Deadly Tammy Goes Full Circle

Biripi woman Tammy Anderson is one deadly woman. As she shares her journey from jigging classes at school to being principal of Briar Road State School, it’s easy to see how she inspires Koori students who have been at the heart of her work for over a decade.

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» Read the following interview with Deadly Tammy Anderson about her journey from classroom to school leadership at Briar Road State School

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Interview by Jessa Rogers

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I asked Tammy how she came to be involved in education as a career. “It goes back to 1990 when I was in year 6” she explained. “A year or so before in 1988 AEOs (Aboriginal Education Officers) had just come into existence. My AEO had a big impact on my primary schooling from that time on. Just having another black face in my classroom inspired me.

As soon as I knew I had to do work experience in Year 10, I decided I was going to go back to my old primary school to do work experience there. I think I thought “I’m gonna be an AEO when I leave school.”

I loved Aboriginal Studies because it was a kind of opportunity for me to feel like an expert, because in that subject we were learning and doing things that I knew about.
My Aboriginal studies teacher asked what I was going to do after school... She asked me had I thought about going to uni. I’d never heard of uni before.

Looking back on her journey, Tammy didn’t always enjoy being in the classroom as a student. “I was probably a good student, but I wasn’t good at school. I didn’t go to class often. I didn’t realise my potential and the only thing that interested me was Aboriginal studies.” Luckily for the many Koori families and children she has taught and mentored, Tammy had an excellent Aboriginal studies teacher in high school. She found her passion as a year twelve student in Aboriginal Studies. “I loved Aboriginal Studies, because it was a kind of opportunity for me to feel like an expert, because in that subject we were learning and doing things I knew about.”

As her senior year progressed, Tammy wasn’t sure what she would do after school anymore. “In August of year 12, I hadn’t taken enough classes to get a UAI (ATAR). My Aboriginal studies teacher asked what I was going to do after school and I hadn’t really thought about it. I was just focused on finishing school; I thought that would make everyone proud. She asked me had I thought about going to uni. I’d never heard of uni before.”

With the assistance of her Aboriginal Studies teacher, Tammy learned of Aboriginal programs and what university was all about. “She helped me send away applications and for Aboriginal Alternate Entry. I probably wouldn’t have been able to go to uni without that.” Although Tammy was accepted and went on to graduate, she remembers the feeling of not being good enough that stayed with her for a number of years. “I questioned whether I was smart enough to be there at uni, and that’s something that stayed with me for the early part of my career. I wondered if I was smart enough, as smart as my non-Aboriginal colleagues.” It’s clear she definitely was, and today Tammy is thriving in her leadership role as principal at Briar Road.

What Goes Around Comes Around

While completing her teacher degree at Wollongong, Tammy returned for her first teaching practicum to her old primary school, working alongside the same AEO who had inspired her all those years ago. After graduation, she took her first casual teaching job at Briar Road. “The school I’m Principal at now is the school I went to.” This connection is a thread that continues through Tammy’s inspiring journey and it’s hard not to wonder whether spirit had some hand in leading her along the path she continues to walk today.
“When I graduated, I did some casual teaching days at my old school. The Principal at the time saw some potential in me that I probably didn’t see in myself. He eventually gave me the chance to undertake a role called Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher. There’s probably only 28 or so of those in the state of New South Wales,” Tammy explained. “It was a specialist position around early English literacy capabilities for Aboriginal students. We had a high population of Indigenous students in the school and this role was kind of my entry into the profession. I honed my skills around students and working with communities.”

Holding her first teaching position within the community that she had grown up in, Tammy and the community both took a while to adjust to her new role. “I wasn’t an AEO. I was a teacher, the only Aboriginal teacher at the school. It took a while for some people in my community to understand that. They sometimes couldn’t understand I was a teacher, because they had never seen an Aboriginal person at that level as a teacher.” Tammy stayed in that role for four years, and while she didn’t see it, her potential for leadership was clear. “The principal said I should think about leadership. I said ‘no way’, but eventually four years on I started to do some relief Assistant Principal work.” Taking her first steps into school leadership at the same school she had attended as a student, Tammy looks back on this time with pride.

**A Heart for Indigenous Education**

“I was a young mum at 20. I’d fallen pregnant while attending uni and started teaching at 22 with a 2 year old. I had a different set of responsibilities.” Tammy notes that she didn’t always recognise the skills she had, especially skills that were necessary in leadership. “Growing up Aboriginal, and as a Mum I had the ability to form really good connections and a strong ability to communicate. That was seen as a strength by my boss.”

Eventually Tammy began to believe in her own capabilities and took the plunge to aim high and apply for a leadership role of her own. “I relieved for five years in Assistant Principal capacity but there was no permanency available at our school. No one moved on and everyone was happy in their roles. So I took merit selection and gained a role at Rosemeadow Public School. I did it for a year. At that time a Deputy Principal position came up in the Airds community, the place I grew up in. Four local Principals had come together to form a shared position that would have responsibility for Aboriginal education in the four schools. They actually identified it and that hadn’t been done before.”

The Airds Community of Schools position was appealing to Tammy whose heart for Indigenous education had never stopped being central to her work and passion as an educator. She applied for the role and was successful. “That position gave me a different context to Briar. In those four schools there were 330 Aboriginal students. My position was about getting consistency across the schools and sharing and developing good practice.”
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While Tammy’s role was exciting and challenging, once again the thread that had run through her career to date came back around when in 2013 she received word that the role of Principal was going to be advertised at her old school. “When I heard Briar Road was going to go up, I knew this was my one chance to affect change in the best school and best community. If there was one school I wanted, it was that school. I put my hand up and I got the job. It’s honestly the best job in the world. Sure it’s challenging and all those things leadership is. But it is the best job being in my community and being Principal. It’s been really rewarding to make things happen that I’ve thought about for a long time and to build on that what previous people have done here.” Now Tammy is back where she started all those years ago at Briar Road, as Principal. “From preschool to year six we have 94 Koori kids. The school is 287 in total so about a third of our students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. I have a fantastic school community, students and staff and I love my job.”

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Looking back on her journey, Tammy says her greatest challenge was believing in herself. “I spent a lot of time looking at non-Aboriginal colleagues and the skills they had. I thought I didn’t have a lot of those skills and spent a bit of time thinking that maybe I didn’t match up. Deep down I guess I might have believed I did, but I’ve wasted some time in my career not knowing if I was good enough. If people who are credible believe in you, you’re OK. I wish that I would have believed in myself. Now I do, but early on I didn’t and I should have.” Looking back on her long teaching and leadership journey Tammy has learned many lessons. “Since 2002 when I started at Briar, I’ve worked in and around this community, for some 13 years now. I take real pride in working with my entire school community and the many diverse cultural and family contexts that make up the school. I enjoy working with a dynamic staff that enjoys the challenge of creating change.”

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Aboriginal education is central to who Tammy is and how she operates. Even though as a Principal she is responsible for all aspects of school, she has never hidden the fact that Aboriginal education is at the core of her practice. “It’s who I am, and what I do. I told them that when I applied for this job, and I told my staff when I started at this school. It is who I am personally and professionally. It sets the tone for how we are going to operate. It’s not the only thing at our place that is important because schools are multifaceted and they are beautiful like that, but Aboriginal education is central to how we do business.”

Coming full circle, Tammy’s personal and professional lives are inextricably intertwined with the thread that continues to weave its way through her life. “I look at the AEO who was here when I was here in year 5. I ended up marrying her son, so now she is my mother-in-law. Her son and I were at Kindy at this school together. When she started here in the late 80s as an AEO it would have been tough. She tells me that she remembers the first day she started here. She was educated too, but just in ways they couldn’t understand. One of the teachers said in front of everyone on her first day, “Can you speak Aboriginal?” and she was so embarrassed that they had asked. I didn’t have to contend with that. She paved the way for other Kooris in our community.”

Tammy is thankful for those who walked the journey before her in Aboriginal education and in leadership. “Whenever I talk about my journey it was certainly made easier by those who walked it, well before me. I guess my aim is to make it even easier for those Aboriginal teachers coming up behind me. I was 34 when I became a Principal. Community knew where I’d come from so no one ever said anything, but there were perhaps others who thought I was quite young for the responsibility.”

To those considering teaching or leadership, Tammy sends this message. “Believe in yourself and in your cultural capacities. I didn’t believe my skills, like being able to talk to and connect with community, were as valuable as they are – the cultural competencies we have as Aboriginal people carry you so far in leadership.”

“When I’m talking to students at our school, I want them all to be proud of who they are and where they come from. For Koori kids it’s about being proud and being Black. The only way students can do that is if they see more Kooris in schools.

The way we are grown up as young Aboriginal children is important to the way we lead. It makes us unique leaders.”
Tammy Anderson is currently Principal at Briar Road State School in New South Wales
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Tammy Anderson was interviewed by Jessa Rogers, PhD candidate, Australian National University, June 2015 with support from MATSITI.


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