

Student teacher Carmel Debel seeks to inspire other First Nations people to teach

Inspiring First Nations people to become teachers is a major ambition of strong and proud First Nations woman and teaching student, Carmel Debel.

Carmel is completing her final year of a teaching degree as part of the Faculty of Education's 'Away from Base' program at Australian Catholic University (ACU).

ACU's Away from Base program supports First Nations students from regional and remote areas of Australia to study, literally away from their base, for a Bachelor of Education (Primary).

More than 600 First Nations students have graduated from the program, with around 80 per cent of students successfully graduating. ACU's Away from Base has an impressive 100 per cent employment rate.

Carmel, a Tjungundji woman of Old Mapoon and Kaurareg of Prince of Wales Island, said, "I was a student from the small town of Cairns, with no travel experience, so flying to Sydney to attend the university's intensive residential was terrifying."

"At first, I cried about catching a plane, bus and a train. My brother took a day of leave to hold my hand through this new learning curve, literally while I wept with dread. These days, I have matured so much and can now do this confidently, including ordering an uber.

"Learning with other First Nations people with similar backgrounds and understanding, helped me to feel more comfortable giving uni a shot. I never thought I had the intelligence for uni. With the assistance of a fantastic tutor, Anne Major, I sharpened my literacy and discovered how to write my learning in an academic format rather than my laidback layman's terms."

ACU's Away from Base program considers a First Nations perspective in all its programming and, when not impacted by the pandemic, has included corroborees and smoking ceremonies, spiritual and leadership tours, NAIDOC activities and visits to a First Nations' school in Redfern, Sydney.

Carmel said, "Our children need to see our people within the educational system."

"I have seen increasing numbers of First Nations student support officers, as well administrative staff and observed that First Nations students and their families feel more welcome and willing to participate because they see our mob in our schools.

“But it’s vital to have more First Nations teachers to collaborate and assist in making informed decisions and suggestions to ensure First Nations Indigenous perspectives and facilitation methods are in our classrooms.”

Recently on a practical teaching experience in a Cairns school, Carmel says she loves everything about her chosen profession.

“I love it when all students and families see I’m here because I want to be, and they start to trust in me,” Carmel said. “They trust in me enough to ask questions, get things wrong, explore further and learn, and show up day-in and day-out. And they can do so without feeling judged or like a burden.”

School wasn’t always such a welcoming place for Carmel. In 1990, when Carmel was in primary school, her mother took her and her brother to enrol in a school.

Carmel explained, “When I was in my early primary years, I presented to a school with my Mum and two brothers to enrol. But when the administration staff and principal saw our Mum was a First Nations woman, they mentioned their school did not take our kind and perhaps the next school in the next town may be a better fit.”

“I didn’t understand why they didn’t want me. This one encounter stirred up so much confusion and rejection. I want to be a teacher to support students in reaching their full potential. I hope to help students always feel welcome and comfortable in a fast-paced, sometimes overwhelming environment.

“Student learning is more achievable when children feel genuinely welcome, safe and comfortable.”

The ACU Away from Base Bachelor of Education (Primary) program is government-funded and involves studying via online learning combined with intensive residential blocks, twice a semester.

The program is supported by ACU’s higher education support unit, Yalbalinga, which is a Kamilaroi word, meaning ‘place of learning’. Tutorial support for students is offered in face-to-face, online or group tuition sessions, or a combination of delivery modes.

ACU final-year teaching student & First Nations woman Carmel Debel is available for interview.

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