

Closing the Gap: one woman's story

Barcaldine, population 1300, lies east of Longreach in Central West Queensland (CWQ). Its place in Australian history rests on two things: the Tree of Knowledge (vandalised and killed in 2006) where the shearers met to plan their 1891 strike; and it is the birthplace of the Australian Labour Party, formed during the strike.

On a recent package tour to CWQ, we discovered another reason to put 'Barcy', as it's known to locals, on the map. Established in 2013, the Hostel currently looks after 26 children attending Barcy's State school and is wholly owned and operated by Aboriginal people, without any government funding. The children, known as "Desert Murriss", come from remote corners of Qld and the NT. Their access to distance education (School of the Air) is nil, as it relies on computers, internet and associated funding, all outside the reach of remote communities.

The Hostel team feels strongly that children with aspirations to complete secondary education need an authentic pathway and plan to achieve their goals, in a community that embraces their cultural capital.



Cheryl Thompson and colleague Wayne,
didge player

Apart from setting up the Hostel, Cheryl Thompson promotes numerous ways of advancing Aboriginal people. Her family runs the Ridgee Didge Café (!) providing not only delicious food but employment and training for young Aboriginal women. She is the creator of the Barcy Base Camp and Desert Dust Dancers (all Hostel students) and seeks to renew the lore and cultural practices of her ancestors through dance & song. The Dancers, boys and girls, present stories of their ancestors and this becomes a gift of cultural sharing and connection to country with visitors.

She has also created Coolamon Coffee, a rich, earthy blend that reflects the connection to country that she loves.

To talk to Cheryl is to be inspired by her vision and her passion for advancing the education and lives of young Aboriginal children.

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To quote **Generation Now's** manifesto: *"We are about focussing in the moment and addressing the issues of the moment. We have a plan. We do not believe that we can afford to wait for another generation to close the gap that exists between Aboriginal Australians and mainstream Australia."*



If ever you get the chance to visit Barcy, stay awhile and see how many ways Cheryl and her people are looking after the next generation of Desert Murriss.

By Chris & Paula Stocker.

Chris is a member of the First Peoples of Australia group.