

Closing the CULTURE GAP

An exciting online project blends ancient stories and new technologies to promote Indigenous health and education.



For thousands of years, Aboriginal children of a very young age were told stories that helped them understand the air, the land, the universe and everything living in them. As those children became adults, they took on the responsibility of passing on traditional stories and enriched their culture with new tales about their own journeys and accomplishments.

The arrival of white settlers in Australia in the late 1800s had a cataclysmic effect on Indigenous culture and lifestyle. Storytelling was one of the casualties, and entire generations came and went without hearing about the legends, spiritual beliefs, laws and survival skills that are the building blocks of Indigenous society.

"There has been a massive gap between the older generation in passing on our stories," says Shane Harrington, an Indigenous ranger with NSW National Parks and Wildlife. "But now there are a lot more teachers out there telling these

stories and securing Aboriginal culture for the younger generations. Those stories keep us safe and out of danger and away from sad places."

Liz's story

Among the many people now promoting Indigenous storytelling is Liz Thompson, an author, filmmaker and founder of SharingStories.com.au – a website helping bring Indigenous storytelling to the digital age. More than an online catalogue of images, videos, voice recordings and words, it gives Indigenous Australians living in remote communities the skills and equipment they need to engage in creative dialogue, not only with each other but with other Indigenous nations and the entire global community.

"All my work has been about telling the stories of communities that have not had the capacity to get those stories into the mainstream media ... it's a huge privilege to work in this space," says Liz.

SharingStories, which is supported by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth, sees Liz, multimedia instructors and local Indigenous elders visit and work in schools in remote communities like Elcho Island and Maningrida in the Northern Territory, Lockhart River in Queensland, Bidyadanga in WA and Wilcannia in NSW. There, they teach students how to produce digital stories about their lives and experiences and publish them online.

"The way we run our program demonstrates how culturally relevant learning can be approached in a manner that supports standard curriculum objectives, enhances digital literacy and supports self-representational storytelling," says Liz.

School's in – and out

Lying south-east of Derby in the Kimberley region of WA, Jarlmadangah Burru prides itself on the maintenance



Thorpedo's backpacks

Former Olympic swimmer Ian Thorpe had seen poverty in the Third World but had never imagined it existed here until he visited Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. He was troubled when he spoke to children who could barely hear him because of easily treatable middle ear infections and was disturbed to learn the illiteracy rate was as high as 93 percent.

So, Ian got the ball rolling with some programs he thought would make a difference. SharingStories is one of these programs, as is the Literacy Backpack Program, which involves filling backpacks with



books and magazines and distributing them to thousands of Indigenous youngsters.

Ian's aim is to ignite a 'reading culture', stamp out illiteracy and finally break down the barriers that can stop so many Indigenous children from finishing school.

And it is not just about education – a flow-on effect of reading books and staying in school is an improvement in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. According to the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW, increasing the education of an Indigenous woman by a single year can reduce the chance of infant mortality among her children by up to 10 percent.

"What a staggering thought!" says Jeff McMullen, CEO of the Ian Thorpe Fountain of Youth. "Isn't this the most powerful invitation to concentrate on early life-empowering education for Indigenous children?"

In 2012, the Australian Unity Foundation gave the Ian Thorpe Fountain for Youth \$25,000 for its Literacy Backpack Program. Along with the Australian Red Cross and Alzheimer's Australia, it's one of eight worthwhile community projects we helped fund during the year for their role in promoting the wellbeing of Australians.

Top: Retired swimmer Ian Thorpe set up the Ian Thorpe Fountain for Youth to help make a difference to the lives of Australian Aboriginal children.

Left: Schoolchildren in the Northern Territory are benefiting from the Literacy Backpack Program.



of Indigenous law and culture. But like many Aboriginal communities, it is facing an uphill battle keeping its younger generation in school.

To help foster student engagement, the principal, Shaun Leatherbarrow, invited Liz and her team to bring SharingStories to their town.

"Often in English or mathematics classes, there are students who teachers struggle to keep quiet, so it's been really good to have classes where they're allowed to speak and tell their stories," says Shaun.

"They think they are just having fun, but in fact there's a lot of literacy going on in the form of caption and script and songwriting – and they're achieving it without having to sit down and be quiet and listen to the teacher's voice all the time. The outcome has been really positive."

The learning experience has not been limited to classrooms, as evidenced at Jilkminggan School, near Katherine in the Northern Territory.

+ For more information, visit ianthorpes-fountainforyouth.com

+ To learn more about the Australian Unity Foundation, visit australianunitycorporate.com.au and click on 'community' on the toolbar.

"Taking the students down to the river, collecting bush medicine, looking at rock art, listening to stories about it and then using the technology to capture what has been happening in those places for thousands of years has been a really

positive experience for our students," says principal of Jilkminggan School Des Barritt.

"SharingStories has helped the children put those stories together in a way that can be shared all over the world – and they're really proud of that." +

+ Visit sharingstories.com.au to read, watch and hear stories for yourself.