

SPEECH BY ABBY-ROSE COX (IYLP TERTIARY STUDENT) – IYLP EP'S GATHERING (30-31 JULY 2009):

Before I begin I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in which we gather on today the Birrabirrigal people of the EORA nation . I would also like to thank the foundation for young Australians for inviting me to speak today. My name is Abby-Rose Cox and I come from Broome which is in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. My Grandmother is originally from Halls Creek which is in the East Kimberly region, but was taken away from her mother and sent to Beagle Bay Mission where she grew up, therefore I stand before you today as a proud Kija woman. I am very grateful to my grandmother who continues to encourage and inspire me. With her determination and will to succeed she was able to enrol my father at Noolingoo College in Broome where he was able to receive a good education.

I am here today to share with you my experiences with the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program and how it has helped me to full fill my dreams and aspirations. I attended St Marys College in Broome up until year 8 and I never thought I would be in the position that I am in today. In year 8 I was top of my class and was not faced with many challenges at school so I found myself getting distracted very easily and missing at least 1 day a week at school. It was to my mother's concern that she suggested boarding school to me. The idea frightened me as I had been brought up with strong family beliefs and connections and I could never picture myself being away from home. My mother and I sat down and spoke about it and decided it would be the best option for me so we filled in applications for Iona Presentation College which is a private all girl school in Perth. To our excitement my application was successful and I was flown down for an interview. The principal of my soon to be college was impressed with my marks at St Marys and they were very excited about enrolling me into Iona. The interview was successful so I packed up my things and my mother and two brothers escorted me down to Perth. I once read this quote that went "It is how you deal with failure that determines how you achieve success." Initially being at boarding school was a challenge. I was constantly behind the rest of the students in my class and I always had to put in twice as much effort as my mates. Their claims to be no difference between Rural and City education, but I can assure you that coming from top of the class in Broome and becoming close to failure in Perth there indeed is a huge difference. Being one of only very few indigenous students in Perth was also a challenge. I did not have a lot of courage to be able to voice my opinions or stand up for what I believed in.

I really did struggle at the beginning but I was soon provided with much support and I would like to take the time to acknowledge these people. Firstly my teachers would give up their own time to meet with me after school hours and I soon came to an even level with the rest of my class mates. I had a lot of respect for my teachers and they became more like friends than teachers. Secondly I was offered an Indigenous Youth Leadership Program scholarship in 2005 and it was with great privilege that I accepted the scholarship. The IYLP scholarships provided more than just financial support. Although the financial factor is crucial to educating Indigenous students, the support of the team at FYA was also a crucial element in helping me to succeed. When I had a problem at school and I wanted to speak to someone outside the school environment. I would contact my support person at FYA and they would always give me valuable advice and listen to what I had to say. Not only did I finish my secondary education at Iona Presentation College, but I also completed my Tertiary Entrance Examinations. Whilst at Iona I was involved in many Leadership activities. I founded an indigenous dance group called "charcoal footsteps", were Anna Manalis a professional dance who

had previously taught in Broome and I choreographed traditional and hip hop dances to be performed at various events in Perth. I fund-raised money to purchase a flag pole so that the Indigenous flag could be raised every day at Iona alongside the Australian flag. I was president of the Future Footprints program which worked closely with all Indigenous students attending boarding school in Perth. I also was on the working group of the IYLP committee which put together the national gatherings. I must say that the gatherings would have to be the most exciting and inspirational events I have ever taken part in. The first gathering took place in Melbourne and it is the most amazing feeling to be brought together with hundreds of other Indigenous students from around Australia to share a once in a lifetime experience. We participated in team building activities, put on talent shows and heard from some of the most inspiring Indigenous leaders from around Australia. I can quite proudly say that on the gathering we formed lifelong friendships and that my best friend today is a student who I was lucky enough to meet on one of the gatherings.

Boarding school would have to be one of the most valuable life experiences. I have learnt how to become independent, I have learnt how to stand up for what I believe in and I received the best education. I think that being able to send Indigenous students away from their communities and open up the doors to see the opportunities that are available to them is imperative. But in saying that I think it is also important to ensure that they still have a strong connection to their cultural beliefs.

The Indigenous Youth Leadership Program aims to provide an opportunity for indigenous students to access and have the best possible opportunity for education equal to any other young person in modern society. It attempts to provide the necessary skills and development opportunities through education. After receiving high-school education Indigenous students can become competitive professionals in mainstream society in their chosen fields. Through the program students develop confidence and courage at the best education institutions in the southern parts of the continent. Indigenous students attend the best schools and best universities around Australia. I think that Indigenous students need to become aware of those people who might question their identity and question why it is that only Indigenous people are given these special privileges. I know from personal experience that I was unsure and unprepared on how to respond to these people who looked down on me because I was on scholarships. The IYLP aims to prepare students for university and other post secondary studies and careers. Kids that are taken from their communities and put into boarding schools and universities become ambassadors for their families and communities. But with this opportunity their comes pressures for the students to give back to the community and their families. I think it is extremely important to help out your community and family, but the expectations that kids have placed on them can become overwhelming therefore I think it is important that students are educated on how to deal with the pressure and manage their own lives successfully. Some suggestions that I could make would be having debating classes set up for these Indigenous students so that they can gain confidence and develop public speaking skills, as a lot of Indigenous students are faced with a "shame" barrier. Also more comprehensive and intensive mentoring to help with social confidence and personal confidence, to eliminate shyness and develop engagement skills. I also think that it is important that Indigenous students are aware of contemporary social and political issues so that they have the necessary skills to be able to engage in argument and discussion.

Last year I graduated from year 12 at Iona Presentation College and I was unsure of whether to take a year off or head straight into uni. I heard through a family friend that Melbourne University had a new program set up for the first time in 2009 called the Bachelor of Arts Extended. The BA (ext) is a program that selects 13 Indigenous students from around Australia to partake in a bachelor of arts. Instead of doing the arts course over a time frame of 3 years, we do it over 4 and the first 2 years we do half mainstream half bridging subjects which allows extra support and assistance in the university life. I was always up for a challenge and thought I had nothing to lose so I applied for the program. When I found out that I made it to interviews I was scared, but excited, so I flew down to Melbourne late January. When I received the phone call saying that I was accepted in the course I was overwhelmed, but scared at the same time as I knew no one in Melbourne. Not a single friend or family member and I knew that I would be the youngest in the course as in Victoria everyone finishes school when they are 18, were as I am still 17. I have been at Melbourne Uni for the last 6 months and my time has been amazing. I have made lots of great friends and I love the course in which I am currently doing. I am also currently on one of the IYLP tertiary scholarships and I think they are very useful as it provides me with financial and social support. I am not completely sure on what I want to major in at the end of my course, but I do have two that I am very interested in. I would like to either major in Media and Communication so that I can change the way in which Indigenous people are constantly looked at negatively in the media and get all the positive stories out there or I would like to major in Psychology as I enjoy working one on one with people and I would like to get back up into the Kimberly region and work on all the problems Indigenous people are facing in the communities. I am a strong believer in making a difference to my culture and I want to change the way Indigenous people are judged.

I think that I am very lucky to be where I am today. I am the first one in my family to accept the scholarship and follow through with my education. I have so many people to thank and I would like to take a moment to recognise them. My family have been of great support throughout my life. They are constantly encouraging me to do my best and believe in me that I can make a difference. My teachers and mentors have been amazing. They have given up their own time to enhance my education and when I came close to giving up they supported me in every way possible. I would like to thank my friends for always making me smile and always pushing me to take up every opportunity possible. I would finally like to thank the Foundation For Young Australians for providing me with the Indigenous Scholarships and for the support given from the staff members. I know the journey may seem long and hard, but these people have made my journey a really enjoyable and inspiring one. I think that if we want to change the current problems that indigenous people face we need to start with education, because as Nelson Mandella once said "education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world".