

## **The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) Annual Conference Dinner, 2013.**

### **Alexandra (Allie) Graham – Cheltenham Girls' High School**

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Good evening everyone. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that we are here today on the land of the Guringai people. The Guringai are the traditional owners of this land and are part of the oldest surviving continuous culture in the world. I pay my respects to the Elders both past and present of the Guringai nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present.

I feel very privileged and honoured to be invited to the AECG Conference dinner tonight and to accept this award. My thanks again to Cindy Berwick, the NSW AECG, Christine Evans and the Board of Studies for this opportunity.

I am 17 years old and currently in Year 12 at Cheltenham Girls' High School in Sydney's north. I was invited to do the Aboriginal Studies Preliminary HSC Course in Year 9 and since then I have enjoyed an amazing three years learning about traditional Aboriginal ways of life; their complicated history and more recently, current issues affecting Indigenous peoples, both in the Australia and New Zealand.

Having grown up in Sydney's suburbia, I held a very closeted, narrow view of life. However, because of Aboriginal Studies that has changed. In 2010, I had the amazing opportunity to visit the Lands of the Arrernte people and their communities, to share their food and to dance with Arrernte women and girls in the remote community of Thakaperte. The trip transformed any preconceived ideas I had formed from my childhood and ignited in me a real desire to learn more..... I came back a different person.

From the Aboriginal Studies course itself, I gained a broader understanding of the deep connection with the Land that Indigenous Australians possess and how it determined every aspect of their life...and still does. I was shocked to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island history after the arrival of the Europeans and how it continues to affect their lives today in so many ways. Last year, I enjoyed researching the key issues of health and education affecting the Arrernte peoples and the Maori people of Rotorua.

Being a passionate dancer myself, I chose for my Major an in-depth study of Contemporary Indigenous Dance in Australia. I found this research fascinating and eye opening as I met many talented Indigenous choreographers who are keeping their heritage and connection with Country alive through a unique fusion of traditional and contemporary dance. I was very privileged to sit in on a closed rehearsal of the Bangarra Dance Company in the Rocks and spent many memorable hours interviewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island choreographers like Gail Mabo, Daniel Riley McKinley, Elma Kris and Vicki Van Hout. Vicki spent many hours with me under a gum tree outside NAISDA in Kariong, helping me understand what motivates her unique style of dance and her passion to teach young Indigenous dancers.

The few hours I spent talking with Gail Mabo will remain one of the most memorable and inspiring experiences in my life. She gave me a deep appreciation and insight into what it was like to live with her father, Eddie Koiki Mabo, as well as the sacrifices her family made as Meriam people living in Townsville in the 60's, 70's and 80's. Gail shared with me some of her precious memories of her father and the very special bond between them which continues to give her strength today. It was these memories of her "Dad" which inspired her to choreograph her contemporary piece, *Koiki*, a work which translates his life, his fight for Land rights for his homeland, Mer, his illness and his indomitable spirit into Dance. I was lucky to be able to see this moving work performed at the NAISDA end of year concert in 2011. I feel very privileged.

I have really enjoyed the Aboriginal Studies Course as it has offered me a completely new perspective and has opened my eyes to the issues and the gap which exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The course has made me aware of the desperate need for reconciliation and consultation in order to go forward as a nation. I am now passionate about working in the field of Aboriginal education and I hope next year, after completing the HSC, to take a gap year to visit Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, to lend a hand and learn more myself.

I would like to thank my Principal, Mrs Susan Bridge, for having the insight to introduce Aboriginal Studies into Cheltenham Girls' High School and for her undying support of the course and its ideals. I would finally like to thank my Aboriginal Studies teacher at Cheltenham, Miss Camilla Watson, who has been truly inspirational, helping and supporting me immensely in my studies. This achievement is just as much hers as it is my own.

One day I hope to see Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject for all Australian students. What a difference that would make! Thank you everyone.

Allie Graham – Year 12 2013 Cheltenham Girls' High School