

Changing lives

Success stories from the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion

By Suzanne Plater

Suzanne Plater is course co-ordinator for the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion.

The Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion was established in 1998 to help close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health education – well before ‘Close the Gap’ became the buzz-term that it is today. The University of Sydney and health professionals across the country recognised that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers were unable to access higher education for many reasons, including family, work and community responsibilities, but also because they were often educationally disadvantaged from an early age. The Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers from all over the country to study full-time for one year and gain a qualification that would enhance their personal and professional capital and capabilities.

Since 1998, 104 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers from urban, rural and remote locations have completed the course (with another 20 students on track to graduate in April 2012). Many have progressed in their careers and have completed or are completing higher degrees. They have also developed and implemented programs which have improved the lives of community members and provided higher education role models. The majority have achieved these impressive outcomes without completing Year 12 or an undergraduate degree.

At the Sydney School of Public Health, we would like to celebrate the successes of these talented and determined individuals by showcasing alumni from across the years who have agreed to share with us their personal and professional journeys since completing the Graduate Diploma.

MICK PITTMAN

“I can’t believe how exciting my life has become”, says Mick Pittman who completed the course in 1999. He was working for NSW Health as an Aboriginal Sexual Health Worker and says he “jumped at the opportunity” when it presented. His manager and other colleagues were very supportive and Mick’s career trajectory has confirmed their faith in him. In the past 12 years he has held various influential positions within NSW Health and the Department of Community Services. He was the Aboriginal Liaison Officer for WorkCover NSW and is now the Aboriginal Advisor to the Department of Premier and Cabinet, assisting them in the evaluation and further development of their Aboriginal employment action plan,

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Mick grew up in Casino, NSW, a “skinny little coloured kid who left school at 14, joined the Air Force at 17 and spent 21 years travelling the world.” When he first told his two university graduate sons that he was enrolled to study at the University of Sydney, he says their response was less than enthusiastic. “They said, ‘Dad, we’re sorry, but you’re gonna fail, you won’t cope.’ I guess they thought I was too old, too Aboriginal. But of course, Sydney University was fantastic. It didn’t matter whether the lecturers had professor or doctor in front of their name, they just walked into the room, pulled up a chair and sat down. And I’m sure they learned as much from us as we learned from them. They just treated us as equals, as peers.”

When asked what he most valued about attaining a graduate diploma from the University of Sydney, Mick doesn’t hesitate. “I became confident. I said, come on, give me a job that you think I can’t do, because I’ll use what I learned at university, I’ll break it down, take it step-by-step and I’ll do it.” Like many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Mick has a strong sense of community and a desire to work for the benefit of his people. “When I see the terrible statistics for Aboriginal men’s health, I think, I’ve had such a wonderful life, I want to help others to have what I’ve had. Life is great.”

“When I open my mouth to speak about health now, I’m confident I’ll be heard”.

ELLA BOWIE

Ella Bowie was enrolled in the Class of 2010, a lively group of 16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all around the country. Ella stood out as a determined and talented Torres Strait Islander woman on a mission to help her people take control of their own health and its determinants. When asked about her journey since completing the GDIHP, Ella wasn’t sure where to start: should she talk about her almost completed Master of Public Health, or the many partnerships and projects tackling chronic disease throughout the Torres Strait, or her capacity to encourage investment in infrastructure and jobs, or her soon-to-commence PhD, or her “deadly” team of newly-minted health promotion officers?

When Ella first enrolled in the course, she was working as a capital works project officer for Queensland Health’s Corporate Services on Thursday Island but had a strong yearning to work in health promotion. “I’ve always been interested in the preventative side of health and so about

five years ago, I asked if I could do the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion, but they said no. They wanted me to stay [working with them]. And every year, Queensland Health would advertise [scholarships for people to attend] the course, and I would ask and they would say no and no and no. But then, when I relinquished my position at Corporate Services, I applied to enrol in the grad dip and got in. And when the new CEO for Health came onboard and heard I was doing the course at The University of Sydney, she supported me and I ended up in a health promotion position, where I wanted to be.”

Ella is now the Senior Project Officer for the Torres Strait Health Promotion Unit and seems to have a knack for convincing different agencies and organisations to part with their money. “You taught me to advocate, so I advocate. And it works.” In partnership with the Torres Strait Island Regional Council she has acquired 15 Healthy Lifestyle Officer positions for the outer islands and four positions dedicated to tackling tobacco smoking. She has also received funding for an array of multi-strategic chronic disease programs and scholarships to send members of her health promotion team to the University of Sydney to complete the graduate diploma.

Ella says that completing the course gave her the knowledge, skills and confidence she needed to “stand up and say, no, a stall on the side of the road is not health promotion. Health promotion is about investing in safe and supportive environments, social and physical.” And while she is proud of what she has achieved in such a short period of time, Ella is quick to point out she relies heavily on her team, all of who bring different and valuable strengths to the task. “I have a really deadly team, most of who have now completed or are completing the grad dip, and I wouldn’t be able to do any of this without them”, she says.

PAUL STEWART

Paul Stewart was only 23 years old when he enrolled in the graduate diploma and was employed by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy as a project officer. His experiences of the course were positive and led in a

short time to a research position with Ian Anderson at the Onemba Koori Health Unit at the University of Melbourne. “In the eyes of Melbourne Uni, the grad dip looked good and got me the job. It helped, that’s for sure.” Once at Onemba, Paul found himself enrolled in a Master of Public Health at Deakin University, which is also conducted in block-mode and awards credit points for the grad dip in Indigenous Health Promotion. “Once I got the MPH, I saw major changes. I was asked to go for a promotion, which I got, and then I was handed all these new jobs, all these new opportunities”, he says.

Paul now splits his time between his first love, research, and teaching. He also coordinates the Indigenous Health and History subject at the University of Melbourne and is supporting Shepparton-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in a Master of Health Sciences. When asked what he’s most proud of (apart from his three children), he speaks passionately about a research project he’s been involved in since his days at VAHS. “We’re about to finalise the Young People’s Project. It was a longitudinal study where we asked the young Koori people questions associated with their health and wellbeing so we could get a good sense of what it means to be healthy and what factors make you healthy. And we hope to use it to inform people and policy about what’s important to our youth. We’re writing papers on racism and suicide and mental health, among other issues raised by the young people.”

Like Mick and Ella interviewed for this story, Paul expressed his heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to enrol in a graduate program at the University of Sydney that was specifically designed to provide educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had not considered attainment of a university degree to be within their grasp. “The way you guys structured the program, you made it possible. We were really well looked after and I take my hat off to Marilyn Wise and Shane Hearn. I wouldn’t have been able to do it otherwise. And it was a real achievement, not only for me but for my family. Hardly any of us had been to university until I went.” *radius*

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“The grad dip created an opening for people like me”

Mick Pittman, Paul Stewart, Ella Bowie

