

# ALFABET

THE ALF'S MID-YEAR REVIEW NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2017

In this issue:

## BOOKS TO THE NORTH

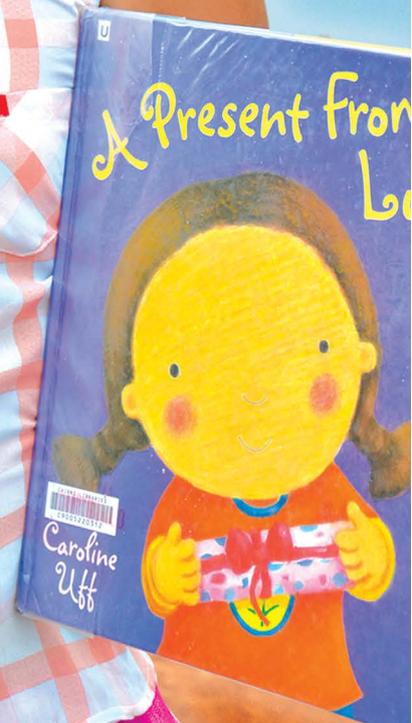
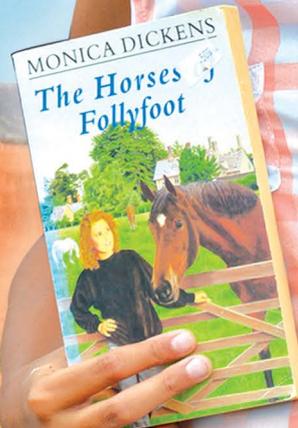
The very latest on the ALF's Northern Australian Books Project supporting schools in remote and regional NT!

Also:

A Melbourne Family's roadtrip around Australia supporting the ALF!

An interview with artist and ALF stalwart, Janet Curtain

PLUS fun for the kids!



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# CEO'S REPORT

Dear Friends and Supporters of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation,

The first six months of this year has been a very dynamic time for the ALF. We have launched our Northern Australian Books and Library Project, which aims to support over one hundred and twenty schools in Northern Queensland, Northern Territory and North Western Australia. This is a really important program as some of these schools are very small and very remote. Distance is a tyranny and even quite large government schools find the conditions very daunting. We have reports of some schools with as many as one hundred students with only 50 or 100 books in their library. Similarly, some schools don't even have a designated library (or a place in a classroom that could be a library). As well as the difficulty of transporting the books there, the very harsh climate, particularly the wet season, is not kind to paper. We are also offering each school up to five hundred dollars as a library grant to enable them to extend bookshelves and other equipment needed for a library. This is a wonderful program and I do hope that you will be able to support us in its development.

Another important development has been the extension of our afterschool tutoring and

mentoring program in Western Victoria and Southern South Australia. Ever since the Victorian Government decided to close small and remote schools in regional Victoria, it has been a struggle for Aboriginal families to educate their children. Some schools are as far apart as 80 or 100 kilometres. Whilst this does not affect families in the big centres such as Horsham or Hamilton, it's very tough on those in outlying areas. This tutoring program will enable basic literacy to be provided for students who only go occasionally to school, or not at all. We think it's a model that can be used all over Australia.

A special program that has been most successful for more than ten years is our Literacy/Heritage Camp. Originally these camps took place over a week and usually during school holidays, nowadays, we usually have at least two a term and we base them on the weekend model. As well as four hours a day of literacy tutoring, students

receive several sessions of Heritage and Cultural studies from parents and Elders. It is important that we all recognise Indigenous culture and support its wonderful heritage.

Thank you again for your great support, we really appreciate all that you do for us. We are especially grateful for the donations that enable us to undertake our programs, and without that support we would not be able to succeed in helping improve Aboriginal literacy.

Dr. Tony Cree,

**CEO**



Bacchus Marsh  
Coordinator, Sue Bacon  
with Dr. Tony Cree

MEET THE TEAM:

# JANET CURTAIN



Janet Curtain lives in Ballarat and works in Western Victoria, producing paintings and murals at schools. Twice a term she attends the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation camps and teaches Indigenous art to our students.

The combination of literacy studies and Aboriginal heritage and culture has been pioneered by the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. An important part of this process has been the wonderful support of Aboriginal teachers, Elders and parents at the camps.

As well as being an artist and a great teacher, Janet is also a mother and grandmother and all her family have been involved in Aboriginal literacy in the Ballarat area over the past ten years.

An interesting aspect of Janet's paintings are the combination of old and new ideas. While she often paints traditional subjects, she does not mind using modern techniques and modern painting methods. Consequently, it is possible for many young Aboriginal people to get involved in painting

and other forms of art. Many students say that they had never thought of painting until they came to Janet's class. She has made a wonderful contribution not only to the Aboriginal Literacy/Heritage Camps but also to the lives of young Aboriginal Australians.

# Janet recently spoke to us about her unique approach to painting, her childhood and piecing together her Indigenous heritage.

Can you explain the significance of Australian art and why it's so important to this country?

It tells a story of the black man's way of living. We see it from a different angle to the white man.

What are the main features of traditional Indigenous art?

The colours and the dot and the symbolism.

Are their recurring motifs and symbolism in Indigenous art?

Sometimes - for example, there are footprints, little figures, etc. There are also little symbols that you can work in like walking tracks along a road, water wells, rainbows and the rain.

What are their main features that distinguish contemporary and traditional Indigenous art?

The colours: We didn't use blues and purples. So traditional Indigenous art mostly use earthy tones.

How were you introduced to dot painting?

I did a 12 month cultural course at uni. I was shown crosshatching and dot painting and after a few months, the teacher told she me she couldn't teach me anything else! I was disappointed!

So would you say it comes instinctively to you?

I dream. That (pointing to the painting on opposite page) was a dream I had. I do dream my art work. I know that sounds weird! When I do it, it's like I'm doing a meditation.

What's the most important thing to keep in mind when dot painting?

The consistency of the paint so the paint doesn't peak. Some paint's a bit thicker; you couldn't do it with oil paint. I use acrylic because that was the paint of the day, basically. You can also water it down to a consistency that won't peak.

How long does it usually take to create a piece?

It depends what I'm doing. If I do crosshatching in it then it can take up to three hundred hours. Most would take about thirty hours, but it's fun.

Can a non-Indigenous person create dot paintings?

They can do a dot painting but they can't call it an Indigenous dot painting. We can

show them how to do it and they can do dots in their painting, that's fine, but don't try to call it Indigenous dot painting because it's not going to happen!

You lead many of the cultural activities at the ALF's Literacy and Heritage Days. What's the most enjoyable part of the day for you?

I enjoy the people and the kids. Doing the dot painting and showing them that, "Hey, don't let teachers tell you you can't do art", because I was told my paintings were rubbish.

Instead of putting kids down, you build them up, you help them and you encourage them. And these little kids; they love getting in there and playing with paint. And it's just helping them with their culture. I just love doing the whole lot with the kids, actually.

Why is it so important for children to learn these cultural skills?

To know their heritage. I only found out twenty-one years ago my Grandpa was Aboriginal and once I found out, a lot of things made sense to me. I used to do weird stuff when I was a kid and I couldn't work out why! My brother used to go walkabout from the orphanage - couldn't work out why! Now we know: It's in our blood. And now he goes walkabout for a living because he's a truckie!

How do you remember your own experience growing up in the orphanage?

Not nice. But I didn't let it beat me. I was told by the teachers that I couldn't draw but I said, "No, I can draw! Just because I don't do it your way, doesn't mean I can't draw."

But I always knew I was a bit different. All the white kids - they all thought I was nuts, but I wasn't! The funny thing was I never hung around with the white kids in the orphanage, I only hung around with the black kids.

There were lots of children from migrant backgrounds, known as the Forgotten Australians and I grew up with many children of the Stolen Generation. A lot of them ended up taking their own lives.

Why is literacy so important for children?

Knowing what they can achieve! And reading and finding out information can help you become a better person. Literacy is part of humanity! It doesn't matter what language you speak, it's still literacy. I wish I could learn Wurundjeri! That would be interesting, wouldn't it?

And Wurundjeri - is this the tribe you are from?

Yes. Down Footscray way but it's a big area of Melbourne, Wurundjeri.

How did you make this discovery?

A lady in Menindee told me; her name was Mira - Auntie Mira. My maiden name was Thornton and her daughter's name was Thornton. I would hear her calling after her daughter and one day I turned around and said, "My name is Thornton!" She replied, "I know, you're part of our tribe. We've been looking for you lot."

I said "What?!" and she said, "Yes, as soon as I saw you, I knew where you were from!"

She told me that many years ago the tribe had split and they had lost contact. I thought, "You bloody beauty! Now I know a bit more."

But I remember looking at my Grandpa - I called him Popeye. He died when I was eight, but I always used to think, "Why don't I have a sun tan like you?" I never twigged that he was Aboriginal! I just thought he had a nice sun tan! I know that sounds weird but I didn't see colour like that.

How did you feel when you made this discovery?

The day I found out, it was like, "Ah! That's why I do that! And that's why I do that!"

I also found out on my mother's side, there's Maori. I say, "I've been hit with the black stick twice but I've come out lily white!" That little fighting bit, I reckon that's the Kiwi!

What improvements are needed to help Indigenous students at school?

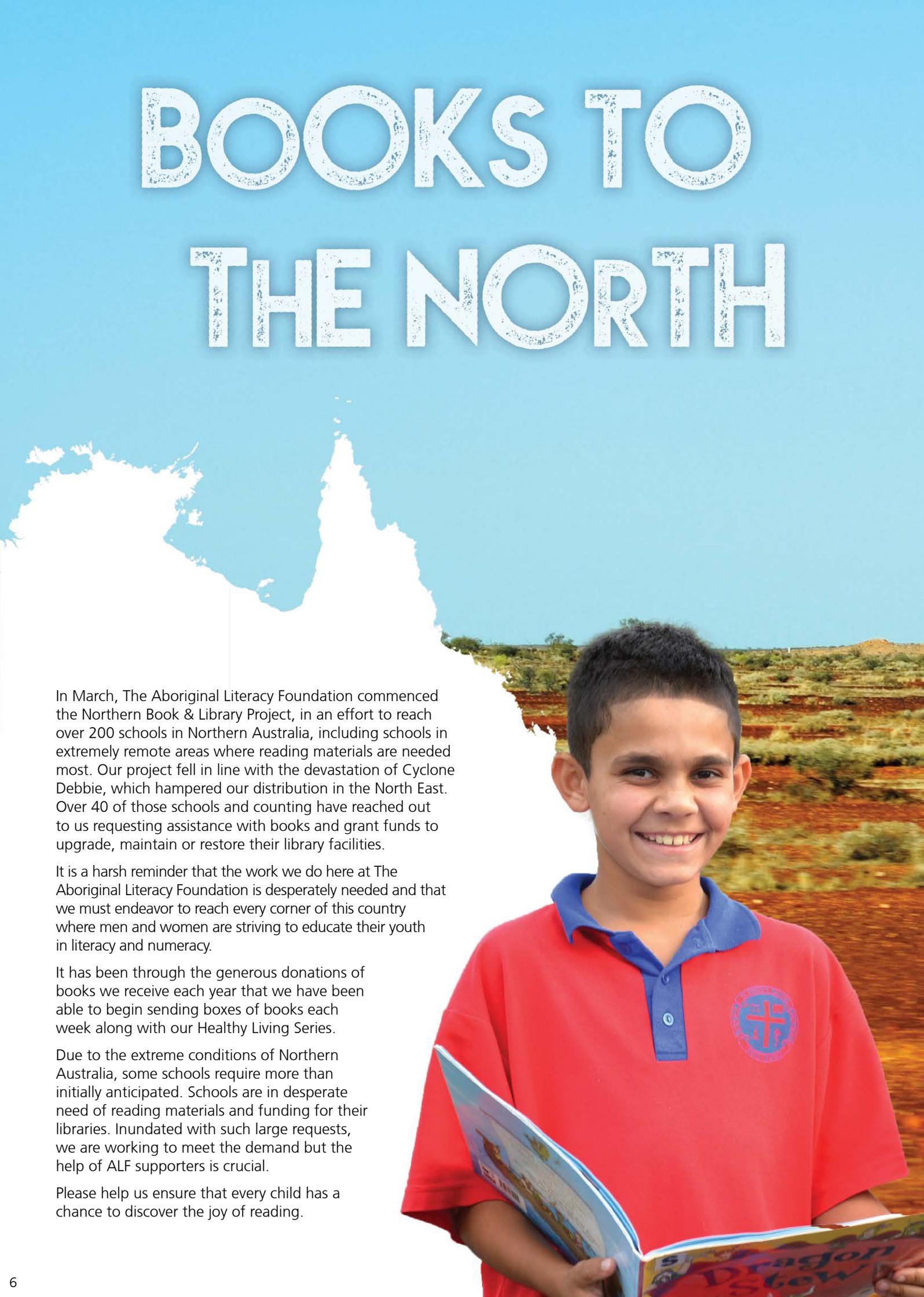
I think they need to know a bit more about the Aboriginal history. I know we have people in schools helping Indigenous students and that's really great, but to teach non-Indigenous students, too, because there's not only black kids here, there's white kids there, and all different nationalities.

For years, Indigenous people were cut down and look what was still happening in the sixties with the Stolen Generation. They need to know. If we can educate them all, it would be for the better.

How were you introduced to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation?

Around the time I discovered our Indigenous heritage, I told someone who must have known Tony (ALF C.E.O.) and Tony got in contact with us. The rest is history! You've been putting up with me for bloody years, haven't you?!

# BOOKS TO THE NORTH



In March, The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation commenced the Northern Book & Library Project, in an effort to reach over 200 schools in Northern Australia, including schools in extremely remote areas where reading materials are needed most. Our project fell in line with the devastation of Cyclone Debbie, which hampered our distribution in the North East. Over 40 of those schools and counting have reached out to us requesting assistance with books and grant funds to upgrade, maintain or restore their library facilities.

It is a harsh reminder that the work we do here at The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation is desperately needed and that we must endeavor to reach every corner of this country where men and women are striving to educate their youth in literacy and numeracy.

It has been through the generous donations of books we receive each year that we have been able to begin sending boxes of books each week along with our Healthy Living Series.

Due to the extreme conditions of Northern Australia, some schools require more than initially anticipated. Schools are in desperate need of reading materials and funding for their libraries. Inundated with such large requests, we are working to meet the demand but the help of ALF supporters is crucial.

Please help us ensure that every child has a chance to discover the joy of reading.



# ON THE ROAD WITH THE ARCHIBALDS

We set off in April on a 4 month family trip across Australia. Our route was to take us north from Melbourne, past Lake Mungo and the Dig Tree, across to Uluru and traversing the Gibson Desert to the Pilbara, and then sweeping north through the Kimberley. Our 4 children, aged 6 to 13yo, were excited, not least to be having a term off school, but also with the prospect of seeing so much more.

The Land Cruiser and camper trailer were crammed with everything we needed, and emergency gear we hoped we would not. We were also very pleased for one crate to have a dozen packets of books supplied by ALF for delivering to Aboriginal community schools on route. As well as the students being able to benefit from the materials, we would have an opportunity to interact with

the communities, beyond looking through car windows and filling the fuel tank.

At the time of writing, after 7,000 km, we have reached the Pilbara. We have passed very different schools. Regional centres like Mildura and Broken Hill are on a larger scale and obviously different worlds from remote communities like Kiwirrkurra in the Gibson Desert. But there is no sense that the support and resources are less needed.

It has been an enlightening and successful exercise for our family. Although the books were generally at a level able to be read by our 6yo, some have been delivered to secondary schools where the students' first language is not English and it was clear that they would be useful. And some communities live in such obviously

challenging circumstances that all support for education is sorely needed.

Our visit to some places unfortunately coincided with school holidays, but we arrived at others in the middle of a busy school day, and we were able to chat about the school and the needs of the students. Often, the reputation of ALF had preceded us.

We have been very pleased and grateful to be able to add this dimension to our trip. Hopefully our deliveries have also helped in building the profile of ALF in its work, beyond what might otherwise have been the arrival at school of a parcel in the post.

**Chris Archibald**



# PROGRAM IN FOCUS:

# BOOKS FOR LEARNING

Since 2011, one of the most successful programs we have run is Books for Learning. This program has brought us into contact with wonderful people around Australia – all of whom share a passion for youth education.

It would not be possible without the involvement of our supporters, with tens of thousands of books donated every year. Understandably, people are very reluctant to throw away the books they or their children have cherished and this program allows these stories to be read and enjoyed once again!

We work with a number of organisations that specialise in family support and foster care. We are always glad to work with organisations who can direct the books to where they are most needed. Notably, in the past 6 months, we have 100 sets of our Healthy Living Series to Division of General Practice in Lightning Ridge, Queensland and 20 sets to VACCA in Western Victoria.

We also send many books to schools around Australia. Michelle Cockie, the Indigenous Liaison Officer also initiated a project at Forest Hill Primary School, which we supported with 20 sets of our Healthy Living Series.

Currajong State School in Qld with over 125 Indigenous students has a similar project which we also supported with sets of our Healthy Living Series and over 200 books.

Families also benefit from Books for Learning: One mother in Queensland whose son has a learning disability recently contacted us for assistance. We put together a literacy backpack with books according to his interests, in particular, rugby and motorbikes. We received the following letter:

“Thank you so much for the books. My son loves them and has been reading them. He has even been describing the stories to me which is a huge step in the right direction. I can't thank you enough.”

Books for Learning gives us our broadest reach across Australia. You will have read earlier of our Northern Territory Books program. According to some studies, only 39% of people in very remote communities have access to books. It sounds unimaginable but we hear stories that show for some, it's a reality. One such instance was a one-teacher school with only 32 students, cut off by waters flowing to Lake Eyre, the school had only 16 books in its library. We immediately supplied the school with 200 books and a library grant to follow.

It is incredibly rewarding work, and we hope you continue to support this program.

## Why is reading to children so important?

It is accepted that the two most significant factors in improving Indigenous literacy are school attendance and early intervention in literacy. Unfortunately, most Indigenous children fall behind their peers before beginning Year 1. This often leads to deep self-esteem issues as children come to see themselves as the 'dumb kid'. After many frustrating years of playing catch-up, it's not difficult to see why many of these children find themselves disengaging from their education.

It is a fact that children under the age of seven, read to four to five times a week can raise their literacy age by six months. A child read to every day can raise a their literacy age by a whole year! It has also been shown that being read to has a greater impact on a child's cognitive development than their parent's level of education.

Making books available to Indigenous children and instilling a joy of reading is a gift - it empowers them as individuals and unlocks their potential.



# BOOK FOR LEARNING PARTNERS

Books for Learning has brought us into contact with many like-minded organisations. Two such examples are The Discovery Book Club in Perth and Djerriwarrh Health Services in Western Victoria.

Every six months, the DBC send a parcel of books to Indigenous children in care. Their regular interactive programs, resourced with books from the ALF, are specifically designed for early intervention literacy assistance, aimed at lifting participants' skills, reading confidence, and inspiring them through social leadership and mentorship.

Djerriwarrh Health Services focus on promoting a message of healthy living. They support Indigenous families; providing dental checks and linking families with health services and support programs.

At our Melton Homework Club, they have provided dietitians, who have taught students how to make a nutritious meal to feed a family of four, for only \$7.50.

Last year, Djerriwarrh Health Services launched a new program focusing on a child's early development called Koolin Balit Babaneek Booboop – which means 'mother-child' in the Woi-wurraung language. We will be supporting this program by providing our Healthy Living sets to all playgroups and primary schools participating in the program.

## HEALTHY LIVING SERIES

You may often hear about the Healthy Living Series. This is a children's book commissioned by the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. It was designed to engage Indigenous children's interest by providing a greater sense of inclusion in the stories. It is written from an Indigenous perspective and depicts relatable settings – all promoting a message of healthy living.

Illustrations were created by renowned Indigenous artist Bibi Barba and Such is the popularity of this series that we hope to expand this concept to older age groups in the near future.

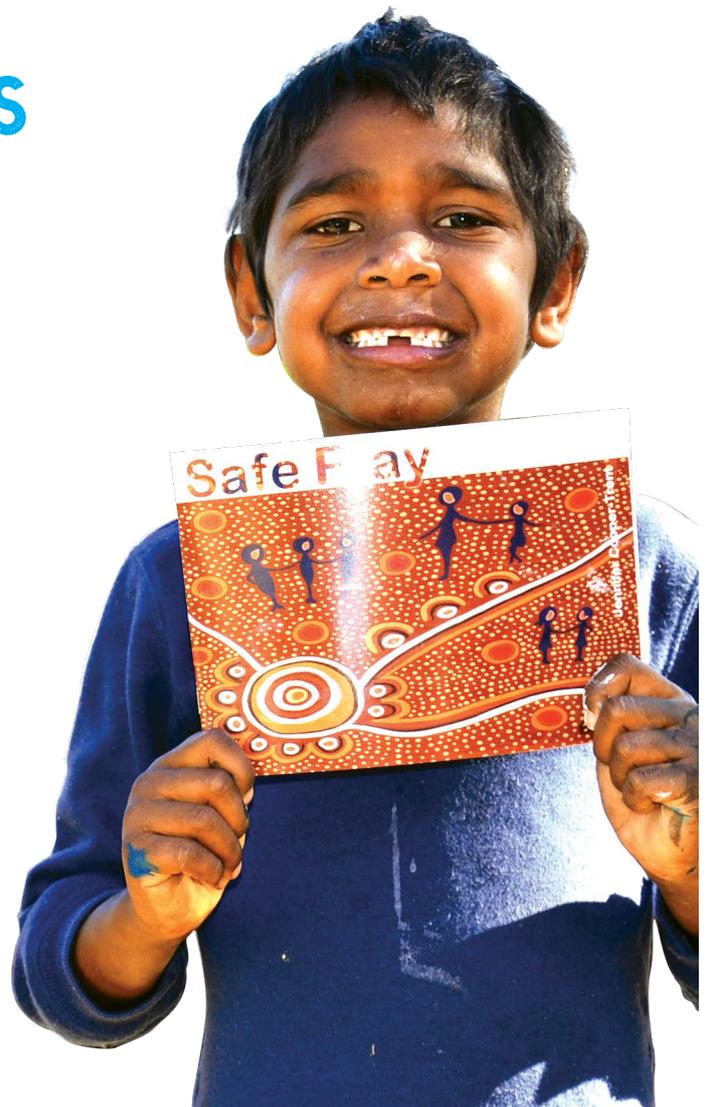
### Thank you

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation receives tens of thousands of books from individuals, families, schools or organisations. We also benefit from the work of partners and volunteers.

Some particular efforts we would like to acknowledge were **Amy Briggs** from Kingswood Amnesty Campus who personally collected 400 books and held a fundraiser to have these books couriered to our warehouse.

**XOUM Publishing** recently donated 14 boxes of their brand new Ghostworks and Number Crunches books.

We would also like to acknowledge **Justine Hall** and Golden Key Swinburne chapter volunteers who recently sorted and packed over 40 boxes to be dispatched in our Northern Australian Books and Library Project. We always enjoy the participation of Golden Key societies and appreciate the enthusiasm they bring to our volunteer days.



# PROGRAM UPDATES

## LITERACY AND HERITAGE CAMPS

For the past twenty years the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has been holding Literacy/Heritage Camps during the school holidays. The theory is that students improve their literacy skills more successfully if it is done in an engaging and systematic way. Most literacy tutoring has been done on a weekly basis of one or two hours. Whilst this can be beneficial, the advantages can be lost in the time between tutorials. Another factor is that the tutorials are usually held after school when the students are tired and often disinterested. It is hard to motivate students, especially primary students at the end of a long day.

The first camps were held with funding from ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) and were based at Ballarat University. In those days the camps were for seven days and the students moved into the University residence. The principles were that students worked better in the morning and with other Aboriginal students. It was also soon found that afternoon activities based on Aboriginal culture helped the process. We invited Elders and parents to take classes on everything from storytelling to weaving mats, making spears and painting. It was a very positive move to have parents and Elders involved in the camp. Finally, we introduced a motivational activity that we felt all the students would enjoy. We tried various sports including football, basketball and judo, but it turned out that what they really enjoyed was horse riding and anything that involved the open air.

Twenty years later we still run the camps, but it is no longer possible to hold them for a week at a university or similar institution. Nowadays, we hold the camps on weekends and usually twice a term. They are very popular with students, parents, Elders and Aboriginal Organisations. Over the past twenty years, two thousand students have attended our camps and many now have achieved excellent academic outcomes and often hold good jobs, often in the Aboriginal bureaucracy. We rely heavily on our supporters to fund the camps and we are always grateful for the support. From time to time we are able to invite our supporters to attend camps.



## DIGITAL LITERACY HUB

The Digital Aboriginal Literacy Hub is a wonderful project that will help thousands of Indigenous children in remote schools to have access to books, magazines and even video material.

An important aspect of the Digital Aboriginal Literacy Hub is its Indigenous Language supplement (ILS). This will provide children, whose first language is not English to have access to the very latest reading material. Another aspect of the Indigenous Literacy Supplement will be the preservation of Aboriginal languages – there are still over 100 Indigenous languages that have a speaking population. It is vital that they are protected. The ILS will play a key role in this important area.

The ALF is proud to be a partner with the Wellington Foundation of Boston U.S.A. Without the Wellington Foundation's support, it would not be possible to complete this work.

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