

# Altered fates

Students who may not do well in the traditional classroom are getting a new education through the Community Dreaming program.



Community Dreaming team with Major General Greg Garde, Head Reservist Policy Department of Defence and keynote speaker at unveiling ceremony.

**H**eywood and District Secondary College in Victoria's western district is a small school of 230 students with a significant Koori population. For three years now, year 11 students who were struggling and likely to leave school have had the opportunity of participating in the Community Dreaming Program. The results are inspiring.

Retention rates have improved, and undertaking the program is seen as a plus on a student's resumé. This in turn has led to apprenticeships and employment for many program graduates.

For teacher Ted Leahy, who won this year's AEU Reconciliation Award for his contribution to the program, it is the individual stories of personal transformation that prove its worth.

"A lot of the students coming into the program haven't had a lot of success at school," says Leahy. "The skills they develop [in the program], and the things they learn about themselves and what's happening in society are quite amazing."

"One of the students in the first program at Portland Secondary College [where Leahy was initially involved in the program] wasn't regarded as being academically able," he recalls. "But he has brilliant creative skills, particularly in song-writing, story-telling, Koori dancing, performing and acting—the whole works."

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For his Community Dreaming project the student decided to do something for local elderly people at one of the town's accommodation facilities to show that young people do care about them. "He wrote them a song and cooked them dinner with a couple of other students," says Leahy. "He basically organised the whole thing."

"He learned to build his self-

confidence over that period of time," he says. The student decided to continue at school—which involved repeating year 11. He was elected school captain in year 12—the first Koori student to achieve this—and has now gone on to tertiary studies with plans to become a teacher.

### A total package

Initially funded by VicHealth, and last year by the Glenelg and Southern Grampians Local Learning and Employment Network through the local Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation, the program is open to all year 11 students, regardless of their cultural background. It is part of personal development skills in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

"We concentrate on TLC—teamwork, leadership and communication—to build their self-esteem, self-confidence and resilience," says Leahy.

The students attend leadership camp and ropes courses, along with peers from nearby Portland Secondary

College. “The students move on to group work and problem-solving, investigating their community and what ‘community’ means to them. It’s a total package.”

Group work plays a big part. “Quite often they’ll delegate to the person with particular skills,” says Leahy. After a while they’ll start teaching the others, working together their skills.”

“We put a lot of emphasis on the students using applied learning—going out and finding out for themselves—and doing it in a way they feel comfortable, and then reflecting on what they’ve done.”

“It’s amazing the group pressure on those students who want to sit back and how they are very quickly brought into line,” says Leahy. “Some groups start out as friendship groups but split up because the students find it isn’t workable.”

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Trained facilitators from industry and the community work with the students. These include elders and members of the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation as well as workers from the Portland Housing Program, and the local drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre.

Understanding Indigenous culture and contributing to reconciliation is embedded in the program. “One of the things we do insist is that the students, as part of their community investigation, research an Indigenous area such as Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation or the Lake Condah Mission,” says Leahy.

“That gets the non-Indigenous

students into Winda Mara and working with the elders. And the Indigenous students feel good about that.” Before long, he says, the students respectfully refer to the elders as ‘Uncle’ or ‘Aunty’.

“We find that the non-Indigenous students learn to respect the values and culture and history of the area,” says Leahy. “A lot had no idea of how rich the south west [of Victoria] is in history and culture.”

#### **A community project and celebration**

The students then go on to organise a project that will benefit the community. “The students have to do all the work,” says Leahy. “They have to decide on the project, contact all the organisations, do all of the communication work, organise the insurance, council permits and anything else that may be involved.”

Projects have included developing a brochure to publicise the need for restoration of the church altar at the Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission, organising refurbishment for parts of the accommodation huts at the Mission, developing a newsletter for the new residential facility for the elderly in Portland, organising a formal dance, fundraising for the Salvation Army and raising awareness of living with disabilities by sponsoring students to use wheelchairs for a school day. A highlight last year was the installation of a plaque honouring Captain Reg Saunders, Australia’s first Indigenous commissioned officer in the defence forces, at Lake Condah

## **A tribute to Arthur Hamilton**

Arthur Hamilton, a proud Palawa man, committed activist and educator, died in 2004 after a short struggle with cancer. He is much missed by his comrades and friends at the AEU.

Hamilton meshed his work as a teacher with his desire to recognise the rightful history, culture and contribution of Aboriginal people in our society. Having a strong equity and social justice conscience, he was a tireless advocate for the rights of both Aboriginal people and those with disabilities.

Hamilton began teaching in 1970 at Claremont High School in Tasmania and went on to teach at Warrane High School, Ogilvie High School, Rokeby High, Claremont College and in 2003 became Acting Principal of Ouse District High School. Over the years he helped many Aboriginal students to realise their potential and provided support and mentoring to Aboriginal staff members.

Hamilton was the coordinator of the Aboriginal Education Unit in the Tasmanian Department of Education for seven years. Amongst other achievements, in this position he developed a three-year strategic plan for Aboriginal education, contributed to a range of teaching resources, co-authored a research report with Professor Paul Hughes and was selected to be on



the MCEETYA taskforce on countering racism.

He had a keen sense of social justice, fairness and equity that provided a parallel career as an activist with the union. He represented Tasmania on the National Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee, held many positions within the Tasmanian branch, and was active in promoting cross-cultural awareness, recognition of Indigenous people and the elimination of racism within the AEU and in schools.

Hamilton was an initiator of the AEU Reconciliation Award which he then won in January 2003 for his work at Claremont College. He always walked his talk and at Claremont College he developed a number of reforms in Aboriginal education and support for Aboriginal students.

The 2005 AEU Federal Conference decided to rename the Reconciliation Award the Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, in Hamilton's honour.

Arthur Hamilton was greatly respected in Tasmania and throughout Australia and is held in high regard for his outstanding contribution to Aboriginal education and trade unionism. He was a brother, comrade and friend and will be missed by all.



Members of Saunders family unveiling a memorial stone and plaque.

Mission where he lived with his family as a young person. To undertake this project students researched the life of Captain Saunders to develop a brochure, negotiated with Winda Mara and the Saunders family to decide where the plaque was to be placed and who was to be invited to the unveiling ceremony, and then organised the unveiling ceremony.

At the unveiling more than 150 people attended from all over Australia.

"Many of the students at the start of the program will not speak in front of an audience, or use the phone to organise a meeting for potential community projects. But by the end of the project they're confidently negotiating with members of the community for the development and completion of their project."

At the community celebration to

mark the conclusion of the program, these students stand up and speak to an invited audience of local business people and community leaders, and explain their project, achievements and the learning processes they have been through.

For Leahy, this is the proof that the students are developing lifelong

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skills and that they've been learning in a way appropriate to their learning styles.

"We're quite blunt with them, telling them that by the end of the six months they'll be talking in front of up to 200 people—and they freak out," he says. "But they get there." ■