



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

INDIGENOUS COLLABORATION

2010

VISION AND
VITALITY

Lending a
helping hand

From strength
to strength

The magic
of storytelling

An ongoing
education

The best of
both worlds

Art with
a purpose

Cover:

Gomeroi gaaynggal – *Gomeroi babies* program
participant Maharlia Reid and daughter Shayliana.
Read more about this innovative collaboration on page 18.

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Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and Global
Relations) and Director, The Wollotuka Institute
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A message from
the Vice-Chancellor,
Deputy Vice-Chancellor
(Academic and Global Relations)
and Director, The Wollotuka Institute



Indigenous collaboration 2010 shares many stories of inspiration across the arts, academia and research. The stories traverse ages, cultures and communities. The achievements – large and small – of people from all walks of life can be found in these pages. An important thread tying them together is a genuine sense of health and wellbeing. Healthy approaches to life and activities that promote wellbeing.

Collaboration is increasingly recognised as important to the health of a community. While it is not an easy task and requires constant effort, healthy collaboration is an area of focus across the University of Newcastle and The Wollotuka Institute. Joel Wenitong – medical student, lecturer, hip hop artist and Indigenous mentor – is a great example of working across disciplines and fields. Read his story on page 4.

Supporting strong collaboration is a feature also of our teaching. The Wollotuka Institute has played a central role in the introduction of the Graduate Certificate in Business Administration specifically tailored for NSW Aboriginal Land Council Chief Executive Officers. The initiative is a collaboration across the University, GradSchool.com and the Land Council to build the skills of CEOs and promote good governance. Read about this exciting partnership on page 20.

Professor Kevin McConkey
Deputy Vice-Chancellor
(Academic and Global Relations)

The connection between wellbeing and art is well established. Our staff and students' artistic pursuits and achievements are a strong element of *Indigenous collaboration 2010*. The persuasive power of the tradition of story-telling through to the creative talents of Worimi artists from the Mid-North Coast highlighted in the Wollotuka Acquisitive Art Prize, for instance, point to the influence of art on wellbeing.

Physical health is also part of *Indigenous collaboration 2010*. Professor Roger Smith's collaborative work on the 'Gomeroi gaaynggal – Gomeroi Babies' program is investigating ways to achieve healthier pregnancies for Indigenous women. Read about the program and the difference it is making on page 18. The University of Newcastle has graduated more than half of Australia's Indigenous doctors. Read about two of our latest graduates and their interesting journeys on page 16.

Professor Nicholas Saunders
Vice-Chancellor and President

The 2010 edition of *Indigenous collaboration* speaks about and celebrates people realising their potential in many ways. Their stories demonstrate that a healthy outlook and approach to life can go a long way towards helping you reach your goals. The University of Newcastle is proud to have been part of their journeys.

Professor John Maynard
Professor of Aboriginal Studies
Director, The Wollotuka Institute

CATCH HIM IF YOU CAN

You have to be fast to catch Joel Wenitong. As a first-year medical student, lecturer, well-known hip hop artist and music producer, Indigenous mentor and father-of-three, he races from one commitment to another.

"I guess you could say I'm busy," says Wenitong, with a laugh. "But everything I do is connected so it's much easier to prioritise. Family, community, health, music. That's what my life is all about."

The 33-year-old dynamo inherited his passion for teaching, music and health education from his mother Deb, a teacher, and father Mark, a University of Newcastle-trained general practitioner.

Both his parents come from a long line of talented Indigenous musicians and, as a teenager, Wenitong was responsible for the sound and lighting at their gigs. He also plays a range of instruments including saxophone and bass.

"Mum and dad have been in a lot of different bands over the years and played everything from reggae to country," he says. "Music has always been part of my life."

Moving from south east Queensland to Newcastle as a 12-year-old so his father could begin his university studies, Wenitong turned to music to help him overcome a sense of isolation.

"I went from a school where 50 per cent of the students were Indigenous and I had a lot of family around, to a school of a thousand where I think there was me and a Sri Lankan kid who were dark-skinned," he recalls.

"I felt like the odd one out."

Hip hop has become the focus of Wenitong's musical skill and he is part of the award-winning trio Last Kinection, which includes his sister Naomi. Established in 2006, the hip hop group has supported international acts such as Public Enemy, Flo Rida and Diplo.

In 2009 Last Kinection was recognised with a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment and Community Award, aka Deadly Award, for Outstanding Achievement in Hip Hop and R & B. The trio is recording its second album and is set to tour in 2011.

Sitting alongside his Deadly Award is the Indigenous Collaborations Excellence Award from the University's Faculty of Health, which was presented to Wenitong in 2009 for dedication to improving the way nursing students learn about Aboriginal history and culture.

"I like to take an informal approach," he says. "We sit around in circles and I teach students about Indigenous culture. Health is very important to Indigenous people and the more informed graduates can be about the issues, then the better the system becomes."

Wenitong has a profound commitment to education – his own, and that of local Indigenous communities. In the mix of his commitments is that of documentary maker and he is regularly commissioned by Aboriginal schools and councils to create informative films about health and social issues.

"A lot of what I do comes back to health education and there's a real need to visit schools and reach out to young people. It's something I'd like to continue when I'm a doctor. The grass roots approach is very effective in getting messages across."

In the 2010 summer, when he will ease back slightly on his daily study schedule, Wenitong will be busy assisting the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council with public awareness campaigns focusing on hepatitis C and teenage pregnancy.

He says he owes much to his parents who have encouraged and supported his various endeavours, as well as fellow University teachers and students. "Mum and dad have always been there for me. Even now, dad helps me out with my medical study and I can ask for advice.

"For Indigenous students, being at university can be very full-on and many are away from their families for the first time. I suppose I want to step in and help in the same way my parents do for me.

"Whether it's tutoring, or helping them unload boxes when they move here, it's all about helping Indigenous students succeed."



“

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Karen Read's first experience of university in the early 1980s in Queensland was far from rewarding. Having left the routine and support of boarding school to study environmental science, the 18-year-old struggled to remain motivated.

"I just felt isolated and gradually stopped going to lectures," she recalls. "All of my friends at boarding school had been Indigenous and I felt like a misfit at university because I didn't know any other Indigenous students. I was the first person in my family to go to university and it was very difficult for them to understand what I was going through."

Read lasted six months and, in the 25 years since, has been busy raising her three sons and making their education her main priority. In 2010, with one son at the Australian Defence Force Academy and her two others in high school, she decided it was the right time to give university another go.

She enrolled in the University of Newcastle's Yapug program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who wish to gain admission to undergraduate degrees and has been transformed by the experience.

"When I found out about Yapug I loved the idea that there was a program at university just for Indigenous people," she says. "To be here and have role models all around me, the beautiful Birabahn building, the students of all ages from everywhere. I felt at home straight away."

"I feel a depth of understanding among the people at Wollotuka that comes from the shared experiences of being an Indigenous Australian. In just a short time, life has opened up for me."

In August, Read was appointed an Aboriginal Education Worker at a Port Stephens primary school, a part-time role she relishes. "If it wasn't for Yapug, I wouldn't have had the confidence to apply for the position or feel as though I had the capabilities to represent Aboriginal families in the education system."

In 2010, Yapug had its biggest intake of students and they came from further afield, including interstate. Coordinator John Lester attributes the program's growth to the increased support from senior Wollotuka and English Language and Foundation Studies management, as well as word of mouth.

The age range of students in 2010 is 18 to the mid-40s, and their reasons for enrolling are just as diverse.



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“We have mature-age students coming back for second chance educational opportunities,” says Lester. “Some, like Karen, have tried university in the past and the timing wasn’t right. They now want to prove to themselves that they can do it.

“A percentage of students want to reaffirm their Aboriginality and establish themselves as role models within their families.”

Lester emphasises that even with the support of Wollotuka staff, Indigenous students face ongoing challenges at university. “Indigenous students have a lot of added pressure, particularly because they’re often the first in their family to attend university. Many feel strongly about gaining a qualification so they can help their communities, which can lead to stress and anxiety. They don’t have the luxury of being average.”

Yapug is offered at the Callaghan campus full-time for one year or part-time over two years. Students study courses including Aboriginal studies, mathematics, information technology, law and Earth science.

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) provides qualified tutors to help students and, after completing the program, they can apply for entry to degrees including medicine, business, social sciences, nursing and teaching.

There’s no doubt in Lester’s mind that the program has the power to dramatically change the lives of students, and their families. “It only takes one Indigenous person to get a degree and a professional-level job and all of a sudden they’ve changed the circumstances for all of their future family,” he says.

“Education is pivotal in the emancipation process. It can break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and provides choices.”

For now, Karen Read is overwhelmed by possibilities. “I have a head full of ideas about how I want to contribute to helping my people,” she says. “I have a lot to say, I have a lot to learn and I feel I have a lot to give.”



“
One more important thing
– don’t let anyone tell you
that you can’t do this.
You can. ”

LENDING A HELPING HAND

As a child, Elaine Chapman received a strong message about education.

“My need to succeed came from my early years being raised by a non-Indigenous guardian who was very cruel,” she recalls, sitting in the sunlit Gibalee Centre on the Central Coast campus where she is Elder in Residence.

“If I came home from school with anything less than perfect marks, I was hit.”

Chapman’s mother, who had renounced her Aboriginality in order to continue working as the man’s housekeeper to be close to her youngest child, could do little to protect her daughter. When Chapman was old enough, she left her Sydney home to start a nursing career at Peat Island Hospital on the Hawkesbury River. She was just 17 and the only female nurse.

She says that it was her tough upbringing that led her to seek out the challenging role, but it was her love of nursing that then became the driver of her ongoing hunger for education. “I found a job that I was good at and no matter how hard it could be at times, I wanted to help people,” she says. “The first six months I was terrified, but nobody would have guessed. I just focused on doing the best I could.”

Four decades later, after working as a psychiatric nurse and then with young people with special needs, Chapman is still focused on helping people through her role at The Wollotuka Institute’s Gibalee Centre. The mother of two university-educated teachers, she can often be found visiting nearby schools, encouraging Indigenous students to aim high, as well as assisting Indigenous students on campus.

“A woman who is completing Open Foundation came to see me recently and she was a mess,” says Chapman, who has obtained a Bachelor of Community Management from Macquarie University and a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies from the University of Newcastle. “She didn’t know where she was going with her study so I sat and talked with her for about half an hour. As she was leaving, I stopped her and said, ‘One more important thing – don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do this. You can.’”

Feeling as though they don’t have what it takes to complete tertiary study is a common experience for many Indigenous

students, according to Chapman. “In general, these kids face the generational lack of education and opportunities. They’re often the first in the family to go to university and their biggest hurdle is pushing on without the academic support at home. Mum and dad might give them love and encouragement, but can’t discuss the details of an assignment they are struggling with.”

Chapman can vividly recall how intimidating those first few months at university can be and she is available to both students and staff to help make the transition more manageable. “When I was studying, I sometimes had to ask my children to help me interpret an assignment question,” she says, laughing. “It’s not shameful to need some guidance and that’s the message I want to pass on to Indigenous kids.”

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

In only its second year, the Wollotuka Acquisitive Art Prize (WAAP) has uncovered a wealth of Indigenous talent and shone the spotlight on the creative skill of Worimi artists from the Mid-North Coast.

"We were overwhelmed by the standard and range of work, which included paintings, photography, ceramics and mixed media," says the University's Art Curator, Gilleen Shaw, of the 2010 event. "We displayed 85 artworks and simply didn't have room to hang all of the entries. There is so much talent and what stood out was the mix of traditional forms and contemporary techniques."

WAAP Coordinator Liz Cameron, of The Wollotuka Institute, sourced the works from artists throughout New South Wales, with a strong presence from Forster, Taree and the Mid-North Coast. One third of the artworks were created by Worimi artists. Queensland and Victoria were also represented.

"We did a trip up the coast expecting to pick up 20 artworks and ended up with 150," says Cameron. "Indigenous work is often under represented on the east coast and artists are reluctant to hand over their work just to anyone because of copyright issues. It was important for us to meet the artists face to face and they were trusting of us because we were from Wollotuka."

The winner of the \$2,000 art prize, Aunty Linda Currie, a Worimi artist and long-time member of Forster's Tobwabba Art collective, depicted an emu in a traditional painting style. The unassuming mother-of-three was unable to attend the presentation due to illness, but Forster Aboriginal Land Council CEO Tim Kelly says her choice of subject is telling.

"Emus are very strong and quiet," he says. "They are also very protective of their nest, and that's like Linda. She is a very proud and protective mother of her three sons."

Currie, who enjoys painting native animals and plants, prefers to use natural, earthy colours. "Worimi artists like Linda tend to favour traditional methods," adds Kelly, who manages the internationally recognised Tobwabba collective. "They are very proud of their heritage and that comes through loud and clear in their work."

Taree artist Gina Varagnolo, of the Biripi people, won the \$1,000 Interrelate Family Services Award for her painting of campfire dancers. "It really builds up my confidence," she says. "I've only been painting for seven years and it has really helped me say things about my life."

The People's Choice Award was presented to first-year University of Newcastle Fine Arts student Casey-Lee Wright, pictured below, for her abstract painting *The Journey*. The 26-year-old was inspired by her move from the small town of Aberdeen to Newcastle to study.

"It's been a very full-on year, but I've loved it," she says. "I've been exposed to so many new things and the program has opened my eyes to so much. I'm enjoying ceramics and sculpture, which I'd never really done before. I'm trying as many new techniques as I can."

Wright's winning art work also represents the emotional journey she has experienced this year with the support of staff at The Wollotuka Institute, whom she regards as family.

"I've been discovering more about my Indigenous heritage and I'm gaining more insight into who I am and where I've come from," she says.



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THE MAGIC OF STORYTELLING

Once upon a time there were two very determined women who saw an opportunity to use storytelling to celebrate the cultural diversity of the Central Coast campus.

The Gibalee Centre's Annie Vanderwyk, whose Ngarrindjeri aunties from Meningie in South Australia shaped her cultural beliefs with ancient stories, contacted University librarian and professional storyteller Julie Mundy-Taylor in July 2008 to advance her idea.

Vanderwyk wanted to know if Mundy-Taylor was interested in discussing the possibility of organising a cross-cultural storytelling session for the upcoming Kids' Day Out event, which is held annually at the Central Coast campus and attracts more than 10,000 local residents.

"I jumped at the chance," recalls Mundy-Taylor, whose childhood was spent listening to her Scottish paternal grandfather tell tales of the kings and clans of his birthplace. "Stories are a unique part of cultural expression and I thought Annie's proposal was wonderful."

The Cross-Cultural Storytellers project was born and in the past two years it has created a platform for the celebration of the Central Coast campus' diverse student population, which represents about 40 cultures. The organisers have also collaborated with dancers from the Indigenous troupes Yamma Kurra, National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Association Dance College and Minni Minning Kaiwarrine, who have enhanced the storytelling sessions with interpretative movement.

Sub-Saharan Africa was the first region featured in the program and Vanderwyk and Mundy-Taylor met regularly with the older members of Yamma Kurra so they could brainstorm ideas. "The cross-cultural exchange of ideas happened at this level as well as between the performers and audience," says Vanderwyk.

In 2009, the storytelling centred on South-East Asia, drawing on the University's links with Singapore through its presence there. Boosted by a Central Coast campus research grant, Vanderwyk and Mundy-Taylor engaged as a cultural consultant Singaporean Kiran Shah, the internationally renowned professional storyteller. Shah and Mundy-Taylor shared the storytelling and the pair drew on traditional stories from Bali, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia that were a blend of traditional legend and cautionary folk tales.

"It was amazing to see the response from the audience," says Vanderwyk. "Listening to a story brings people together and there are common themes or morals expressed across cultures. It's a very important art and I'm passionate about making sure it continues."

In the past two years, audiences have included preschoolers and their parents, University and TAFE students, Central Coast staff and the general public. "We've shown that stories aren't just for the littlies," laughs Vanderwyk.

The organisers felt particularly proud when the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Nick Saunders, invited the storytellers to perform at his end-of-year presentation in 2009 at both Ourimbah and Callaghan. It was much-deserved recognition for a program that has taken dedication, creativity and a commitment to cross-cultural collaboration.

"It has been inspiring for me," says Mundy-Taylor, who first began an official role as a storyteller 26 years ago while working at Bankstown Library. "Annie said to me last year, 'You've been doing a course even though you didn't know it – working with blackfellas'. And she's right. I've learnt so much."

The program has provided a forum for two units of the Central Coast campus – Gibalee and the library – to work together. "It has forged strong links, which has flowed positively into other areas of mutual service provision as well as strengthening communication," says Mundy-Taylor.

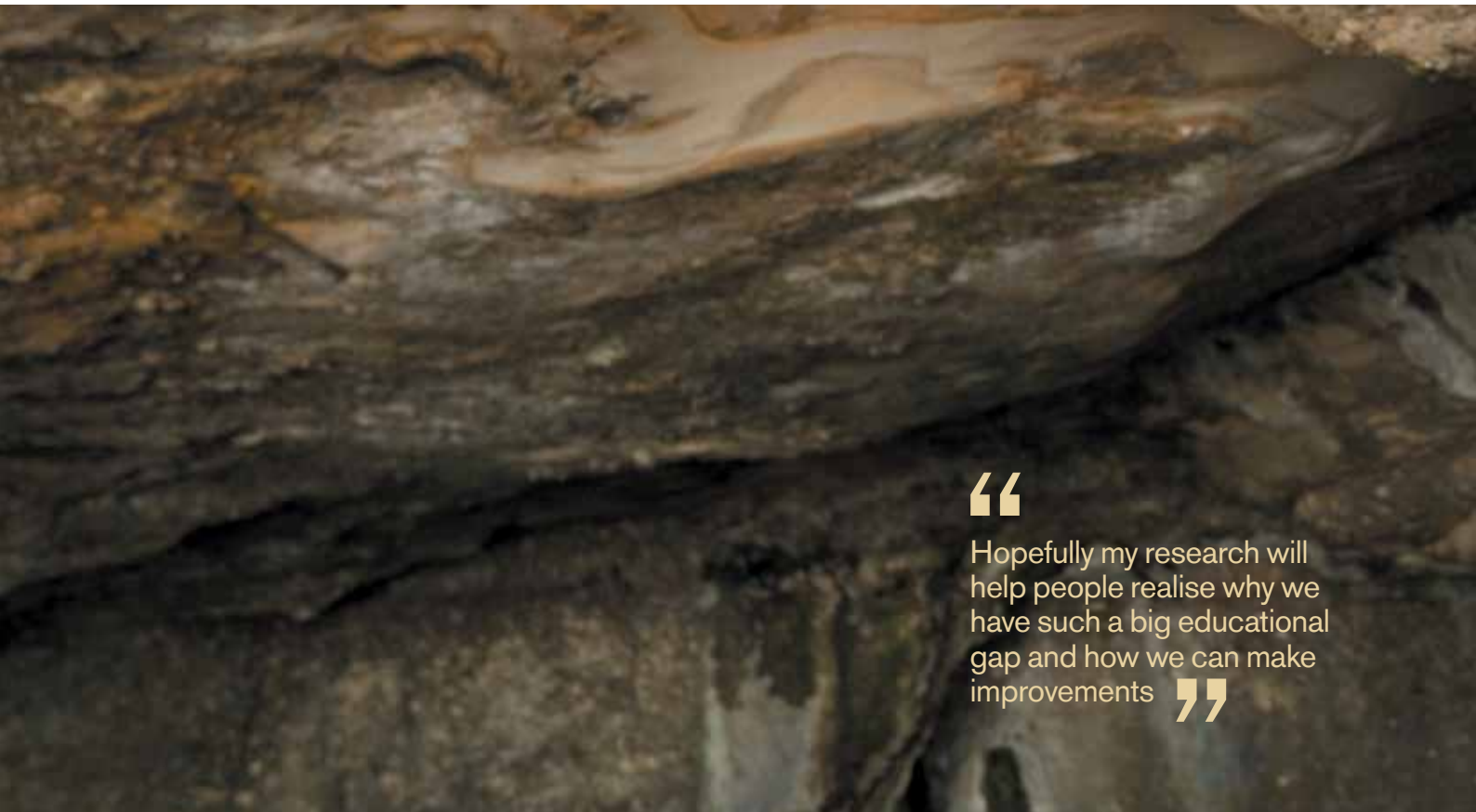
"The program has also provided us with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the roles of each unit and identify ways we can support each other."

Thirteen Indigenous student performers have also had the opportunity to work with both service providers and gained valuable experience working with the storytellers. "The program has never been just about reading or telling a story," says Vanderwyk. "We've wanted to make sure we engage the senses. By including movement, we've been able to give added meaning to the sessions."

"Storytelling is an exciting and unique way of expressing cultural harmony. You can't underestimate its power."



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“

Hopefully my research will help people realise why we have such a big educational gap and how we can make improvements ”

AN ONGOING EDUCATION

Growing up in Forster, Laurel Williams spent hours roaming the picturesque stretch of coastline between Bennetts Head and Pebbly Beach near the home where she was raised by her grandparents.

After leaving school at 15, a decision that was readily accepted both by the education system of the day and her family, Williams, a descendent of the Biripi people, was not expected to achieve much beyond walking down the aisle, which she did at 17.

Today, sitting at the dining table in her Lake Macquarie home with a painting of her beloved childhood stomping ground on the wall behind her, Williams describes her “second life”, which began in 1976 after the end of her 20-year marriage.

“It all started with a call from my sister-in-law who was involved in the NSW Aboriginal Education Committee (now the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group). A delegation was heading to Victoria to observe their community model,” she recalls. “Bob Morgan got sick so they had a spare seat and she suggested I pack a bag and go along.

“That phone call changed everything.”

Williams, who was then living in Western Sydney as a single mother-of-two, observed that education held the key to opportunities for Indigenous people. For the first time, she saw how “silly” it was to have left school so young when she enjoyed learning and achieved good results.

“No-one encouraged me to stay on and continue my education,” says Williams, who emphasises that the 1950s didn’t offer women many options apart from low-level jobs, marriage and childrearing. “After getting involved with the NSW Aboriginal Education Committee, I was surrounded by people who wanted to make a difference for Aboriginal people.”

Williams quickly made up for lost time and enrolled in a secretarial course so she could use her newly-obtained skills to lend a hand as a volunteer supporting the work of Evonne Bolton at the NSW Department of Education’s head office.



“She was Aboriginal Education at the time,” recalls Williams. “Evonne’s role was to help establish Aboriginal content in the mainstream school curriculum.”

From there, she accepted a job at Karuah as one of the first Aboriginal Teachers Aids (ATA) and completed the associated training program at the University of Sydney. Frustrated at being kept out of the classroom by photocopying and book covering tasks – “Schools didn’t quite know how to integrate ATAs” – she decided to become a teacher.

Williams graduated from the Aboriginal Rural Education program at the University of Western Sydney as a primary school teacher in 1988 and has since worked in three tiers of education – schools, TAFE and Higher Education. She has completed a Master of Education through the University of Wollongong and is now in the third year of a PhD at the University of Newcastle.

Williams moved to the Hunter region in 1994 to complete a 12-month secondment as a senior lecturer in the then Department of Social Work. “The department wanted to include an Aboriginal perspective in their content so I developed a booklet and a series of videos to use as teaching tools for lecturers,” she says. “I only came for a year, and I’m still here.”

She went on to become the University’s first head of the Department of Aboriginal Studies and was appointed acting director of Wollotuka in 1997 before becoming director in 1998 for two years.

Her current research focuses on the impact of Aboriginal community on education provision in NSW and the life member of the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group is busy completing field data collection and analysis. In her spare time, she is also writing a book detailing her 35-year career in education.

“When I was younger I never imagined this would be my path,” she says. “I had no one to encourage me to further my education. It’s the same for many Aboriginal people who have not had the opportunities to develop academically. This impacts on employment and social interaction, and feeds the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.”

“Hopefully my research will help people realise why we have such a big educational gap and how we can make improvements. I have to pull myself up at times and acknowledge that inroads have been made with education, particularly at the University of Newcastle. But we can always do more.”



THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

When people discover Sophie Shinnick's interest in Aboriginal Studies, they are intrigued. "I explain that there's no limit to how much you can learn," says Shinnick, who topped the state in the 2009 Higher School Certificate in Aboriginal Studies. "There's so much cultural information to take in, as well as history and politics. It's never dull."

Her passion for the subject did not waver in early 2010 when deciding what University degree to study. "I was keen to do law but I felt torn about letting go of Aboriginal Studies. I was excited to find out I could do a combined degree covering both my interests over five years at the University of Newcastle."

Shinnick is the only first-year law student also completing the Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies program, which does not bother her in the slightest. The 19-year-old enjoys being with students from other faculties in the informal, discussion-based learning environment at the award-winning Birabahn building.

"I'm in two very different learning environments with the combined degree but they work really well together. I find I can intermesh information from both programs and make the most of links between the subject areas."

"I'm interested in native title and I am able to get the different perspectives – the legal and that of the Indigenous communities affected. The best way to learn about Indigenous culture is for community

members to share their stories, which The Wollotuka Institute organises really well.

"You can read the statistics, but nothing has an impact like hearing about the Indigenous experience firsthand."

Shinnick attributes her interest in Aboriginal Studies to media coverage of Indigenous issues as well as the dedication of her high school teacher at the Hunter School of Performing Arts, Gregory Douglas. "Mr Douglas is not Indigenous, but he taught in a culturally appropriate way and was always in contact with the Aboriginal community in Newcastle," she says. "I suppose I'm following his example because I'm not Indigenous either, but I feel strongly about learning as much as I can about the issues."

Shinnick's family have encouraged her interest and, in turn, she has broadened their awareness of Indigenous culture by sharing her experiences. "I attended the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's awards dinner with my mother and she had never been among so many Aboriginal people," says Shinnick. "It was a great night and it meant a lot to be able to share it with her."

With plans to become a lawyer specialising in land rights, Shinnick also wants to help raise awareness about other Indigenous issues such as health. She also understands how important the role of education is in changing misconceptions, including her own.

"I thought the Aboriginal political scene didn't really commence until the 1960s with the freedom rides and referendum campaign," she says. "Within the space of one lecture by John Maynard my opinion completely changed. He talked about Aboriginal political activism commencing the day Europeans arrived in Australia."

Shinnick is optimistic about what can be achieved to bridge the gap in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. "With culturally appropriate community consultation there can be positive changes," she says. "We're all human, we have things in common and I think it's a matter of making an effort and being open minded."

A LIFE-CHANGING LEGACY

She may have forged a successful career as an obstetrician and gynaecologist, but the late Dr Beryl Collier never took her education for granted. Her parents had worked hard to enable their daughter to pursue medicine, making sacrifices so she could attend the University of Sydney.



Later, through her work in rural New South Wales and her voluntary role with the Central Coast Reconciliation Group, Collier became acutely aware of the barriers Indigenous people had to overcome to access higher education.

"Beryl was concerned that many people in the community couldn't access educational opportunities because of a lack of financial support," says long-time friend Betty Leach, who is an executor of Collier's Will. "She may have been a doctor, but she was a teacher at heart and deeply committed to education. She wanted to make sure that after she was gone, something could be done to make a difference."

Following her death in August 2009 at the age of 81, a bequest of \$300,000 was left to the University of Newcastle Foundation for a scholarship in perpetuity for Indigenous students at the Central Coast campus.

The inaugural Beryl Collier Indigenous Scholarship will be awarded from 2011 and will provide an Indigenous student with \$6,000 per annum for the duration of their degree as well as \$5,000 annually for payment of HECS fees. There is also provision for an Honours year if appropriate.

"Beryl left it to my discretion to decide how to use the money and I know she would have been very excited about the scholarship," says Leach. "If Beryl hadn't had such poor health in the past couple of years, the scholarship is something she would have established herself. She would have been too modest to put her name to it, but it is important to us that her name will carry on."

Collier also bequeathed a collection of 10 Indigenous artworks to the Central Coast campus that will hang in the dining room in the Pro-Vice Chancellor's offices at Ourimbah, which will be renamed the Collier Room in honour of the bequest.

Describing her friend as passionate, strong-willed and "a lot of fun", Leach says Collier believed that education could make the world a better place. "What set her apart was her commitment to making a difference. She wasn't one to just talk about it."



She may have been a doctor, but she was a teacher at heart and deeply committed to education. She wanted to make sure that after she was gone, something could be done to make a difference ”

SCHOLARSHIPS PROVIDE A BOOST

The Central Coast Reconciliation Group has given four Indigenous University students from the area a much-welcomed financial boost in 2010.

The recipients of the \$500 grants include marine biology student Elle Gardner, primary and art education student Paige Brandy, Kurt Dimmock who is completing a double degree in business and commerce, and nursing student Krystal Ronning.

"The grant will help me buy text books and a uniform for lab classes," says Ronning, a single mother from Gorokan who works as an enrolled nurse at Wyong Hospital. "I am the first to go to university in my family. The grant is a great idea as it brings home the importance of education, and the amount of support there is for Indigenous students."

Ronning says the money will also help her reach her goal of improving the health of the disadvantaged.

"I am very interested in the health of mothers and children, which is why I want to focus on midwifery."

Chris George, of the Gibalee Centre, says Ronning's application stood out to the judges as there were few Indigenous midwives working in the health system.

MEDICAL GRADUATES GIVING BACK

For the first demanding year of the Bachelor of Medicine program, Leila Usher kept waiting for someone to tap her on the shoulder and question what she was doing.

“I felt as though I didn’t deserve to be studying medicine,” says the 26-year-old. “It took me a while to accept that I had as much right to be there as anyone else and I just had to give it a go.”

And give it a go she did. As well as the often overwhelming workload, Usher also had to juggle parenthood, which included a period as a single mother. “I had my first child at the end of first year and then another baby in fourth year. Mum and my sisters came to the rescue and, after my second son was born, my partner became Mr Mum and managed the home front. It would have been impossible to get through the program without his help.”

Now enjoying an internship rotation at John Hunter Hospital in obstetrics and gynaecology, Usher can reflect on the events that set her on the path to becoming the first university graduate in her family and one of three University of Newcastle Indigenous medical graduates in 2010.

“I worked part-time during high school and didn’t really cope with my study load,” recalls Usher. “I’ve got a lot of illness in my family – diabetes and cardiovascular

disease – I thought about nursing so I could help them. It wasn’t until a friend mentioned she was enrolling in the Yapug program that I decided to seriously consider going to university.”

Usher studied chemistry and Aboriginal studies through Yapug and was surprised by how much she enjoyed life on campus. “The support provided by The Wollotuka Institute made the difference,” she says. “Everyone was very encouraging and it was tutor Joel Wenitong who suggested I apply for medicine rather than nursing and I got in. Apparently I could aim higher!”

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) was essential to Usher’s success. “A lot of my tutor’s effort went into calming me down and helping me process all the information,” she says. “The big challenge for me was working out what I needed to focus on because there was just so much to absorb.”

Fellow Indigenous graduate and former Australian Navy medic Beimop ‘BJ’ Tapim recalls a Navy doctor telling him, “The information isn’t hard, but there’s lots of it”. That same doctor convinced Tapim to enrol in the University’s Bachelor of Medicine program because of its widely-respected support of Indigenous students.

Like Usher, Tapim owes much of his success to the encouragement and support of those around him. “It takes time to develop skills and confidence,” says the 34-year-old who hails from remote Murray Island in the Torres Strait. “After a while you build up your knowledge, but in the beginning it’s very, very daunting. I often thought I wouldn’t make it through.”

Tapim also juggled parenthood with his study load: he and his partner have six children between them, including twins born in May 2010. Family has inspired him to stay focused, particularly after struggling in the third year of his studies.



"I became complacent and lost my motivation," recalls Tapim, who is completing a rotation in neurosurgery at John Hunter Hospital. "I failed a course, which was a wake-up call. It was important to concentrate on the big picture and I wanted to set a good example to my family so I got back on track. The support of University staff also helped me regain confidence."

A senior lecturer in Indigenous Health, Anita Watts, says the University has a proud record of supporting Indigenous students throughout their medical studies. "It is exciting to add three graduates to the 140 Indigenous doctors already practicing in Australia. The University has now graduated many Indigenous students in the medical program, which is very impressive."

Both Usher and Tapim feel strongly about giving back to their communities by using their medical skills to assist in Indigenous

health programs. Usher is considering a career in either paediatrics or obstetrics and gynaecology while Tapim has not ruled out working in health policy.

"I think it's important to think about creating change on a bigger scale," says Tapim.

"I still need to decide whether I'll be more useful working in a community, or helping shape how we address the significant health issues Indigenous people face."

“

It was important to concentrate on the big picture and I wanted to set a good example to my family so I got back on track. The support of University staff also helped me regain confidence ”

“

They can come along to the art studio with their children and family members, so they feel relaxed and can connect with the other pregnant mothers. We take a low-key, informal approach, especially with the educational aspects. The women will be painting while a paediatric physiotherapist chats to them about a baby's developmental milestones. We don't enforce a particular structure ”



ART WITH A PURPOSE

The bold and colourful painted plaster casts of pregnant bellies created by expectant mothers in Tamworth represent a distinctive program focused on the health of Aboriginal babies and the wellbeing of mothers.

The 'Gomeri gaaynggal – Gomeri Babies' program is an innovative collaboration comprising two parts: a scientific investigation led by Professor Roger Smith from the University of Newcastle, and an ArtsHealth program funded by the Thyne Reid Trust and delivered by Dr Kym Rae of the University Department of Rural Health to Aboriginal women.

After three years of consultation with the local community, Gomeri Babies was launched in February 2010. It investigates ways to achieve healthy pregnancies for Indigenous women who are twice as likely as non-Indigenous women to give birth prematurely and 40 times more likely to have babies with renal problems.

The program, which is located in premises near the Tamworth suburb of Coledale, supports the scientific research by providing a welcoming environment for expectant mothers and their families to participate in a range of creative and educational activities.

“The women we see in the program are often quite young and don't feel comfortable attending antenatal groups run by hospitals,” says Tamworth-based program coordinator Dr Kym Rae.

“They can come along to the art studio with their children and family members, so they feel relaxed and can connect with the other pregnant mothers. We take a low-key, informal approach, especially with the educational aspects. The women will be painting while a paediatric physiotherapist chats to them about a baby's developmental milestones. We don't enforce a particular structure.”

The encouragement of Indigenous artist and elder, Aunty Pearl Slater, also helps the young women relax. “She is very creative and the women turn to her for assistance,” says Rae. “She's a quiet presence and respected by everyone.”



Complementing Slater is non-Indigenous artist Andrea Bruno, pictured above, who teaches the women a variety of artistic techniques and helps boost their confidence. “She bounces around with fabulous ideas and the girls feed off her energy,” laughs Rae. “There’s a lovely balance.”

The plaster casts that were created by some of the women show how successful the ArtsHealth program has been. Each expectant mum proudly offered up her protruding belly to be covered in plaster to form the blank canvas for her artwork.

A translucent area made from fibreglass in the centre of the cast enabled the projection of ultrasound images of the unborn babies. Each exhibit has been painted and tells a unique story. Leaves are a common motif and represent growth; dots suggest interconnectedness and represent the spiritual world that influences most Indigenous art.

Intrinsically linked with the art program is the scientific research that is examining predictors of premature delivery, fetal growth and renal development at birth.

The study records the nutritional status, immunological profile and renal function of participating Indigenous mothers and the ultrasound profile of the unborn baby’s kidneys throughout gestation. The women are also surveyed on their exposure to cigarettes and racism, as well as their psychological stress, which are thought to be factors that lead to the preterm birth of small babies.

The Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Health, Professor Nick Talley, who has provided funding to support the Tamworth base for Gomeri Babies, believes the impact of the program cannot be underestimated. “We have both an opportunity and responsibility to do more to improve Indigenous health,” he says. “This initiative is a good example of a novel approach that is valued by the Indigenous community and has great scientific potential.”

For Rae, who has developed friendships with many of the women attending the art studio, the impact of the collaborative program has been far-reaching. “Our mums are more confident and are trying new things,” she says. “Some of the women could never have imagined having their artworks on display and yet they’ve been included in exhibitions in Tamworth and Newcastle.”

Rae is hopeful that the women’s new-found confidence will help them become more comfortable approaching health professionals for assistance. “In the longer term, I hope they are able to take home what they learn and put it into practice, becoming role models for other women in their community.”

Professor Smith leads the Mothers and Babies Research Centre within the University of Newcastle’s Priority Research Centre for Reproductive Science. He also leads the Hunter Medical Research Institute’s (HMRI) Pregnancy and Reproduction Research Program of which Dr Rae is a member. His research is supported by grants from HMRI including Sparke Helmore / Prime, Thyne Reid Charitable Foundation, Kiriwina Investments, Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation and Hunter Children’s Research Foundation.

PARTNERSHIP PROVIDES PERFECT LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Learning on the job has always come naturally to the CEO of the Karuah Aboriginal Land Council, David Feeney, but that hasn't stopped him taking advantage of a unique university course to gain a formal qualification.



The University of Newcastle through the Faculty of Business and Law and The Wollotuka Institute, GradSchool.com and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC), have joined forces for the first time to offer Australia's first Graduate Certificate in Business Administration specifically tailored for NSWALC Chief Executive Officers.

So far, 25 participants have commenced the course, which was launched in May 2010. By the end of 2011, 45 CEOs will have been sponsored by the NSWALC.

"It is the best idea," says Feeney, who has nothing but praise for the 18-month online program. "Being a CEO is an enormous responsibility and you are accountable to your community, as well as government. I can relate to a lot of the issues because I'm involved in them every day, but now I'm learning how to look at different contexts."

GradSchool.com's General Manager of Business Development Jodie Davis says that the NSWALC wanted to boost the skills of its management staff who often

have years of experience, but have not necessarily undertaken tertiary study. "It is a new experience for most of the participants, but they are making the most of the opportunity," she says.

The CEO of the Tamworth ALC, Fiona Snape, had only ever studied at TAFE before enrolling in the program and was nervous about the transition to university. "It was a little daunting at the start and I was a bit hesitant," she says. "Now I've settled in I think it's fantastic. We're learning about topics we can relate to in our day-to-day work."

"I'm determined to finish and I'm keen to pass on the skills I'm learning to other staff."

The program provides a blend of academic knowledge and professional skills tailored to the roles and responsibilities of the CEO position. Participants complete four subjects and teaching is provided by the Faculty of Business and Law, with additional support offered by The Wollotuka Institute.

Once they complete the graduate certificate, participants can go on to complete a Master of Business Administration.

"The course has opened my eyes," says Feeney. "I'm enjoying learning about organisational and cultural structures then putting it in an Aboriginal context. Being CEO is tough because you're trying to juggle everything – social and cultural issues as well as managing money and working with all the government departments."

"We've needed this course to help us gain more skills. It couldn't have come at a better time."

The University of Newcastle

For more information about the articles in this publication please visit www.newcastle.edu.au/institute/wollotuka

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