

## Deborah Hall's part of the Des English Memorial Lecture

Nancy has encouraged me tell my story as an educator and community worker. She believes it says something about the Territory and the people who live and work here. I'll share my story and leave it you to decide!

I began my working life in Adelaide with the degree in Geography and Politics, a Graduate Diploma of Education and an interest in developing countries.

My first teaching job was in country South Australia. And like many teachers my first year 'out' was a rough one. The second year was lots of work **and** lots of fun.

After two years teaching in Australia I met the criteria to volunteer overseas, so I packed up and flew to Papua New Guinea. My job at a high school was on the island of New Britain. My classes had about 30 students and I still remember fronting up to a sea of faces, all of whom had brown skin, curly black hair and the school uniform of brown and yellow. I despaired about ever learning the students' names. I needn't have worried because after a while I knew everyone's name and could see at a glance what part of the country they came from. The students cultures (and there were many of them) were very different from mine. I learned about listening and I learned about waiting, rather than quickly jumping in to say my piece. This was an intercultural lesson and it was a lesson in working with people who process information in different ways.

I taught English and Social Science, I drove the school bus and I looked after the library. When the headmaster suggested I be the teacher librarian I protested that I didn't have the first idea about how to do it. He said not to worry, I was a native speaker of English and would be able to do it. As it happened I really enjoyed the work in the library, gave it a major overhaul and wrote curriculum for the weekly library lesson for each class.

Two years had turned into four when I made the big decision to return to Australia. It was hard to leave, but I felt that if I didn't I'd be leaving Australia for good and Australia was still home.

I returned to Adelaide and found work in a TAFE College. My job was to teach about Australian Systems and Society to a group of unemployed adult migrants. I sat in on lessons about Electronic Assembly, Industrial Sewing and

Welding. For the lessons about Australian Systems and Society we decoded school reports for the parents in the group. We got to grips with Maccas menus (because their kids wanted Happy Meals and the adults didn't know how to order them). We visited Parliament House to learn about government in Australia. And we had a tour of the sewerage works to see where waste water went. I learnt how knowledge and experience can build confidence, this was another lesson that I took into my future jobs.

Teaching in the TAFE course was a lot of fun, but I was restless. Looking back at that time I can see that what I thought was restlessness was actually about re-adjusting to life in Australia after the intense time in PNG.

Halfway through my first year back in Australia I came up to the Northern Territory and spent two weeks bushwalking in Kakadu. Then I went back to Adelaide and finished my contract with the TAFE College. Six months later I packed a few things into my little Mazda hatchback and drove north up the Stuart Highway. That was 28 years ago. There was one person I vaguely knew in Darwin.

I knew I could teach but I wanted to try a different job. I'd taught for 7 years and had a 7-year-itch.

My first job was volunteering with a service for homeless people who wanted to settle down. I made coffees and toast for a breakfast program and drove the mini-bus. Many of those using the service had problems with alcohol and some had been such hard drinkers they had brain Injuries. Typically they had short term memory problems and difficulty learning.

My first paid job in Darwin was home care work for Red Cross. I'd drive from house to house vacuuming, sweeping and cleaning bathrooms. I met some very interesting people along the way, some of whom needed home care because they had Alzheimer's Disease.

A full-time job came up with the Aged Care Assessment Team in the Northern Territory health department and I applied. The job was to co-ordinate home care services for people with memory problems and provide carer education. I raced off to the library, which is where you went for research in the early 1990s. I found books on dementia and read everything I could. I was selected for the job and with a brief handover I became the Northern Territory's sole Dementia Worker. Most of my work was in Darwin. I was part of the Aged Care Assessment Team and learnt a lot about being in a multi-disciplinary team.

Being Darwin it was also a multicultural team. The doctor was from India, the coordinator was born in Tehran, the receptionist was a Maori woman, the Occupational Therapist was English, and the Social Worker was a coloured woman from South Africa. And the Aboriginal Liaison Officer had family in Central Australia and the Top End.

When I got to grips with my new job I couldn't resist doing carer education and training service providers. My trips and training took me to Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek.

A group of family carers and I started the Alzheimers' Association of the Northern Territory.

As the only dementia worker in the NT, and a representative of the committee I travelled interstate and participated in many national meetings. Apart from at this conference yesterday, the only other time I've spoken at a national conference was on the topic of dementia. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer and I wrote and presented the first paper on the subject of family care for Aboriginal people with dementia.

Something I read at that time has stayed with me for twenty years. It was a description of human brains as 'vast, mysterious and complex'. I discovered that working with people whose brains work differently was a fascinating challenge. It was incredibly rewarding - to find ways to help people communicate and to feel relaxed in circumstances they found difficult. Helping carers and family support each other was also a great part of the job. Highlights included providing day respite for families over Christmas when other services closed down, and holding an annual Bush Dance where people with dementia and their families could all have fun.

Four years of travelling the Territory and being stretched pretty thin were enough and I sought out another job.

I stayed with the Health Department and started work as a Project Officer with the Alcohol and Other Drugs Program. It was a time when the Territory had a special levy on the price of full strength beer, wine and spirits. My first work was to assess applications for sponsorships. Later I was the training and support officer for the Aboriginal Community Development and Training workers. They went to small places like Gunbalunya in Arnhemland and Borrooloola in the Gulf Country and helped those communities take some

control over the consumption of alcohol on their land. My last block of time with this program was managing funding for the Territory's domestic violence counsellors and trainers. As before, I used my teaching and training skills and brought the workers together for professional development and networking.

My next move was to the community sector. The Darwin Community Legal Service employed me as an advocate for people with disabilities and people living in aged care. I learned about the Disability Service Standards, Human Rights, Aged Care Standards, complaints processes, legal remedies, advocacy strategies and more. The work of our small team stretched across the Top End of the Territory. Much of it was individual advocacy. But we also ran residents' meetings and took on Systemic Advocacy. We did project work in Wadeye, Borroloola and Groote Eylandt.

Once again I dusted off my teaching and training skills. We provided training on topics like Duty of Care, Disability Service Standards and Advanced Care Directives. One memorable set of sessions was with a group of young people with intellectual disabilities. We set out to explain what the Disability Service Standards meant in practice. I took Corn Flakes, Fruit Loops, Coco Pops and muesli to the session. We talked about choice and illustrated the point using breakfast cereal. Everyone had a favourite and we talked about how it's your right to have choices in life, at breakfast and at lots of other times.

Our service had an Advisory Committee and that's how Rachael and I first met. You'll remember that I'd arrived in Darwin not knowing anyone. Obviously that changed over the years. By the time I was working at the Legal Service I had a partner and I became a mum.

I was 7 years into my job at the legal service when a few things combined to prompt another shift.

It was tiring to always be working with problems. Clients were often at the end of their tether when they arrived at our door. They were angry, frustrated *and* also reluctant to complain. It's very difficult to complain when you are dependent on a service. Here in Darwin, like many small centres, people don't have much choice of service-providers. If you 'burn your bridges' you could end up worse off than when you began fighting for your rights.

My daughter was in primary school at this time and my partner and I weren't always able to take holidays during school holidays so she had to go to vacation care.

Nobody at the legal service was expected to last for 10 years so they offered some long service leave after five years and I qualified for that. I took my leave and used it to be with my daughter some more and renew my teaching qualifications. I'd kept up my South Australian registration, but felt that after 15 years away from the classroom I really needed some refresher.

This was how I met Nancy. She taught a course on Inclusive Education and I did that as part of a Graduate Certificate of Education.

I left the legal service and took up relief teaching as a way to sample the local schools. Relief teaching paid well, but didn't have any of the satisfaction of developing relationships with a group of young people and finding creative ways to teach. Henbury Special School was just down the street and around the corner from home and so I sought it out. I thought it might be good to help *prevent* abuse, neglect and exploitation rather than help to fix problems.

Ten years ago I got a contract with one of Henbury School's outreach classes. And this year, for the first time in my working life, I will have stayed in one job for ten years.

My job at Henbury has been part-time. I chose that because I wanted time with my family, I could afford it, and I wanted to do some other work on the side.

I started a consultancy providing strategic planning and governance training for small non-government organisations. Through this consultancy I've worked with passionate people, often volunteers, in community-based organisations such as women's shelters, foster care, sexual health, environment, and sporting and recreation groups.

My years in Papua New Guinea and my years in multicultural Darwin and the NT had bolstered my interest in culture. A casual conversation led to some worthwhile work of a different kind.

I joined a group who ran cultural awareness training for Australian volunteers going to Asia and the Pacific. The training was highly participatory and encouraged volunteers to be aware of the culture they were carrying into their

assignments, that is *their own culture* and to be respectful of the very different cultures of their host countries. It was good work to be among passionate people who were ready for adventure and very open to learning.

You might be wondering how I managed to get past the '7 year itch' and reach the 10 year milestone with Henbury School. A large part of the answer is the students I've had the privilege to teach, my work colleagues, and supportive management. The other thing that's kept me interested is the amount I've had to learn. As you've heard this morning, I like change and challenge. My job at Henbury has offered both.

I have worked in outreach classes, in mainstream senior schools. The senior school curriculum I've taught has included literary and numeracy, social skills and life-skills.

I've found opportunities for students to be part of mainstream schools and be part of the community. I like to seek out opportunities for inclusion – in the mainstream school and in the community. These young people are about to leave school. The community needs to know and respect them and they need to know and feel confident in the community. I think we have a responsibility to prepare young people for life outside of school and as much independence as they can possibly handle – that's their human right.

I've been able to teach about culture and relationships, two threads in my working life that I believe are relevant for our wellbeing as a community, as a society and globally. As Special Education teachers it's possible to overlook the culture of the young people we work with. Our students' abilities and potentials have a cultural context, we should honour it and work with it more than we do.

One highlight of my teaching was when a group of Henbury senior students volunteered at the Arafura Games. The class was learning about work, teamwork and volunteering and it seemed like a good opportunity to get out and about, contribute to the community and have some fun. The Arafura Games of 2011 attracted competitors from more than 40 countries to compete in 23 different sports in and around Darwin.

5 Henbury students became volunteers alongside, and not differently from 1,000 other volunteers. The students delivered lunches, collected table tennis balls for wheelchair athletes and held the country flags and medals at the

weightlifting presentation ceremony. They had the same shirts, caps and backpacks as other volunteers, they did the same work and they got the same appreciation and respect. I can still see the photo I took after the presentations. The 5 students in their uniforms are proudly standing beside a huge sign that showed people where the event was being held. The one word on the sign is 'weightlifting'.

This is where my work story is up to. I'm not sure what's next, but I *can* say I'm enjoying what I do. Thank you for listening.

I'd now like to hand over to Rachel Kroes. Rachel will present a parent's perspective. She's also an activist and has done amazing work in the disability sector. She'll tell you about some of that now. Rachel....