

# ALFABET

THE ALF'S MID-YEAR NEWSLETTER

**WINTER**  
2018

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 **ABORIGINAL**  
LITERACY FOUNDATION

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WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this newsletter contains images of deceased persons.

# CEO'S REPORT

This has been a wonderful start to the year. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has had considerable success in two main areas: Our Northern Books and Library Project and our Literacy and Heritage Camps that are enjoying their 25th year.

Our Literacy and Heritage Camps were part of a paper read at the World Literacy Summit in March. Many countries were represented by their literacy organisations and much comment was made on the Camps as a way of promoting literacy in Indigenous communities. As will be noted in the feature article in this month's ALFABET, the Camps were not unique to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation but had been used by the Navajo First Nation people in North America.

They have been enormously popular with Indigenous students who really enjoy getting together and studying with their own community. An important feature has always been the opportunity for parents, Elders, and guardians to teach traditional heritage skills. These have been as varied as the making of mats from native flax, the telling of traditional stories and painting. The important thing is that all these activities celebrate Indigenous culture and have an extremely positive affect on the students and their studies.

Our Northern Books and Library Project has caused interest world wide and was even mentioned in the recent CHOGM Conference. One of the great things about this program is seeing the way children around Australia have responded by bringing their own books or holding book drives at their own schools: This connection between students is very special.

I'm also so glad to have met so many of these schools and supporters through the course of this program.

In 2018, we are sending books and library grants to remote schools in the Cape York and Northern Queensland area and we look forward to another encouraging response from our supporters.

An important new development has been the ALF Distance Education program. This program is specifically directed at remote schools in Northern Australia who have difficulty in providing a full range of subjects and academic levels: Many schools have only one teacher and up to twenty or thirty students. In such instances, the teacher is expected to cover every area of study from Prep to Year 12. This program provides a digital platform for students to have face-to-face tutoring with their teacher, often many thousands of kilometres away. We feel this has the

potential to help many remote students and teaching staff.

We look forward to a wonderful six months ahead. Thank you to all our supporters for your ongoing interest and generosity. Our work would not be possible without your support.

Best wishes,

Tony Cree

CEO



# STEVEN JOHNSON IN MEMORIAM

Steven Johnson played a crucial role in the development of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation – a relationship which began in 1993. Steven met ALF CEO, Tony Cree through the ATAS Program (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) which arranged for qualified teachers to tutor Indigenous students. From early discussions on Indigenous education strategies came the formation of Aboriginal Literacy Heritage Camps and ultimately, The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. Steven was a great champion of education for Indigenous kids and a great supporter of all Indigenous causes. He is sadly missed.

Steven's wife, Heather recently spoke with us to reflect on Steven's life and legacy.

## How did you meet Steven?

He lived next door to us in Carlton. I was probably seven and a half or eight. He was literally 'the boy next door'.

He was stolen when he was three and became a ward of the state. The only reason I met him was that he was hiding in the hay loft (at his mother's house). He'd broken out and used to do it regularly. He'd hide in the hay loft and I'd sneak him food. When his mum came home and found out, he'd get growled at and then she'd hide him back in the hay loft.

## At that age, what were your impressions of Indigenous people and their treatment at the time?

I didn't know people were Indigenous. I had always been around black people and I didn't see colour. Melbourne at that time, in the 50's and 60's, was very multicultural. It seemed every block had 170 nationalities on it.

Adults worked side by side with each other. It was multiculturalism – though it wasn't a word back then! We just survived.

## Since then, how have attitudes towards Indigenous people and issues changed?

I think people are more aware. They have a much better understanding than in the 50's: Nobody talked about the Aboriginal side, and never around children. It was never in

the news, they didn't advertise how poorly we treated people. It wasn't until most of the Stolen Generation were in their 30's that most of the extreme drama started to enter their lives because of the trauma and their experiences as Stolen Generation kids.

I know one gentleman, who is now 56. He's just had his last bowl surgery from surgery damage that was done to him as a child in Ballarat, where he was placed.

Just the sheer terror of it! Can you imagine being ripped out of your parents' arms and taken somewhere they spoke a foreign language, and everything you do is wrong?

Everyone it affects differently, and Steven was rebellious. He

was a rebellious person. He marched for 'Burn the Bra', Women's Rights; all those things.

## Steve as an Elder was a highly respected member of the ALF team and in the Indigenous community, what is the role of an Elder?

Quietly to advise. Over a coffee and a cigarette, a lot can be achieved. And Steven found that going outside and sitting down somewhere worked better for many people. Most of his work was with the Stolen Generation and he helped them a lot. Because a lot of them weren't dealing with their experiences, and a lot of them still aren't dealing with it today.



**What value did you both place on education?**

Very highly. Steven didn't read until he was 19 – he could read 'John and Betty' because he memorised it, but he couldn't read a book.

A man taught him to read using a Stephen King book of all things. 12 months later he sat for his HSC and took out the highest score in Victoria. He had a brilliant mind but young Aboriginal children, don't seem to move forward as I see other children (in the current education system).

Depending on how you approach them, many 'picture think'; so, they have to see it as well as hear it. And when an Elder tells a story, they draw it on the ground. They are transferring an image you can see in your mind and giving you the verbal information.

When Steven began to learn, he didn't stop, he was like a big vacuum cleaner. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how children learn just as long as they do learn.

**With regards to Indigenous students, are there certain things which could be implemented that would help them through their education experience?**

Facilities like the ALF tutoring centres. A lot of the parents are not up to sitting down and reading with the kids. Their skills are not there, so for those people, it's really beneficial having a place they can come.

**Tony and Steve worked on the Literacy Camps from 1993. They ran for a week in those years, what are your memories from those times?**

Fun. It was Steven and I, Tony and 'the troops' during the day and we'd have up to 15, 20 kids. They loved bushwalking at night and Ballarat Uni has a lovely section down there they can walk through and lots of animals live on the grounds, so they had a bit of fun with that.

From the location of the Uni, we were able to take them out and show them places on that side of the town, and there was no time factor.

They did tutoring in the morning and had a lunch break. Then in the afternoon we'd go to Lal Lal and take the backtracks and see the scarred trees.

Once they had dinner, it didn't matter if we came back in the dark, they loved it. But at least we didn't have them climbing out windows and running amok!

**How do you think education standards have changed?**

They've gone down. Teachers are expected to be social welfare workers, then they have to manage over fifteen students which is fine if five of them don't need help and the other ten aren't needing a lot of help. However, if you have over fifteen students, then once you take out lunch breaks, settling time, morning tea and afternoon tea, you're not able to spend much time with them. We should have a teacher's aide in each classroom, or one between two. One person can really only do one job well.

**How important is it for Indigenous children to learn their heritage?**

Exceptionally important. A lot of the children that Steven and Tony worked with actually had a very good grasp of history, heritage, food and plants. Unfortunately, it rarely seems to be passed on to their children. They're working people in a white man's world. They're not camping weekends and they live in very modern houses. There's still cultural interaction; and they're taken to dance groups and youth groups, but for the littlies, there's not a lot.

Steven took our kids out every day. We lived in the bush and they knew if they got stung, what plant to use, what root to use and what to avoid. Further North, the plants indicate what's fishing, what's running, what's now moved to this zone for feeding. It's no different here but if you ask any of these children, they would be hard pressed to tell you.

I have so much stuff in Steve's paperwork. I haven't thrown any of it away but I worry down the track that it will be lost. And paperwork does get lost if it's not put together and managed. That's how we lose history.

Ultimately, history is what you build your future on and you attempt to not make the same mistakes. But you should know where you come from and have an understanding of why it is you live or do what you do.

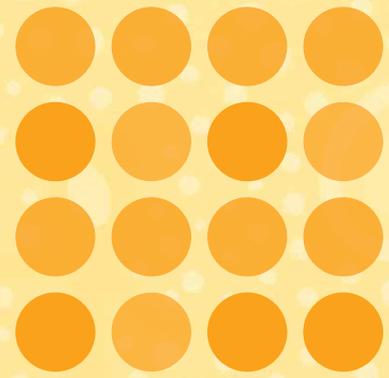
*Left: Horse riding at a Literacy Camp in Ballarat.*

*Right: Tony Cree, with Anne Patmore-Cooper and Steve*





# 25 YEARS OF LITERACY AND HERITAGE



In 1993, The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation heard about the success of Literacy Camps used by the Navajo Indians in Arizona as a method of raising literacy levels. It was found that Indigenous Northern Americans worked better in a culturally secure environment, especially if this took place in the form of a camp.

The University of Arizona in 1992 had researched these programs and had found that they achieved outstanding success.

Around that time, Tony Cree and several other academics at the University of Ballarat had become interested in Indigenous education. The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) was approached to find out whether they would be willing to support a similar program for Indigenous students in Western Victoria. Tony Cree came into contact with Steven Johnson from the

Aboriginal Co-op in Ballarat. Steve had four children, all at primary school, and he was concerned that they may not be achieving their full potential under the present educational arrangements. Several other Aboriginal families indicated they would be interested, as well: The Williams from Smythesdale, the Ryans from Creswick and the Coopers from Mt Pleasant. Other students joined individually. The first Camp have approximately 20 Indigenous students, at least 8 parents and 6 qualified teachers.

The Camp took place in the Easter holidays at the Mount Helen Campus at the University of Ballarat (now Federation University). One of the dormitory buildings in the students' residence was used for accommodation and an arrangement was made for meals to be provided at the Student Union, which was about 200 meters away. Although the accommodation and food had to be paid for at cost price, the University provided classrooms and sporting facilities. ATAS covered the cost of teachers.

The Camps also had the support of the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) who were interested to see whether this North American plan might translate into something similar for Australian Indigenous students.

At the beginning of the Camps, students undertook testing to determine their reading age and track their level of improvement over the next 7 days.

Every day started in the same way; after breakfast, there would be a 4 hour session

of literacy tutoring (wherever possible one-on-one basis) with teachers. Various literacy computer games were also introduced in the tutorial sessions, which in these years, was before the common use of internet and laptops.

In the afternoon, recreational activities were provided by the University. This included swimming, use of the gymnasium, football, basketball and horse riding. The riding was an immediate success and has been a part of the Literacy and Heritage Camps ever since.

After recreational activities, the Camp was handed over to parents and Elders to undertake heritage studies. These included story-telling, dancing, the making of native flax mats and bags, the carving of boomerangs, woomeras and even spears. Many of the Elders in the community also had a background in traditional languages and were able to pass on some really important oral traditions.

As well as learning cultural heritage skills, the Elders and parents really enjoyed the opportunity to play a central role in Indigenous students' education.

At the end of 7 days, the testing indicated that the average improvements in literacy level (on the Schonell scale) was 2.1 reading years. This roughly equated with the results recorded at the Navajo Camps.

When the students returned to school after the break, several teachers made contact with Tony to say how delighted they were with the improvement in their students.

The program was subsequently written up in several educational journals and also in the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation publication 'New pathways in Aboriginal Education'.

In recent times, instead of the full week, Camps have been held over a weekend, although the principle remains the same: To create an environment that fosters learning; both academic and cultural. An environment that pays respect to Indigenous heritage and fosters a sense of self-worth among the students.

The Literacy and Heritage Camps have been one of the unique exercises in Australian Indigenous education. Over the years, many students who participated in the program have gone on to graduate from University or TAFE and often they have credited their involvement with ATAS and Literacy and Heritage Camps as one of the main factors in their success.

To witness academic disciplines working alongside Indigenous traditions helps students to see that it is not one or the other. They can maintain their identity and still bring their talents and skills to a modern Australian society.





# NORTHERN BOOKS & LIBRARY PROJECT

## Queensland & Cape York



2017 saw the successful completion of our Northern Australian Book & Library Project for Northern Territory, where 58 schools and community groups received boxes of books and grants to replenish their libraries. We are pleased to report that this project has potentially reached over 4,000 Indigenous children so far.

As we follow on from our efforts in the Northern Territory, we hope to further expand our network of schools in Australia's North. Our storage facilities are almost full in preparation for the next stage of the project, which will expand to the remote and rural areas of North Queensland; covering areas as far as Cape York and Torres Strait Islands and as wide as Mount Isa and Birdsville.

Over 90 Schools and community groups in Northern Queensland have been contacted by The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation and invited to apply for assistance.

The problem facing students in remote areas in Australia's North was highlighted in a Curtin Economics Centre Report on Education Inequality in Australia: "Location can play a significant role in determining the level of access to resources that people within a community have. People living in regional and remote areas across Australia typically have lower levels of access to education, care and health services and facilities than those living in major cities and urban areas."

It is the goal of this program to reach out to as many of these children as we can and we're always glad to work with schools and community groups who are able to direct resources to where they are most needed.

Our book programs give us our greatest reach in Australia but also provides us with the opportunity to meet so many of our supporters. We would like to thank all those who have contributed to this project,

particularly the many students who have taken it upon themselves to hold book drives at their own schools. It's wonderful to see children around Australia recognising the value of reading.

In 2019, we will turn our focus to Western Australia and look forward to bringing you further details throughout the year.

*Above: Northern Books and Library participant, OLSH Catholic College*

*Right: ALF student, Hannah plays 'Lex's Bookworm Adventure'.*



In 2018, the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation launched its Distance Education Program. Partnering with needatutor.com.au, free online tutorial assistance is being made available for students in need.

needatutor.com.au is an Australian start-up who have developed a platform allowing students and teachers to interact in a manner similar to Skype. Users can search through registry to select the tutor who best suits their requirements. From there, users can view the profiles of prospective tutors, check their availability and book the session.

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has launched this program at schools in Bradshaw, Katherine and Kroker Island – 200km north-east of Darwin. All three schools participated in the first phase of our Books and Library Project and we're delighted to be working with them again.

We believe this program has enormous potential, not only for children, but adults as well.

A recent report by Charles Darwin University, assessed the rate of functional literacy among adults in very remote communities at only 15%. The same report determined one of the main obstacles affecting literacy education in the NT is the way in which current programs are deployed: Remote communities in Australia's North are often serviced by 'fly-in fly-out' models and given the vast distances that must be covered to reach these small but widely dispersed communities, a meaningful and lasting engagement with students is very difficult.

Harnessing digital technologies to connect directly with those who wish to advance their literacy and numeracy skills will be a powerful tool in redressing the gap in

educational opportunity – particularly in people held back by significant distances.

The positive effects of a rise in literacy in Indigenous communities cannot be understated. It is our hope that initiatives such as these will foster vital community and home-based learning. Ultimately, what greater force for education could there be than a literate parent?

Partnering with:

**needatutor.**

# ABORIGINAL LITERACY FOUNDATION AT THE WORLD LITERACY SUMMIT, 2018

From March the 25 to 27, the fourth World Literacy Summit was held in Oxford and was attended by over 400 delegates from 50 countries.

The Opening Ceremony took place at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford; an impressive old building designed by Sir Christopher Wren in 1680.

The Sheldonian Theatre is normally used for events such as presentation of degrees to Oxford students, so it was very suitable for the Opening Ceremony conducted by Her Royal Highness, Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands.

Our CEO, Dr Tony Cree is also Chair of the World Literacy Council and played an important role in organising and sharing the presentation of the World Literacy Awards. These awards are made for outstanding service to Literacy by an Individual, Country, Organisation or Charity. This year, was the inaugural Schweitzer Medal and Lectureship. The winner of this award, as well as receiving

a financial prize, also presents a lecture at Oxford University. The Schweitzer Award celebrates the work of Dr Albert Schweitzer, who devoted his life to medical wellbeing and education in remote parts of Africa early last century. The connection with Oxford relates to his famous lectures in the 1920's in support of his work. It is hoped that the new lecturing award will continue this tradition.

The World Literacy Summit provides a wonderful stage for many organisations around the world to share their work and their experiences. As well as the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation, nearly 200 organisations are represented in the World Literacy Council and many were present at this year's Summit.

Many insights were gained from the event and we are looking forward to participating in the next World Literacy Summit in 2020.



*Above: Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, Annette Mpuga and Tony Cree*

*Below: The Sheldonian Theatre*



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