretty important. I chose the employment and I've always regretted it because I never got to have that sense of completion, to successfully complete my Year 12 and go to university. So I started working full-time at the jeans shop and worked my way up to assistant manager, and then I decided I didn't really want to sell jeans for the rest of my life. I knew that there was more, and so I went to TAFE and did a Certificate in Community Services. I then moved to Adelaide and I got a traineeship, working as a trainee travel consultant.

I really enjoyed that but I was a long way from home and I got very home sick. So I went back and that's when I actually started working for the Education Department at about the age of 21. There was an advertisement in the paper for an Aboriginal Education Worker at one of the local primary schools. So I went along, not really knowing anything about what the job was about or what I'd need to do, but I was successful and I won the position, and started working as a school based AEW. I was working with families and teachers, organising the Aboriginal Student Support Parents Advisory committee and supporting the homework

centre. I really enjoyed it, but of course, AEW work is contract work. You wouldn't know one term to the next whether you'd still have your job. That is really hard when you're trying to plan for the future and have some job stability.

Another opportunity came up. Family Day Care advertised a traineeship, a full-time field worker position. I applied and won that, and then six months into my traineeship a 0.6 three year contract came up. I applied and won that position. I was very well supported in those workplaces. I got a lot of training and mentoring from the people who I worked with, and they really believed in giving me a fair go.

I didn't encounter any of that ugly stuff that can come with Aboriginal identified positions. I was in a really well supported environment. I worked there for seven and a half years and while I was doing that I had lots of opportunities to do other training and development. I did a part-time project and I developed some early learning series books for the Early Learning Program. That was a really challenging, fascinating and wonderful experience and it was probably when I really got my first taste of working a lot with communities. Apart from the AEW job, most of my work had been mainstream and working with mainstream clients, not necessarily Indigenous clients. And that's when I really knew that I wanted to be working in Aboriginal Education; there was too much that our kids and our families were missing out on and I wanted to be a part of making a change for that.

More recently, the biggest challenges I've faced have been teacher ignorance. We've been doing Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum workshops with teachers. I've been surprised at their lack of knowledge of Aboriginal culture, and their distorted view of Aboriginal people's tradition and history. They don't understand that Aboriginal

people's culture is here and now. Some of them assume that Aboriginal culture is just about spears and boomerangs and didgeridoos and bush food.

It really is so frustrating because people with these attitudes actually discount me as a person, along with my culture. One of my colleagues will challenge teachers when they say, "We don't do Aboriginal Studies or Aboriginal Perspectives because we don't know anything about it."

She responds with, "Well, would you teach ancient Roman history without researching it? Why would it be any different for Aboriginal culture?"

The saviour mentality also frustrates me and there is a lot of this in our schools—particularly from the student counsellors, because they're the ones who are dealing more with students with high social and emotional needs. They are well meaning, but this mentality can lead to a dumbing down of our kids' curriculum, and so many schools do that. They assume our kids can't do certain things, instead of actually realising that it's their responsibility to be teaching them.

When I think about the future, my focus does keep changing.

I think this all comes back to my lack of completion of Year 12; that I wasn't made to stick with it, so it's easier to jump and swap and change. I've always got great ideas about what I could do and how I could do it, but I'd really like to be working in policy. We need to be making more positive changes and that can only occur when it starts coming from the top down.

The people who are working on the ground at the moment in Aboriginal Education are working so hard and they give their heart and soul, but most of the time they're working against the system and that's so frustrating. We have lots of policies in place, like a DECS Aboriginal

Strategy, our Aboriginal Employment Strategy and the State Strategic Plan. Our people are the most researched group in the world, yet we still aren't seeing the outcomes from all of those studies. There comes a time when we need to bite the bullet and start putting words into actions.

But we need to have that support from the government, from our leaders.



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**GAVIN KHAN** is currently a lecturer at The University of Adelaide in the School of Education, on leave from his position of principal at Williamstown Primary School in South Australia's Barossa District. He is a Kookatha and Arunta Aboriginal Australian from the far north of South Australia and has been a primary teacher, an Aboriginal Education Teacher, District Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher, District Aboriginal Education Project Officer, District Aboriginal Education Support Service Manager and Principal. Gavin was founding Co-chair of the National Aboriginal Principals Association which he was instrumental in establishing

in 2006 in collaboration with Susan Matthews. He had a close association with APAPDC's Dare to Lead project, serving as a committee member on the Dare to Lead National Steering Committee, Kids Matter and Mind Matters National Steering Committee, Leaders Lead working group and a reviewer for the National Museum of Australia 'Indigenous Education Series'. In 2007 Gavin won a 'Deadly' award for Achievement in Education. He is one of the first Aboriginal principals of a mainstream school in South Australia and in 2005 was involved in carrying out an 'Open Discussion' with DECS employees involved with Aboriginal Education. This resulted in realignment of the structures for

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the education and care of Aboriginal children and students in South Australia. Gavin has a background in classroom teaching throughout South Australia, in a variety of schools and settings. He has been a passionate advocate and leader for the improvement of educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and students, building capacity and creating greater opportunities for Aboriginal teachers to move into leadership roles. He is currently completing a Masters in Education part-time at The University of Adelaide.

Gavin Khan *Belief in the Magic*

I've recently found out that I've won a principal position for the next five years, and being principal at this school is just great. You couldn't get a better school and community area. I want to maintain the level of income but also be able to study, and the study that I'm interested in doing is developing my research skills, to base any of my thoughts and ideas on research.

I'd like to put myself into a position to be challenged professionally. By studying and doing research I would develop conceptual understandings and language that will enable me to be more concise, because that is one of my weaknesses. I'd also like to be able to identify and share those things that I know and have learnt so that non-Aboriginal people can understand my perspective as an Aboriginal person. That's something that's really important to me.

I would like to learn more about Aboriginal culture and politics. It's good to see things from other perspectives. The way that I learn is to talk and ask questions, and sometimes I don't think about the sensitivity of the situation. I just really want to learn so that other points of view make sense to me. Sometimes when I ignore those sensitivities within the context of the conversation, it may be read by the other person as me being rude, but I'm not attacking them, I'm challenging them. It's important to be

able to identify what's cultural and what's not, because that's one of the things that a lot of Aboriginal teachers and leaders struggle with. A lot of my learning has occurred as a result of being able to identify what's cultural and what's not. This happens when you're a new leader and you're developing new understandings within a new context or situation. This is something that is experienced by people regardless of gender or culture or background.

It's very rare to come across people who are willing and able to challenge or to offer another point of view, or who will ask those questions that help clarify things in your own mind. Sometimes you learn that you have misread their meaning altogether. These are the experiences that a new leader has when they go into a new community or school because there is so much you don't know and there's often not a cohort of Aboriginal people who have been in those leadership positions. You can't get that unique perspective or feedback, and therefore learning and understanding the cultural norms can be a really difficult process. Females new to leadership probably went through this as well: "Am I being treated this way because I'm a female or simply because I'm a new leader?"

Anyway, if I was to project myself ten years into the future I would hope I've still got my health, because statistically as an Aboriginal man it starts to decline at my age. I hope I would have done some study but also to be back in schools and have that special contact as a leader working with communities. So rather than being a pure academic, I think I'd like to have a balance between the two. I've got no aspirations to be the next Chief Executive or District Director or anything like that. It's not about the position for me, but the learning that I will have done. That is more important for me.

I hope I will still be living in Adelaide. I don't think I'd be able to cope

with all the craziness and rushing about in somewhere like Sydney, even though cities like that are great to visit.

If I was to give advice to a young Aboriginal student who might be interested in teaching, I would ask them why they are looking at education, and have they really done some serious thinking and research. Have they really looked into it? In some traditional ways, more Aboriginal people go into education and health fields than any other field, so why is that? Is it because that's what the family have done before or are they closing or narrowing their options simply because that's something that is more comfortable? These fields are better trodden than other tracks, for example archaeology or science.

If they have done the research and really thought about it, I would encourage them to go into teaching because there are a lot of opportunities in the education field. It's important that they maintain their Aboriginal identity but not at the expense of being able to be a good teacher. This may sound really harsh, but they can't create a cultural smokescreen that they can hide behind or use as an excuse for not going as far as they can in their career. They will meet with racism, but I think persistence and resilience are essential skills needed by everyone in the future. Being able to step outside your comfort zone, and go forward and trust people is so important. I've learnt to trust not only Aboriginal people, as I know there are non-Aboriginal people out there that will support you, that understand and will help you. And it's really important to remember that you're not always going to get help from other blackfellas. That's not always the case. A lot of my support and help has come from non-Aboriginal people. That's something that took a while for me to learn and I think the sooner that Aboriginal people learn that, their ability to be supported and be strengthened is going to come sooner rather than later.

When I was about 21, I was young, passionate and very brash in many ways. There's still a degree of that in me now at almost 40 years of age. I think having a real vision or a strong-held belief that there is justice, that there is something that we can strive for, is really important. At 21 I also had a real belief that I could change the world. I think I still hold that. I do have an ability to play a part in changing the world for the better, and that's something I really believed in. In some ways that 21 year old was probably a little bit all over the place, but that's okay. I've accepted who and what I was then. The beauty of growing older is in the learning and discoveries that take place and the amazement about the world and people in it. I didn't always appreciate that the world wasn't as bad a place as I thought it was back then.

Back then, I didn't want to take many risks because I believed more in the 'life script'. I listened and abided by the script that was written by others, probably to my detriment. So my encouragement to anyone else is that you don't have to always play the role in the play, in the script that's been written by others. That includes your family, your cultural group or your community or what's based upon a history.

What are the things that I am proud of? I'm most proud of my niece and nephew. And myself? I think I've stuck in there at times when things were really challenging. But I'm still here and I'm still within the profession that I love and that's teaching—getting this far and still being able to smile and laugh and to have hope and have a belief in the magic of kids and teaching. Something that I'm also proud of is that I've not resigned from the Department. There were many times that I filled in a resignation form, but I'm still here, I'm still kicking, I've still got a job.

Never underestimate the goodness and generosity of people. I think it's important to believe in yourself and to be yourself, and value and celebrate

that. When I'm talking about 'yourself', it is about your history and your family's history and your place in the community. You do have something to offer and people will not always appreciate or understand that.

In some ways it's your responsibility to communicate it in a way that others can understand, and never stop learning. That is something that's really important, and being able to see things from a different point of view and perspective, and to recognise that each of us has different life experiences and different values, beliefs and understandings.

When you do look from different perspectives you can really unpack what diversity means. There is so much value that can be added to the education system, to our society, and to our own professional, personal and cultural selves as well. Even though it can feel uncomfortable, that process is a really powerful thing that builds us and binds us.



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**KEVIN LOWE**, a Gubbi Gubbi man from SE Queensland, is Inspector, Aboriginal Education in the NSW Office of the Board of Studies, a key position in the development of Aboriginal syllabuses and curriculum perspectives in NSW. He has had extensive teaching and educational management experiences in NSW schools, TAFE and universities before taking up his current position in 2001. In his current position, he has led a small team of highly skilled teachers and linguists to develop a wide range of high quality teaching resources to support teachers in the teaching of genuine Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal language programs. He has held the position of Deputy

Chairperson of the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL), the peak advocacy body for Aboriginal community language programs, and for many years been actively involved in the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. Current work within the Board has focused on working with Aboriginal communities, schools and education systems in establishing programs that centre the development of learning partnerships.

Kevin Lowe *Walking the Talk*

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My mum was living in the outer suburbs of Sydney at Blacktown with my father when I was born. The relationship with my father was obviously fairly rocky as he shot through when I was about six months old. My father had come from Ireland via Liverpool in England. Things must have been fairly dire for my mother, though she never spoke of it to me. What information I have is from my grandmother and an old school friend of my mother's who I later came across when I was living in Bellingen. At about the age of two I was removed from my mother and put into foster care for a period of time. When I look back, that was a very traumatic time for me—with distinct memories, though not all of them bad.

Somehow my grandmother, who had gone overseas and had taken up with an old English friend that she had met before the war, came back to Australia. That would have been in about 1955 or so. She had been very much part of the left labour movement in both Australia and in Great Britain. Soon after coming back, she bought an old van, stocked it with sheets, towels, and what seemed like half the kitchen and became a commercial traveller, servicing remote farming families in western NSW and Queensland.

Through my mum, she found out where I was being fostered and one day she came to the house where I was staying and took off with me. I only

have fragments of memory about this period, like the time the car door flew open and my grandmother and I fell out of the car; it was only later that my old granny told me of the 12 months or so that we spent out on the road. My grandmother had a large number of brothers and sisters in different towns in the country and I was also progressively sent to live with great-aunts and uncles, in Coonabarabran and Grenfell. At some stage, when things were sorted out with child welfare, my mother was able to reconnect with me and we lived for a while in Gunnedah, and then back in Sydney.

My mother had put herself through Tech College and learnt shorthand and typing—apparently she must have been fairly good at it as she was offered a job as a teacher. She took a job in Gunnedah and so we went out to live together for the first time in a good few years. I remember that we took rooms in one of the hotels on the main street in town. We later moved into a small unit and then a house down near the river.

I had commenced school in Toongabbie, which was near where my grandmother had built a house after she came back to Sydney. My mum had a very small fibro 'lean to' house and we lived there with her dad. By the time we went to Gunnedah, I had already been at two schools. About 18 months or two years after being at Gunnedah, my mum had saved some money and decided to send me back to Sydney to attend a boarding school. I am not sure what she thought this was going to do, but I remember it being one of the most miserable times of my childhood. Then one day she swept back into town with a new husband—and so I left that school and went to live in the suburbs—attending a school in Ashfield before we finally settled in Jannali, where I completed my primary education.

All of the moving about had made it difficult to make friends and

made my relationship with my mother, who had remarried and had a newer, much younger family, difficult. I didn't know where I really belonged. You know, I'd had this long period of time when I didn't have an ongoing relationship with her. I always felt I wanted to be close to her but I wasn't, so I left home when I was 16 and put myself through the rest of my schooling. I was very lucky that I had some good friends, and one of these in particular asked her parents if I could stay at their house. I am sure that they probably thought that it would only be for a short period of time, but it lasted to when I completed my HSC in 1970.

I probably got through school because I don't know if I had any other aspirations to leave and work. I wasn't very good at school as I missed a lot of important learning. I was a shocking speller and many of my basic English skills weren't all that good either, so I had to really struggle with schoolwork. The only exception to this was Social Studies and later History. The family's interest in politics really enthused me, and this period of the late 1960s was an extraordinary time—Women's Lib, the Vietnam War, and the whole social 'counter revolution' of hippies and drugs affected everyday conversation.

A friend's father got me a job office cleaning. I worked part-time and I worked out what I didn't want to do. Some great teachers thankfully inspired me. I think I was very, very lucky. I think a generation of people like me were very lucky.

I went to a boys' high school with over a thousand boys in a growing outer suburban area. The site was full with demountable buildings situated in military barrack fashion. A lot of the staff were ex-World War II veterans who themselves had gone off to war when they were 18 years old, or not much older. Now I think back, their extraordinary lives must have really impacted on them, you know, what they had seen and

done. It certainly made for interesting times. As I said this was the time of the Vietnam moratorium and things were very political with students leading the protest along with unionists, church leaders, mums and dads and many schoolteachers. You would have imagined that they would have supported the war. Yet many didn't and especially the conscription of students straight out of school. Those of us at school who were most active in the anti-war movement had some great role models and supporters to oppose what was going on at that time.

I came from a very political household. My grandparents had been leading members of the trade union movement and the Communist Party from the very commencement of the 20th century. My grandmother's family, which is my Aboriginal family, had come to the notice of the Special Branch and police from the 1920s and later ASIO after the war. Much of this activism originated with my great-grandmother who had already been singled out by the police in the 1920s and 1930s for her and her children's political activism in the trade union movement and in particular the Unemployed Workers Union during the 1930s. For this she and her children were singled out by the police, being shot and gaoled. There was even the suspicion of murder of one of her sons who died suspiciously after visiting a property and buying food—including flour.

Politics was part of the day-to-day conversation at our house and we were very involved in it. A lot of the teachers were veterans from WWII but they weren't in favour of the war; they weren't in favour of conscription. You know, they certainly weren't in favour of their school charges going off to war at the age of 18, so it was an interesting dynamic; very interesting. Yet they also provided a good basic education that proved to be highly effective in getting many of their students into universities.

I guess I saw the other side of teaching because in other ways it was

pretty hard. I mean in a boys' school there's a lot of testosterone. There are a lot of angry boys and a lot of angst and stuff like that. The cane was part and parcel of daily discipline and teachers used it in all manner of ways, so there was a subtext of violence from everywhere, from some teachers as well as the students. Yet somehow the school worked. I don't know how but I guess it was all about control exerted by the teachers.

At senior school there was some very interesting mentoring by some of the more significant teachers. That affected me and I was inspired by it. I always liked history. History was a living thing for me because we talked about it all the time—family history and connections and political history and things like that.

I'm not surprised that I fell into doing just well enough at school. I guess I was part of that great 'unwashed' who went through uni as a result of them being opened up in the early 1970s, after Whitlam came to government in 1972. It was an exciting time. Universities were humming, bustling places and it was the place to be. The activities were driving broader social change at that time.

I went to university where students were exposed to some great debates which raged about us at this time. These impacted on many facets of our lives, in particular, on the notion of teaching—what content, whose content and how students were positioned in respect to teachers and schooling. Schools were at the vanguard of the social and educational revolution that came out of the 1960s and 1970s. There were many discussions about social justice, differentiated outcomes for groups within schools and about the very structure of traditional schooling. The system was growing at a great pace, and new schools were being opened up in the ever-increasing suburban estates in the cities.

However, while these debates were raging across the campuses, I

believe we were also being provided with a good grounding in educational theories and practices and with the requisite teaching skills to professionally prepare us to enter the educational world of schools.

Having said that though, many of us who entered the teaching service at this stage had a level of bravado that must have put a smile on the faces of those older teachers who had only just got us off their hands. I thought my skills were better than they really were, and it took me some time before I had a better understanding of the tasks in front of me in becoming a teacher.

I am not so sure about the quality of trainee teaching at this time. In particular, I feel that the program regime that supports the education of most Aboriginal trainee teachers runs counter to best practice in adult learning. My time in teacher education clearly highlighted the unrealistic expectations of many of these programs. Indeed I believe that we should not be surprised at all with the very low levels of student retention given that most of those filling undergraduate programs are often working parents or even grandparents with family and community responsibilities, along with full-time work requirements. Then we expect these students to do block release four times a year, leave family and work and then compete with full-time students who have all the resources and educational capital that their families and schools have invested in them.

I really lament about the issue of leadership in school based Aboriginal programs in New South Wales. I feel that people with potential are promoted too early and are moved into positions for the sake of having a person sitting in an identified position, before they can ground their skills in authentic school practices. Departments of Education are looking to fill positions that have been created but with too few people to take them. The task of affecting significant change in school and teaching practices is

linked to the skills of the change manager and the credibility they bring to the task.

The expectations to affect an improvement are so large: with the task of negotiating ticklish issues between the communities and schools and teachers, culturally appropriate curriculum, funding and a range of other significant issues. They're constantly put in a position of having to be a conduit to sell often poor decisions, underfunded positions—policies and practices that we know are very unlikely to work—these require people of significant skills. Teachers need to have access to really good tried and tested strategies, linked to good teaching practice—theory and practice—and then overlaid with culturally appropriate programs that our Aboriginal communities know will make a difference. That requires a really good strong skill base, and we don't think about that and we just fill positions for the sake of filling them.

I was a very political and unionised teacher. Early on I was an active member of the teaching union and was the school representative at the time of school closures and the forced transfer of staff. This put me into quite a deal of conflict with principals, regional and head office staff and even Directors-General. I worked out very early on that you couldn't afford to be a mediocre or even average teacher. If you're going to be mediocre, the best thing to do is not to make any waves, not to draw attention to yourself. But if you're going to stand up and take on big or challenging issues, then you need to have credibility, particularly if it means siding with community and/or students who have fallen foul of the school system. I found that I needed to assure myself that I wasn't going to get sidelined by somebody who would say, "Yeah, that's all well and good, Kevin, but you can't do the job." So I made a lot of effort to make sure that I could do it.

That set me on a long and continuing journey of postgraduate study; I wanted to shore up my position and develop a keener understanding of the issues affecting student performance and interest in school.

I had missed out some fundamentals in my early schooling. My grandmother was probably by far the most significant person in my life, both in real terms and in an intellectual sense. She was born in Western Queensland in Winton. Her family had moved from a small town near Rockhampton, looking for work and keeping out of the reach of the government officials. My great grandfather, a Gubbi Gubbi man was born in or around Gympie.

My great-grandmother, who had passed away several years before I was born was renowned as very active in the Australian Workers' Union in Queensland. She was mentioned in papers from the 1920s and 30s as a highly articulate Aboriginal woman who was well known in the radical left politics of the labour movement and the Communist movement. All of her eight children were born with a great sense of politics and social justice and family history. My grandmother had very strong political and social aspirations. While her schooling was minimal, she was highly articulate, well read in the left wing political theory and was a good organiser. Yet, though even as an older woman, she could be found down the street or at the station collecting signatures or handing out pamphlets, she always had time for the grandkids. She inspired my sisters, looming large especially after our mother passed away when she was only 42. She was highly significant to me as she gave me the strength to get through my troubles when I was young.

I think grandparents can play an enormous role. It's where the elders in a community have been able to maintain a really strong sense of purpose and what's important: culture, history and language, family

connections, stories. They are our anchor giving us a really strong sense of belonging connection; they hold the community together and are their most significant reference point and asset.

It took me a long time to realise that really good leadership is collaborative in nature and purpose. In my early years in teaching, school and departmental leadership, it was based on a top-down model where things were just passed down and you were expected to follow the lead of those further above you in the pecking order. The whole discourse of institutionalised education was ‘instruction’, with teachers being instructed and then instructing children. I hope we’ve moved away from that and we’ve demanded a totally different skill set from our leaders. Leadership through collaboration, leadership through ideas, leadership through demonstrating that you have the capacity to do the task, that you’re wanting to take people on. Our current work at the Board entails working with many community-school programs. The team here work to facilitate a collaborative team approach with principals and teachers and with community people to develop genuine learning partnerships.

We advise schools to listen and take advice from elders, and seek out a trusted mentor. It would strengthen school progress if schools could find people who are genuinely willing to talk to them and give them a sounding board for their own ideas. This might give them the confidence to step up to the mark and take risks to step out of their comfort zone, but do it from a position of strength.

When I was doing some teacher training at university, one of the students I taught said, “I’m an Aboriginal person. I would like that to be respected, but not to be seen as an educational licence to be given a lesser education”. She went on to say:

“I want a different sort of educational experience, but that experience

must lead me inexorably to the same point: I want to be able to walk into a classroom and into a staff room and hold my head up because they know that I can do the job well.” She elaborated, “I’d be really upset if, in the end, you don’t give me a qualification that allows me to do the same things as the trainee teachers two doors down who are taking a different route to the same point. If I can’t walk into a classroom and teach those kids and write that program, then you will have failed me.”

I guess that really highlighted to me that while we do things differently, the end point has to be the same. That’s why some of the Aboriginal teachers who go out to schools don’t survive. I have this really strong sense about a lot of our trainee teachers coming through—they come with the expectations of family, community and a system that doesn’t understand the enormity of often being the first or only person to go to university and later to be appointed as the “Aboriginal teacher” to a school. It’s a strange system that allows people to struggle through this with only limited resources. Little wonder that there is such a low retention rate in these undergraduate programs. I see it as such a terrible misuse of individual and community assets. We must be better at supporting our teachers through their training and then in the early years of teaching.

So leadership is about preparation, support and valuing yourself and the system, developing programs that actually support and mentor Aboriginal teachers through their early years of teaching.

It is imperative that institutions don’t allow people to go through under-skilled; it’s demeaning and people know it. We want the best education for our undergraduate teachers, not a second rate one. Quality teachers will make a difference to our students; to all students. The issue of low expectations is demeaning; we see it in schools in the quality and level of teacher engagement. There has been a malaise based on these low

expectations and students continually work down to perform at the lower level because they don't know any better and they're allowed to get away with that.

If we continue to allow that to happen we undervalue our kids, we undervalue our community, and we undervalue the profession. Teaching is about real credibility. We've got to start demanding this if we want to be good leaders. We've got to go right back and restructure this educational experience for our trainee teachers and school students alike.

I hate people giving our kids, giving all kids, second best. I've taught in really poor areas with working class kids and I've seen great teachers. They had really high expectations. They didn't accept second best. In the end it's about the kids. It's about the way you really engage with the kids. They want to be engaged but they also want to be taught properly. Leadership is about recognising this within yourself, your classroom and school. Knowing you can make a difference. That's true leadership.

So I have talked about lots of things that I see as being critical to educational leadership. Experience has shown me that the best, most effective, respected leaders are proactive in their dealings with the big issues that will make a difference. They must be community focused, for it's genuine partnerships with our communities that will in the end make the critical difference in education.



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**JANET MOONEY** is currently the Director of the Koori Centre, University of Sydney. She is a Wandandian person from the South Coast of NSW. She has had many years of working in Aboriginal Education, as a secondary teacher, Education Officer, Consultant in Aboriginal Education, Lecturer in the Aboriginal Education Assistants Program at the Koori Centre and then as the Coordinator of that program. She is an Indigenous academic who has dedicated her career to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal people; she believes strongly that education is a tool for social justice and therefore actively promotes exemplary and innovative educational practice.

Hence, in all of the positions she has held she has kept abreast of sound educational practices for Aboriginal learners, but has strived to create an understanding for non-Aboriginal people of the practices and principles of attitudinal change that can only produce a more cohesive community of Australians.

## Janet Mooney *The Artist Within*

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My name is Janet Mooney. I'm a Wandandian person from the Yuin Nation. I was born in Nowra in 1954. Back then it was still a fairly racist place, not that I think it's changed all that much. I travelled quite a lot as a kid because Dad was always looking for the elusive buck, so I grew up in many places around New South Wales and Queensland.

I went to eight primary schools and two high schools, but I left in Year 8. Education-wise, it was a very broken experience and it was difficult to learn. When four or five, I was playing at the brickworks at Nowra and running across the bricks. My girlfriend and I jumped into what we thought were cold ashes from the brickwork fires, but unfortunately they were not. They were cold and grey on the top but red-hot in the middle, and I burnt my feet nearly up to my knees. I went home and my mother used the old bush medicine. She soaked them in water and wrapped them in flour and cloth, and I don't even have a scar on my legs. Of course, I was off school for a long time and when I went back I couldn't understand nouns and verbs which is what was being taught at the time. The teacher told me that if I wanted to go on walkabout, that was my problem not hers, and I would just have to catch up the best I could. Those were the sorts of issues in schooling that were around at that time.

As I mentioned, I left school in Year 8. I basically did lots of cheap

labour jobs, opening scallops, building boxes for bananas, working in restaurants and so on until I got a job with Veterans Affairs. I worked there for about seven or eight years, and then I made a decision.

I'll tell you a funny story. There were people there who lived their lives around TV programs. They used to come in and talk about Number 96. Now, television has never been one of my great favourites and I can't understand why people have to talk about TV programs all the time. I looked around and wondered if I could live life like this, where the only interest would be Number 96 or something similar. I decided that I needed to educate myself, so I went to TAFE.

I got my School Certificate through studying at night and then I took a year off from Veterans Affairs to do my HSC.

Like my mother, I'm very interested in art. We're accomplished artists in our own way. I had a flatmate who had gone to Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School (SCEGGS). She'd just finished there and she gave me a canvas and some paint. I did a painting and she said, "Go to art college, you fool." So I did. I applied to both Sydney art schools and I got in to the Sydney Art Institute where I completed my Bachelor of Visual Arts. The Sydney Art Institute is now the New South Wales College of Fine Arts. From there I attended Sydney University and did a Graduate Diploma in Teaching and became an art teacher. At that time I was actually employed as a carpenter. I had a Carpenter's Certificate and was teaching women to renovate houses. I took a substantial drop in pay to be a teacher, but of course it was one of the major steps in my life.

I taught mostly at a large inner city high school, Cleveland Street High School back in the old days when it was very overcrowded. I met some fantastic colleagues there, and they have remained colleagues to this day. From teaching I went on to be a consultant in Aboriginal

Education and I worked with a fantastic woman named Elaine Bennett. We worked together training people to introduce Aboriginal Studies and Perspectives across the curriculum. Too often it was a process of ticking boxes, but occasionally you came across people that were really interested in Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Studies.

From there I applied for a job here at the University of Sydney as a lecturer, and that was with the Aboriginal Education Assistance Program. At that time there were three people plus the coordinator, and that made up the AEA Program. It was the Dawkins era which saw the amalgamation of the colleges into the universities, so they brought the Aboriginal Studies Unit from the Sydney Teachers College here. That little unit of one person amalgamated with the AEA Program and became the Aboriginal Education Unit, and from there it built up. We brought in another unit which was the Indigenous Support and Cultural Support Unit and they created the Cadigal Program that assists Indigenous students to get into uni through special entry provisions.

After that I became Coordinator of the program for a year and then Acting Director of the Centre in 1996; I was successful in getting the Director's position in 1997, and I've now been here at the Uni for 18 years. So that's my work history and how I got to be where I am today.

I guess one of the most important things along the way is getting to a point where you believe in yourself. You know, that's a really important step to take because too often you get knocked down as a kid. My mother thought I could do well but my father just said, "Why do you need an education? Leave school." My father is non-Indigenous, but this attitude was also a product of his time. It's just what women did, particularly Indigenous women from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

I had people who were inspirational to me like Anne Eckermann,

Davina Tyrrell and Linda Burney who remain friends today as well as mentors: fantastic strong women who just inspire you to go on to better things.

I guess I advocate really strongly that education is the tool that everybody needs. I got to university after being told I was stupid. I didn't think I could do it, but it was much easier than I thought. Don't get me wrong, it's hard work and you have to give up a lot—unfortunately including some very close friends because they didn't understand that I couldn't go out to dinner any more. I could only afford bread and butter. But for just four years out of your life it makes such a difference to yourself and your family.

But, yes, education is it; if you want a chance in life you need an education.



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**FRANK PEARCE** is an Aboriginal man whose family originally came from the North Coast of NSW. He grew up in Redfern, Surry Hills and Kings Cross and attended St Mary's Cathedral School in his early primary years. He is still happily married to his wife of 42 years, Fay, with three sons and eight grandchildren.

In 1966 Frank began working for Sydney Buses, firstly as a bus conductor then driver. At 32 he went to night school and obtained his School Certificate. He became Senior Revenue Clerk at Sydney Buses until forced redundancy in 1991. He became an Aboriginal Employment Officer with what was then DEETYA. In 1997 he

graduated with a degree in Adult Education and in 1999 he attained his current and most satisfying position as State Coordinator of Aboriginal Education for the NSW Catholic Education Commission.

Frank Pearce was honoured in July 2007 in Adelaide as one of the most significant figures of the Dare to Lead project for his contributions to Aboriginal Education. He was also further honored in 2008 by being named as a member of the Indigenous Guard of Honour for the Pope's visit.

Frank is currently studying for a Masters in Research degree which explores the possible link between the employment of an Aboriginal Education Worker and improved Indigenous educational outcomes.

His favourite quote is "being Aboriginal is a reason to succeed, rather than an excuse not to" and his motto "Whatever it Takes".

## Frank Pearce *Whatever it Takes*

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I was born in Crown Street Hospital. My family was living in Woolloomooloo and I went to Plunkett Street School. Then I went to St Mary's Cathedral School. I was only there for a short period; I think it might have had something to do with the fact that we couldn't pay the fees back in those days. That was, to be quite truthful, probably the most wonderful portion of my life. I thought it was great because everyone who lived in Woolloomooloo in the 50s were black of one shade or another, so there was no discrimination. I didn't even realise there was discrimination, to be truthful.

My grandfather was a Bunjulung man from the north coast. I never got a chance to learn too much about my early heritage because my father left my mother when I was about two, and didn't spend a great deal of time with any of them. I picked up most of it because my sister did some research and I picked up stuff from her. So that was a really good period of my life, I think. It was a very safe period. My grandmother worked as a cleaner in Kings Cross for about 50 years and she used to walk down these really dark steps late at night, down the bottom of Woolloomooloo and always somebody would say, "Hello, mum, how you going?" But not now. Now they come in your front door. I lived with my grandmother for a long period of time. Both of my grandmothers probably had the strongest

influence on me.

My stepfather is a Niue Islander from somewhere around New Zealand. That's probably where I got the ability to read. I suppose he gave me the hunger to read. I think a lot of the reading was to run away from a lot of personal family stuff; hide in Long John Silver and all those sorts of things. 'Wind in the Willows' was my favourite. I wanted to be the toad or whatever his name was. He was a little villain. I probably helped a great deal to bring my brothers and sisters up—five of them—from an early age. From seven or eight, I'd be looking after my brothers and sisters while my mother was out earning a living. Then from there I think I progressed to Cooks Hill High School in Newcastle, and that's where I learnt about racism real quick, being the only Aboriginal in the school I suppose. I suffered that through first year, second year, and about halfway through second year I left. In those days there were no Aboriginal people in any capacity working in schools to turn to for assistance or comfort.

I couldn't cope with it any more. Every day was a fight for survival, so you learnt quickly. Probably from there I once again helped my mother support the other kids. I'd be out selling newspapers in the morning and in the afternoon. During the day I'd be running around the paddocks up there collecting manure. I used to collect manure to sell as fertiliser. It was an interesting period of my life, I suppose. My first job was a messenger boy in the Sydney Town Hall. I only got that because my grandmother knew an alderman and that's how you got in at that stage. After about two years working as a messenger they sent me off to be a cleaner down in the old fish markets, which was very interesting for somebody that detests fish. So for the first two months there I couldn't eat.

That was my job for about 18 months. Then they closed that down and moved the fish market to its present site. I went into the vegetable

market.

I got married at 19 and we didn't have a great deal of money and my brother-in-law convinced me to go and work as a bus conductor with Sydney Buses, where I graduated to driver. That was probably the first time I'd had a quid in my pocket, because you used to work virtually around the clock, and holidays and Christmas Days and whatever other days.

From there, I think it was 1976, for some reason or other I said, "Well, I can't keep doing this." So I decided to go back to night school and do the School Certificate I never got. I went to Arthur Phillip, next to Parramatta station. I was actually delivering papers in the mornings, doing a 12 hour shift driving a bus, and then going to school five nights a week—on top of looking after two children because the wife worked at Parramatta Leagues Club every night. We did that around the clock.

In between, I had a mile of jobs, delivering newspapers, cleaning toilets, delivering furniture. Back in those days you could virtually walk out of one job and into another; you could always find employment. I worked as a bouncer in Kings Cross for quite a period; worked as a disc jockey in Kings Cross. They were very interesting times because that's when all the Yanks were here. I think half the people I knew or grew up with are either dead or in gaol. I saw some very interesting things. While I was with Sydney Buses I was involved in two robberies. The Ryde one was interesting because we were sitting there with all the pay money and these guys just came crashing through the gyprock with shotguns and wearing motorcycle helmets. They'd been camped up there all night and they just dropped straight through the gyprock. From my upbringing, it didn't bother me all that much. There were a couple of guys that ended up completely gaga from stress; same thing at Waverley bus depot. There was

a knock on the door from these guys in police uniform so the boss opened the door and there was another robbery. They put us all in the safe. A few people recognised who it actually was but weren't going to say anything.

But I thought the buses were pretty good. I really enjoyed that. Then I graduated to what they call a senior revenue clerk, after I'd done my School Certificate. I started as a junior revenue clerk, and I then took an exam and ended up as a senior revenue clerk until made redundant in 1991. Then I actually found out what it was like to be an older black person trying to get a job, because it had never ever happened to me. In my entire life I'd never been out of employment, so for the next two years I got absolutely nothing. I went for something like a couple of hundred interviews; God knows how many resumes I wrote. This went on for at least two years, which sucked up the majority of my superannuation — because I was one of these people that was never on the dole — didn't believe in that sort of thing. As long as you had two legs, you could make some money. I'm trying to think what happened then. Well, it was quite funny because probably for two years I put 'Aboriginal' on my job application. After I took 'Aboriginal' off, I got accepted in quite a few places. But after meeting with the people I decided I wasn't going to take it.

Then by some fluke they were advertising for what they call a 'trainee employment officer' with the old CES. They wanted an Aboriginal officer. I won that position. You were trained for about 12 months or so, and you had to become qualified in different things. I worked in Blacktown CES, in Mount Druitt CES, in Mount Druitt Youth Access Centre and I worked in Castle Hill CES. Probably my greatest joy out of the time working with the CES was that I actually managed to get long-term jobs for much older Aboriginal people. I was getting 40 and 45 year old guys into apprenticeships who had never trained for anything, because I more

or less had the gift of the gab, I suppose you'd say.

The funniest thing was that a lot of people think I'm Italian, Greek, Maltese, Arabic—you name it—and I'd get employers on the phone talking about how they didn't want any more of these lazy black blah blahs, and I'd let them go for about two minutes and then I'd say, "You do realise who you're talking to?" and they'd say, "No."

I'd say, "Well, I'm the Aboriginal Employment Officer." Well, you'd hear "click" at the other end of the phone. There were a few horror stories, because every time an election came up there was a reaction to the huge Aboriginal unemployment figures. So what they tend to do is try to push them off into courses so they actually disappear off the unemployed list and they were just shoving people in all over the place. One lady rang me to complain—she was about 18 stone and they put her in a weight-loss clinic. The boss called her all sorts of names all day long, so I got her out of there.

They put a lot of young Aboriginal kids into places like department stores as supposed trainee salesmen. You'd arrive over there and the kids would be sweeping a back room. But in those days there was a lot of training subsidies so people had 'money' stamped on their head and that's what they were interested in. I worked around the system, I suppose, because I recognised the fact that a lot of the employers were pretty ordinary. But then if you could manage to get a young Aboriginal kid into an apprenticeship and keep him there for between 12 to 18 months, he had every chance of going somewhere else. So I overlooked a few things, as long as I got them the job. Then in their wisdom, the good old government decided they'd close the CES.

Then I went into DEETYA. They actually wanted people who knew something about the transport industry to run vocational courses for

long-term unemployed, particularly Aboriginal people. I just happened to have worked for Sydney Buses for 25 years. So, to cut a long story short, I achieved a one hundred per cent better placement record than the CES itself in getting long-term unemployed into jobs.

I've got a funny bent. I write poetry, I write stories, I write amusing things about different things. And I used to write all those and stick them on the CES intranet and they'd go Australia-wide. I didn't actually realise where they were all going and I was getting all these people turning up for my training courses. We'd involve the employer from day one, which I found was the most important thing because, from my Aboriginal background, it's all about relationships. The relationship built up and we were placing them hands over fists into jobs. Then they offered me a job with the Immigration Department. I wasn't too hot on that, so I went to work as an Aboriginal Education Officer. A major difficulty was that for a lot of the time we were underfunded which meant we were understaffed, so instead of having one field officer area I had two or three. I had everything from Blacktown to Bargo. A lot of the work was visiting Aboriginal homework centres of a night. I found that very rewarding actually.

To this point I have left a large part of my educational journey out. When I was with the CES at Blacktown, I had a mate who wanted to go off and do a diploma in adult education or something, but he was a very shy fellow, and he wouldn't go by himself. So he talked me into it and I signed up for this course for two years, which was very interesting. It was the Bachelor of Education in Adult Education and Community Education or something similar. The first day was very interesting because we had 35 people, and we were in the smallest room you could imagine. The first thing the Aboriginal coordinator said was, "Well, don't worry

about it being crowded. Half of you will be gone by the end of the first term." So then three years later, all bar one who went off to have a baby, graduated. To this day I am not sure if he was using reverse psychology. About halfway through the diploma they decided they'd turn it into a degree. They had no plan, they had nothing. We wrote it for them as we went, which was very interesting. My mate left before he achieved the diploma and I was still there to finish the damn thing, because I'm one of these people—I start something, I finish it.

Up until I started this course I'd never spoken in public and never would; I never even spoke at my own son's wedding. But that turned me around because it was a much safer environment and you were actually working with your peers, I suppose, so you felt comfortable. So it gradually grew from there. Five weeks into the course there was me and two other guys who were like the leaders. We were doing 'dial an essay' from all around bloody New South Wales at one or two o'clock in the morning when somebody was behind on their assignment. I'd be getting them ringing me from everywhere, but we all pulled through it, and that all went well. Then I went from there to here.

My current job as the State Coordinator, Aboriginal Education for the NSW Catholic Education Commission is probably the most rewarding I've ever had in my life. I am working with the best group of people in my entire life. I have bosses that have a high degree of confidence in me. If it's Aboriginal Education, I do it and they support me. There's nothing I'll do without passing it by them first, but I don't think I've ever had a knockback in nine years. I must be doing something right because last year I received a national award from the Dare to Lead Program for my personal contributions to Aboriginal Education. I have also been asked to be part of the Indigenous Guard of Honour for the Pope during World

Youth Day.

Funnily, with this job when I applied for it I was culled before the interview because I didn't have a heavy Catholic background, and for once in my life I actually argued. I said, "You people have got to be kidding. You don't want the person who's reading and judging your reports at the other end to write them for you." So I got the job not long after.

At the moment, I'm doing a Masters. It's a bit odd I suppose, because I'm 60 and I'm really starting to view retirement. It was a bit of a fluke I even got into the Masters. My Aboriginal advisers used to meet upstairs, and this fellow used to keep coming and having sessions with them. My curiosity got the better of me so I knocked on the door and he invited me in for a cup of coffee. Apparently he was a lecturer from the Australian Catholic University and they were doing a Masters. I was just sort of laughing and said to him, "Well, what Masters have you got where I don't have to go and it doesn't cost me any money?"

He said, "Research."

I said, "Well, how does that work?"

He said, "Well, what you do is, you've only got to go and do the preliminaries with the university. Then you end up writing a thesis."

I said, "Well, what's a thesis?" So he explained it to me.

I said, "Oh, yeah, that sounds good." He also told me that I didn't have to pay HECS for it, so I decided to do it and then there were other areas that started to twig with me.

I signed up with a certain university and that was a horror story because it was probably six months before they actually rang me to tell me I was accepted, and I had to start in two days. It was a block release course where I had to do two blocks of research methods. I arrived at the course and unbeknownst to me I was supposed to have read 500 pages of

a textbook I'd never seen before, and then at the end of the week I had to do an exam. So that was a nightmare. I couldn't even buy the textbook. It took some weeks to get one. So I bumbled through that part of it, don't ask me how but I got through it. Then the second one was a classic. I think there was about ten of us in the class, two resident class geniuses who knew all about research. So the lecturer spent all of his time talking to them to the detriment of the other six of us who had no idea what the hell the conversation was about.

At the end of that particular period I had to sit for an open-book exam. I had absolutely no idea what the hell an open-book exam was so I didn't know how to prepare for it. So then I finally twigged what it was all about. The fact that I could actually have notes there probably made me do worse, because I knew I'd be relying on that, rather than relying on my brain. I actually got physically ill in the car on the way in. I suppose I just passed, so I got through that. Then at the interview at the end of it, the guy said to me, "I don't really believe that you've got the conceptual or academic abilities to complete a thesis."

I said, "Well, listen, mate, you're wrong. You've got no idea of my abilities. You don't know anything about me personally. You never supported me."

All throughout this course I sent a constant stream of questions via email and was lucky to get a reply within ten days. Then right at the end of it he said, "Well, really, I wouldn't encourage any Aboriginal person to do a research degree." So my hair stood up on end and I'd just taken one look at the bloke and had to leave before I choked him, and I just walked out.

I thought, "Well, this is not the place for me." I happened to be visiting St Vincent's College in Potts Point and there was a lady there named Professor Karen Malone who at the time was working in the University of

Melbourne. I sat down with her and we had a big chat and we got around to my supposed university career and she said she'd help me to get into the University of Melbourne. Unluckily, they didn't have any HECS places left, but then two weeks later she rang to tell me that she'd been shifted to Wollongong University and would I like to sign up? So that's where I've been since. We had a few problems because amongst Aboriginal people there are a lot of bereavements and stuff that puts you behind.

At the moment I've taken a semester break because the workload I've got here, which is getting bigger every day, was just getting a bit too much for me. But I'm still continuing on, and I continue to fight with academia daily, because there's a problem with the non-Aboriginal person's academic viewpoint of Aboriginal students. I've had many fights but I'm actually able to do my work in an Aboriginal way, so they've finally come to the party on that.

The ethics paper was probably the funniest. They said, "Well, before you do this, you've got to write an ethics paper." I said, "What's that?" So I had to write an ethics paper completely blind. I had absolutely no idea what 'ethics' was. Well, the funny part of that is I probably sweated over this thing for two months and it's now their best practice ethics paper for Aboriginal people wanting to go to university. My uni supervisor asked me to come down and speak to a few students. I didn't want to do it because I had no idea what I was going to talk to them about. Anyway, I arrived there and found myself in an auditorium with 100 first year teachers and not a single piece of paper, because I thought I was going to come down and talk to five people around a table. I somehow managed to talk for the next hour and a half. They were quite happy and they all went off to save the world and all that sort of thing.

So, yes, that was good. Probably the biggest scare I've had since then is

when I was asked to go to Loreto Kirribilli to talk to some Year 8 students. I said, "Yeah, righto," because they'd just been off to the Aboriginal Health Initiative or something and they wanted me to connect education with health. I've arrived there and was sitting out in the waiting room when a lady came and got me. We started to walk down and sighted this huge auditorium.

I said, "Where are we going? I thought you only wanted me to talk to Year 8 students." All I could see were hundreds of people all heading for this auditorium.

She said, "No, you're going to speak to 780 people and the whole school staff." So they got me again.

I was so nervous I was shaking but an hour and a half later they gave me a standing ovation and a book on Gandhi.

I've been married for 42 years to the same woman. I'm still looking for the marriage licence because I'm sure it had 'obey' in there, and I'm sure she's shredded it somewhere along the line! I've got three sons and eight grandchildren. During the period I couldn't find employment I had to spend my own entire super and all that sort of stuff. I virtually came in here with nothing. I had no idea—aside from the house we own—how we were ever going to have enough money to retire. Whilst visiting a school in Eden not far from the Victorian border we were on the way home and we stopped at Bega, had a cup of coffee and bought a farm! We were sitting right outside the real estate office and this bloke was putting a sign up. He was marking a 25 acre property down from \$39k to \$35k so we bought the 25 acres, which I've happily just paid for. So by the time we sell our house and all that sort of thing, we should have enough to live on; plus hopefully with the Masters I can do a bit of consultancy, keep my finger in somewhere.

I have trouble with academia because I can't write the way they want me to. Often when I go and see a school principal they'll think, "Mm, black person, they won't know much," and they use really long words and I'll sit there for five minutes and say, "Why did you use that when you could've used this?" And their face drops. Some of them don't have great expectations of a lot of Aboriginal people when they meet them.

But I've probably got to a stage in life where if I didn't like something I'd say it to the Pope. I've written to Rudd, I've written to Nelson; written to all of them. I'll sit on it for a while, get a bit hyped up, and then I'll have a go. That's the good thing in my current job. I don't think I've ever had a Ministerial knockback. And the funniest part with my Ministerials, they probably start with, "Hi, Kevin. Hope you're well. How's your family?" And I always get an answer. Other people I know write classic Ministerials, and they'll be waiting six months. I mean, Kevin Rudd's just a bloke with a mortgage and kids and everything else. He's just got a different position to me. That's the way I treat it. But unluckily that's not what a lot of Aboriginal people do; they're a bit frightened of things, of what's going to happen. I've got the view I'm in God's waiting room and what more can they do?

My project for the Masters has changed focus three times. It started out with a focus on the attendance of Year 8 and 9 Aboriginal students in the Parramatta diocese. I then jumped to researching the huge drop-out rate of Aboriginal kids in Year 8 and 9, even though they don't have one shred of proof they can show me as far as figures go. Our students are measured from Years 7–10 and 10–12, so you can't tell what 8 and 9 is because they're stuck in the middle of those two sets. I got halfway through that, and then the Aboriginal Education Worker thing blew up. I started hearing rumours that people would really like to do away with

them, because there's no actual academic proof they improve educational outcomes. So now I'm researching a link between Aboriginal Education Workers and improving Indigenous outcomes. I've just sent out my survey to 5,000 principals. I'm getting responses from everywhere. It just sort of grew. One principal wrote back in response to one of the questions which was, "What's the difference between having an AEW and not having an AEW?" And he wrote something about, "It's like one school having electricity and the other none." What I'm really finding good is that while it's clear I'm from the Catholic sector, I'm getting lots of replies from public schools.

My main advice to young Aboriginal people is, you can be anything you want to be, but if you don't stand up for something you'll fall for anything. You need to be prepared to take risks. If you really believe in something, regardless of what anyone else thinks, you need to chase it. A lot of kids in boarding schools often go back home and really suffer the tall poppy syndrome. The Aboriginal people in the communities need to start addressing this issue for the sake of the success of these kids. The road is not always going to be smooth. You've got to be prepared to stand up, find what you believe in and chase it. And don't ever let anything deter you; doesn't matter what it is. There's always a way. If you can't go over the mountain, you go around it. I probably got this from my grandmothers. Somebody does something for me, somebody sends me something, and I never forget to send a thank you. That seems to have opened a lot of doors.

I find it really strange, because I've been in a lot of jobs where you've got no idea how the hell you're going because nobody tells you one thing or another. Well, they'll probably tell you when you've done a bad job, but very seldom when you've done a good job. That's another thing with some

of the teachers I've worked with. They tend to concentrate on the negatives rather than saying to the kid, "These are your really good points. You've got a little bit of a problem with the other thing but we'll work on it."

The trouble with mainstream education, from my elderly position, I suppose, is that when some teachers or principals get Aboriginal kids—and it's probably not just Aboriginal kids—they don't work on the relationship before everything else. You really need to understand the child and get to know them. Back in my day, they seemed to know what made you tick.

I'm not sure if it's the pressures of today with teachers because they must be buried in a million more things than our teachers were ever expected to do. Principals have been turned into administrators. I mean, they're just killed with paperwork. There are too many demands on principals.

With the Stolen Generation and the Apology recently, I've been thinking about things that I hadn't probably thought about for 40 years. Down in Sydney, right on Cockatoo Island they used to have a reform ship they called the Sabroan—which was a French sailing ship. That's where people got put, and my uncles used to terrify me when I was a kid by telling me that's where they got taken away to. They had very short lives because they took up drinking metho and stuff caused by that. My sister was put in Parramatta Girls Home at about 10 or 12. She has recently departed; they had a hell of a lot of problems all the way through. I probably hadn't thought about that for years until they started talking about the Apology. It all sort of comes back to you. You start to put all the pieces together. I don't sit around feeling sorry for myself all the time. Most of my seminars—doesn't matter whether it's the Prime Minister—start with a few jokes about the wife. The old sisters I meet, they come and they say, "Your meetings are not like anyone else's."

And I'm a Rooster supporter in the Rugby League. There's only one;

not that silly looking Rugby Union. They sit around having a conference in the middle of the field for four hours and they all jump on each other. No, very funny game that one. I watch a bit of the AFL now too. I must have the only wife in Australia who's actually prepared to watch eight games of football a week. We've got kids who played Rugby Union and basketball and soccer and God knows what, and now the grandchildren are starting. The wife is a wonderful woman. I don't know if you've put that in there. That's good; make sure she sees that. More publicity is good!

With Aboriginal kids, always aim high. Don't ever believe anyone that tells you that you can't achieve something, if that's what you want to be. I mean, if you want to be a space pilot, there's some way to do it. Just find the way.

I don't start at the front and work towards achieving something. I want to know what the final result is I'm aiming at, and then whatever I've got to do to achieve it—well, they're the little bits I've got to put in place. Never be afraid if you don't reach your goal; just shift it a bit. Go further, have another go. Don't completely put time limits on yourself, because there's so much in life that takes over and moves the time limits. You've got to have a certain amount of discipline. This is probably all the wisdom of my grandmothers.

My favourite quote is: "Being Aboriginal is a reason to succeed, rather than an excuse not to."



DR ALICE (ALITYA) RIGNEY is a strong Aboriginal woman who is a retired school principal. She is a very strong advocate for the advancement of her Aboriginal people. Over many years, education has been a very important focus for her and this has been where she has seen, and been involved in, the many exciting changes for students' achievements. This then, has brought great pride to her Aboriginal community, for which she works so tirelessly.

There have been roles that Alice has undertaken to 'demystify', in many systems, enabling Aboriginal people to advance into positions where change can happen for the good of all people. Alice has been the initiator in outstanding

leadership roles which include:

- Early 1960s first in a group of Aboriginal people to work for the Education Department
  - 1985 first Aboriginal person to join the administration ranks in the Education Department in SA
  - 1986 first Aboriginal female principal in SA
  - 1991 Australia Day Honours Public Service Medal
  - 1998 received Doctorate from University of SA
  - 2000 Ambassador for Dare to Lead and the Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR)
- Alice's other interest has been in bringing people together. This was the beginning of the Reconciliation

process in which many people seek to heal issues of the past. This has been done not only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but also between Aboriginal and Aboriginal groups. This has been achieved through carers groups, Elders groups, Aboriginal language groups, Native Title groups and education committees.

This strong advocate for the rights of ALL people, but particularly Aboriginal groups, believes that caring, sharing and coming together in a world which considers the rights and interests of ALL people is mandatory for a secure future, for a continued peaceful co-existence among ALL.

## Dr Alice (Alitya) Rigney *Fulfilling the Dream*

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My name is Doctor Alice Rigney. I am also called 'Alitya' which means 'Alice'. I'm a Narungga Kurna person and I was born on Yorke Peninsula at Point Pearce. I grew up in an apartheid situation and education there was not really as we see it today. Because of some good luck, we were educated at school and then went on to further education. There were really significant people in my life in my growing up years that I'd like to comment on, because they had a lot of influence on the directions I took in life and the journey I took from the mission on Point Pearce, South Australia.

My great grandfather was a lay preacher in the Anglican Church and he was a very big influence in my family's life. His name is John Milera. It would have been very difficult for him, but also very empowering because of the leadership that he undertook in the community. My grandfather, Herbert John Milera, was a prolific writer who had a lot of issues with the government and I've seen records of the letters he wrote to them about Aboriginal affairs. He had a big collection of pens and pencils and he used them all in writing his papers and letters. My mother, Nellie Richards/Wanganen (nee Milera), was a very proud Narungga woman and also a great influence on me. Our lives were never simple. We were always oppressed but even through that we survived. My mum was a real survivor

and a very powerful woman in my eyes. There were fifteen children in the family and I am the oldest. I was always in awe of how she managed in that situation. Her life wasn't easy and I'm very proud to be her daughter.

There have been lots of other significant people in my life, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. When I was growing up on Point Pearce, it was a family set up. Everyone knew everyone else's business and what you were up to. You could never get up to anything that wasn't considered appropriate to the family and the culture—what was deemed the right thing to do and the right way to behave. There were always uncles and aunts looking out for you and looking over your shoulder, so you had to do the right thing. But you wanted to do that anyway because they gave you so much love and support and assistance, so you wanted to do the right thing by them. My leadership development started when I was growing up and before I took up a career in education. I decided I wanted to leave and just be by myself and do my own thing but I wasn't permitted to be a loner because I had leadership and responsibilities in my community. I was very fortunate that I had Elders who guided and taught me the responsibility of giving back to my community and a sense of importance about what was owed and the importance of giving something back, because you've been given something. Whatever direction you might take, you must always give something back—it's a two way sharing commitment. It was a magic time for me and I had some excellent role models who were absolutely wonderful.

I was working for the local Aboriginal Council, Point Pearce Aboriginal Community Council Inc, on the Mission. I had to ensure that these people, who were my Elders who I had to look up to and respect, got the attention they deserved or they would let me know where I was failing—and they did! I worked hard for my uncles, but we worked and

grew together and that's what it's all about. We must do the right thing by people; I have always believed that to have a strong vision we must all walk together in the same direction to be successful.

Education in the Mission initially stopped at Year 3. Later it concluded at Year 7. We weren't permitted to go to the local school that non-Aboriginal kids went to. This was in my lifetime and I still see myself as a young person!

Anyway, a wonderful man named Ron Neilson came to our community as principal of our school and because of his strong social justice views, he did a lot of wonderful things for my people. He opened a co-op and he had Aboriginal people working in it, providing a service as shopkeepers. He also negotiated with some of the Adelaide schools to take students from the Mission. This wasn't heard of before he came. So there were fourteen girls who were given permission to go away to Adelaide to continue their education and I was one of them. We boarded at a little place in Millswood just off Goodwood Road and we used to walk to Unley Girls Technical High School, which being a girls school was a great advantage for us. We used to walk past Goodwood Orphanage and we built up a relationship with the Aboriginal kids there. We made friends with them and we used to give them sweets and talk to them through the hedge. I took a leadership role at the high school and I ensured that the Aboriginal girls were given support and if there were arguments they were sorted out and had a good outcome. Leadership roles seemed to come my way and I wondered then if that was what my life was going to be about. I loved it there and lots of us girls got our Leaving and Matriculation Certificates and came out well, job wise. Many of us were very successful. There were lawyers, principals, nurses and social workers.

I wanted to be a doctor, a medical doctor. I'm a Doctor of Education

now, but back then my ambition was Medicine. However I was counselled that because I was a black female I couldn't become a doctor. That was alright because that was the way the world was then. So I became a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Ayers House was our dormitory. We had role models in there like Lowitja O'Donoghue, Audrey Kinnear and Margaret Lawrie. Many of us worked as nurses at other hospitals as well, but nursing wasn't really what I wanted. As I said I wanted to be a doctor. I had good grades at school and I'd done well, but it wasn't to be.

So I left nursing and I went back to my community and got married to Lester Rigney and had three children, Eileen Wanganeen (nee Rigney), Tracy Ritchie (nee Rigney) and Lester-Irabinna Rigney. When my son was four I became interested in his education and I went to Kindy with him. Eventually I became his teacher and he didn't like that very much! He believed I didn't pay him enough attention, but of course I certainly did and I had to consider all the other Aboriginal kids in the Kindy as well. Elizabeth Newchurch and I both became co-directors of the Kindy. This was because the Kindergarten Union of SA couldn't get teachers to work in the community, so we were given the leeway to become teachers.

However, when the Education Department took over responsibility for education in our communities across South Australia, we were relegated to another position, similar to school support officer status. So I then went to work in the school as an SSO. Now they are called Aboriginal Education Workers, and the title is changing again! It was a time when there were lots of changes. The principals were really nice. These were the non-Aboriginal principals who came into our community and they were very sensitive. I'm still friends with some of them. I really loved Ron Neilson as a principal, and when I graduated I was appointed to his school at Taperoo. That was the most magic day! Unfortunately he has passed on

and I went to his funeral. I'm still friends with his children. He was such a lovely person.

Another principal, Murray Willis was an outstanding person in our community. He was very dedicated to the students and to the whole Aboriginal community. He got them involved in things like spear fishing. Our men used to go out with spears, now they have modern technology like spear guns! Our boys are still involved in that. I worked in the school with Murray for quite a few years and then I decided I would go to Maitland Area School.

Maitland was not a community that was conducive to good relationships in my time, so I went in there with apprehension and trepidation. I was nervous about how I was going to be treated there. My reason for going was that I knew that the Aboriginal kids in the school needed support to achieve good educational outcomes. I already had a good relationship with the school librarian because she used to be the Kindy teacher in Maitland and I got to know her when I was the Kindy teacher at Point Pearce. So I knew at least one of the staff members and that made me feel a bit better. My son-in-law was a student while I was there and I really wanted the kids to be successful. Many of them were, particularly my son-in-law who worked really hard and deserves his success.

Sometimes you have to go to difficult places and you have to know whether or not you have the stamina and the strength and support to cope in that particular setting. Throughout my journey I've had this in mind and I've had a good grounding in strength and stability, and the good advice that people have given me. I believe that if you go out into unfamiliar territory you have to consider whether or not you are going to be successful in it. How are you going to cope? What support systems will you have? You have to think about these things if you are going to achieve

your goals.

Anyway, I stayed at Maitland for quite some time, and then the Education Department contacted me through John Coker and he told me that he wanted me to go back to the Mission because they needed me in the school. So I went back to Point Pearce and became a Kindergarten teacher again. The Teacher Registration Board gave me teacher status, but only to work on the Mission, not in mainstream schools. That wasn't good enough for me. I then left for a period of time and went to work for the Aboriginal Council, where I had to be really careful and respectful of my uncles. I did all of the Point Pearce Council's daily administration work and organised their meetings. I got VIPs to come across and meet with them and it was exciting because it was a changeover time in regards to self-determination for Aboriginal people. It was a magic time. It was when we lost the term 'Mission' and we became open communities. I was there when they took down the Aboriginal Mission sign. It was exciting but it was also a challenging time because now we were determining our own lives and future.

However education has always been a drawcard for me so I went back to the school again and worked in the Kindergarten, but I knew being there wasn't what I really wanted. I had teaching qualifications but they were limited to the Aboriginal communities such as the Anangu Tertiary Education Program program. I wanted to get full qualifications but that meant moving to Adelaide and I had my family to consider. My girls were boarding at high school in Adelaide at Walford Church of England Girls Grammar School. My son was with me and my husband who had never been off a Mission in his life. Could I uproot them? I talked it over with my family and they decided that we would do this so that I could get my formal teaching qualifications. We had no house to come to and we

were coming to Adelaide on a whim and a prayer. I had family in town so there was some support, but my husband didn't have a job and had to find one. I moved in with my sister and we lived in one room. It was a very challenging time for us.

I decided to try two things. I would try to get into the Aboriginal Task Force as a way to progress to becoming a teacher and I would also apply to the university system to do my teacher training. I went to a man who looked after Aboriginal Affairs and told him what I wanted to do and he told me I wasn't ready! He told me to go back and finish high school. So there was a block straight away, but I didn't listen to him; because I knew I was ready. I could feel it in my bones. This was what I wanted to do. I got into the Aboriginal Task Force at Adelaide University but I also got accepted to do teacher training which was where I really wanted to go. I went to the De Lissa Institute at the South Australian College of Advanced Education in North Adelaide and I was the only Aboriginal person in about four hundred students. Fortunately there were other mature age students like me and they became my support mechanism through my uni studies. We still see each other and have a good relationship.

The staff there were wonderful too, but I missed the intrinsic cultural stuff that was important to me. I needed my own mob around me too. Luckily for me the Aboriginal Community College was just around the corner in Brougham Place. So if I felt I needed my people around me, I went to the College and soaked up all the culture and support there that I needed and then back to De Lissa to do the job that I was there to do. I was there for three years, and then I was absolutely terrified because I was going to be placed in a school! I was wondering about what the white parents would think about me. I was an Aboriginal person going in to teach their kids! Fortunately the placement was at the school where Ron

Nielson was Principal, so I knew I could handle it. But as I said earlier he passed away. That was in 1980. The other principal, Peter Langford, was great as well. I had my own classroom and it was like a United Nations! I had all these kids from many different backgrounds with many problems, successes and ultimately great outcomes. It was a tough area back then, however it's changed a lot since.

I absolutely loved it. I loved teaching. I loved imparting knowledge into those little brains. I used to get government agencies to come and work with me on some of the problems that the kids had and we worked together on behaviour modification for the kids that needed it. We worked well as a team.

Some of the Aboriginal kids there were my relatives and for them to call me Mrs Rigney was something that they weren't used to. They decided they would call me Auntie Rigney, combining Auntie with my last name. It was a magic time. I used to do the home visits and I looked after the Vietnamese kids too. I used to get really upset though when I'd be at the shops or in the street after school and I'd see other staff members walk on the other side of the road. But then I realised that I had to allow people their own commitments to do what they believed in, and not be too upset about it. I had to have people I could talk with and relate to as well. I never told those staff members how disappointing it was. It was something for them to deal with in their own way!

Anyway, I stayed there for three years and then the Department's Aboriginal Education Unit, namely John Coker, asked me to come and work with them. I told him that I needed another three years to concentrate on developing my teaching practice, then he could come to me after that if he still needed me. John Coker was the head of Aboriginal Education at that time and he agreed to do what I wanted, but at the end of three years

he was back again and asked me to come and work in the Department. I told him that there were no Nungas up there, so why would I want to work there? I was worried that I wouldn't be able to survive on my own. He convinced me to give it a try, so I became the Coordinator of Aboriginal Education Workers across the state.

It was a very supportive role that I played. It was also a recruitment role and I absolutely loved it. I was the only woman with five or six men but they were lovely and they were there because they were committed to Aboriginal Education. I was the only Aboriginal person in the whole Department and the leadership role was good because I was able to demonstrate leadership at a different level for Aboriginal people. I then got involved in the Department's recruitment of Aboriginal teachers. I worked really hard with the universities' teacher training program to encourage Aboriginal people into the education system. However I found that a lot of the graduates were snapped up by other organisations and this was a shame because we weren't having our people at the chalkface. Kids weren't seeing the role models in schools, even though there were role models in other areas which was excellent.

Then in 1983 the Aboriginal school was being set up at Elizabeth and we were busy with lots of meetings. I was amazed at the racism that came through at that time. We held open forums and met with local schools and teachers and students. These open forums were a real eye opener for me. People complained that if lots of Aboriginal people moved into the district there would be overcrowding in the homes and crime would escalate. All these negative things came out and I realised we had a lot of work to do. We tried to reassure them, for fear of the unknown is something we all suffer from and this was coming out loud and clear. I realised we had to do something to alleviate the fear that they had. We

told them that the school kids would only be from the local area which was where lots of Aboriginal people lived in the community already. There were law enforcement people if a criminal problem did eventuate and lots of other services as well to deal with the perceived problems.

At that stage DECS didn't have a school set up for us so we went into surplus buildings at Fremont Elizabeth High School. It was survival time I can tell you! We had grotty old buildings with no heating or cooling and I remember it was so hot. Our kids had no designated play area and so playtime was horrific. The kids would go into the toilets and splash themselves with water to cool off. I went into the toilets one day and spoke to the girls. They were all much bigger and taller than me but I told them they had to stop all the splashing with water because someone could slip and hurt themselves. They didn't argue because they respected me as their Auntie and there was no issue with that for which I was culturally thankful.

When they were building what is now the Kaurana Plains Aboriginal School, the kids from across the road would look after it and tell people to keep away from the wet concrete and so on—ownership from day one. The day we moved in was the most beautiful day. We had no problem with playground duty because the kids, staff and I just loved having our own place. They had ownership of it almost immediately and it was so good to just get in there and relax and not have to worry about all the things we had to deal with previously. The building was beautiful. It was set up in colours that reflected the earth and what our people could identify with.

Once we had the environment set up, we had to think about staffing it. I went in there as a teacher and in the same year the principal's position was advertised. I asked myself a lot of questions. Could I do it? What support would I need to be successful? Why would I want to do it? You

see, it was very political. I talked to people about applying and some told me that I wasn't ready, because I was a woman and I wouldn't be able to do the job. But I decided I wanted to do it because there were no Aboriginal principals around and our kids needed role models. They needed to know that this could be done and we needed our place in history, and our kids could be part of that. The system also needed to be demystified, for success to follow.

I applied for the job and I got it. There were about seven people on the panel, but it was great. So once I got the position I had to think about the teachers. It was so important that we had one vision and we all needed to be in that vision together to get the best outcome for the kids and the community. We decided on the name Kurna because it was about country and that is so important. But we also had kids from several different Aboriginal Nations and that should be reflected in the staff as well. So we had Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff from the global community being represented. We had to ensure that the culture was in the curriculum so that students had a two way education—the education of the system and the education of their culture. The two had to be marinated together if we were going to do the best by our kids.

I presented the Aboriginal Dreaming with the kids and we had lots of stories that came from within our own community. The kids loved this because it came from them and it was an incredible resource to have in the school. I actually targeted people who I knew would be good to have on staff. I negotiated with the University of SA because they didn't want Aboriginal student teachers to do their practical teaching at Kurna. I knew this because my daughter Eileen was a student there at the time. There were also mature aged students there whom I grew up with, namely Alma Ridgway, and one of them came from the Northern

Territory, namely Pilawuk White. I targeted them and I negotiated with the University for them to do their placements with me at the school. They had the main lecturer from the Uni come to do the observations and they could see how we all interacted and worked with the students. We were doing the best that we could, just like all schools do. The teachers were strong women and they did outstanding work. It was the greatest thing that ever happened!

I also had to think about continuity because I wanted the school to be around forever and it was important that it had stability. It had that in the 13 years that I was there along with my staff. We appointed non-Aboriginal male teachers in the secondary section along with a Singaporean woman teacher, Pathma Iswara and a non-Aboriginal female teacher named Jenny Burford. The secondary school kids went over to Fremont Elizabeth for their lessons and we had to work with the high school to make sure that our kids were looked after while they were over there.

There was a lot of work to do and it was a hard job, but the kids were going to be the beneficiaries, so it had to be done. The teachers at the high school as well as at Kurna Plains wanted the best for our kids because their results would reflect on the schools, so we worked together and it all worked very well. Fremont Elizabeth High School have to be thanked for their input, especially the principals Bev Rogers and Lea Stevens.

It wasn't easy as there was so much work to do being a new school in a new area. Whenever we held a function in the school I always invited the people who lived on our street to attend because I wanted them to see first hand what had changed and what we were doing. I wanted them to see how important it was that we all worked together. At the time, it was my understanding that the local Member of Parliament didn't want us there so I included him to ensure that he saw all the activities and the good work

that we were doing. Every time I saw him at a function I went up to him and made myself known to him and talked about the school. It was all so time consuming and it was a hard job but I loved it. I loved the politics and I loved the way that people responded and how they helped with their time and commitment to the school. Thank you all!

I remember one of the students didn't like the way he was penalised twice. If he did something wrong at the high school he got punished over there and then also had cultural punishment from me at Kurna Plains School R-12. We talked about it and negotiated discipline and penalties. I wanted the best for him, just like I wanted the best for my own kids. He was an achiever as well. We had a big meeting about discipline and developed a good open policy that the community contributed to. Discipline was a huge attribute to our school because many of our kids came from other schools where they'd had some pretty horrific experiences. We had to settle them down and ensure they got the best that they could for themselves culturally and a good education achievement. It came from open, honest and up front discussions.

Not only did I stay there for 13 years, but so did the staff. It was a magical time and many of them still talk about their time at the school. I wanted the staff to understand my role in the school and what it was like to be a principal—sometimes being the meat in the sandwich between the Department and the community, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I thought it was important that as a leader they understood what I was going through. I let the staff, through delegation, have a go at being the principal and they still laugh about it. I think it's really important to let people walk in your shoes so that they can understand you and where you're coming from.

We used to talk to the kids about what makes a good role model and

we'd encourage them to be good role models for other children. We'd tell the Year 1 students that they were Elders and role models for the Reception children coming through. This worked well and it alleviated upsets in the school yard because there was respect for others. It was an 'Eldership' that they took on board. So that's how we incorporated some of the cultural aspects to make sure that behaviour was manageable and everyone was Auntie and Uncle in the school. This was cultural respect for all!

In leadership, you have to walk hand in hand with people and all work together for the future. It's important that this happens because I had a vision that incorporates culture and education, people and respect. We all walked in the one direction for the kids who will be the beneficiaries. I've always believed that you have to give people a go in leadership and to be part of the life that you would like for them. I got my doctorate in 1991, along with Nelson Mandela and Bob Hawke. I wanted to go to South Africa to get mine with Nelson Mandela, but the University wouldn't come at that! It was an honorary doctorate bestowed on me for the work that I had done in Aboriginal Education, and I have worked hard for this. My kids used to see this and they'd say they'd never be teachers because of the workload. I told them that if they really want something out of life, they have to work hard for it. Of course they knew this and did.

My son, Dr Lester-Irabinna Rigney, is a professor at Flinders University First Nations Unit, and its Director. One of my daughters, Eileen Wanganeen, has currently been appointed principal to our home community at Point Pearce School. My other daughter, Tracy Ritchie, has been working for abused children for many years. One of my granddaughters, Tahlia Wanganeen, is a lawyer and another granddaughter, Illira Alitya Wanganeen, works with the University of Adelaide. Another granddaughter, Kalari Lanta Ritchie is training to be a social worker and

the others are doing very nicely thanks!

If I was to give advice to young Aboriginal people coming through school today, it would be the same as what I told the kids at Kurna Plains. They can be anything they want to be, even Prime Minister. They can fulfil their Dreams but they have to work hard. They have to be very strong in their own identity and have their culture intact; otherwise they would be letting themselves down. They have to get support from others. Wherever I've been I've always made sure that I had support around me, because you can't achieve in isolation. They have to have good role models and there are lots of them out there who are only too happy to give assistance. The world is their oyster, but they must have a good education as their basis to be the outstanding achievers which is their right!!



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**BRUCE ROPER** is a Yamatji man. Bruce's mother was born on Twin Peaks station near Mullewa in the Midwest Region of Western Australia. She was one of the very first children at Sister Kate's home. His mother was part of the Stolen Generation. Bruce's current position is Manager of Aboriginal Education, Aboriginal Education & Training Directorate, Department of Education & Training, Western Australia. He is responsible for managing all of the Aboriginal Education systemic programs across Western Australia. Bruce has spent 25 years working in education. Bruce was brought up in Perth but spent 15 years in the country, as a principal, and deputy

principal in primary and district high schools. He has also been principal of three large primary schools in Perth. Bruce came into teaching as a mature age student, after working in several jobs including, insurance, hard rock mining, rouseabout, semi-professional cricketer, window cleaner, chain man for a survey team, lab assistant and bus driver. Bruce brings a wide range of skills and experiences which he uses to good effect when working to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children.

## Bruce Roper *Setting the Bar for the Next Wave*

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I was born in the Perth metropolitan area and grew up in a low socioeconomic area. I went to the local high school which was across the road from where we were living. I grew up in a small nine-square house. It wasn't State Housing but it was a one-income family. I went through high school with the full intention of finishing Year 12.

My mother was a Stolen Generation child. She was taken away from a station in the mid-west of WA when she was about four. She went through Mogumber and Moore River Missions and was one of the first children at Sister Kate's Home. She spent her childhood there from four to 15 before she was, for want of a better word, 'manpowered' to a farm during the Second World War, as a domestic which Aboriginal girls were trained to do in those days.

When she finished as a domestic, she went back to Perth and was a bus conductress. She met my father on a bus and three weeks later they decided to get married. He was a plumber and mum was a home-maker. The biggest influence they had on us was reading. Mum could read but Dad didn't learn until he was in the Navy during the war. That was only because a ship's doctor took an interest in him, and taught him to read.

What it did for Dad was give him a love of books and Mum also had a love of books, so their three children consequently were always reading.

I've got a brother who's got a Political Science degree, I've got a Bachelor of Education, and my sister works for a big mining company in the city. There was always reading. We never had much money so we went to the local high school because we couldn't afford anything else.

I grew up in a loving household and had plenty of support from my parents. Mum was a very good sportswoman. She played cricket for Western Australia for a couple of years before she got married; she played for an Australian side against England in 1948. We always had a strong sporting background. Mum and dad were always there. They weren't drop-off parents; they always attended when we were playing, whatever we were playing. Even as an adult when I was playing senior cricket, mum was always there.

My working career started as a public servant with the State Government Insurance Office when I was 18. I worked there for nearly five years as an insurance clerk. Then I travelled and when I came back I decided that it was probably time to start making decisions about where I was going to go. I thought about applying for teaching. I read about it in the newspaper and made contact with the university and they said, "Well, yes, we like mature age students. Come down and sit a test to see if you're up to it." I passed easily enough. So I went back to school at 22 years of age and spent the next three years completing my teacher training.

Initially I was sent to the country to a place called Mullewa which, surprisingly enough, is my mother's home country and her home town. It's in the mid-west, 100 kilometres east of Geraldton.

I taught there for a couple of years. I got married just before I went there, and then we came back to Perth for a couple of years. I took on an acting principal's role with a bit of encouragement from a principal friend of mine, in what was my seventh year of teaching. That was 1989. By 1997

I was principal of a level 5 school, which has between 300 to 700 students, in Carnarvon which is about 1000km north of Perth.

I moved from being a classroom teacher in 1988 to running a large school as a principal in 1997. The sacrifice that goes with that, though, is that you're on the move every year or so. My son had five primary schools during this time; my daughter was lucky—she only had two. Over this period I did a number of jobs. First the acting principal's job, and then a PCAP Field Officer, which involved running a Commonwealth program—a Priority Country Area Program. Some people in the other states call it the Country Areas Program (CAP).

I did that for a couple of years, and then I won a substantive deputy principal's role in a district high school. Following that I went north to a bigger district high school where I was running the primary side of it with three or four hundred kids. From there I went to a little rural school down in the south of WA and then that I was promoted to a big one in Carnarvon. After I had completed my three years in Carnarvon I returned, and from 2000 to 2003 I was principal at a big city school in a low socioeconomic area of Perth.

The key thing is that I have never taught in what we would class in Western Australia as a 'leafy-green' school. I have only been principal of schools that have had significant challenges in them. The school in Carnarvon had 70% Aboriginal enrolments, and some were family members of mine. The school in Perth had about 35 to 40% Aboriginal enrolments as well as 30 different nationalities in the school. It had 320 students, so it was a fairly mixed multicultural group.

If we're trying to give a message to other Aboriginal people that they can do this sort of thing, they've got to come in with a mind-set that they are, or need to be, the best teacher going round at that particular time. If

you are going to lead other people in a school, then you must have very good teaching skills, there's no doubt about that, and you have to have some years of teaching under your belt.

There's only one school that actually has a 50(d) principal position in it. A 50(d) just basically means it is for Aboriginal people only to apply. So if you are a principal in WA, then you've got to win it in the mainstream, competing in open fields.

Consequently, because as Aboriginal people we tend to be judged a bit harsher, we've probably got to give 110% rather than 100%. You have got to be a top-line teacher, there's no question about that.

Another key for me was getting a kick-start by a couple of principals who were more senior than me who said, "You should be doing this. You should be getting involved and having a go at this." They're still close friends of mine, even though one has retired now, and they were very good mentors for me.

The other role that has probably had an influence was being a deputy principal first because you learn a lot. You accept a lot of responsibility in the school, but you are able to watch someone else handle situations that you will learn from. Any principal has tricky situations to deal with, and I found it a good learning experience, watching them in action and seeing how they dealt with various things and what was successful and what wasn't. It wasn't only mentoring, it was also critical observation and questioning.

For any aspiring principal—it is crucial to have a mentor they can see in action, who they know is successful and who is knowledgeable. You've got to have your eyes and ears open. You've got to be able to learn from them.

The other aspect that also helped was developing my own network

of principal colleagues. I could call on them and discuss things—it gave me an opportunity to unload and get some ideas. Someone will have an answer somewhere in that regard if your network is wide enough.

For any young aspiring Aboriginal principal or teacher who wants to be a principal, again I would say, “Get involved.” But first of all, become the best teacher you possibly can, then get involved with other activities within the school. Look for opportunities to take on projects or programs. It may be as simple as running a minor sports carnival or it may be being part of the school council, where you’ve got some influence over a particular decision.

When I was principal, even though I had overall responsibility I used to make my deputies take control of priorities in the school. It built their skills and knowledge, and they could then move on.

The two principals who worked with me both said in different ways, “We have an obligation as principals to succession plan for the future.” Even now, they get me to lecture trainee teachers at universities in WA. I say to these students, “You guys might not realise this yet, but you are the future principals of our schools. You’re only 19, 20 now. You think, ‘Well, what’s he talking about?’ Let me tell you, ten years down the track you guys are going to be in those positions.”

We have an obligation as principals to train them up to be the next wave. That was very clearly done for me and I try to help other people in the same way, because we have a strong obligation to do that.

Some of the things an Aboriginal principal might also encounter, and it makes it very difficult, is if you have family in the school. I had family in the school when I was principal in Carnarvon. There were relatives there who didn’t know me very well and sometimes I had to take punitive action which could make things difficult. By the same token, it also enabled me to

develop some really positive relationships with local community members and gain a better understanding of the community, which benefited my students in terms of their education.

Besides building your skills, taking responsibility keeps you fresh while you’re still in a teaching position. If you go out of your way to be proactive and actually go and look for some responsibilities, then it gives you a fresh challenge, because day-to-day teaching is a tough job and it grinds you down. You can get tired and a bit cynical, I think. That’s one way I coped and I had a bit of encouragement.

You must make sure when you’re given responsibility that you do the best job that you possibly can, so you’re constantly building on your own skills. In WA we don’t have many Aboriginal principals, so those who are there now have an obligation to mentor and help out aspiring future principals.

Aboriginal teachers and aspiring principals need to understand that they aren’t going to get a job as a principal because they are Aboriginal. They’re going to get the job because they can do the job and they are the best person for it. People expect more of Aboriginal principals. Therefore 110% effort is required to do a 100% job.

Being an Aboriginal principal is something to be proud of because you are setting the bar for future generations coming through. One of our first Aboriginal teachers in WA said to me, “You probably aren’t aware of this, but there are other Yamatji people out there who know about you, who will be quite proud that there’s a Yamatji man who’s a principal of a school somewhere in WA. They might never have even met you, but people will be proud to know.”

I haven’t met all my family. I meet some of them as I go around the state and they may be aware of me as a principal and be very proud that

I'm a Yamatji principal. So be proud of the achievements you make and work hard to do the best job you possibly can, so that people recognise you as a damn good principal who just happens to be Aboriginal.

And for the future, keep looking for fresh challenges. I'm currently the Manager of Aboriginal Education in our central office in Perth, and I've been doing that now for five years. I would never have thought I would have applied for a job like this, but I'm in a position where I can influence the direction of programs happening for our kids in WA. Again, I've got to still be looking at the future: Where do I go next? Do I stay in this line, do I go back to a school or do I take another direction? The key to it is to stay fresh, keep looking for new opportunities, and set the bar high again for others to aspire to.



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**EDIE WRIGHT** was born in Broome and is Bardi. In 1958 her family moved to Derby where she grew up and did most of her schooling. She is married and has three sons and three grandchildren. Her background in education has taken her to a remote community school in the Kimberley as the principal. In her current role as a manager she is focusing on addressing disadvantage and improving outcomes for Aboriginal people. Edie is also an author and has published a biography called 'Full Circle' which is the story of her mother and maternal grandparents.

Edie Wright *A Fire in the Belly*

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My name is Edie Wright and my maiden name is D'Antoine. I was born in Broome, Western Australia in 1954 and grew up in Derby where I did most of my schooling. My mother's family was displaced from a remote mission called Mapoon which is situated on the west side of Cape Yorke in Queensland.

My maternal grandparents were sent from Mapoon in 1927 by the Presbyterian Church to work on Kunmunya Mission, an extremely remote and isolated settlement in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. As my maternal grandfather Alfred Brown was very skilled at operating boats, he was sent to Kunmunya to run the mission lugger. The lugger was called the 'Watt Leggatt' and he sailed it regularly between Kunmunya and Broome, the town the mission re-supplied and collected mail and freight from. He did this for 15 years and while he was occupied sailing the 'Watt Leggatt' my grandmother assisted the missionaries in the school teaching traditional Aboriginal children and working with their mothers. During the time my grandparents lived in Kunmunya they had six children before my grandmother died in 1937. In 1929, two years after they arrived at the mission, my mother was born on country in Kunmunya. Consequently she has a strong cultural connection with a group of Aboriginal people in Derby called the Mowanjum people, especially the Worrorra people who

are the traditional owners of the land the mission was on.

My paternal grandparents came from One Arm Point, an Aboriginal community north of Broome and the home of the Bardi people. They both had non-Aboriginal fathers but their mothers were Bardi so they had a very strong traditional upbringing. Around 1926 they were forced to move away from One Arm Point to the culturally diverse pearling town of Broome. The main reason for the move was so that my father and his siblings could have access to schooling. My paternal grandparents were Richard and Amy D'Antoine but they were known to locals as Goodgie and Gingu, their traditional names. They were highly resilient and resourceful people and played an integral and important role in the pearling industry in Broome. My grandfather beach combed for pearl and trochus shell as well as bêche-de-mer, a highly prized sea slug that fetched good money on the Asian market. In 1929 his intimate knowledge of the remote and rugged Kimberley coastline allowed him to take an exploration team through treacherous waters now known as the Horizontal Waterfall. During this particular trip he took the team of explorers to a popular place that they named Talbot Bay. I often reflect on his skills as a sailor and I am very proud of his extensive knowledge of the sea and tidal movements, knowing he was instrumental in the naming and opening up of these places which are now extremely popular tourist locations.

While my grandfather was out exploring, my grandmother washed clothes, cooked and ironed for the master pearlmen as well as cared for their children. My grandparents worked tirelessly to provide for their family at a time when the lives of Aboriginal people were heavily controlled by the authorities. They were forced to live under the most draconian piece of legislation in the history of Western Australia. It was called the 1905 Aborigines Act and although its intention was to protect Aboriginal

people, in reality it controlled and oppressed their lives, along with those of thousands of other people.

As people of strength, tenacity and perseverance my maternal and paternal grandparents coped exceedingly well under the 1905 Act. Their strength of character allowed them to raise healthy children, who contributed significantly to the social capital of the Kimberley in the pre and post Second World War period. My parents inherited their resilient traits and they themselves raised an extremely large family. After the war my parents married then my father built luggers in Broome before moving permanently to Derby in 1958.

As for me I have ten siblings, of which two are deceased, and I have a cousin brother who my parents raised, so I come from a huge family. My extended family connections include the Shadforth, Hunter and D'Antoine's which gives me a network of family and relatives that spread across the Kimberley, into the Northern Territory, south to Perth and recently into Victoria.

The most significant legacy my parents left my brothers and sisters was the urgency to work hard at school and get a good education. I remember on one occasion when I was at risk of leaving school early Dad said, "Life's not easy and if you want to walk in the white man's world, you've got to have a white man's education." Although my father drilled this into us constantly, at this particular time his words resonated deeply with me, so I stayed on at school, worked hard and completed Year 12.

My father was a true leader, in the sense that he showed it through his actions. After boat building he was involved in the construction of jetties in the three coastal towns in the Kimberley. I'm a believer that leadership is an activity, it's what you do, not the position that you hold or your qualifications. My father led by example and, together with my mother,

they went about making sure we had the best possible opportunities in education. They made sacrifices in their life because it was important to them that we attend school and have access to educational benefits enjoyed by non-Aboriginal people.

In many ways my family was very lucky in that we were subject to three generations of control through the oppressive legislation and subsequent fallout of the 1905 Aborigines Act. Our journey is one of control and not that intergeneration removal. We are lucky, we never experienced consecutive generations of institutionalisation and traumatic removal. Having said that, my maternal grandfather was the only member of our family who was removed as subsequent generations were not. We were spared removal at a time when it was widespread practice across Australia. My grandparents and parents never complained about the 1905 Act. They realised they had little control over it and just got on and did what they had to do to raise healthy children, under extremely difficult and trying circumstances.

After the 1967 referendum, the Commonwealth had concurrent powers with the States to legislate on programs to improve the social condition for Aboriginal people. Out of this came Abstudy, and I was a beneficiary of this program. The program greatly supported my parents through financial assistance to send myself and my younger siblings to boarding school, as the local school only went up to Year 10. I went away to Perth for further schooling and completed my Leaving and matriculated in a couple of subjects and although I got a good education I learnt the meaning of racism. An unfortunate incident occurred during the Christmas vacation in 1970 when I came home for holidays. Just before I was about to return, my parents informed me that one of the other Aboriginal girls from the boarding school had contracted leprosy. The school did not want me, or

the other Aboriginal boarders from the Kimberley, to return. Allowing us to return would place the other non-Aboriginal boarders at risk. Fortunately my father knew people in positions of power and the school begrudgingly allowed me and another extremely good friend of mine to return, only because we were doing Year 12. Out of about ten Aboriginal girls that attended the college, only two were allowed to return. This was my first bitter taste of racism and when we returned to school, it was never the same. Following this experience I started to hesitate and hold back on my interactions with people I felt uncomfortable with. At the time I did not realise it was a way of protecting myself and I started to develop a kind of steeliness within myself to deal with life.

By early 1972 I was working in the pathology section at the Derby Hospital as a laboratory assistant. By the end of that year I was married with a baby on the way. Although I had a great husband and a beautiful family I knew I wanted to achieve more and challenge myself. It was like a fire in the belly for me, I wanted more out of life. The opportunity came in the very early 1980s, when the Catholic education sector started to train Aboriginal staff in schools to become teachers. I realised this was the opening I had been waiting for and enrolled in the course. This was my introduction to teaching, a career that I am still in today. In 1986 I graduated as a qualified primary teacher and I started work at Holy Rosary School in Derby.

After a few years teaching I felt I needed more experience so I moved across to the Education Department and started teaching at Derby District High School. It was during these years that I realised just how important teaching was to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal children. As a classroom teacher I implemented strategies that recognised Aboriginal children came to school speaking a language other than English. I was

fortunate to develop my knowledge and understanding in this area while I was teaching in the Catholic system. It was a time when the Department did not recognise Aboriginal children as second language learners. During my 12 years at Derby District High I had a number of roles including classroom teacher, administration and deputy primary principal. I found myself well on the road as an instructional leader, showing teachers new to the Kimberley strategies to teach English to Aboriginal children who had English as a second language. In addition to this, I was part of an administration team that lead an innovative program to improve the educational outcomes for all primary children attending Derby District High.

Then once again, I had this rumbling in the belly. I wanted to challenge myself further, so in 1995 I started writing my mother's biography. This started with hours of oral history, conducting intensive taping sessions with her so I had material to supplement the research I had done to include in her book. During this time I decided to finish my degree in education. If I wanted my next career move to be that of a principal, I had to have a degree. So I plodded along writing Mum's biography, doing my degree, raising a family and teaching. As if this wasn't enough, I started taping my father's history, knowing that in the event he died I'd at least have the tapes to work from and many years later this proved to be a wise decision. By now my boys were older, one was at boarding school in Perth doing very well and the other one was with me at Derby District High School. It was a demanding time and now when I reflect on it, it was a time in my life when I was cementing and pulling together all my ideas about leadership, where I was going with my career, and writing a biography. I set goals for myself, read a lot and looked for a career move that would test my potential as an educational leader.

In 1999 the District Director of the Department of Education schools in the Kimberley approached me and said, “Look, there’s an opportunity for you to go out to Wangkatjungka as principal. Do you want it?” I discussed the offer with my husband and we assessed our family situation pragmatically. Our sons were young adults, I was doing well with my career and my husband was starting to become disenchanted with the way his work was going. There was no urgency for us to remain in Derby so he took redundancy from his department and resigned after thirty years of loyal service to his organisation. We took up the offer offer, packed up our house and headed for the remote community of Wangkatjungka in the Fitzroy Valley area. By this stage my manuscript had been accepted by Fremantle Arts Centre Press and they were putting the finishing stages to it before it was published.

Being principal of Wangkatjungka Remote Community School was a huge learning curve for me. In many ways it was a role I was not prepared for. In the late 1990s the Department did very little to prepare new principals to be leaders in their schools. I knew I had the knowledge and understanding to improve educational outcomes for children but I was not cognisant of school operation, accountability and leadership. I quickly learnt about management and leadership through the unrelenting support and coaching I got on the job from my husband. He had just come fresh from a large organisation that was results driven and he expected nothing short of excellence from me. He made me become totally responsible for developing positive school culture, building relationships between the school, community, neighbouring station and related service providers. In addition I had to support staff in a remote location and lead the teaching and learning program through instructional leadership. I wanted desperately to make sure the students and parents at Wangkatjungka received the

same quality education as their counterparts in other mainstream schools, but in an inclusive way.

We stayed there for four years during which time my husband taught me about leadership. I learnt to deal with conflict, manage underperforming teachers, risk manage the suicide of a non teaching staff member, make the hard decisions, think strategically and expect high performance from staff and students, as well as build positive relationships with a struggling community trying to develop economic independence. All this would not have been possible without the coaching and encouragement from my husband. I think often our spouses are the unsung heroes when you go remote, and for the four years we were at Wangkatjungka, the Department got two for the price of one. His unwavering support allowed me to work towards providing a quality teaching and learning program that connected to the children’s culture in a fair and safe school environment.

In 2001 Fremantle Arts Centre Press published my first biography, ‘Full Circle’. I remember the day they sent me the finished book and I just marvelled at it thinking, “Did I really write this book?” In many ways it was quite surreal and I was quite confused, not quite knowing what to do with a finished book whereas I was very comfortable with a manuscript. Today when I pick up ‘Full Circle’ it serves to remind me of my own personal journey to discover my family’s place in the history of race relations between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people in Western Australia. I also remind myself one of the reasons for writing it initially was to have a family record of Mum’s life and that of my maternal grandparents.

During the writing process I realised the importance of my work to both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audience. For me, the story was also about the plight of other Aboriginal people and their families. Months

into my writing I realised the importance of my research as an objective recount of the impact of the controlling 1905 Act on my family. I did a lot of research, starting with oral history with significant people who knew my mother and her family. I interrogated Native Welfare files, mission records, certificates, books and letters held by the Church. I wanted to use my research to complement oral history which it did nicely, confirming facts, dates, places and events. I also researched medical records because our family was gravely affected by leprosy. It was important to me to write about leprosy and little did I know that it would later be recommended reading for medical students. All the time I thought, “Maybe some day an interested person will pick up this book and they’ll learn a lot about the plight of Aboriginal people.” It was beyond my wildest dreams that it would be used as recommended reading for medical students to gain an insight into the effects of a debilitating disease. So what started as a record for my family finished as a compelling book for a range of different audiences and purposes.

My writing has broadened my sphere of influence as a leader. I am able to touch an audience that is not limited to schools and I’m confident ‘Full Circle’ can be found in English speaking countries other than Australia.

My husband and I left Wangkatjunga after spending four years there from 1999 to 2003. We developed friends who we still see today and cherish dearly. When I go back on school visits the old people always ask, “How’s Wrighty?” and the young adults are keen to see photos of my grandchildren and family.

Towards the end of 2003 I found myself working in Broome. I was encouraged to apply for a newly established position of Manager of Aboriginal Education. The position was to operate from the Kimberley District Education Office and support schools to improve educational

outcomes for Aboriginal children. I realised it was an opportunity to improve the educational opportunities for Aboriginal children at a district level, so I applied for and was successful in winning the position. We moved back to Broome and in many ways it was like coming home. I started my life in Broome when my mother and father were young, highly respected parents, who lived in the quaint house that the Short Street art gallery operates from today. I knew we had a life in Broome so there was a sense of anticipation and nervousness when we moved back.

Running parallel with reconnecting with my Broome family was the challenge of a new career. I was very fortunate to have an inspiring District Director who is highly experienced in Aboriginal Education. She helped me bring my understanding of Aboriginal Education to another level and see it strategically. Moving from a focus on teaching and learning to that of community capacity building was a radical shift. I realised the real crisis in Aboriginal Education was the disadvantaged situation many children and parents were trapped in.

I found my role moving towards leading and managing programs designed to develop leadership capacity in Aboriginal children, staff and parents—it was about community development rather than teaching and learning, school compliance and operations. I reassessed where I stood in terms of moving Aboriginal students and families forward and realised it was about winning one child at a time, one family at a time. More importantly, it was the realisation that the change had to come from within myself as I learnt the impossible—you can’t change others, you can only change yourself.

Currently that is where my passion lies, and I feel strongly that if we’re going to make the much needed improvement in Aboriginal education, we have to find a way to hand back the responsibility to parents. Many

Aboriginal parents and carers do not have the social capacity to successfully engage with schools. I believe this capacity and capability was removed through past policies and practices. In my position I have the opportunity to make a difference. I can lead and manage programs that support parents and carers to regain and restore their family functioning capacity so they can step up to their responsibility as first educators of their children.

Somewhere in the middle of my work commitments I started my second manuscript; a second biography about my father and my paternal grandparents. 'Full Circle' continues to receive positive reviews and I know I am capable of publishing another book. I am open and relaxed about the process and keen to share the progress of my manuscript with my family and friends. More importantly I have four lovely healthy grandchildren to share it with. I get enormous pleasure from teaching them to read and write. Who knows, one may become a writer some day.

I love writing and I see this as my next career move, to write full-time. There are so many stories to be written and a huge audience out there, keen to soak up a good book. Through my writing I have met many outstanding, empathetic and humble writers who are motivating coaches and mentors, keen to support me to achieve my dream.

In closing I would like to offer some advice. If someone asked me, "What is one message you would give a young person aspiring to be a good leader?" I would say you have got to be in touch with your attitude and learn about yourself first. It is important to be in tune with your own attitude and emotional intelligence. Be aware of your behaviour, actions and emotions and the impact they have on your family, friends and colleagues. You have to be constantly reflecting on your behaviour and sphere of influence and changing it to improve relationships with people. Recognise you can't change the behaviour of others but you can change

your own. Understanding your own behaviour and being the change you want to see in others is a hallmark of a good leader and to do this you have to be intelligent about your emotions. Great leaders have outstanding emotional intelligence and confidently confront challenges.



