ALFABET

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ABORIGINAL LITERACY FOUNDATION

SUMMER 2026

READING IS DREAMING

IN THIS EDITION

ABORIGINAL LITERACY FOUNDATION

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CEO'S REPORT

The second half of 2025 has been successful for a number of reasons: We have been able to further develop our tutoring programs in Hamilton, Bairnsdale, Ballarat and in Melbourne as well as continuing our online tutoring program. What makes the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation so different from other Aboriginal charities and Government Departments is our emphasis on tutoring programs for Indigenous children - particularly those at risk of absenteeism or leaving school altogether. We have always aimed at raising literacy levels of our primary age children to enable them to build on these fundamental skills in secondary school. Unfortunately, most Aboriginal children in remote or regional Australia are vulnerable to a range of complex factors which affect their ability to attend school. We know that the absentee rate among Aboriginal students in remote areas is 63% - in 2025 this simply isn't good enough. Our aim is to keep children at school until at least Year 10 when they can enter TAFE and acquire a lifetime employment skill. We have also had some wonderful successes with children whom we have tutored through to Year 12 and on to university. Such examples include a doctor, and at least half a dozen teachers.

A developing aspect of our work is supporting Aboriginal children from Northern Australia who come to board at schools in the southern states. I have written previously about the five girls from Arnhem Land, and as of 2026, we will be supporting a student who will be boarding at Geelong Grammar School. As well as providing financial support, we also supply extra tutoring for these children to help them cope with the higher educational standard expected at these schools.

Another important aspect of our work is publishing. Over ten years ago, we introduced the Healthy Living Series of four illustrated books, each on a topic of importance for Aboriginal children's health. This series ran to more than ninety thousand copies (360,000 altogether). In 2023, we were commissioned by the Royal Australasian Society of Surgeons to produce a fifth book on the importance of ear health. We entitled this What We Hear and engaged both an Indigenous editor and illustrator. The importance of Aboriginal people being aware of the dangers of ear infection cannot be overemphasised. Prior to the release of this book, nine in ten Aboriginal children in remote and regional areas suffered from some form of middle ear infection.

Finally, we are making an effort to preserve Aboriginal languages, as well as developing English literacy. It is estimated that at one stage there were over one thousand Aboriginal dialects in Australia. We are now down to about two hundred, many of which are in danger of disappearing, with only one or two speakers left. On our Digital Literacy Hub (our online library), we are starting a whole new section to preserve examples of Aboriginal languages wherever possible. We currently have over fifty available to read, some particularly rare.

I should especially like to thank those individuals and organisations who have made special donations to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. Often, they insist on anonymity and frequently demonstrate extraordinary generosity in bequests. It's hard to thank these people enough and express how much they have helped us promote literacy in Aboriginal communities. This is not to say that we do not appreciate every contribution from supporters - it all helps and I am amazed how much these contributions add up each month.

As a fully independent organisation, we cannot rely on government funding, or the highly competitive corporate and philanthropic grant process. It is the support of everyday donors that provides the most consistent form of revenue our organisation receives. This is enormously important in budgeting for our programs each year.

May I wish you all a wonderful Christmas, and a terrific 2026, and thank you again for all your support over the past twelve months.

Dr Anthony Cree

CEO and Founder
Aboriginal Literacy Foundation

Below: Dr Anthony Cree with Outstanding Contribution to Literacy by an Individual winner, Stanley Stanis Kaka.

World Literacy Summit, 2025

PIONEERING WORK

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ABORIGINAL LITERACY FOUNDATION

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation was founded after the Federal Government's closure of ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme). This initiative had seen a gradual improvement in literacy levels in urban, remote and rural areas. The program which brought tutoring to Aboriginal families was found to have been too costly. However, for years this program had been a lifeline for many communities - particularly in remote communities where schools had closed. This was particularly the case in Victoria in the 1990's when the Government closed many country-schools with less than fifty students. Often the ATAS program would send a tutor twice a week to the school and the students would then return for their in class studies. The ATAS program also supported Aboriginal students at university. Dr Cree was particularly aware of this support in his role as Head of the Master of Education Program. He was also aware that the twenty or thirty Indigenous students at his university relied heavily on the program to complete their prescribed units and to study for exams.

It was for this reason that in 2003, using funding from a recent inheritance, he founded the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. Initially his only aim was to assist the Indigenous students at his university. But soon he was approached by other universities in Victoria who had the same problem with their Indigenous students suffering from the sudden withdrawal of support and struggling with the challenges. This was a time before a dedicated Indigenous department or Liaison Officers. Dr Cree decided to move the headquarters to Ross House in Flinders Lane - a central location easily accessible to students at other Melbourne universities and colleges.

Soon it was discovered that university students often had younger siblings who were struggling at school, or who had left school completely since the closure of ATAS. As a result of this finding, tutoring for school children, particularly primary, was started in both Melbourne and in country Victoria. In those days there were no other Aboriginal Literacy charities. On the basis of his initiative, demand then came in from Sydney and Brisbane to set up branches there.

Initially these programs worked well when the tutors had only one or two students at a time, but soon it became apparent that the demand was too great. Eventually, Dr Cree decided to keep the actual tutoring of students to Victoria and southern New South Wales and where possible tutor interstate students using distance education models. Prior to the closure of ATAS, these students would have had some support, but it was impossible for a private organisation with limited resources to tutor literally thousands of students.

The role of a charity is sometimes to pave the way and show where need is required. In both New South Wales and in Queensland, the example of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation was instrumental in the state government education authorities setting up their tutoring in schools for their Indigenous students.

An extension of the early tutoring work was the novel idea of Literacy Camps. The concept of these camps came from research undertaken in the 1990's at the University of Ballarat. Dr Cree ran a residential camp for one week during the Easter holidays. The basic model was for each morning to be taken with intensive tutoring, leaving the afternoon free for sport, followed by more tutoring in the evening. It was found that it was possible to improve a child's reading age on the Schonnell Scale (an internationally recognized literacy rating measurement) by up to three grade years - in that short period. The reasons for its success were multivarious: being among students with similar literacy difficulties removed any embarrassment in them regarding their own struggles. More significant was the way Indigenous culture was celebrated, with local community leaders, Steve Johnson and Ann Cooper, who took students on tours of local landmarks and told traditional stories, usually after dinner.

When students were asked in a questionnaire what they thought was the reason for success, they almost all said they liked being in an Aboriginal environment surrounded by friends. These camps took place at a time when awareness of Indigenous issues were given much less time, and exposure to Indigenous culture was virtually non-existent. Many students understandably felt a sense of alienation in the school system. Bringing elements of Indigenous culture into the classroom and recognising significant events such as NAIDOC Week is now recognised as an important way to keep Indigenous students engaged in their education.

The Literacy Camps in their initial form carried on for another ten years. Due to cost pressures and funding for other important programs such as distance education and book distribution, the camps are now reduced to a weekend where students will attend during the day.

One of the major successes of the past ten years has been the Books to the North Program. This Program developed from a single request from one of Dr Cree's former education students, who now found himself Principal of a remote Aboriginal school. Their computer was out of range of internet connectivity, and the school had only a few dozen books he had

sourced from friends and family. A book drive was held at a Melbourne school and several hundred books of varying reading levels were sent to this school in the remote Northern Territory. Very quickly, word spread, and the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation were inundated with requests for books for schools that were in a similar situation. Often out of internet range, often with limited electricity, often with rundown buildings and problems that were nothing to do with education, such as flooding or periods of drought. The Books to the North Program has continued to grow and is now regarded as the flagship program of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. Our work has been outlined in Federal Parliament as a program of excellence and has been replicated in every state, not only by other literacy charities, but also by most State Education Departments.

In this description of the development of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation, we have only covered a small part of our history. Our success could perhaps be attributed to adapting traditional education models to engage Indigenous students. Another example of this, would be the Koorie Outdoor Education Program (now used in fourteen countries), and our Healthy Living Series books which depicted families and scenes more relevant to Indigenous children.

Perhaps the most important area of a charity, such as the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation, is to lobby for the cause of Aboriginal literacy. This is undertaken by example, but on several occasions, we have spoken at the Senate Standing Committee hearings on Indigenous Education. These important statements can be viewed in Federal Hansard, which records all such contributions to the debate.

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation's history is one we are immensely proud of. Our early years, when we were operating in a very different social and political climate, were immensely fruitful. We also navigated the vagaries of the Pandemic, and responded to numerous events that might have interrupted the educational needs of Indigenous students. The ALF organisation is just as passionate and committed to the cause of Indigenous education now as it ever was.

Jill Thompson

Member of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation Board of Management

THE DIGITAL LITERACY HUB

Aboriginal languages are a vital thread of cultural survival for First Australians, containing accounts of ancestral journeys, stories, culture and even practical information such as navigation. Once an Aboriginal language has died, all traditions contained within it are lost. The community is left with only a handful of Aboriginal words for place names to remind them of their former culture. This can be seen in the built-up areas of New South Wales and Victoria where language has often been lost but the names of places have remained.

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation is determined to keep some record of the remaining known 150 or so Aboriginal languages. Often this will be only a fragment with a minimal translation, sometimes coming from an early missionary who had translated part of the Bible into a local language. Frequently, it is this fragment which has enabled scholars to later reestablish vocabulary and grammar. At the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation, we are redeveloping our Digital Literacy Hub. This online library has over one thousand books, all of which can be downloaded free by Aboriginal schools and individuals. We are now developing a dedicated Aboriginal language section, which we hope will become a widely used resource.

Many languages have been lost to the world. Not even the British Isles have been spared with the loss of languages such as Cornish (the last Cornish speaker died in Bendigo, Australia in the 1950s). However, nowadays, digital technologies have provided a wonderful opportunity to preserve these voices.

Our original library was set up ten years ago through the generosity of the Wellington Foundation of Boston USA. This was breakthrough technology at the time and has made a wonderful contribution to the lives of remote Aboriginal school children and their families. Our recent work with Arnhem Land communities in producing dual-language books is an example of both English and Indigenous language successfully co-existing.

We are very much aware of the need for Aboriginal children to be proficient in English, in order to thrive in their education and careers. However, this doesn't need to come at the expense of Indigenous language. It is important not only for Aboriginal people but for all Australians that this cultural source should be maintained for future generations.

To access the hub, visit
digitalliteracyhub.org

NAIDOC AWARDS

Each year during July, the community celebrates NAIDOC week. (National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee). NAIDOC Week is an opportunity for all Australians to learn about First Nations cultures and histories and participate in celebrations. The 2025 theme, 'The Next Generation: Strength, Vision & Legacy,' celebrates not only the achievements of the past but the bright future ahead, empowered by the strength of their young leaders, the vision of their communities, and the legacy of their ancestors. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation supports the next generation of our Indigenous community through our varied education programs. Our motto is 'Today a Reader, Tomorrow a Leader' and we work to support and give those tools to the next generation. Schools across Australia will support the celebration of NAIDOC week in several different ways. It may be through education programs, fundraising activities, arts and craft activities or a flag raising or smoking ceremony. Several of the students whom we tutor regularly were presented with awards at their school. The awards were for Art, Education, Personal Development and Sport. They helped to acknowledge the student's achievements and growth through the year. We wish to congratulate all who were recognised this year.

TUTORING UPDATES

Our tutoring programs have continued in the Victorian regional centres of Ballarat, Hamilton, Bairnsdale, as well as in Melbourne. In Ballarat, there has been such a high demand for tutoring that we have needed to introduce a waiting-list for students. We will explore the possibility of expanding the program next year to meet the needs of families in the region. There are several reasons for such high levels of attendance: firstly, we provide all students with afternoon tea and can arrange taxis for families who have transport difficulties. However, what makes the biggest difference is the dedication of our tutors, who go to great lengths to make each class engaging and fun. Aunty Ann Patmore is also on-hand as a font of cultural knowledge and often leads students through arts and crafts activities during breaks from class work.

A developing aspect of our work is supporting students from northern Australia who come to board at schools in the southern states. We have written previously about the students from Arnhem Land, boarding in Hamilton. As of 2026, we will be supporting a student who will be boarding at Geelong Grammar School. As well as providing financial support, we also supply extra tutoring for these students.

BOOK PROGRAMS

BOOKS SENT FAR AND WIDE

Throughout 2025, we have continued our Books to the North program. Every year, participating schools in regional and remote areas of NT, QLD, WA and SA receive several satchels of books. This year we sought to expand our service to reach even more students in remote areas. We sent a package of books to approximately 80 remote schools with an invitation to join our program and receive more books. We have had requests from Fitzroy Crossing, Broome, Marble Bar, Useless Loop, Halls Creek, WA and Areyonga, Robinson River, Aurukun and Coen, QLD. It is interesting to research these areas and to realise how remote these communities are.

We have also continued to fulfill requests for books from educational services, charities and health and children's services. These include for example NBNA Academy in Yeppoon, QLD who are setting up a new school for students Year 7 – 10, Larapi Child and Family Learning Centre, Wynyard, TAS, Act for Kids, QLD and Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation and Tennant Creek, NT, to name just a few. We include sets of our Healthy Living Series as well as children's books that are appropriate to their organisation. We look forward to reaching out to more schools and community groups in the coming year.

HEALTHY LIVING SERIES

We are delighted to announce the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation will be publishing a sixth title in our hugely popular 'Healthy Living' series. In 2012, the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation partnered with Jennifer-Cooper to produce a series of four early-reader books, specifically designed for Indigenous children. These books were What We Smell, What We Eat, Feeling Good and Safe Play. The aim was to depict characters and scenes that would be more engaging for young Indigenous children living in remote or regional communities. We were also very fortunate to have the beautiful cover artwork produced by well-known artist Bibi Barba.

The reception was enormously positive, and countless educators and parents have expressed how engaged children have been with the book. We have since then undertaken numerous reprints to manage demand. Books are mostly used by schools, but have also been distributed to childcare centres and kindergartens. Sets are often included in new-born baby packs for expecting mothers.

In 2023, at the request of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, we added a fifth book to the series entitled, 'What We Hear'. RACS were alarmed at the rate of Indigenous children who required surgery to treat middle-ear infections which had developed into chronic extra-cranial conditions. This condition is largely preventable, so the book aimed to foster good hygiene habits, in a fun, easy-to-read way. Among key recipients of the book was Ear Buzz, a wonderful charity who provide a mobile ear clinic to Indigenous communities in Western Australia.

The sixth title of the 'Healthy Living' series will be focused on encouraging Indigenous students to remain in school. The retention rate of Indigenous students in Year 7/8 is 59% (55% for boys and 63% for girls). We also know that the attendance rate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remains at 14 percent. There are many reasons for this disparity: geographic isolation, and sometimes complex and challenging domestic situations. Often schools find their own solutions to these issues: many have found success providing community-run bus services. Others will provide students with a free breakfast. In our tutoring work, we have drawn on both solutions to encourage students to attend. The book will contain tips which may be as simple as starting the day with a proper breakfast and drinking plenty of water throughout the day or just encouraging students to ask for help. Given the age-group we hope to engage, the book will be written for a slightly older audience – though the books will still be included with the Healthy Living Series set.

We look forward to bringing you updates as we progress through the journey of engaging illustrators through to publishing.

POETRY COMPETITION

2025 1ST PRIZE

We have great pleasure in announcing that the winner of our 2025 Poetry Competition is Brayden Molloy, a Year 9 student from Alice Springs.

Brayden produced a wonderfully vivid poem, with humour and personal touches from family life, such as his Dad's steak "still mooing on the plate"!

We are so thrilled for Brayden and his school who will each receive a $500 prize.

We were so delighted with the response to the poetry competition, now in its fourth year. The competition provides a wonderful opportunity to raise the voices of Indigenous children, and to share their perspective of life as a kid.

Food it can be good it can be bad if it's from mum it will always be yum.

And if it's bad I can get mad.

It can be healthy or not as long as it doesn't put me belly in a knot.

But I'll love food that can put me in a good mood.

Upon the table a canvas is spread, a symphony of green gold and red.

Breakfast dinner lunch "can I have a munch".

If I'm in a restaurant I'm happy as can be if I don't see a frozen pea.

Every cheese has a tale to tell in its flavor and smell.

Aged in silence in the dark but mostly eaten at the park, in the sun having fun.

Melted chocolate in the fountain next to the marshmallow mountain.

Chocolate cake in the oven to bake eggs, flour, cream, all in a flavour beam.

The roast crispy like it was in fire everyone must desire.

A well-done steak right on to mum's plate.

Still mooing for dad just like he always had.

Veggies in the steamer just getting neater.

On the plate no one can hate: food.

BEQUESTS

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation is most grateful to individuals or organisations who choose to make a bequest. We would recommend that you inform your solicitor to include a bequest in your will – If you prefer, you can use the form provided below.

I _____ wish to bequeath _____ dollars to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation.

I would like this bequest to contribute towards:

A library for a remote school

Extending the tutoring program

To provide a school or post-school scholarship

All work currently undertaken by the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation

Other (please specify)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please forward a copy of this form to your solicitor and a copy to the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation at info@aboriginalliteracyfoundation.org

or

Ross House
P.O. Box 315 Flinders Lane
Melbourne, Victoria, 8009

Sally Woiniski was a hospital matron for nearly thirty years. During this time, she encountered many Aboriginal women who she felt were poorly educated, particularly in matters of health. She had long felt that more of an effort should be made to help Aboriginal women and their children in this important area. She gave a bequest of $50,000.00 to be spent on health education for Aboriginal women and children. Part of this bequest was able to be spent on publishing our most recent book to prevent ear and nose-infections often resulting in life-threatening extra-cranial infections.

George Edwards had owned an engineering business in regional New South Wales. He had employed many Aboriginal people over several decades and was well aware that poor literacy skills and also the lack of any TAFE training held these hardworking people back. George made a bequest of $20,000.00 to be spent on literacy in the workplace with particular emphasis in the Western New South Wales area.

Martha Coats was a librarian for more than forty years. She had heard about the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation sending books to Northern Australia and founding school libraries. She left a bequest in her will that $25,000.00 of her superannuation funds be spent on founding at least one school library in a remote area with particular emphasis on providing Aboriginal literature where possible.

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