**Gaby’s training for important health position**

Gaby Bruning is a young woman training for a vital job. She’s completing an Aboriginal alcohol and drug worker traineeship with Wellington House, a 12-bed residential unit providing withdrawal and other care to clients with alcohol or other drug problems.

Ms Bruning is based in the eastern suburb of Box Hill at Wellington House, a 12-bed residential unit providing withdrawal and other care to clients with alcohol or other drug problems.

She is completing a Certificate IV in Alcohol and Drugs, but is also gaining hands-on experience by working three days a week at Wellington House.

Ms Bruning has also been given responsibility for providing supervised treatment and care for people withdrawing from alcohol and drugs.

“It’s important that the traineeship exists,” she said.

“Historically, there have been issues which Aboriginal people have had to face, so it is good that with my understanding of Aboriginal culture they have someone to reach out to.”

Aboriginal Employment

Coordinator Stephanie May said the Aboriginal alcohol and drug worker traineeship was an important part of Eastern Health’s Aboriginal Employment Plan, known as Karreea Yirramboi. “Eastern Health understands the importance of diversity and inclusion in our workforce, and increasing the employment participation of Aboriginal people is crucial to this,” she said.

**Commitment**

Karreea Yirramboi is one part of Eastern Health’s commitment to close the health gap between Indigenous people and other Australians.

Other recent projects have included asking the question, an initiative designed to ensure Indigenous people are identified more often and can be referred to the most appropriate services for their healthcare needs; and the Closing the Gap Sports Day, where Eastern Health staff play some of best Aboriginal sporting talent in the region in a football match and netball tournament to promote health services in the region.

By **CYNDI TEBBEL**

GARY Cattanach’s love of teaching has extended beyond the classroom into an innovative project with long-term benefits for a whole community.

Mr Cattanach, who received the Australian Education Union’s 2014 Arthur Hamilton Award for an outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, is the trade school coordinator at Nambucca Heads High School, on the north coast of NSW. At a school where more than 20% of the students are Indigenous, in a community with unemployment at more than twice the national average, it’s a role with significant social relevance.

But that doesn’t tell half the story. For more than 25 years Mr Cattanach has been a leader in the process of reconciliation through education, in and out of the classroom, as a teacher/mentor to students, parents and the school.

Mr Cattanach, a Gungarri man from Charleville in central Queensland, says his love of teaching young people and helping them find a path in his own experience of having grown up in similar, sometimes difficult, circumstances. His spirit, he says, is a gift from his mother, a Gungarri Elder and a “great teacher”.

Most recently, in the context of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage, Mr Cattanach has taken the leading role in establishing the first Junior Land Council (JLC) in NSW and possibly in Australia. The project, a partnership between Nambucca Heads High School, the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council and other community organisations, was launched in 2010.

The catalyst was a neglected plot of land at the Bellwood Aboriginal Reserve that was ripe for a makeover.

“The area was a dump, which was great for me,” Mr Cattanach says. “I like dumps. I was raised next to a dump.”

Mr Cattanach and his team reimagined what was a no-go zone for most of the community. They enlisted an enthusiastic team of Indigenous and other students, teachers and community members.

With many obstacles to overcome, it hasn’t all been a walk in the park.

“I was an experienced teacher when I started the project,” he says. “But there were staffing issues, and I needed to be able to make changes to the curriculum, timetable and school calendar with the cooperation of the principal and staff.”

“I also had to gain the trust of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, establish Aboriginal autonomy and leadership and overcome the fear of failure.”

Mr Cattanach’s push into the reserve had a small but cleverly practical and inclusive start. He showed the students how to build a letterbox for each house at the reserve.

Then he called in the bulldozers to smooth the “mongrel bush” into a turfed playing field. Next came a children’s playground, vegetable gardens and fruit trees.

**Decisions**

The young JLC members were actively involved in every stage of the transformation and made policy decisions that went beyond the cosmetic. For example, it was their idea to designate alcohol-free zones at the reserve, which the community supports and enforces.

Mr Cattanach is justifiably enthusiastic about the measurable results at school and in the wider community. As a result of the JLC’s participation in the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council has jumped 300%. Students involved in the JLC, and others in their immediate and extended families, are more engaged at school.

There are more Indigenous students on school committees, relationships between students and staff are more positive and respectful, and school attendance has improved.

Mr Cattanach is excited about the JLC’s evolution, but also realistic when considering its future. For one thing, he returned to full-time teaching this year, so others will need to step in to help keep the project on track.

Ongoing funding is another concern. “Given the budgetary constraints around the country, principals and administrators are running scared, wondering how they are going to survive the moment,” he said.

In a move not directly related to his work, “but quite a story if people are willing to listen”, the land council has applied for a grant to set up a cultural tourism project that would bring visitors to the reserve to teach them about its historical significance.

“If they can get the application up – and I’ll help – I think people would be interested in this yarn about what the kids in the JLC have done to help the community and themselves,” Mr Cattanach says.

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer. This article will be published in the Australian Educator, Winter 2015 edition.