

## **INDIGENOUS SUCCESS PODCAST WITH ALYSSA ARMSTRONG**

### **Voiceover**

Welcome to “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, with Dr Katelyn Barney and Professor Tracey Bunda.

### **Dr Barney**

Hi everyone, I’m Katelyn, and welcome to our podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”. I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we’re recording this today, and pay my respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong connections to Country. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where you’re listening from today and pay my respects to them as well.

The podcast series focuses on what works in outreach programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students. This series is part of a suite of resources developed from an Equity Fellowship that I undertook in 2020 funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. It focuses on success factors that are based on key findings from the Fellowship. Each episode is an interview with an Indigenous staff member or student about aspects of effective outreach programs. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country and I’m joined by my co-host and colleague, Professor Tracey Bunda who is part of the advisory group on the Fellowship.

### **Dr Bunda**

Hello everybody. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Country, regardless of where you may be. I’m a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and I’m currently the acting Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies unit at the University of Queensland. Katelyn and I decided to call the podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it” because there are multiple understandings of “success” in this context – what are the influences that lead to success, what life experiences help success? Do we have to think about locations and the context that lead to success, and what are the cultural matters that inform success. You may also hear Katelyn and I use the terms “Aboriginal” and “Torres Strait Islander”, “Indigenous”, “First Nations” in this podcast and we want to acknowledge this and note we are aware of the diversity and the different aspects on the use of these terms.

### **Dr Barney**

We hope that the podcast series is useful for outreach practitioners working with Indigenous students, but we also hope the podcast is useful for anyone who has an interest in student equity and student success in higher education more generally.

The focus of this episode is about the benefits for Indigenous students in participating in outreach programs in the early years of high school and our guest today is Alyssa Armstrong who participated in outreach programs at University of New England in both their junior and senior outreach programs, and she’s also worked as a mentor on the program. So, welcome Alyssa.

### **Alyssa Armstrong**

Thank you.

**Dr Bunda**

Alyssa, can you introduce yourself in whatever way you feel comfortable.

**Alyssa Armstrong**

Hello, I'm Alyssa Armstrong. I'm a proud Gumbaynggir woman from Grafton, New South Wales. I recently turned 20, and just finished the snow season up at Blue Cow, Perisher in Jindabyne.

**Dr Bunda**

Can you tell us about the outreach programs that you participated in while you were at school, Alyssa?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

My first Oorala girls' camp I attended, I was in Year 9. I can distinctly remember being in Year 8 and watching my friends that went have such a fun time and being like, "I have to hand in my application next year" – I was very much like, "On it next year". Yeah, it was such a great opportunity to go, and it was really eye-opening, for me especially, just seeing how accessible uni was, and not so much like an outlandish thing, like, "Oh, going to uni is so hard" which everyone makes out like it is and going to Oorala was definitely a step back, and yep, they unwinded everything and they were like, "Here are the steps and the procedures you have to take to be able to go". And yeah, it was such an eye-opening thing for me, and there's a lot of the other girls too – we had a lot of girls that came to the camps and they were from really isolated towns and they didn't really get to see what happens at uni that much.

I guess I was a bit luckier; I was from Armidale which is where the UNE is; I was more like, "Oh, the uni's there", but yeah, it was such a good opportunity for those girls to go there and see how accessible uni was. The programs and place, and the scholarships in place to be able to get there – because a lot of people thought, well, you had to get a really good ATAR to get into what you wanted. Lynda Lynch and all the other people there made sure that we knew that there was different programs and different alleyways to get into uni, so we all felt like this is a place that we can attend, and it wasn't just so outlandish.

**Dr Barney**

Thanks, Alyssa. So, I think you participated in those outreach programs in Year 9, 10, 11, and 12 didn't you?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

Yes.

**Dr Barney**

Can you tell us a bit about the benefits particularly of participating when you were in Grade 9, because, you know, one of the findings of the Fellowship was the majority of outreach programs are aimed at students in Years 10 to 12, but the earlier outreach for Indigenous students is really key, and there's also other research done by Maria Raciti that talks about that, and the timing of outreach, so, could you tell us a bit about particular experiences participating when you were in Year 9, and what you think the best aspects of that camp were?

### **Alyssa Armstrong**

I saw a lot of girls come in and they just would not talk to anyone, wouldn't lift their head up for anyone, and at the end of the week, they were the biggest loud mouths – you couldn't stop them from talking, and you wouldn't stop them from having an opinion and it was just the most beautiful thing about the camp. It just brought so many girls that were from these homes where they were pushed back into this role, or this identity, and they came out to these camps and they were like, "This is who I am and I'm going to let you know this is who I am". So, it was really good to see a lot of girls getting a lot of confidence from the camps where they wouldn't have gained it really anywhere else because another great thing about the camps is at the start, when I went to them, they were really small – they were like, it was only a certain amount of people can get in, because that was the funds I guess they obviously had for the programs.

So, it was very much one-on-one; you had a lot of opportunities to have a lot of one-on-one access with mentors and teachers I guess you call them. It was very much a good pathway for someone that is so young, and the world is so daunting, to go there and be like "Oh, well, it's much better and much more accessible". I just feel as if getting to them younger is the best – the best time to get them is before they have issues, I guess I'd say, because going to these camps, as I said, it takes them out of these stereotypes and these roles, and they're not around their family, and they're not around these people that tell them who they are, and they're like, "Well, this is who I am, and this is what I can do – let me do it. These are my interests; I want to go to uni. Let me do it".

At school, personally, I was tokenised a lot because I was one of those high achieving Indigenous people that did really well, so like, "Let me put you on the newsletter, let me put you on this", and I feel like these programs were a good opportunity to get those kids that weren't looked at so much into places where they felt like they could achieve high, because, as someone that... I had parents personally that wanted me to go to uni. I was always told uni was something I could access, so going to these programs, seeing these people that literally had no one out of their family graduate was really amazing because they were like, "Wow, this is something I can do". And, it was really good because I feel the issue is with kids not graduating and kids not going to uni at the moment, it's the vicious cycles at home – we've always known that, we've always been aware of it but we're not doing much about it and I feel like these camps where you're able to take a step out of home situation where you're by yourself and around people that actually want you to succeed, they're going to have these terrific, like, "Oh wow, people aren't putting me down, people aren't being like 'Oh well you can't go to uni'." So, it's good. These programs should happen more and not just be like... because at the start when I attended, there were only for Armidale people, and then when you'd reach out, and then we had Sydney people the next year, then we had people, really rural people the year after.

Lynda really reached out to so many kids and gave them so many opportunities – it was so beautiful.

### **Dr Barney**

Thanks, Alyssa. That was really great to hear your perspective on how those programs can build students' self-confidence and self-esteem, and sense of belonging at university. Can you talk a bit about any connections or networks with other students that you made in those programs?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

I definitely made some friendships that I never thought would have ever happened. I definitely made connections with girls in Armidale that were really meaningful because having that connection of being Aboriginal in your home town. I moved from Grafton so I always felt like an outcast, especially in my community because I wasn't the Aboriginal landowners of that land, so I always felt like I was a bit of an outcast. Going to those camps definitely made me feel more connected with those girls that I once felt like put me out. So, it was good.

**Dr Bunda**

And on those camps, Alyssa, you were an ambassador as well as a mentor. Can you talk about that experience?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

I guess it got to the point where I had attended the camps so many times that the routine of the camps wasn't engaging for me anymore because they wanted to bring new girls in to experience the camp that happened last year, but they also wanted to have that foundation of having those strong leaders in there, so I guess it turned into the point where I was asked if I'd rather come to the camp as a leader and a mentor rather than a student. And it was good; it made me feel more confident as a leader which was really nice, and it helped me become more of a strong leader at my school, and more proud of who I was, because at these camps, it's nice; you get to meet these people – they're strong Aboriginal people from day one. They know who they are, they don't need anyone else to tell them who they are but for us girls that were being so young, it was definitely such a strong moment, having those people be like, "Be proud of who you are. You don't have anything to be ashamed of. You girls are black and you're proud – keep it that way". It was good.

**Dr Bunda**

Going from shame to being game. Post-camp follow-up is something that students often noted was lacking when Katelyn was doing interviews, and students would like to have more engagement past the outreach activity. Did any of the programs have post-camp follow-up, and if yes, what happened after the camp?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

I wouldn't say there was post-camp follow-ups as much but I did have the camp organiser all the time email me, and she had my number – she'd message me – and she'd always be asking me to catch up, asking how I was, and if there was any opportunities at the uni, she'd always be emailing them to me. It did not feel like as soon as I left the camp I was, like, out of there; I felt like I could walk in there any day and everyone would be like "Hey, Alyssa. How's it going?" It was good.

**Dr Barney**

Thanks, Alyssa. It's good to hear you talk about that continued connection that you had with the outreach staff then. What impact do you think overall that the outreach programs have had on you?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

Well, I now know the steps to take, individually each step to take to get to uni. So it's, as I said, not an outlandish idea anymore, and I now know how supported I am at the Armidale uni because of those programs. I now know personal people in the uni so it's not like I don't know anyone; it was really good to have those eye-openers. Well, I don't know if any other uni does have Indigenous programs like Oorala, but I definitely feel like having Oorala at Armidale made me want to go to Armidale Uni because that support system was there and they always said that [0:11:50] always have a fallback if you needed it, so it was good.

**Dr Bunda**

We've been talking about Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, and being it. What do you think Indigenous success means?

**Alyssa Armstrong**

Indigenous success to me is when I'm not scared of my little brothers attending school and having their classmates put them down in a racist way. Indigenous success to me is when we start putting Aboriginal kids up, and when we push them up, Indigenous success will happen all the time.

**Dr Bunda**

What a great mantra – “Let's push Indigenous kids up”.

**Dr Barney**

Love it. Thanks, Alyssa. Great to talk with you and hear about your experiences doing those programs from Grade 9, 10, 11, and 12, and particularly around the self-confidence and sense of self that those programs can build I think is really important.

**Dr Bunda**

Thanks, Alyssa.

**Alyssa Armstrong**

Thank you guys.

**Dr Bunda**

Katelyn and I both want to thank you for joining this podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, and being it”. If you've got any questions about this podcast or any of the other podcasts that you may have listened to, please contact Katelyn on her email address – “k.barney...” – that is B-A-R-N-E-Y – [k.barney@UQ.edu.au](mailto:k.barney@UQ.edu.au). Thank you very much, and we hope that you'll join us in the future.

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