Weemala

The Spirit Within

Compiled and written by Marguerite Nolan, Yasmin Evans and Nereda White
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This publication is the result of a collaborative effort, and many people worked long and hard to ensure that it happened. First and foremost, we owe a tremendous debt to Diane Mitchell, our project administrator, whose tireless enthusiasm, phenomenal organisational skills and can-do attitude ensured that the project stayed on track. Di also helped with the transcription of interviews and we are grateful to both her and Di Spencer for undertaking this rather thankless task with such good humour.

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We are grateful to Sheryl Rowse, who coordinated the art direction of the project. It was Sheryl who turned words on pages into the visually stunning book you have before you. Her consultative approach and patience were greatly appreciated in the closing rather frantic stages of the project. We also want to thank Margaret McDonell for her editing work, a task she undertook with sensitivity and alacrity.

Mervyn Wilkinson, our photographer, supplied many of the images in this book. He is a good friend of Weemala. He puts a lot of himself into his photographs, and I’m sure you will agree that he has captured the spirit of the place.

Most importantly, we want to thank the many students and ex-students of ACU’s McAuley campus who shared their stories with us, including those who are not in this collection. Their generosity and strength has been an inspiration to us.

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This book has emerged from a project funded by the Vice-Chancellor’s Strategic Initiative Fund 2002. The project flows from the University’s Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation 1999 which committed Australian Catholic University to make a meaningful contribution to the advancement of Indigenous communities and peoples through educational programs and scholarship.

It is pleasing that the University has been successful in this regard, through the provision of Indigenous-specific programs, and through innovative support schemes in other degree programs. The levels of achievement by Indigenous students at ACU National in terms of access, participation, retention, and success are considerably above national averages for Australian universities.

The editors, Nereda White, Marguerite Nolan, and Yasmin Evans, are to be commended for the production of this book.

I would also like to acknowledge the Indigenous students whose stories provide the essential core of the historical picture presented here.

The intention behind the preparation of this book is to provide an historical record of student experiences in their studies at the University. The stories are evocative and revealing of the complex cultural, educational, and other factors influencing Indigenous students who are pursuing formal studies at university. As such they provide insights which will prove invaluable to those responsible for the design and implementation of these courses. They also present a rich tapestry of individual and community experiences for Indigenous students at the University. The editors have presented the stories in a way which is respectful of the individual students and informative to the reader.

Foreword

Prof Peter Sheehan AO, Vice-Chancellor

Muredach Dynan, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality and Outreach)
Introduction

This book is designed to celebrate the achievements of ACU’s Indigenous students, both past and present. While listening to the stories of some of the people who have studied at ACU’s McAuley campus, we have been struck by the richness and diversity of their lives, and the amazing contributions they make to their communities. Given this, it was difficult to decide which accounts to include in the collection, and what we have here is only a glimpse of a great many more stories.

A number of themes have emerged through this project, and it has been both inspiring and humbling to put together these accounts of determination and courage. For many of the students whose stories you are about to read coming to University meant facing and overcoming their fears.

The production of this book is an opportunity to reflect on the past and look forward to the future as the impact of our students flows through the community. Central to this has been the dedication of the staff of Weemala, the Indigenous Support Unit at McAuley. Weemala began in 1989 with two Indigenous students — today Weemala supports 120 students, not only with their academic work, but also with friendship and care. Weemala sees part of its role as supporting students in being who they are.

The staff at Weemala feel honoured to have met and worked closely with the students they support. “We want students to know that they are welcome to drop in any time, have a laugh, share a story, and be with their mates at Weemala.”

The Indigenous students who pass through our doors come from all over Australia and bring with them humour, hope, knowledge, and spirit. Many of them also bring histories that have been marked by displacement and dispossession, regulation and intervention, loss and bereavement. What has become clear is that the contribution of Indigenous students to ACU is a gift that the students continue to share in their various life paths. The stories they have generously shared with us do not do justice to the entirety of the lives they represent; nor is it possible to capture fully in this written form the spirit of the voices through which the stories are told.

Finally, we acknowledge the many people who have journeyed with us at different times over the years who cannot be here to share this celebration with us.

Marguerite Nolan, Yasmin Evans, Nereda White
History
History

Australian Catholic University is one of Australia’s leading tertiary institutions in Indigenous Education. As part of its commitment, ACU has established Indigenous Student Support Units on its major campuses. Weemala, which was established in 1989 when the present University was still McAuley College, is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Support Unit on McAuley campus. It provides social, cultural, personal, and academic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking tertiary study. Weemala was initially called the “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit”, (AAISU), later renamed “McAuley Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre for Education (MATSICE)” and, finally, “Weemala”, a Torres Strait Islander word which means “distant view”.

The symbolic representation, of being able to see not only far into the distance but also to see into the future, was deemed appropriate for an organisational unit established to provide pathways to future learning. In its current setting at the new McAuley campus at Banyo, where Weemala is located near the Nudgee Waterholes and Bora Rings overlooking the surrounding countryside, the symbolism of the meaning of the name “Weemala” seems especially apt.

Tracey Bunda was the first co-ordinator of Weemala and she worked with Phillip Driese who moved from Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs to take up a lecturing position with Weemala. In 1989 the first two education students, Darlene Garvey and Patrick Savage, commenced study in the Bachelor of Teaching, graduating in 1991. The first nursing students were enrolled in 1990 and Ted Murphy was the first Indigenous nursing graduate in 1992. From these three students, the numbers of students have steadily increased over the years so that, in 2003, there are approximately 130 Indigenous students enrolled across a range of programs including postgraduate study. One of these is Weemala’s current co-ordinator, Nereda White, who is completing a PhD in Education.

This increase in student numbers is largely due to the implementation over the last decade of courses specifically designed to enable Indigenous people to study for a university qualification without the necessity of having to leave their communities. Students attend intensive residential blocks on campus twice a semester, and study for the remainder of the time by distance education in their own communities. These courses, which have been developed in close consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, meet the life circumstances and aspirations of Indigenous people.

The Associate Diploma (now Diploma) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education began in 1994. The Diploma in Business Administration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) in 1998; the first cohort completed their course in 2000 and graduated in 2001. The Bachelor of Education Primary (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) had its first intake at McAuley in 2000, and, in April, 2003, the first students to complete this degree received their testamurs at the graduation ceremonies.

More recent initiatives include an innovative dual degree course, Bachelor of Nursing/Bachelor of Applied Health Sciences (Indigenous Primary Health Care), which is offered jointly by the University of Queensland and ACU, and a Tertiary Preparation Program conducted in conjunction with Southbank Institute of TAFE which involves Indigenous students in activities at ACU’s McAuley campus that are designed to facilitate pathways to enrolment in University programs.

ACU is grateful to the Wexford Senate Bursary Trust, which offers postgraduate Indigenous students enrolled in the Queensland campus financial support towards the cost of fees and related expenses. This scheme is sponsored by the Queensland Irish Association and the University, and is designed for Indigenous graduates who seek to develop their leadership and professional skills through postgraduate study. In this book you will meet Eddie Watkin, the first recipient of this Bursary.

Weemala aspires to increase the participation and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at McAuley campus. To provide each Indigenous student with the optimum opportunities for success, Weemala encourages the provision of personal and academic support in an environment of spiritual caring that focuses on the individual’s self-worth and dignity. In striving to create an environment of collegiality and caring, Weemala staff liaise with the community, students, and university staff to promote an awareness of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives.
Aunty Joan Hendriks

Her presence as an Elder has ... blessed both indigenous and non-indigenous students

Ask most people around McAuley campus about Aunty Joan Hendriks and you can guarantee they'll know who you are talking about. Joan is well known and loved by the community of ACU McAuley at Banyo. She has been involved with ACU for many years as an Indigenous Elder, lecturer in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, friend and mentor to Weemala staff and students, and member of the Advisory Committee of the Weemala Unit.

She is a loving, caring woman who always gives generously of her time to share her spirituality and cultural knowledge with those thirsting to know more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Joan has lectured in a number of units: the Bachelor of Education compulsory subject "Indigenous Peoples Past and Present", in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural studies in both the Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and the Diploma in Business Administration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), and in spirituality subjects in the Bachelor of Education Primary (Indigenous Studies).

Aunty Joan is a respected Elder of the Nugi peoples from Quandamooka (Moreton Bay), She lives at Tingalpa, but her place of belonging is across the waters of Quandamooka, where she retreats to replenish her spirit after the busyness of city life. Joan is the proud mother of Cindy, Sonya, Leah, and Danny, who are involved in the areas of Indigenous health, education and community. To her many grandchildren she is simply their beloved "Momo".

Joan has lived most of her life in Brisbane and devotes her time, experience and wisdom to the many social justice issues with which she is involved. She is the Co-chair of Reconciliation Queensland and an appointee to the Commission for Australian Catholic Women. Manalama is the Catholic Church representative body of Nungalinya College, and Joan has been involved in Manalama since its inception. Within the Catholic Church Joan has served on community and education committees too numerous to mention. Her tireless efforts in community work were recognised when she was awarded the Centenary Medal in 2003 for distinguished service to the community through religion and Indigenous community welfare.

Joan went back to Griffith University as a mature-aged student, graduating with Adult Education teaching qualifications. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s she taught in the Indigenous Peoples Australia Unit at Southbank Institute of TAFE in Brisbane. In 1996 she commenced work as the Co-ordinator of Churches Together Aboriginal Partnership Program (renamed Churches Together Indigenous Peoples Partnership — CTIPP) and is responsible for delivering the workshop "Education: A Key to Reconciliation" throughout the Brisbane Archdiocese.

In 2003 Joan was invited to present the Jack Woodward Memorial Lecture, which is sponsored by the Federation of Parents and Friends.
May we journey together sharing common ground in educating to make a difference — living relationships as One in Christ incarnating difference — to bring about change, for the future wellbeing of our Australian society.

Joan has made an important contribution to the Indigenous Reflection Space at Banyo, giving advice on its cultural components, helping to choose the words for the commemorative plaque and assisting with the planning for the launch. Joan hopes one day to complete a Bachelor of Theology with an interest in Indigenous Spirituality. We trust she will choose McAuley at Banyo to undertake that journey.

Her presence as an Elder has not only blessed both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students. Nereda White, Co-ordinator of Weemala, says of Joan: "This generous woman, so gentle of spirit, so knowledgeable and yet humble in her wisdom, has brought a special gift to the whole community of ACU. We have been blessed by her time, encouraged by her words on many occasions, and so very proud of her achievements. Her spirit will always be a part of Weemala.”
I came to Weemala in 1996 on a six-month secondment from Queensland University of Technology where I was lecturing in the Oodgeroo Unit. Margie Browne had just resigned from the Weemala co-ordinator’s position to take up a job with Queensland Health at Roma. Because I had done some part-time teaching with the residential programs, Professor Dynan asked if I could help out until a permanent co-ordinator was appointed. I did, thoroughly enjoyed myself and, at the end of the secondment, I stayed.

When I was at school I was taught by the Sisters of Mercy whose founder was Catherine McAuley. It seemed such a natural thing that I ended up at McAuley campus of Australian Catholic University as Co-ordinator of the Weemala Indigenous Unit. It was as if my life before this had prepared me for where I am today, and that the spirit of Weemala had guided me to this place.

I was born in Innisfail, started school in Mt. Isa but spent most of my growing years in Bundaberg where some of my family still live. I belong to the Gooreng Gooreng people of the Burnett area through my mother Phyllis Appo. My grandmother Lena Horton was raised in Cherbourg Mission with her brothers Riddler and Kingie and sisters Queenie and Lilly. We had a typically big family of eight — five girls and three boys. We didn’t have much money, but we managed and we were happy.

I believe that education can have the power to transform the individual and through them touch the lives of their families and communities.

We moved around a fair bit because Dad was a labourer and had to go where the work was. Life for most black people in those days meant working in the fields, and I did my share of picking beans, grapes, strawberries, tomatoes, and tobacco, and stripping and planting cane. I remember once my sister and I got a job at a seafood factory, and we used to come home smelling so awful we had to get changed in the downstairs laundry before we were allowed up into the house! We were lucky enough to be able to get a good education through the help of the nuns and the local priest who assisted us with school fees.

After I finished school, I went to work in Canberra where I met my husband Graham. We stayed there for seven years. We moved back to Queensland after we had our daughter Dana, and then our son Luke was born in Nambour. I worked part-time while the kids were young and was actually picking strawberries when an opportunity arose for me to go to uni. We moved to Brisbane in 1987. Graham and I both trained as teachers and our lives took a new turn. We became committed to new causes, for him it was environmental issues and for me it was social justice for Aboriginal people.

I know that education alone cannot bring about change in addressing inequities when there are so many complexities in Aboriginal people’s backgrounds. But I believe that education can have the power to transform the individual and through them touch the lives of their families and communities. That education must take place in a learning environment that supports Indigenous people spiritually, academically and culturally. I found this at Australian Catholic University through Weemala, and it convinced me to stay those many years ago.

Being part of Weemala is an incredible experience — appreciating the uniqueness of each student, walking with them on their journey, watching them grow, getting to know their families and their aspirations, celebrating their achievements, sharing funny stories and the sad moments. And the ACU staff have been part of that, not just supporting Weemala staff and students, but being part of a real partnership, making it a collaborative effort. It’s
also been a place where I have been able to grow.

I have had some wonderful achievements: producing two great children — Dana, a pre-school teacher who also came through ACU, and Luke who is a vet science student — both now fine adults; becoming a grandmother to Jayce, my honey-bun; getting a Master’s degree and now doing my Doctorate; having opportunities to speak publicly; meeting interesting people such as the President of Ireland; making good friends; travelling overseas — so many more things I could mention.

One of the best memories I will take away of my time at ACU is being there on Graduation Day, seeing our students — some who have struggled, perhaps taken longer to get through, faced enormous odds, grown so much — up there on the dais “getting that piece of paper” with smiles so wide, the cheer of their families from the floor and from lecturers who have been with them on the journey.

As I wipe the tears from my eyes I know it has all been worthwhile and trust that the spirit of Weemala will continue far into the future. For as long as I am able, I want to be part of that journey.
Tracey Bunda has always insisted that Indigenous Education must be multi-focused and not be relegated to a support role: “Indigenous educators must have a teaching profile and then have a chance to develop a research profile.”

Tracey came to ACU from the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education in Victoria, taking up the position of Director of the Indigenous Support Unit. Philip Driese was already working in the Unit which together they renamed Weemala, a Torres Strait Islander word meaning “distant view”.

In her time at Weemala Tracey also developed and maintained a community profile. “We undertook NAIDOC Week activities every year; we invited Torres Strait Islander students to do a Kup Mari, and we developed a NAIDOC Week church service.”

Tracey and Phil taught Indigenous Studies, an introductory unit for education students. They also appointed Margaret Browne. “We wanted an Indigenous nurse to academically support our nursing students. As educators, Philip and I were not able to assist the Indigenous nursing students in this way.”

Tracey has every right to be proud of what she achieved in her time at ACU. “By the time I left, we had students in the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Business, as well as in the established courses of Nursing and Teaching.”

When Tracey left ACU in 1992, she was disappointed to depart so suddenly because of illness. After the birth of her daughter Ngioka she was diagnosed with chronic post-natal disorder and was unable to return to work. It took Tracey several years to recover from that experience.

Tracey is the youngest of four children and was born in Ipswich. Her dad, Vince Bunda, was brought up in Cherbourg, and her mum, Nellie Dalton, was born on Stradbroke Island and incarcerated at Purga, a Salvation Army mission outside of Ipswich. Her parents met when her father was escaping from Cherbourg. He was a serviceman all his life until he retired at 58, fighting in WWII with the 9th Division of the Australian Army, and then after the War joining the Air Force. Tracey’s mother worked as a domestic or stayed at home to raise the family. “She scrubbed many a floor to help all of her children.” Tracey was the first in her family to receive a higher education degree. “My brother and I were educated at Grammar school — there was really no option not to go — my parents were willing to make an investment in education because they were denied an education. Their kids received the education they saw as essential for success.”

Tracey, who completed her teacher education at QUT, recognises that Australian Catholic University consolidated her career and gave her the opportunity to be an Associate Professor at Newcastle University, where she assisted in establishing the Umilliko Centre for Indigenous postgraduate and research studies. In 1998 Tracey moved to the Ngunnawal Centre at the University of Canberra, so that she could concentrate on her own studies. She is now completing a PhD in Education entitled SOLID OR WHAT?: University Governance and Indigenous People.

“If I’m seen as a good Goori woman within Indigenous Higher Education, it is because I’ve had solid relationships with deadly people like Phil Driese and Nereda White. They have been so supportive. I would like to acknowledge all the staff and students that have shaped and inspired me.”
Margaret Browne has made an important contribution to furthering the health, education and training needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. Her contribution was acknowledged in 1992, the same year that she became Co-ordinator of Weemala, when she received the honour of being named Queensland Aboriginal of the Year.

Margaret's father is a well-respected stockman who worked on and managed cattle stations in Queensland, and her mother is a gifted horse-rider. Margaret, who is one of seven children, was born in Eidsvold, and began her schooling by correspondence there. After living on cattle stations for the early part of her life, the family moved into Eidsvold so the children could attend the Eidsvold Primary School. The family relocated to Mundubbera where Margaret's schooling continued at the Mundubbera Primary and High Schools.

Leaving school at 14 Margaret went to work as a housekeeper and live-in nanny. The woman she worked for was a nurse, and they got talking about nursing to the extent that, at 15, Margaret began working as a nurse's aide. When she was 17 Margaret moved to Bundaberg and began her hospital-based training, finishing in 1976. In 1977 she moved to Ipswich to study midwifery and then worked in the Special Care Nursery at Ipswich Maternity Hospital for about ten years. During this time she completed her neo-natal nurses training at the Mater Mothers' Hospital in Brisbane, and worked there for a while. Margaret then worked for the Aboriginal and Islander Community Health Service in Wooloongabba, and in that capacity she came to ACU to run a Hepatitis B clinic.

Tracey Bunda was the Co-ordinator of Weemala at the time, and she had been looking for a nurse to work with the Indigenous nursing students. Margaret was offered that position. Although initially only tutoring Indigenous student nurses, Margaret's position was extended so that she was working half-time as a lecturer for the Faculty of Nursing and half-time as a tutor for Weemala. In 1992 she took over from Tracey as the Co-ordinator of Weemala, and also maintained her lecturing position with Nursing. Margaret achieved a great deal in this position, including setting up the Diploma of Education (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander). In her time at ACU Margaret also completed her Bachelor of Nursing, graduating in 1993.

After Margaret left ACU she went to Roma and Charleville Health Districts as Co-ordinator for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services, and then worked for Queensland Health in the Corporate Office, writing policy for Indigenous Health. She has since worked in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for Health Education and Training, becoming the coordinator in 1998.

Margaret has also worked as a consultant for the Department of Employment and Training, running workshops with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Queensland, to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and show them how to become involved in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

Margaret is now working in the Department of Employment and Training doing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service delivery.

Margaret has two sons, Brad, a carpenter, who is 28, and Mitchell, who is seven. She remains a strong presence at ACU, and the University will always remember and be grateful for her contribution.
For both Darlene and Phil, who met at ACU, the value of education is a theme that runs through their lives. Phil, whose father is of German descent and whose mother belongs to the Kamilaroi people, is the second eldest of eight children. "Six of us are teachers: this is an achievement for any family let alone an Indigenous family from south-west Queensland."

Phil has been connected to ACU from its earliest days. "I had the privilege of assisting in the establishment of the Weemala Centre at ACU, Brisbane. Not only was I the first Indigenous person to be employed by ACU’s Brisbane campus, I was also the first Aboriginal graduate after I successfully completed my Bachelor of Education in 1991. Working within Indigenous education for nearly twenty years has taken me to every state and territory within Australia, and overseas for conferences and meetings, and has allowed me the privilege of working with and meeting many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples around this beautiful country."

Darlene, who was born and raised in Cairns, was the first Indigenous female student of Torres Strait Islander descent to graduate from ACU’s McAuley campus, with a Bachelor of Teaching in 1991. "My parents instilled in us from an early age the importance of a ‘can do’ mentality coupled with the importance of formal education — they wanted us to establish solid foundations on which to continue post-compulsory studies. I believe these viewpoints were quite revolutionary at the time and firmly shaped by my mother’s strong Catholic faith." Now a university lecturer, Darlene says of her chosen profession of teaching, "It is hard, but certainly one of the most rewarding professions. I have always found that being a teacher is more than a job — it is a vocation, a calling, an opportunity to serve."

Darlene’s maternal grandparents live on Hammond Island in the Torres Strait. "My father’s family made important contributions to the economic life of the Torres Strait. They were predominantly Asian merchants and shopkeepers. I suppose that a lot of my work ethic stems from this side of the family. My paternal grandmother (‘Por Por’ in Chinese) is 98 years old, and still recalls with startling clarity her early years in the Torres Strait — living history! Really, we have been fortunate in inheriting a balanced spiritual and work-conscious outlook to our lives."

Phil went to school in St George and Warwick before training as a teacher at James Cook University in Townsville. His first teaching job was back at his primary school, St Joseph’s. But Phil wanted to teach Aboriginal students so he moved to Woorabinda, an Aboriginal settlement west of Rockhampton, and taught maths, physical education and cultural studies. In 1986, he moved to Rocky and then on to Brisbane after taking up an administration position with Abstudy.

Darlene, who had a baby while she was studying, remembers fondly the support she received at ACU. She came expecting a smaller faith-centred campus. "It wasn’t until I visited some of the larger Brisbane universities that I knew how lucky I was in this respect. The support network was extensive and involved committed staff, fellow students and the wider community." She reserves high praise for Weemala. "A tremendous amount of social support was also offered by the Weemala team who organised academic support and instigated social gatherings. To this day, I have not witnessed another Indigenous student
Phil also has plans. "One day I would like to complete a PhD in Aboriginal Education and would like to co-ordinate an Indigenous centre within a university. I also have plans of travelling around Australian and overseas. I would love to visit places such as Egypt, America and China. I could quite easily see myself walking along the Great Wall of China, the pyramids and overlooking Niagara Falls."

Darlene acknowledges the wider benefits of being an Indigenous teacher in mainstream classrooms. "I sincerely believe that my role as a mainstream classroom teacher has been very effective in addressing some of the challenging issues related to reconciliation and race relations in our country — on so many occasions, parents and students have raised media stories to do with Indigenous issues and just looked for an opportunity to talk about what is being said. I have always found these talks to be refreshingly honest and insightful for both parties."

Phil and Darlene have two children with another on the way, and they continue to plan for the future. Darlene would love to do more: to travel, to complete her Masters, "but our first priority is to safely deliver our surviving triplet who is due in December 2003. Everything else can wait until she is safely in our arms."

Darlene already has ideas for future studies, "I am particularly interested in researching the idea of multi-age education … having taught in this context, I have been able to experience first hand the benefits for children, but also feel that further teaching approaches could be incorporated into this teaching methodology. I have also considered the idea of undertaking studies in the area of guidance and counselling — the children we teach have so many burdens on their little shoulders it would seem."
Patrick Savage

Patrick was born in Innisfail in far north Queensland, and is the second youngest of nine children. "I appreciate the sacrifices that my family had to make to put me through university. They wanted to see me make something of my life. I love them for that."

He began his Bachelor of Teaching at ACU's McAuley campus in 1989. "At nineteen, I chose teaching because I felt I had something to offer children and especially Indigenous children. I wanted them to realise that you don't have to settle for mediocrity because of the colour of your skin." The course was challenging, and Patrick worked hard to gain his degree — as he says, "the dictionary is the only place where success comes before work."

While Patrick was studying he was offered a rugby league contract with the Brisbane Broncos. While dealing with homesickness, he also combined training with studying. But he persevered and completed his teaching degree in 1991.

During his time at ACU Patrick developed a close bond with the Indigenous students: "There is this level of understanding or instinct that only Indigenous people can tune into. I felt very relieved when someone could understand what I was really going through." The staff of Weemala also helped out:

"Without Weemala, I would not be where I am today."

His time at ACU made him passionate about helping children and helped him to realise that underprivileged children do have aspirations too. One of the great advantages of a teaching degree from ACU is that it enables students to be employed in the state education system or the Catholic education system but, as Patrick says, "the University was preparing us for more than teaching. It was preparing us for a changing world with so many influences, trends and dynamics."

After graduating Patrick concentrated on football, making the top grade: "I truly valued the experiences and accolades that accompany playing a high profile sport like rugby league." In 1993 he began working full-time at the Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School in Brisbane: "I spent four splendid years at the school learning about Aboriginal culture, and assisted in keeping the identity and links to ancestry strong."

In 1994 Patrick met his wife, Tess, and they married in 1997. They now have four children, Ajai, Jymahl, Dahlia and Tolowah. In 1998 Patrick transferred to the Torres Strait and, since 2000, he has taught a combined year 6/7 class at Horn Island State School, where Tess is a teacher aide. "Now I am a role model both to my peers and the younger children."
One Thursday in 1995 a TAFE lecturer walked into the staffroom where Julie was working as an admin officer and said, "Who wants to go to University?"

The following Monday Julie, a Woppaburra woman, enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts program. On her first day at university she was thrown into the deep end. "The guy that was supposed to be the guest speaker didn't turn up and so the guy in the Weemala unit said, 'Hey Sister, I need your help. Can you come up here and talk in front of everyone?'

'What about?' I asked.

'What it's like for you coming back to uni — you're an Indigenous woman, sole parent, mature-aged woman — what's it like for you?'

So, within five minutes of being at uni, I was standing up in an auditorium in front of my fellow first years saying what it was like and what I was expecting — I had no idea! That was my introduction to university!"

Julie enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts with the intention of transferring to Education the following year, but she enjoyed her arts course so much she didn't bother. She ended up majoring in Visual Arts and Behavioural Science with a minor in Australian history, and was the only Indigenous student in any of her classes. "Being different from most of the other students — not just being Indigenous, but a mature-aged single mother, I felt like I had to work harder, that I had to prove myself. I used to stay up studying all night." For Julie, one of the best aspects of the course was that she was able to focus on Indigenous topics in assignments and artworks. Although she had two young children when she began studying, she is proud of the fact that she never had to get one extension for an assignment!

During her studies, Julie embraced the opportunities that came her way. She co-ordinated "Art from the Inside", a project funded by the Regional Galleries Association and the Arts Council, designed to encourage Indigenous people in State Correctional Centres to submit art works for exhibitions arranged by the University. Julie curated three exhibitions and, by the third exhibition, there were over 100 works displayed. "Some of those guys in gaol had never picked up a paint brush. Some were in there for pretty violent crimes and yet they created these most beautiful, peaceful paintings." Julie also went to Israel, participating as an Indigenous educator in a cultural immersion program organised by the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney.

After graduating from her Bachelor of Arts degree Julie kept studying full time, undertaking a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Teaching, and a Graduate Certificate in Religious Education. Following this, Julie worked as a student support officer in Weemala until 2003. She loved helping students because she knows how they feel and what they're going through. Julie is now part of the Weemala family. "ACU has allowed me to still be Indigenous — to have my identity."

Through her studies at ACU, Jewel's research and writing skills, and her confidence, have grown. As well as improving her personal circumstances, her study at ACU has "motivated family, friends and community to undertake study. Being at ACU has changed my approach — I am more open to seeing what is possible. I am more aware of the ripple effect."

Julie is now a Senior Project Officer for the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, and her daily presence on campus is sorely missed.
From the beginning Ted knew he wanted to be a bush nurse. While he was studying his Bachelor of Nursing at ACU he did a Practicum in Woorabinda for a week, and Margaret Brown (the then Co-ordinator of Weemala) showed him the primary health-care centre in Alice Springs. In Alice, Ted went to a public health conference and then spent two days in the clinics. That trip was a valuable part of his educational experience.

After graduating, Ted spent a few years working between intensive care units, rural community health, and district hospital accident and emergency units. Then he took a position as a bush nurse in 1997, where he remained until 2001. “My mum was real proud that I eventually became a bush nurse.”

Ted is a descendent of the Kabi-Kabi people. He was born in Brisbane and grew up — “roamed wild, more like” — around Highgate Hill and Inala. He has three older brothers and one older sister, and, as is common in Murri families, he recently learned that he has other siblings as well, in his case two younger sisters.

Ted was a mechanic and had only completed a year of high school when he enrolled in his degree in 1990. He never thought he’d go to university, but he decided to come to ACU because he knew “a number of nutty-but-nice Catholics who were heavily into social justice”, and because it was a small campus. For him, the best aspect of going to ACU was the learning and the “palpable aura of enthusiasm and commitment” surrounding the people at Weemala. As well as this, “the fact that other Murris were there, mature-age students among them, was of immense benefit”. At ACU’s McAuley campus he learnt the “art and science” of nursing, and a healthy disdain for the words: “that’s how we’ve always done it”.

Ted is now a lecturer in the School of Health and Sciences at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory, and co-ordinates the Certificate IV course in Aboriginal Health Work (Clinical). He trains Aboriginal Health Workers, preparing them for working in isolated communities where the nearest doctor might be 200 kilometres away.

“My job is to prepare the students for their isolated practice. It means that I also get to travel to almost all the Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, where I conduct on-the-job training and assessments for the students. It’s competency based, so my time at ACU has certainly contributed to my ability in this position. The hardest part is that 80 per cent of my students speak an Australian language other than English as their first language.”

In 1998, Ted married a Japanese woman, Reiko, in Kunbarlanjinja, who gave birth to a daughter, Lily Hanako, in Darwin in 1999. “We call her our little Japorigine,” said Ted. In 2001 they left the bush and Ted and his family now live in a house on five acres in Humpty-Doo, where they eagerly await the birth of their son in December, 2003.
Violet Standen

Violet Standen was born in Townsville but grew up mostly in Gladstone. When she completed Year 12 in 1989 she headed to Rockhampton to undertake a Nursing Degree at the University of Central Queensland (UCQ). However, she decided to leave halfway through the course and improve her academic skills by completing a pre-tertiary course at Rockhampton TAFE. Violet returned to UCQ to complete some subjects in the Bachelor of Arts Degree. In 1991 she moved to Brisbane and applied to study at ACU because it catered for her personal and academic needs.

Violet completed her Bachelor of Arts majoring in Drama and Australian Studies. One of the best aspects of university for Violet was being involved in the ACU drama productions. This experience helped when she began working for Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts as the Community Workshop Liaison Officer and, after completing that role, was voted onto the Board.

"Attending university has allowed me to develop into the person that I am today. It has also allowed me to discover all the opportunities and options that I could have as an Indigenous person. My encouragement to each Indigenous person is to keep continuing to strive for that goal and never give up".

Violet went on and gained employment at Hendra Secondary College, Mitchelton State High School, and Gravely State School as a Cultural Liaison Officer. “My role within the schools was to support Indigenous students in their school work, numeracy and literacy, organise cultural and educational excursions, and be apart of the Aboriginal Student Support Parent Awareness (ASSPA) Group.

“I ceased employment at the schools in June 2001 and I commenced employment at East Coast Training and Employment. My role at this organisation was to co-ordinate STEP (Structured Training Employment Project). In this project I recruited Indigenous Australians to be job ready, and then placed them into employment or further training”.

Violet is currently working for MAXNetWork Employment as the Indigenous Employment Consultant within the company. “I work within the South West and Logan Districts, with those Indigenous clients who are long-term unemployed. As part of my role within MAXNetWork I also co-ordinate the STEP project. I am required to recruit and employ ten Indigenous trainees from Queensland, New South Wales, and the Northern Territory. I have enjoyed my work because I have supported several Indigenous people, whether it has been in performing arts, education, or employment and training”.

“One of the strongest influences in my life is my family because they have supported me when I was studying and in my employment. My greatest strengths over the years are my husband and my faith in God. These have been my support and have encouraged and motivated me during my different stages in life.

“My goal for the future is to continue to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in whatever industry, because I want each individual to succeed and fulfil their dream.”
Craig came to ACU to "to preview the leaders of tomorrow". He enrolled in the Diploma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Business Administration in 1998 because it was for Indigenous students and was dealing with Indigenous issues, and through that process, "I gained a better understanding of myself, my brothers and sisters and my own academic ability".

Craig is a Torres Strait Islander from the Eastern Islands. "We are known as mainland islanders, and it is only because of the Second World War when the Government relocated our family off the islands to Cairns." He grew up in Brisbane at Acacia Ridge and went to Grade 10 before becoming a painter by trade. So, as he says, over the past five years he went from being an unemployed painter to the Executive Officer of the Far North Queensland Indigenous Consortium for Social Emotional Health and Well-Being, funded by the Department of Health and Ageing.

Being from the Torres Strait, Craig has strong ties to the saltwater, and the importance of the water to him becomes clear as he tells his story. "I tried to control what I was doing for a very long time and found that controlling my destiny doesn't work. For me, my philosophy has become like sailing in a boat — I found that if you sail with the wind you can achieve a lot more than sailing against it. Sailing with the wind has brought me to where I am now. I am still sailing with the wind.

"My life has changed so much in five years. I don't want to change it again now, I don't want to put restrictions on myself. That would be like putting an anchor on my boat. I am not finished yet. I don't want to be confined and I don't want to anchor my boat — my boat has only just started to sail."

Craig knows the direction the wind is taking him. "We are here today to lead tomorrow's children. If we don't get it right and we don't work together — and this is what it really gets down to: working together and getting that rapport happening early — if we don't work together and lead, tomorrow's children are going to miss out."
Julie Appo

The Burnett River Rock engravings were the focus of Julie Appo’s Honours thesis which she completed in 2002 making Julie the first Indigenous student to complete a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree at ACU. The river rocks are a large gallery of Aboriginal rock engravings (known as petroglyphs) and are unique to the Bundaberg area. They were first studied in 1971 when the water levels of the Burnett River were low enough to allow such an undertaking to be carried out. Approximately 96 rocks were removed and relocated to various museums and communities throughout Queensland.

Julie’s thesis provided important historical information on the rocks. She investigated the links between the river rocks, and her maternal great-grandmother (a Gooreng Gooreng woman) and her descendants. Julie found that the loss of knowledge about the rocks, including what the designs meant, and their subsequent removal had a profound impact upon not only her family members but the local Aboriginal community to which they belong.

As part of the process of coming to terms with the grief associated with that cultural loss, Julie felt impelled as an artist to express her feelings on canvas and paper. She interpreted the traditional markings into contemporary pastel drawings that are bold yet graceful. “The Burnett River Rocks afforded me an opportunity to document whatever remains of the past to develop a cultural continuum — a reclaiming of the past to express the present in a meaningful and contemporary way.”

Julie’s drawings were incorporated in an exhibition which reflected the people’s cultural loss. But Julie’s work is not only inspired by loss; many of her drawings, paintings, and installations were inspired by the transition of her people from a traditional to a contemporary lifestyle. She felt drawn to depict the lifestyle of those who were classed as fringe-dwellers.

Julie came to ACU because she saw that they really looked after their students: “the atmosphere in Weemala — it’s like a family. At ACU, I had the best experience I think I could have had.”
Louise Page remembers when her mother, Sandra, rang her to say that she was going to Australian Catholic University to fill in some forms, and that she wanted Louise to go along. Louise was working at Bundamba Primary School as a teacher’s aide and, that day in 1997, mother and daughter enrolled together in a Diploma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. Sandra completed her degree in 2002 and Louise is due to finish hers in 2003.

Sandra was born in Childers. Her mother’s people are the Batdjala people and her father’s are Gooreng Gooreng, although she has lived in Brisbane for most of her life. “I was thinking about studying for years, even when I was living in Townsville. I had worked in a uni (at James Cook University) but on the other side of the bench, in the kitchen. I didn’t know how to approach it or how to go about it. I sort of felt I didn’t have the confidence at that time.”

Sandra knew that it wasn’t going to be easy. “I didn’t actually know myself how big a challenge I was taking on. I said to myself, I will start this and see how I go. My own expectations of myself were very low at that stage because I hadn’t done any study for years. Not since I was about 14 years old. The rest of my time was spent raising my family and here I was now — left with nobody on my hands to look after, and I think I was feeling a little bit of low self esteem at that stage. I didn’t know how I would cope.

“As an Indigenous person, Sandra came to University with a negative approach, because you don’t know how we’re going to be treated. Slowly, very slowly, those feelings started to change, and then I was getting over one little hurdle, over one assignment, getting over another one and then I just kept pushing myself. So I gained the confidence to carry on, confidence in myself as a learner and also as a person. It wasn’t a jump — it was a giant leap for me to get on the program. There were probably brain cells I hadn’t used for a long time.”

Sandra received a lot of support and encouragement on the way: from Weemala staff, from lecturers and student services as well as from her family. “I was always encouraged to go all the way. I don’t think I heard any of my children say to me, ‘Mum what are you doing that for?’ I think to have that whole support system is very important.”

Sandra appreciated the way Indigenous culture is part of the University and enjoyed participating in NAIDOC Week and Indigenous Week. “I think it also broadens the University’s outlook as well. They are also learning from us about Indigenous issues.”

For Sandra, success means being a teacher and applying that success to others so that they can be successful within themselves. “I think there is a message to future students, and students coming through now: keep on going. Even though you might fail a subject, just pick it up if things aren’t too hard, keep going with it. If you can’t get other people to encourage you, encourage yourself.”

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Sandra and Louise
Don’t feel like you are the only one that is having problems, you are the same as everybody — we are all in the same boat.
Up until 2000, the year that he began a Master of Arts in Leadership, Eddie Watkin didn’t know anything about ACU. Now he’s an advocate of the University. For Eddie, one of the most appealing aspects of the University is “a sense of being able to tap into an Indigenous as well as a non-Indigenous learning family”.

From an early age Eddie felt a predestined purpose but in his earlier days, “I was forever running away from it. I felt I couldn’t do it.” But, by the mid-1990s, he knew that this was a journey he was going to take.

Both of Eddie’s parents are of Torres Strait Islander heritage, his mother from Mabuiag Island and his father from Erub in the Eastern Islands. He was born and raised in Cairns and grew up with a strong sense of community. After high school he completed a Bachelor of Education at James Cook University and then worked for five years as a teacher in Mackay, representing the city in touch football and coaching the touch footy and athletics teams at school. “This gave me a grounding in teaching, school/community partnerships and leadership management.”

As a teacher Eddie was active in bringing the community into the school and taking schooling out into the community. Although he probably wouldn’t have used these words at the time, he sees in retrospect that he always took an inclusive and facilitative approach to schooling.

In 1987 Eddie was wooed by Education Queensland’s Head Office in Brisbane and, although he never intended to move further south, attractive incentives combined with the potential for tweaking concepts that he had learnt from teaching encouraged him to take up the position. He took on the role of Education Officer (Special Duties) and took it further than it was ever intended to go, becoming the state co-ordinator and co-founder of the Aboriginal and Islander Tertiary Aspirations Project (AITAP).

This project developed a life of its own, as Eddie travelled around the state developing strategies to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into tertiary education. Eddie advocated partnerships between students, parents, teachers, schools, communities, government and universities. “We had to walk the fine line of bringing all the parties together.”

Believing he had taken AITAP as far as he could, and needing a break after a job which was pretty much 24/7, in 1991 Eddie did a stint back in the classroom to see what was happening on the ground.

In 1993 Eddie began to move from a focus on student learning to adult learning and human resources management, with an emphasis on leadership.

After successful work stints in Telstra and the central office of Education Queensland, his “perception of the world was enlarged” when, in 1997, he took up a Churchill Fellowship. This enabled him to travel around the United States and Canada, looking at leadership development for Indigenous peoples. During this Fellowship he met Indigenous scholars coming out of places like Harvard, and
The spiritual dimension ... is something that Indigenous people have to offer Australia and so often it gets locked out

wondered why we didn’t have similar things happening here in Australia.

When he returned Eddie looked at postgraduate possibilities, deciding not to do a Master of Business Administration because of its lack of focus on leadership. He became involved in an Indigenous management training group and through that heard about ACU and its Master of Arts in Leadership.

Eventually he came to ACU for the friendliness and enthusiasm of course co-ordinators and Weemala staff, as well as for its range of learning strategies: face-to-face, online, external and residential. For Eddie, one of the best things about ACU was “the opportunity, willingness and the time that ACU staff would make for you in having one-to-one discussions”.

After he started his degree the University did all it could to make sure the path was easier from a financial angle and assisted him in securing a Wexford Scholarship. He is grateful to the three people who were the drivers behind this: his supervisor Ann Bramwell, Muredach Dynan, and Nereda White. For Eddie, Ann is more than a supervisor, she is a mentor and coach.

“My time at ACU has sharpened my focus and commitment to leadership education, learning and development; it has also given me the confidence to further explore and experiment with the knowledge that I gained throughout the course. I have nothing but praise for the MA (Leadership) and Weemala staff at ACU McAuley. Thank you for your generosity, positive encouragement and support during my time at ACU. It has been an honour and a pleasure to be a graduand of the University, and I look forward to spreading the name of the University and its spirit wherever my journey takes me.”

Eddie acknowledges that the spiritual dimension is a strong part of the psyche and identity of Indigenous people. “This is something that Indigenous people have to offer Australia and so often it gets locked out.” He is grateful that ACU is an institution that embraces this dimension.

Eddie graduated in 2002 and is currently working as a leadership strategist. Among his interests and passion is “supporting Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people to be believers of themselves as well as reaching their leadership potential”. His work involves being a presenter, facilitator, coach, trainer, and consultant. He also teaches at ACU. Eddie’s work now has a strong leadership focus and he works with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across the country.
Sandra and Renée Blackman are not just mother and daughter-in-law, they are “good mates”. Renée remembers how she talked Sandra into studying nursing. “I went over to Australian Catholic University, had a look around. It was good — you guys at Weemala gave me all the hope in the world and I was there going, ‘Excellent, this is the one, this is the one’. I came home and just started talking about it — and Sandra said, ‘Do you think I could have a go? Do you think it would be alright if I went out there and had a look?’ I said, ‘Yes, go for it, talk to them and see if that’s what you want to do – we’ll do it.’”

Sandra had completed a degree in Social Welfare at James Cook University but became interested in health after working as a teacher’s aide counsellor for twelve years. “We were looking at the kids’ performance and their levels of education, and found a lot of the kids were suffering so we started looking at their diet.” Sandra decided to join Renée at Queensland Health as an Indigenous Health Worker focusing on nutrition.

Renée took a “special interest in diabetes because it runs in my family, and I just didn’t want anybody dying the way my grandma did — that was the driving force. Queensland Health actually put me through a diabetes course over at the Wesley Hospital — I had that qualification before I became a registered nurse.”

While studying, both Sandra and Renée received scholarships from Queensland Rural Health. This meant they received financial assistance while studying and, during their holidays, provided nursing services in rural communities. They were able to do practical nursing placements in Cherbourg, Bundaberg, Mackay, and Gympie, and are currently working in Mt Isa. Both women found ways to manage study, work and family.

Sandra is one of thirteen children, eight brothers and five sisters, with only four brothers and four sisters still living. “I grew up and went to school in Yeppoon, and of course I didn’t stick with it — I stayed until about Grade 7 and then I went and worked out West for four or five years. I was doing domestic work in one of the homesteads at Longreach.”

“When I came back down to Brisbane to see the big city, that was it — I never went back. I met Wayne and then got married, had my four kids and I am still going.” Sandra became involved with education when her children began school. “They wanted one of the mothers to go into the classes and help the kids with their reading. One of the teachers said to me, ‘Why don’t you go and do a welfare degree because you are good with kids and you are good with people.’ And so I went and did that for six years.”

Having a welfare background helped Sandra when she first started her nursing degree, but it was still hard, especially with certain subjects that she had to repeat. “In the end I felt confident enough to say: ‘I failed this subject and I don’t know what I did wrong – can you put me on the right track and tell me what I have got to study?’”

Renée was born in Nambour and is married to Sandra’s son, Wayne, and they have two children, Gail and Janice. At 26 Renée realized she wanted a career by the time she was thirty. “I was looking for something that I could really..."
sink my teeth into — and nursing was it. ACU was my choice of universities. I was interested in health because of the number of Murri people in my family dying from preventable diseases — heart disease, diabetes — all those sort of things. My husband is a very supportive person. He was working at the time and he said, ‘If that’s what you really want to do, go ahead and do it, and I will support you for three years’. That was really good. The kids were excellent because they were at an age where they could understand this is Mum’s time to study, and I usually did it when their bedtime rocked around at 8:30 pm.”

Renée now tells other Murri people to “have a go. Sandra and I know how bloody hard it is — just hang in there and don’t stress out too much or panic. Ask for help if you need it” — don’t be ashamed. ACU are more than happy to help.” Renée explains that it was not easy at times being the only Indigenous student in the classroom. “The hardest part I think when you are young and impressionable is to keep your identity and stay strong.”

Renée and Sandra now work together in the medical ward at Mt Isa Hospital. “It is really good. We are not the minority now; we are the majority. We can talk to our patients in our own lingo. Probably 80 per cent or more are Indigenous, and when they actually see us you can see the relief in their faces. They really look forward to seeing us — we can see we are making a difference to them.”

Sandra also talks about how good it has been to study and now work with Renée. “I love her. We are happy together and people say, ‘you don’t fight!’ One of the doctors up there — they call us Blackman Senior and Blackman Junior — couldn’t believe it. It is a big novelty to have a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law working in the same hospital.”

Have a go. Sandra and I know how bloody hard it is — just hang in there and don’t stress out too much or panic. Ask for help if you need it — don’t be ashamed.
Dana White

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters to what lies within us.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

It has taken me 23 years to appreciate who I am and to learn the importance of drawing upon my inner strength to achieve my goals. My name is Dana White and this is my story.

I grew up in a large extended family. This family was all I knew and loved. My Elders, my aunts and uncles, cousins, mother, father, brothers and sisters nurtured me, guided and taught me what I know and trust. I learned through the traditional stories over a shared meal, through song and dance at gatherings, through games down the backyard with cousins, and through play and humour in almost every experience I can remember.

It is no wonder school was such a boring place for me and I felt like I didn’t belong. I actually didn’t like school that much. I seemed to get into trouble a fair bit and was sent to the Principal’s office on a regular basis. I think I spent more time at the back of the class, or standing outside the classroom door. It wasn’t that I wasn’t smart. In fact, I did exceptionally well with my school work. I just couldn’t settle. Looking back, I don’t think I was being challenged enough.

What is pretty amazing is that, today, I am a pre-school teacher at a local Catholic school in Brisbane.

Much of who I am as a person and a teacher has come from my family background and cultural values, and the teaching philosophies I developed as a student at ACU. I was born in Canberra in 1979, first child to Nereda and Graham who were both working in the Public Service. In 1981 my parents moved to Queensland to be close to my mother’s family who live in Bundaberg. We settled in Yandina, near Nambour, and it was there that my younger brother Luke was born and where I started school. Our move to Brisbane in 1987 came about because Dad and then Mum decided to go to university to become teachers. Luke and I grew up around people studying and attending classes so it seemed natural that we would follow in our parent’s footsteps.

At high school I got a bit side-tracked and only went to Year 10. At that time I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life. Then something extraordinary happened. My mum met the co-ordinator of the School at Sea in the Bahamas. At 15, I flew half way across the world, not knowing what to expect. It turned out to be an amazing experience and one that changed my life forever. A group of students and teachers from 16 different countries, we rose with the sun to catch our breakfast — cracked conch (shell). We studied in the sand with driftwood as our desks. The outdoors was our classroom, with marine biologists teaching us as we sailed through the Caribbean. We learnt science but we also learnt a lot of other things like languages, navigation, sailing and teamwork.

French and Spanish were the only languages allowed at meal times, which was a real challenge for me. We lived on a shipwreck in between the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Dominican Republic. It was here we researched humpback whales and coral reefs. I got to swim with whales, dolphins, stingrays, jellyfish and yes, sharks!! We also island hopped, sleeping under
wet trees and in caves. We made documentaries, and my story appeared in Australian Geographic, international magazines and the School at Sea booklet.

After I came back from the Bahamas I went to TAFE to get my Senior equivalent. At the same time I was doing some voluntary work at a local primary school with lots of Indigenous children. It was then that I decided to go to ACU and learn to be a teacher because I felt that I could help other Indigenous kids. I have good memories of ACU at Mitchellton. I spent a lot of time in Weemala where my mum was the Co-ordinator. I think I drove her mad at times but we also grew very close. I made good friends who are still close to me and I was able to share my culture with non-Indigenous students. I used opportunities to research Indigenous issues for presentations and assignments.

My culture and heritage are important to me. My grandmother is an Elder of the Gooreng Gooreng people and my great-grandmother lived at Cherbourg mission, near Kingaroy. In my teaching I try to apply all the skills that I have learnt from my family and my life experiences. I have a strong multicultural focus in my program and even though I don’t have any Indigenous children in my class at present, I always incorporate Indigenous perspectives — not only during NAIDOC Week — but throughout the year.

The success I have made in my professional life has been complemented by personal success. In 2002 I became a mum. Words cannot express what it is to have my son Jayce in my life. He has given me the one connection that I didn’t have with parents, and now I better understand and truly value children’s backgrounds, where they come from — not just where they are going.

I heard at my brother’s Year 12 graduation in 2000: “Great achievements and great love involve great risks”. This is probably the truest statement that I have ever heard in my life, and this is what I base my life goals upon to try to be the best.

It doesn’t matter what we become, it’s just who we become. We try. That is the most important action in our lives. Through trying, we can reach self actualisation. We can reach for the stars. We can reach for whatever we have dreamed about. Whether we touch it, is not important. But it’s the people we touch, it’s the footprints we leave, and it’s the history we contribute to this mankind that makes its mark.

It is what lies within us!
John and Renee Maris

John Maris moved to Queensland to be part of the first intake of students in the Diploma of Business Administration (ATSIS) in 1998. "I have introduced a new culture to my family which is a learning culture. It’s about being a responsible parent, about being a responsible community person. At the end of the day, it’s about being a responsible Murri."

Since John graduated his son Joshua has graduated with the same Diploma, and his daughter Renee is in her first year studying the Diploma of Education, with a view to doing a Bachelors degree when she finishes the Diploma. John established some lifelong friendships while at ACU, he said "I now consider ACU a major part of my life."

John had never been involved in a university before, and it was a new experience for him. He was proud to have achieved this goal of graduation. "I thought it was a new challenge and I wanted to have a go at it. I will probably never wear one of those black skirts again, unless I’m down the Valley some time! But I think just to walk across that podium is a personal achievement."

His graduation picture was in the local paper. "People had been saying to me that University is not designed for people like you. So I put the picture in the paper. It’s good for our community to be recognised in this way. Before, the only way that people took notice of Murri people was if they were locked up, or in brawls on the weekend. Now the community has a different outlook."

John recalls that the lecturers at ACU were supportive and open to suggestions. "We educated non-Indigenous staff and students. It was a mutual learning experience. We were a politically motivated and powerful group and any suggestions we made were listened to. The lecturers became part of the whole learning culture." During his time studying at ACU John "saw people grow in confidence and look after themselves. He also remembers the importance of Weemala. "It was that spiritual attachment to something that you could feel comfortable with, and it was the support centre around you."

Since graduating, John has become a role model in his community and at schools, and his family is proud of what he has achieved. For him, "part of it was preparing ourselves for what we wanted to take back to our communities." John is now working as a Resource Officer at the Charleville Area Office Department of Families, and he uses what he learned at ACU every day in terms of management, leadership, budgeting, and workplace relations skills.

He is also active in community education and undertakes cross-cultural training for Education Queensland, the police and for non-Indigenous service providers like Centrelink. He is an Indigenous advisor on some of the Inland Water Courses and Manager for Financial Disaster Recovery for the Southwest. He is Chairperson of AASPA (Aboriginal Student Support Parent Awareness) at St Mary's School and at the High School, as well as being a Public Officer for Indigenous health. "A lot of that was not in my personal framework six years ago, I can tell you. I am on the Charleville State High School Board, and I am the first Aboriginal person that has done that in the school's 85 years."

"I have always had that political motivation but, once, education to me was never a priority, my..."
priority was survival. But now that I have walked on that side of the fence, I can appreciate the quality and value of education. Our goal at the moment, and mine in particular as an Indigenous leader in our community, is to better the education standard for all of our community. So there is no segregation, there are no missed opportunities.”

John’s current project is opening an entertainment centre with his son, Joshua, with the final goal being to work with young Indigenous people to release a CD. Joshua is now doing an apprenticeship as a pastry chef and ultimately he hopes that the business training he received through his Diploma of Business Administration will help him set up his own bakery.

Following the new family tradition, John’s daughter Renee is now studying a Diploma of Education at ACU. “My Dad did it. My brother did his Business through here, and I tried full-time uni at another university and I just bottomed out there. That’s when Dad said Weemala had a great support system. I have seen how they treated my Dad and I said that is the type of support that I need throughout uni. I thought I would give it a go. Here there are so many people I can turn to.”

Renee loves doing a course designed for Indigenous students. “I have learnt more from the other students, speaking to them about their personal experiences of their culture, than I could have learnt from any textbook. I feel that we are the lucky ones. We are the ones that are going to get out there in the teaching community and know how to relate to Aboriginal children because a lot of Aboriginal children have a lot more problems. I think that everybody studying Education should have to do a course like this to be able to relate to the Indigenous students.”

Renee says that although her father always knew about his Indigenous heritage, coming to ACU gave him the desire to record it for future generations. “We knew we were Aboriginal but we didn’t know where from because of the Stolen Generations, and it wasn’t until my Dad actually did Indigenous Studies in his Business course that he traced back our family history. Now he has actually found out that our great aunty, Emily Hornable, helped to write the Murrawarrie Dictionary.

My Dad was always proud of being Aboriginal and he did a lot of Aboriginal art, but it wasn’t until he came here that we found out about our own history. My Dad cherishes Weemala for that. You can ask my Dad — he will say: ‘If you are Aboriginal go to Weemala.’ ACU has had a huge impact on our family.”

One afternoon last semester Renee was giving an oral presentation. “I couldn’t think of anybody to do for my topic, and my boyfriend said to me ‘Well, it was your dad who got you into the course in the first place — why not try to do him?’ So I am doing my presentation on Dad — what I think his characteristics are, what I think his achievements are, the way he has inspired me. And in the end I am going to make it into a hard copy with all the photos that I am going to give it to him as a birthday present. I am going to call it My Inspiration, and just give it to him and tell him what I feel about him. I figure he has never had anything in his life and look where he is now! He has given us every opportunity he can. Look where I can end up.”
Julieanne vividly remembers her first day at ACU in 1999: “The first residential was frightening, going into the unknown!” For Julieanne, not only was she worried about the work but also, being fair-skinned, whether or not she would be accepted by the other Murri students. But after she arrived her fears disappeared. “After day one, I looked forward to returning. Everyone was warm and friendly and embraced me as part of the family.”

After several years studying and learning about Indigenous culture, she now feels part of the Indigenous community: “The elders have said to me: ‘It’s what’s inside and not the colour of your skin that makes you a Murri’.”

Julieanne’s father was in the Australian Army, and Julieanne was born in Singapore. “I am probably the first naturalised Indigenous Australian. It’s ironic that I had to be naturalised so that I was allowed back into the country that my ancestors originally owned.”

Julieanne’s mother grew up with the understanding that her mother’s family was of German origin, and her father’s family was from Wales. “She was always told that her father was a dark Welshman and she has always accepted this.

Julieanne decided to do a history of her maternal grandfather and his family. “I never dreamed that what I uncovered would cause such a split and anger amongst my family.

Julieanne Eisemann

I am probably the first naturalised Indigenous Australian

I found out that my grandfather was Wakka Wakka. I was excited when I found out; I have a heritage and a history within Australia. All my mother said was ‘I am who I am, this is a gift my father gave to me’.

My grandmother and other family members have never spoken to me, my mother or uncle and cousins again. My mother and I have two regrets: Grandfather is not alive so we cannot thank him for the gift he has bestowed upon us. The other regret is that we cannot find where my great-grandmother was buried so that Mum and I can pay our respects to her. This is so important to us. She had a hard, cruel life being a black woman in a white policed society. She was a strong person and in my eyes a real heroine.”

Julieanne, who had been a nurse for twenty years, wanted to go somewhere so that she could learn more about her Indigenous heritage and culture. She also wanted to learn administration skills. “ACU offered all this in the Diploma in Business Administration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander).” During her studies, Julieanne got a job as a Customer Service Officer at Centrelink. She has now graduated from the Diploma course and is studying a dual Arts and Business degree full-time, with the support of a scholarship from Centrelink. “I am a good employee and I become very dedicated to what I do. I am ambitious but I give 110 per cent.”

Julieanne, who has a husband who is also studying, four children and a full-time job, has had to work very hard to get through her studies. “I did have to put a lot of effort into my work but I found the support at ACU gave me the confidence to know that I was capable of doing this. I would not have done what I have done without Weemala. The lecturers and staff at ACU have given me such confidence and belief in myself that I feel I can achieve anything if I put my mind to it.”
Sharon

When Sharon started a Diploma of Education at ACU, she expected a busy, noisy campus. "It was a great relief to find a quiet atmosphere and so many mature age students. For family commitment reasons, the fact that the course was external was perfect; that it was only for Indigenous students was a great bonus." She graduated in 2001 and is now in the second year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) while working as a teacher's aide.

Sharon's mum was born in Digarra. "When she was 13 she became very good friends with the police sergeant's daughter and they used to hang out all of the time. They used to have picnics on the jail cell floors, but when he moved he actually took my Mum for a two-week holiday back to Sandgate and never took her back home. So she grew up with them and didn't see her parents again." Sharon's mum met her father when she was 19 and it was considered scandalous when her father, who is of German descent, married an Indigenous woman. "I would have been maybe 11 or 12 when my Mum's family from Mt Isa started to come and visit."

Sharon was brought up in suburbia in Brisbane, and went to school during the assimilation era. "You just didn't exist as an Aboriginal student, you were just a student. I think that is why it is harder now because there is a big push for Indigenous education and in one way it is wonderful because it is building strength and character but in another way is hard because there is a lot of political turmoil wrapped up in it."

When she first left school, Sharon began a Diploma in Fine Arts, but left after a year. She then worked in a factory making hot water valves between having children, now aged twelve, sixteen and eighteen. "That still wasn't enough to convince me to study. It wasn't until I moved to Caboolture and the kids started at their new school, and they were looking for an Indigenous teacher aide, that they asked me if I would be interested and that worked."

Sharon believes that her studying has been good for her eldest daughter, who left school during Year 11: "She's started saying that she wants to go back and do something. She doesn't want to be a checkout chick for the rest of her life. If I hadn't been doing this, she probably wouldn't have looked at it as an alternative for her." As for Sharon's husband, "The first time that he realised that I was actually learning something and becoming clever, that was a big shock."

Sharon appreciates the support she has, especially from Weemala. "It is probably the emotional support more than anything else because it gives you a sense of belonging that you can come here and you know there is somewhere you can go in the University that you can fit in regardless of age, regardless of sex, that you know that you can walk in those doors and you know there is going to be someone there with a smile and a happy face and you just growl at them depending on our moods. I have never felt like I don't belong here. Probably because of the situation that I have grown up in it could be easy to feel like you're not Indigenous enough, but I haven't had that feeling here."

Sharon Williams

There is a big push for Indigenous education and in one way it is wonderful because it is building strength and character but in another way is hard because there is a lot of political turmoil wrapped up in it.
Maxine Zealey is the Co-ordinator of Ngutana-Lui, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Studies Centre at Lilac Street, Inala. Ngutana-Lui is a Kobi Kobi word meaning “to teach”, and the Centre is part of Brisbane Catholic Education. In her role Maxine works with Indigenous Participation Officers, consultants, teachers and schools to provide cross-cultural awareness programs. “The Centre provides support to Indigenous students, families and communities, both culturally and academically, as well as providing pastoral care for all. The cultural awareness program facilitates an understanding of the history and cultures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.”

Maxine also conducts programs for police recruits, ACU students and other community groups. Two of Maxine’s sons are in the Police Force. Curtis is stationed in Bundaberg and Travis in the Longreach area. Maxine’s eldest son, Kristopher, is an outdoor Education Officer in Victoria.

For her work in the area of Reconciliation Maxine received a Centenary Medal. “Growing up in an Indigenous family I saw the need to build relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Through my studies I have been given the opportunity to work in the area of Reconciliation, promoting its purpose. When I first began my studies I never imagined that my work would be acknowledged in such a tremendous way, and I am thankful to be able to make a difference in the lives of my people.”

Maxine first began her studies with ACU in the Associate Diploma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, which she completed in 1997. She was nervous about coming to University, not knowing what to expect. At the time she was working in the fields picking tomatoes, and later as a hydroponics supervisor. Her early fears were soon replaced with relief as she settled in to the life of a student. “The residentials were wonderful, like meeting family instead of just going to uni.” During her Diploma studies, Maxine worked as an Indigenous teacher aide at Holy Rosary Primary School at Windsor.

Maxine then journeyed to Yalbalinga and Mt. St. Mary’s Campus in Sydney to complete a Bachelor of Teaching and Bachelor of Education. During this period she became the Indigenous Education Officer for Anglican Schools, providing support to staff, schools and Indigenous students. In 1999 Maxine returned to Brisbane Catholic Education as Co-ordinator of Ngutana-Lui.

“I would never have been able to get where I am today if I had not done this course. Studying has given me the confidence to pursue and effectively maintain a management position. Now, as an Indigenous teacher, I have received the skills to develop and implement such programs as the curriculum for Indigenous studies.” In her work Maxine continues to be involved with ACU. Each year ACU students who are enrolled in the Bachelor of Education core unit, Indigenous Peoples, Past and Present, visit Ngutana-Lui to participate in cultural awareness workshops.

In addition to her teaching and family life, Maxine has another love and talent — painting. She is a gifted artist who has designed many logos and created many beautiful paintings and murals. She designed a Christmas card for ACU and created a mural for the Anglican Church in New Farm. She also designed the large Ancestral Figures and the Rainbow Serpent for the Reconciliation gathering at Suncorp Stadium in 1997.

Maxine and Meleah Zealey
Coming to ACU has had a “tremendous impact” on Maxine and her family. She is a mother of four children and grandmother of five, and her brother and sister — and now her daughter — have followed her into University. “My family was enormously proud of me getting a university degree.”

“I used to think I wasn’t very smart. I missed a lot of school because of being sick with asthma and I left at 14. The jobs I was able to get were mainly unskilled. After I came to University I gained more confidence in my abilities as an Indigenous person, and I was allowed to be more in touch with and proud of my culture.”

Maxine’s family belong to the Gooreng Gooreng people of the Burnett River Area. She is the granddaughter of Lena Horton and great-granddaughter of Lexie Dublin (Granny Clarke). Maxine was born in Alpha, where her father was working in the railway. She grew up in Bundaberg, where her mother still lives, and still retains links with her community. She hopes one day to return to Bundaberg to live and paint, but is committed to staying in Brisbane until her daughter Meleah completes her studies.

Meleah Zealey is an on-campus student at ACU. When asked to nominate a student member for the Weemala Advisory Committee, Weemala staff found it hard to go past Meleah who is a regular in the Weemala student room.

Meleah is currently studying a Bachelor of Education (Primary) with a specialisation in Early Childhood Studies, and has always wanted to be a preschool teacher. She moved with her parents to Brisbane when she was in Year 9, when her Mum was studying the Associate Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education at ACU.

She came to ACU because it offered a specialisation in early childhood education, the area she was interested in studying and which she felt would give her better options for employment. As she had family members studying at ACU Meleah knew it would be warm, friendly and family-orientated. Reflecting on her time at ACU, she says “I believe that studying and interacting with others at ACU has helped me to grow into a more educated and mature person who is dedicated and passionate about what I am studying.”

And her dedication has paid off. Meleah has consistently achieved in her results and is set to complete her final year of study in 2004. “When I finished high school I was fortunate enough to know what I wanted to be. My love for children, and watching my mother graduate, cemented my goal to become a teacher. I chose ACU as I had often visited Weemala with my mother and I saw the commitment and support she received as a student.”

“When I began studying at ACU the most valuable advice that was given to me by my mother was to use the assistance of an Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) tutor. This support has enabled me to achieve far more in my studies than what I ever expected. I have been given the opportunity to speak to many first-year students about entering the university life, and I always pass on my mother’s advice.

“Studying at ACU has given me the opportunity to achieve my dream of becoming a teacher. Now my future is extremely exciting as I hope, through my teaching, that I can make a difference in the lives of children, and I hope that I can spread my skills and culture to those around me.”
Due to finish her nursing degree at ACU at the end of 2003, Danielle Arabena, who came to ACU to study midwifery, now plans to sit an entrance exam for medicine and hopes eventually to become a doctor. “There are hardly any Indigenous doctors. My vision has changed from being a midwife as there is more need for me in the medical mainstream. I want to make myself an accessible GP and treat Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.”

Danielle’s father is a Torres Strait Islander from Murray Island, who grew up in both Thursday Island and Cairns. Her sister, Kerry, has been a leader in Indigenous health. “My whole family has a history of diabetes and so I am well aware of the issues that can occur in Indigenous families and how that impacts upon a family.”

Danielle completed high school and went straight to university. “I studied a Bachelor of Business in Communications at QUT.” Later Danielle worked in the Oodgeroo Unit at QUT as an Associate Lecturer, providing support to Indigenous students at Kelvin Grove campus. She then took time off work to have a family.

Danielle lives on the northside of Brisbane with her husband, Vince, and daughters, Kayla and Amy. Before returning to study Danielle did part-time work in alternate therapies, but felt that there was something else that she wanted to do. “I got over watching Play School all the time and my brain started hurting from not using it. I went back and started doing massage and natural therapy and then, when I was walking around a baby expo, I saw the ACU stall for midwifery. I just had something in my head — like a little voice saying this is what I was meant to do.”

Danielle’s study has had a big impact on her children. “They play ‘uni’. One wants to be a vet and the other wants to be a doctor. I just don’t want my girls to learn from me to accept second best. I want them to be able to say — go and strive — and the Indigenous community is crying out for health professionals, whether it be nurses or doctors, and I believe I can do it. I am also teaching them about holistic healing. I really see that my vision is to marry the two.”

To get through the course, Danielle says, “I had to become the queen of time management. I am lucky that I am disciplined enough to be able to say ‘No, I know it is a really beautiful sunny day outside and everyone else is down the coast, but no, I am going to enjoy sitting in here and typing my few thousand words for a nursing assignment’. It is always a joy to do stuff and to get just rewards for the amount of effort and work put in. I found in first year I had a couple of fantastic tutors and I received really good marks; this makes you more positive and want to continue on. I am a mature-aged student, I am married, I just focus on what I need to do.”

As well as her study, Danielle had to deal with family stress. “Unfortunately, in my first year, my father ended up having his leg amputated due to diabetes. He was in hospital for a long time. The rehab was really stressful but I still managed to potter through.”

“I have had fantastic support from the Weemala Unit and believe if people did come down from the Torres Strait, I am sure they would also find the support fantastic. At the Weemala Unit you can find a friendly face, or even if you want to come down and have a rant or rave about something, at least you have got someone familiar, who honestly wants to listen to you, and for me that has been an absolute God-send in the times when I have been stressed.”
Jayne

I graduated from ACU with a Bachelor of Business, majoring in Marketing and International Business. Since enrolling at ACU I have become a seasoned international traveller. In September 2000 I went to Israel for two weeks as an Indigenous youth representative. At 22 I jumped at the opportunity. That certainly changed my life. We went to historical sites of conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I learned how different cultures deal with conflict and that opened my eyes to the nature of reconciliation.

In November 2000 I went to Japan to learn about Japanese culture for two weeks as part of an exchange program with Shohoku College. By then I had caught the travel bug and in 2001 I went to Vanuatu with friends. I stayed in a village and learnt about village life. Vanuatu is pure paradise.

I then decided to take a trip to Singapore and Hong Kong. I chose those two countries specifically because I was learning a lot about them in my International Business course. I was interested in how Singapore as a multicultural society copes without having many natural resources. I was pretty impressed.

Hong Kong was just awesome. My mother came along with me on this trip because I wanted her to experience it with me.

These experiences have opened my eyes and given me more of an appreciation of Australia as well. They empowered me to come home, to make the most of life and love it.

Employment opportunities have come through my studies at ACU. One day, visiting Weemala, I read a notice about cadetships for Indigenous students in Government departments. I applied and was eventually offered a cadetship with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). They have paid my HECS fees for the last two years as well as given me a salary. The opportunity also included work experience as well as guaranteed employment at the end of the cadetship. DFAT has given me the perfect opportunity to put theory into practice.

At the end of 2002 DFAT offered me another year of study. The only thing left to do was my Honours. So far this has been my biggest challenge. My Honours thesis is on mentoring, a far cry from marketing and international business. This is my passion and I want to explore it more. I have three mentors as well as my family that I have kept close to me and allowed to teach me. They are a support network in decisions I make. I wanted my three brothers to see my commitment to finishing the course. If I can start being a role model for my family I can use their support to build a strong foundation for their futures and mine.

My Honours year has given me a clear idea of what I really want to do: to work with Indigenous people, using my business skills to promote Indigenous works in the community.

In May 2003 I worked for Brisbane City Council as a stage manager for Styling Up, Australia's largest hip-hop festival, at Inala. That gave me a sense of pride in the number of talented Indigenous people living in the area.

My message for other students is don't be afraid. Be open to people who want to support you and give you encouragement. Open your eyes and seize opportunities!
"My name is Steven Johns and I am 46 years of age. I have four beautiful children: Benjamin, Hannah, Alexander, and Juanita, and a new grandson, Harvey. I am a single Dad. It’s the responsibility of being a single father and being given the opportunity of education that makes the journey worthwhile. My heart lies with our children. This is my focus on life now, to give what I can through my life experience.

"My father’s name is Victor George Lewis Johns; my mother, June Alvina Johns. My Indigenous spirituality comes from our grandmother, Signet Ada McLennan and our great-grandmother, Minnie Lilly. Her Aboriginal name was Bordetar and she came from Elsie Station in the Northern Territory. My great-grandfather was Jock McLennan, the sanguine Scot, who was a drover on Elsie Station.

"Recently I went to Darwin so that I could immerse myself in my Aboriginality, meet up with family and get in touch with my spiritual essence. While there, I discovered I have relations that I never knew I had. When I was talking to my Uncles and Aunties I found out that I had relatives on Melville Island, and learnt so much about my family history. For me this bridged the gap. I have been standing on the edge and now that gap is closed and I can step forward because I know who I am. I am of the Kurrawa Larrakia nation. I wanted to stand on the land where my father was born."

Steven left school at the age of fourteen and went straight in to work as a boat-builder. He hadn’t had any formal education from that point until he came back to university in his mid-forties. From boat-building he moved into mould-making, and then into the arts which he has worked in for most of his life. For World Expo 1988 he worked on the white “human factor” statues around the Expo site and the giant insects in the Epitarse Forest. Steven has bronze-cast three Australian of the Year award recipients — Mandawuy Yunupingu, Alan Border, and Peter Hollingsworth. He has since lived and worked as an artist and sculptor in Thailand for four years, and in Hong Kong, China and North Korea. So Steven has lots of life experience and respect for cultural difference, which he describes as “a beautiful thing that we have to grab a hold of and understand”.

“I have travelled and experienced many cultures from all over the world. Those days are over. Steven Johns has now found what he has been looking for — education, so that this can lead me to guiding, protecting, and helping our Indigenous children today, for they are our future. I am currently enrolled in the Diploma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. This course has been a blessing and an awakening for me as it has made me more aware of the need for our children to experience the interweaving of Aboriginal spirituality within our new technological age of learning.”

Coming to ACU to study education was a completely new direction for Steven. “For me, having the opportunity to come to university was like a bolt out of the blue because there is no way in the world that I thought I would’ve ended up here.” And, although he had plenty of life skills, he was worried that he didn’t have any qualifications. After all, his past experiences of schooling were not positive ones. “Back in those days it was, ‘get out to the verandah, Johns!’ It was very difficult to begin with. Just being here was difficult. But I have always had a strong work ethic,
been adaptable, and this has helped me settle into my studies. I have been ‘going with the flow’. And I have found good support from lecturers and Weemala staff. Weemala is very special.”

Steven talks about the important connection with other Indigenous staff and students: “It is an unbreakable thread that runs through each and every one of us. It is so fine and beautiful and spiritual but yet it’s invisible.”

“The lecturers are magnificent, understanding, patient, forthright. They talk to you, not at you. They will not let you believe in something that is not true, they will say ‘Hang on, wait a minute,’ and they will make sure everything is crystal clear. They are forgiving, tolerant.”

Steven is now President of the Yelangi Indigenous Preschool and Kindergarten, Vice President of the Enoggera State School P & C, and past Chairperson of the Enoggera State School ASSPA (Aboriginal Student Support Parent Awareness) Committee. His goal is to complete the Diploma, and go on to the Bachelor of Education so he can be out there teaching. For him, this will be “a perfect opportunity to work with kids with learning difficulties, because I know exactly what they are going through. I know what it is like because I have lived it!”

To assist him with the financial costs of tertiary study Steven was awarded the Bill Ritchie Memorial Scholarship in 2003. Steven says the Scholarship “will surely be a valuable tool to support our children of the future”. This award was presented to Steven by Professor Muredach Dynan during ACU’s Indigenous Week. At the ceremony Steven and Kathryn Grant, the second scholarship recipient, surprised Professor Dynan by presenting him with a “Deadly Award” which acknowledged his commitment to Indigenous students at ACU.

In addition to his academic activities at ACU, Steven has taken a leading role in the installation of Aboriginal Art in the Indigenous Reflection Space.

His advice to other students trying to juggle a range of commitments: “You really have to draw on your inner strength … You have actually got to reach in there and grab it and bring that power up into your chest and up into your train of thought.”
I was born in Cairns in Queensland. I am the eldest in my family. I have a twin sister who is a detective in Alice Springs. I had a brother who was born a year after us in Cairns but he passed away when he was 14 and I was 15. I have a younger sister who lives on the Gold Coast. She was born in Dubbo, NSW.

My mother was born in Julia Creek, northwest Queensland, and my Dad was born in Lithgow, NSW. My mother’s family is from far northwest Queensland and her mother was removed from Lawn Hill Station near Mt Isa, and sent over to Palm Island. That is difficult because no one really knew where Grandma came from or whether she had any family. So we don’t really know much about her side of the family. My grandfather, who is also Aboriginal, is from Croydon in northwest Queensland.

My Dad’s side of the family is of English and Irish descent. They mostly live in Mackay, Queensland. As a child, I lived most of my life out in the bush and in small country towns. My Dad used to travel around doing various diamond drilling and construction type jobs so I went to about 15 different primary schools.

We moved to the Northern Territory when I was about 13. I lived out at Arnham Land at Kakadu National Park, just on the edge of the Billabong in a camp for a few years. Then we moved into Darwin but Cyclone Tracey had hit so it was flattened and we lived in a caravan and then a demountable. I stayed up in Darwin until nine years ago and then moved to Alice Springs and lived there for 8 years. I have three children aged 16, 14 and 12.

In the middle of last year my marriage broke up and I suffered from depression. I decided to move over here to Brisbane because I really wanted to finish my studies and my son has a dream to be the next Aboriginal professional golfer.

In Darwin, I worked for the government for about 12 years. I was doing system administration. I oversaw the Treasury computing, word processing and secretarial systems. I knew it was time to get out of the government as it was unchallenging. When I went to Alice Springs I listed with a workzone agency and they placed me in schools and I thought, ‘Far out — this is where I am meant to be.’ I worked with Indigenous secondary-age students at a Lutheran boarding school.

I started off doing admin support and then it branched off into absolutely everything. After three and a half years, I was approached by the Catholic school in Alice Springs and offered a job supporting Indigenous students. Within twelve months they offered me the coordinator of Indigenous education role. This was the most rewarding job I’ve ever had.

In the College, which goes from Transition to Year 12, there were approximately 120 Indigenous students. While I was there one of the Deputy Principals came up to me and said ‘You should be a teacher,’ and I said, ‘No, I can’t do that, don’t be silly.’ I loved school but didn’t think I could do a degree course. She said, ‘Come on, we’re gonna jump on the Net and see what we can find!’ I wanted to study at a Catholic uni because I was Catholic born and bred, went to Catholic schools wherever possible during my life. And when my brother died they did a lot for us and I always thought I would give something back.
So we got on and looked up Australian Catholic University and she found the Diploma Course. I liked the way I could study at home and only have to travel over for the block of lectures. It suited me, working and having children. And I have always seen myself as going back to Brisbane. It was a Catholic uni, it was with a Murri mob, and I said to her, ‘I don’t want to look at any others.’

I am looking forward to getting out and teaching for a couple of years. I see myself working in Indigenous Catholic education. I think I have a lot to offer Queensland education when it comes to Indigenous education.

At the same time, I really want to get into a class and have my own little babies for a couple of years. By my mid-40s, I might branch into administration or fulfil a dream of being a volunteer abroad, teaching in the South Pacific.

My family are so proud of me. I think too, that I am showing them how not to do it. You stick to school, you do what you want to do straight up. If you want to be a teacher or you want to be this or that, go and do it straight away. Don’t wait until you are 35 and have three kids. Just grab the opportunity.

My studying has had a domino effect. While I was studying I got my niece through Year 12. So, that was the first one out of all of us and our kids. Those around us start getting into courses too, because they see that you’re doing it and that you can do it. So I see that the effect will just keep going.

Be proud to be Indigenous and go for your dreams.

Those around us start getting into courses too, because they see that you’re doing it and that you can do it. So I see that the effect will just keep going.
Toni Brady-Phillips

Toni began a Diploma of Business Administration in 2002 and will graduate in 2004. “I found out about the course from my cousin. She did the Diploma of Business and graduated last year. Now she’s a mother with three kids and enjoys it very much.”

When Toni came to Brisbane for her final residential in October 2003 she brought along her baby daughter, Angelina Jo, who was then three months old. Toni also has a three-year-old, Natalia Louise, and her ability to juggle family and study has been an inspiration to her classmates. As she says, “when you have the commitment to University you have to sort things out.”

Although originally from Brisbane, Toni has lived in Cannonvale in the Whitsunday region for nearly two years. Toni has had to travel a long way for the residentials, but enjoys the off-campus mode of study. “I find it is good because I don’t like sitting in a classroom with a teacher just talking, talking, talking. It’s good when you are in your own personal environment and you can do it at your own pace.

Having two little children to look after means that my daytime revolves around them, and at night is when I do all my study. When I come to Brisbane for residentials I not only come down for Uni, but it gives me a chance to spend time with my family to catch up on things as well.”

“When I first moved up north, being so young and having a very close relationship with my family, I found it very difficult to be so far away, and wondered if I had made the right decision to be in a place where I did not know anybody. But, looking back, that was the right decision and I am very happy with life right now.

My parents are the best, without them I would be lost. They have guided me and my brothers and sisters right throughout our childhood, and are still there for us today. We were fortunate to have a very good upbringing. My parents don’t drink or smoke, and they came with us to dance classes and sports activities. It was really good because they focused all their time and attention on their children. As an Aboriginal family it’s not often you get eight kids finishing high school right through to Year 12.”

Before moving up north Toni did a Certificate 3 in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Traineeship through the Academy of the Darling Downs, as well as on-the-job training at Forest Lake College.

From the age of 18 she worked in schools for three years. “I got offered an opportunity to go up north and perform traditional Aboriginal Dancing, and I took it straight away. Unfortunately, three months into my new job the company went bankrupt, which left me without a job.

After going through all that, I decided to start a university course in Education and was able to receive credits from ACU. But, because the Airlie Beach area is based around business, I decided to do the Diploma of Business Administration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) instead.”

As well as strong family support when she
If you want to then do it. The only way you are going to get home is through knowledge.

comes to Brisbane, Toni also receives support from her husband. He is also studying, a full-time Diploma in Applied Science, long distance through the Gatton campus of the University of Queensland, and they support each other in their mutual goals.

“My partner works in a wildlife park in Cannonvale and I was working in an Aboriginal Didgeridoo shop. When I was working six days a week there I had a lot of time to study and complete all my modules, as well as getting my training in Business. Now that I have finished working things are a bit different. I’m at home and I have to try and get into a routine for myself and my younger daughter. My three-year-old daughter goes to day care two days a week, so that gives me an opportunity to work with my tutor and read my modules.”

Toni has been keen to take the opportunities that have come her way. “Maybe it is because I am from the younger generation, but the opportunities are there. Take advantage of the situation and use it and go higher in it and then you have no excuse. As long as I’m doing something for myself and for my family then I’m going to do it. I’m not going to back down from nobody.”

“I let any Aboriginal person that I speak to know that there are courses at ACU for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to study. I tell them what Weemala has to offer. I say, ‘If you want to, then do it. The only way you are going to get home is through knowledge. You have the brains, education is the key.’ That is how I see it.”
Karen

When Karen left school she didn’t consider going to university. “I didn’t think I was bright enough to go to Grade 12 let alone bright enough to go to university. I was never encouraged by anyone — not even discouraged — it was not even an option that was presented to me in any form. I didn’t have any role models.” Thirty years later, Karen is studying a Bachelor of Business part-time at ACU, and has become a role model herself.

Karen was born in Brisbane and her mother, an elder of the Quandamooka people, was born on Stradbroke Island. Her father is of German heritage.

Karen had worked in a part-time capacity before she was married. “After I was married and during the time I had my children I always worked in a clerical area, so I had a background in office administration. I went to Mitchelton State High School and I left school at Grade 10 and then went to TAFE for a year to further my typing and bookkeeping skills.”

When she was 40 Karen decided to return to study. She was encouraged by her sister, Joanne Claybourn, the Director of the Koobarra Kindergarten at Zillmere, who had made a similar journey. “She went and changed direction in her life, and so I saw that as an opportunity to do something as well. I knew that I had to make decisions for myself and the best decision that I could make to secure my future was to get an education.”

At Joanne’s suggestion, Karen contacted the Weemala staff at ACU and discussed the options for study. “I think the best advice they gave me was to do something that built upon and used what I already knew. And it has been absolutely true — having that base has made it so much easier in that it didn’t mean going back to square one to learn everything about something that I knew nothing about.

I had a good understanding of business administration — I just needed education to know how it could work better. I have been able to focus on areas that I didn’t know about — so I have been able to learn and grow and do something different, because I have learnt now that there is more to working in an office or having a business degree than just typing letters and answering the telephones — which I didn’t really know before.”

Karen’s big concern was whether or not she would be able to gain employment after she finished studying. “I was thinking I was old and unemployable and that is exactly how I felt. I felt at that stage that I didn’t have anything to offer to a prospective employer. That has just proven to be completely wrong. At the time I certainly didn’t know that it would make such a difference — and it has.”

Karen began getting good grades. “When you start to feel like you can achieve, your self-esteem seems to increase and you think ‘Oh gee! I can do that!’”

Karen originally worked in the family business, but after the business was sold she changed direction. She moved into a part-time
receptionist position. "I was getting more responsibility in that position; they asked me to do a little bit more and my hours increased. Then I took on a new role and that was with an Indigenous program that they had at the Department of Public Works where we supported Indigenous apprentices within communities throughout Queensland.

When I started doing that I could really see the relevance of the study to the job and the job to the study, and I could see where having a major in Human Resources could really benefit me in my work." Karen now works as an Indigenous advisor assisting the Department with issues relating to the Indigenous community. She also works closely with Indigenous apprentices.

“So I have certainly been very fortunate and have made every opportunity a winner. I would like to stay in Indigenous policy because it really is very rewarding and, even though you see a lot of problems, you can also see a lot of rewards as well.”

Karen has been balancing work, study and parenting, and had to cope with the loss of her mother in 2002. She has two children. Her son, Craig, is studying economics at QUT and a daughter, Jessica, is studying speech pathology at the University of Queensland. “I know that they are very proud of me. We would all sit down and do assignments together. I think that was very important.”

“I should also mention the support that I have had from Weemala, whether it be just to drop in to say hello to somebody or to ask a question, or ask somebody if they could look at an assignment. Or little things to make you feel like you have somebody to go to. It has been an enormous help. I don’t know if I would have been able to achieve what I did had I not had that support. If I’d just gone into the deep end — I might not have swum!”

Karen’s hopes for the future are “that my children have health and happiness, and my thirst for knowledge never wanes.”
In one of his first classes at ACU, Dean was asked what he wanted to do when he finished his study. Nereda White, the current Co-ordinator of Weemala who was teaching this class, remembers his response. He wanted to be doing what she was doing, completing a Masters degree and working in a job helping other Indigenous people become teachers.

Nearly ten years down the track, Dean is doing exactly that. After completing the Associate Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in 1996 Dean went to ACU’s Mt. St. Mary’s campus at Strathfield in Sydney where he completed a Bachelor of Teaching in 1998, and a Graduate Diploma in Adult and Community Education in 1999. At that time, McAuley campus was not offering the articulation into the Bachelor program.

Dean is one of five McAuley students who undertook cross-campus studies to achieve their qualifications, being supported by both the Weemala Unit in Queensland and the Yalbalinga Unit in NSW, and he has retained friendships with students and staff in both states. Dean is now engaged in a Master of Education by research through McAuley campus.

Dean came to ACU for its friendly atmosphere and supportive staff. An added attraction was that his wife Leisa was working in the Personnel Section of ACU at the time.

Leisa now works at the University of Queensland and she has supported Dean in his educational journey. With their children, Jessica aged 12 and Nicholas aged 7, Leisa and Dean live at Bracken Ridge in Queensland.

It’s a long way from Moree where Dean grew up. After completing Year 12 at Courallie High School Dean enlisted in the Australian Army. During his time in the Defence Force Dean was posted overseas to Malaysia, as well as serving in the Intelligence Section of his Unit in Brisbane. After electing to take discharge, Dean worked within the Department of Social Security as a Counter Assessor. It was at this time that he decided that he needed to do more with his career prospects and — just by chance — Leisa brought home information on a new course of study being considered at McAuley.

Dean is now working as a District Community Education Counsellor covering schools between West End near the Brisbane central business district, to Maroochydore on the Sunshine Coast, managing Indigenous Education Services in 37 high schools and 123 primary schools. He provides support to community education counsellors and Indigenous teacher aides in their work with Indigenous students and teachers.

In this role Dean has encouraged other Indigenous people to take up study. ACU has gained a lot of students through his recommendations and Weemala staff have had many course enquiries starting with “Dean Duncan told me to ring,” or “I heard about your courses from Dean Duncan”. Reflecting on why he chose to take up study, Dean says that coming to ACU “instilled a need to support my children through to tertiary level education to reach their own goals.” It also gave him the opportunity of taking responsibility for his own learning. For Dean, the best thing about ACU was the friendly staff and how the Uni took into account personal aspects of students’ lives outside of their studies. This was critical for Dean who worked full-time throughout his courses, while raising and supporting a young family. It is still
important to him today in his current role as a postgraduate student.

Dean’s Masters thesis is looking at the performance of Indigenous boys in the education system while they are in receipt of sporting assistance from professional organisations — an issue dear to his heart. Dean has chosen this topic because of his insight into how Indigenous boys react to opportunities granted to them by these professional organisations.

Dean hopes to convince both students and the organisations of the need for positive reinforcement of educational outcomes while the students are still pursing sporting goals. In that way we will see more Indigenous boys successfully completing studies through to tertiary level, while going on to forge great sporting careers. Through this study Dean hopes to demonstrate to professional organisations that Indigenous boys have a great deal to offer their chosen sports off the playing field as well as on it.

Dean is also looking at the possibility of travelling to the United States to look at the experiences of African-American and Native American boys in similar circumstances, and how their educational and sporting organisations are supporting them. With so many programs on offer to Indigenous boys, Dean hopes to develop a framework that professional organisations here in Australia may build on to support the students in the fields of both sport and education.

Dean has also been very active in pursuing his interests in educational fields. In 1996 he was invited with a group of students to participate in a cultural exchange that saw principals, deputy principals and teachers travelling to Japan. This opportunity served to further instil in Dean the belief that there are great experiences out there that Indigenous people should be accessing.

Being a keen sportsman, Dean has also used his work as an avenue to further his interests and participation in school-based sport. He has led a group of secondary students to Fiji to participate in an international schools carnival, as well as being active in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Schoolboys Rugby Union.

Currently Dean is looking forward to an opportunity of travelling as team manager to Argentina with the Lloyd McDermott Rugby Development Team, where they will compete against other international teams in a rugby carnival.

Dean ultimately hopes to implement a flexible framework within the education field that will assist in the academic progress of Indigenous boys who are also excelling at sport and to form strong relationships between schools and professional organisations on the placement of selected students. Dean envisages that these relationships will then be capable of supporting students in both the academic and sporting areas.
Aunty Audrey and Yasmin

“So what are you doing with your life? Have you thought about doing some study?”

For Aunty Audrey Evans, university wasn’t just a place to get a piece of paper, it was where you went when you wanted to change your life. “If I can do it so can you,” she would say with a cunning smile. Aunty Audrey would explain that originally she only went to Grade 4 at school, but following the death of her husband, David Evans, she knew she had to further her education if she was going to raise her three teenage children. At age 55 she went back to high school at Oxley Secondary College to complete her senior year. That was a big culture shock for an Aboriginal Elder from Longreach “who grew up on the streets, and was well educated in alcoholism, poverty and domestic violence”.

At first she failed to adjust and had to repeat all her subjects the following year. But study was her passion, and when she graduated from high school she went to Griffith University to do her Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities.

One of the many people she inspired was her daughter, Yasmin, who fondly remembers her mother’s influence.

I remember the day Mum got the news that she was accepted into uni, it was the same day I found out that I wasn’t accepted. While Mum had been working hard to get her Senior, I was busy socialising with my mates — I mean when you’re a teenager what would Mum know anyway? Now I’m in my thirties I realise she was a very wise woman. Mum earned my respect because she didn’t just tell me to go to university, she showed me how.

Like Mum I struggled with high school, in fact I repeated Year 12 three times! I once believed that people who went to university were “brains” and that I just didn’t have those brain cells. Now I know that university is like a magic trick, it seems impossible but once someone shows you how, it’s easier than you think. It just takes lots of practice.

University definitely changed both our lives. We started to see the world differently, and where our family belonged in that world was also different. Mum’s greatest fear was that she would end up a bag lady on the street when she was old. As she graduated, Mum realised that she wasn’t just a “stupid gin” like her father had always told her, but rather had lots to share with her family, friends, and community.

Following her first degree, Mum decided to do a postgraduate degree in Education. Our kitchen was turned into a classroom, my brother put a blackboard on the kitchen wall and Mum would spend hours talking to everyone in the family (including the cat and dog) about what she was studying.

The family would often laugh at how she got her teaching degree and the old age pension at the same time. However, she had no intention of retiring on a pension, as Mum was driven to teach others and soon started with Weemala as an ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) tutor and Lecturer in Indigenous Culture.
Again, it was because of Mum that I first became involved with Weemala as an ATAS tutor. Looking back I had no idea then just how important the people at Weemala would become to me and my family.

Many students were introduced to Weemala and ACU through Aunty Audrey; even when she was in hospital getting a breast scan she was handing another patient an enrolment form! Her ideas for Indigenous education were also shared with ACU National as she was an active member of the Weemala Advisory Committee.

Aunty Audrey wanted her life story to inspire others so she completed it as part of her Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. Sadly, Aunty Audrey passed away in 2000, only one month after completing her autobiography, Many Lifetimes.

This was an extremely difficult time for our family, but the support we received from Weemala and staff at ACU was phenomenal. It was this support that encouraged me to keep going and honour my mother’s spirit.

I now realise that her body may be missing but her spirit is still shouting loud and clear: “Education! Education! Education!” Thanks Mum, I’m so glad I listened.
The spiritual dimension is something that Indigenous people have to offer Australia.

Eddie Watkin

Weemala
The Spirit Within

This book is designed to celebrate the achievements of ACU Indigenous students, both past and present, the richness and diversity of their lives, and the amazing contributions they make to their communities. As such, it is an opportunity to reflect on the past and look forward to the future as McAuley campus relocates to its new site at Banyo. It is also a tribute to the work of the staff of Weemala, the Indigenous support unit at McAuley campus. Their dedication has played a large part in the stories presented here.