

INDIG LANGUAGE WAKES FROM LONG SLEEP

Wergaia, the language of the Wotjobaluk people in central west Victoria has been 'sleeping' for a very long time. That's how Belinda Marks describes the language that her people in the Wimmera area once spoke. She is one of the people now working to stir the language from its slumber and bring it to life again in the community.

For Belinda, reclamation of the Wergaia language is about much more than words and sentences. It is a proclamation of her culture and a tribute to the elders who used the language until they were moved into the Ebenezer Mission (1859-1904) more than 100 years ago. Over time the language was silenced.

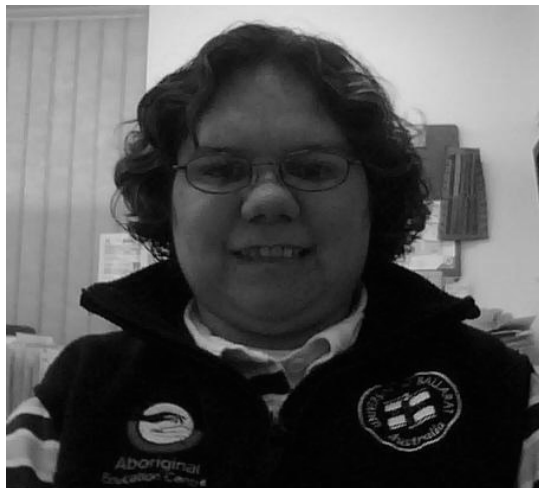
Belinda (pictured), an administration officer at the Aboriginal Education Centre at the Ballarat University in regional Victoria, has almost completed her three-year course to revive and reclaim the Wergaia language. The course, a recognised Year 12 VCE subject, is conducted along with students from Horsham, via a video link-up with Monash University linguist Dr Julie Reid. It is supported by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. Belinda has also been awarded a 2008 Good Shepherd Indigenous Scholarship.

The nine students, all family members, also gather each week for a Learning Pathways course, where they help each other with any course problems and assignments, speaking only Wergaia. For some students in their 50s, the study has been difficult, but they have persisted.

"Studying the language, sounds and words has really broadened my understanding of the Wotjobaluk people and the culture," Belinda said.

A challenge facing Belinda, 32, and her 'classmates' is how to take the reclaimed language forward and into the community. Ideally, she would like to see the language taught to Wotjobaluk children and to the wider community, but there are obvious barriers.

"One of the big problems we have is that a lot of our people have not even been to school much in their younger days so they would not be able to learn the language as a VCE course," Belinda

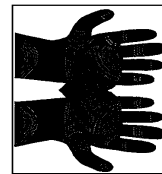


said. "Once we have finished at the end of the year we are going to look at other ways people can learn."

Like most other VCE students, the Wergaia language class will be studying hard for their November 18 exams, but they already have some great achievements under their belt. As part of the course they have each chosen favourite dreamtime stories and translated them into Wergaia – the first resources of this kind in existence. As well, a Wergaia Community Grammar & Dictionary has been written. It features word lists, reconstructed grammar and a sound system.

The students use the Indigenous Languages of Victoria: Revival and Reclamation Study Guide, research by Dr Reid and others, as well as recordings of the language that are housed at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.

Belinda and her classmates phone, email and chat to each other using Wergaia and she hopes to one day teach the language so it never 'falls asleep' again. In December they will share their experiences when they present a paper at the World Indigenous Conference of Education in Melbourne.



At a meeting in August Jacqui Garber, Grants Manager for MacKillop, acknowledged Good Shepherd's work in encouraging others to sponsor indigenous women's tertiary studies.

Jacqui said the partnership MacKillop had formed with Good Shepherd Social Justice has opened up so many doors. Some **Life & Justice** readers have personally sponsored students to study medical courses. Also as a result of other SJ stories, MacKillop is now in conversation with other congregations about more scholarships. You can make a donation to:

The Mary MacKillop Foundation

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