Aboriginal woman Helen Empacher is an experienced educator, born and raised in Sydney. After acting as Principal at La Perouse Public School in 2013, she was appointed to her current role as Principal of Mascot Public School. Helen shared her education journey with MATSITI as part of our series on inspirational Indigenous principals.

A year 3 teacher who showed belief in her abilities and thought she would one day make a great teacher, was an early inspiration for Helen Empacher. Since that day Helen has tried to be the ‘Mr Gilbert’ for every student who has passed through her care.

Her extended family has also been a huge source of strength, particularly her grandparents, and Helen has drawn on their support whenever she experienced self-doubt during her journey.

» Read the following interview with Deadly Helen Empacher about her journey to becoming Principal of Mascot Public School.

MATSITI is a four year $7.5 million Australian Government initiative to increase the number and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools. See more inspiring stories of Indigenous teachers & leaders at: www.matsiti.edu.au/tag/profiles
Deadly Helen & the Power of Belief in Education

Interview by Jessa Rogers

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There is always a difficulty doing justice to an inspiring journey in a short piece of writing, especially one like Yuin educator Helen Empacher’s. Her career spans more than two decades, and her inspiring story is a bicultural tapestry with threads formed by those who raised her, especially her Mum and grandparents.

Born to Helen Wells (nee Mumbler) and Richard Wells, Helen’s grandparents, known as Nelly and Nugget Mumbler, continue to hold a special place in Helen’s life. “All of my grandparents played a significant role in my upbringing which I am eternally grateful for. As a result, I treasure the relationship that my own children had or have with their grandparents. My Nan’s father was Christopher Stewart, also known as Hackett, from Wallaga Lake. Her mum was Agnes Donovan, previously of Kempsey and Wallaga Lake. My pop’s father was Harry Mumbler and his mum was Jane Drew. They married on a mission at Kinchela in 1909.”

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Knowing who she was, and where she came from, certainly gave Helen a strong foundation to build a successful and inspiring career as an Aboriginal principal. Teachers, too, formed important aspects of her childhood and her ambitions for the future.

“I was lucky enough to have an experience with a teacher in Year 3 who showed a belief in me and my ability to be whatever I wanted to be in life.

I can remember a significant moment in my life when I was explaining to the class how I got an answer to a maths question and my teacher at the time, Mr Gilbert, saying something to the effect of me making a great teacher one day.

It was the first time that I thought that the teachers didn’t all dislike me because I was Aboriginal; that here was someone who saw past that and didn’t allow my culture to cloud his judgement of me like all the other teachers did.

I can remember that so clearly that it was a turning point in my life and from that day forward I knew that that was exactly what I wanted to be, a teacher.”

The support of Helen’s family gave her strength to pursue her goal to become a teacher and gave her the confidence she needed in spite of others looking down on her as an Aboriginal woman.

“My grandfather was very vocal in his support of me wanting to pursue that as a career. My mum and my Nan were equally adamant that I shouldn’t listen to these gubbahs who told me that I couldn’t do this or that. I drew strength from all of them and followed my dream.

In turn, I have tried to be the Mr Gilbert in every child’s life who has passed through my care.”

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**From Teacher to Principal**

With many years of teaching now behind her, Helen truly believes in the power of education to change lives.

“I believe that it gives us extensive choices in life and that every student is entitled to learn. I believe that teams, not individuals, build success. I believe that effective learning requires collaboration between teachers, students and parents and caregivers and that this collaboration needs to be grounded in mutual respect and trust. I believe that improvement as a school matters as it affects the lives of children,” she explains.

With such a rich teaching history, including some time teaching overseas in the UK, Helen took on the new challenge of school leadership and faced her own doubts toward success.
"I have tried to be the Mr Gilbert in every child’s life who has passed through my care."

“During 2009, an opportunity to relieve as Assistant Principal came up in the school that I was teaching at and I was approached by the Deputy Principal to take on the role. I had no idea what he saw in me at the time but I wasn’t very good at saying no in those days, so I accepted the offer and nervously went about my business,” she explained. Before she knew it, the position became available on a permanent basis and Helen took some time to do some soul-searching as to whether or not she would apply. “My mum had passed away the month before it was advertised and it closed on her birthday, so I took it as a sign from her that I should at least have a go, just like she had encouraged me to do when I was unsure as to whether or not I could even be a teacher in the first place. Lo and behold, I got the job!”

Stepping Out of Her Comfort Zone

Helen’s willingness to step out of her comfort zone and to try new things has paid off, with rewards in the way of new experiences, extended leadership opportunities and new positions. “I relieved as deputy principal, then secured that position permanently. Likewise, I relieved as principal and then secured a permanent position at that level soon after as well. While it seems like an easy road on paper, it wasn’t without doubts or hurdles, or even a bit of good luck.”

“But I am fully aware of the intense doubts and hurdles that my Mum and grandparents faced in their lives as Aboriginal people and I refuse to dishonour the pain that they endured to fight the fight that gives me the choices and life that I have today. In short, I have often taken on these opportunities to honour the path that they tread before me, with positive outcomes for me as a result.”

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Helen’s career has gone from strength to strength, as her confidence in herself has also grown. Continued hard work has seen further opportunities come her way and Helen’s confidence to have a go teamed with her commitment to follow through has been a winning combination for her education career.

Helen notes that one-on-one conversations with her deeply respected mentors assist her in making decisions and remind her of the conversations she used to have with her mother and grandparents. Such conversations help her balance what she states has been the hardest part of her journey, namely the doubts from others, but mostly the doubts from herself.

“I’ve been lucky enough to have great support around me from family and friends, and a growing sense of confidence in my abilities and what I have to offer to education. Lucky for me, I have a bit of a stubborn streak too so when someone tells me that I can’t do something it tends to make me go for it harder just to prove to them that I can. I guess that comes from being Aboriginal and being told no so many times because of my cultural background and knowing that my culture is not a hindrance, in fact it’s a blessing.”

Leadership is often about putting yourself last at work because you want what’s best for others, not yourself

Teaching is a deadly career

Helen says teaching is a deadly career for so many reasons, especially because it places you at the centre of many people’s lives. Her advice to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking a career in education and a potential leadership role within education is to find a great mentor and be honest with yourself about why you want a leadership role.

“If it’s to have power, then think again. Leadership is often about putting yourself last at work because you want what’s best for others, not yourself,” she says. “Shadow a great leader to see how they operate, why they operate the way they do and what results they get as a result. Map your plans. Challenge yourself out of your comfort zone and into the next level. And don’t give up on your dream. And don’t let anyone else talk you into giving up on your dream.”

Helen says she will continue working in her role for as long as it challenges her mentally and intellectually. “My original dream was to be a teacher and I’ve exceeded that so I’d like to see where the future takes me.” Helen’s words of wisdom are powerful markers of her inspiring career. “Believe in yourself because somewhere there are people who do exactly that - whether they’re alive and well or whether they’re watching from the spirit world. I take strength from my ancestors and respect them for the life that they have given me today. I want to show them that I was worth it and that I’m grateful and proud.”
…being told no so many times because of my cultural background and knowing that my culture is not a hindrance, in fact it’s a blessing.”

Helen Empacher is Principal of Mascot Public School in NSW

Helen Empacher was interviewed by Jessa Rogers, PhD candidate, Australian National University, in August 2015 with support from MATSITI.

There are more inspiring Indigenous teacher profiles at www.matsiti.edu.au/tag/profiles

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