



I'd like to share with you all the story of an Aboriginal woman called Alice Rigney. She was an inspiring leader and Australia's first female Aboriginal school principal. After the cultural walk with Uncle Frank a few weeks ago, Alice's journey brings to life for me one way the Kurna language has been revived, preserved and taught to future generations.

Her story was one featured in a book called Trailblazers, which shines a light on the lives of 100 extraordinary South Australian women.

From her early years growing up on the Point Pearce Aboriginal Mission in the 1940s, as a young woman demanding entry to teachers' college, and later as an innovative school principal and administrator, Alice Rigney fought hard for greater opportunities in education all her life.

When her youngest child's kindergarten lacked teachers, she stepped into the breach, an act that set her on a path to becoming a qualified teacher, Australia's first female Aboriginal school principal and the first Aboriginal person to join the professional ranks of the South Australian Department of Education.

Along the way, she preached the power of education in transforming lives and changing destinies, in the process opening doors for others, including for her own children. She also made a major contribution to the preservation of Indigenous culture, introducing the teaching of the Kurna language into the curriculum when she was principal at the Kurna Plains School in Elizabeth.

Her first teaching appointment was at Taperoo Primary School, where she found her class was a 'United Nations' of students from all different backgrounds. She was 'absolutely terrified', wondering what the white parents would think of an Aboriginal person teaching their kids. But she had found her vocation. 'I absolutely loved it. I loved teaching. I loved imparting knowledge into those little brains,' she said.

After six years teaching, she joined the professional ranks of the South Australian Education Department. In 1983, when the nation's first Indigenous school, Kurna Plains School, was being set up at Elizabeth, Rigney played a major role in gaining community support and she became its principal in 1986, a position she held for the next 13 years.

She introduced the first Indigenous language curriculum. The Kurna language had been 'sleeping', since the death of the last known native speaker in the 1920s. But the discovery of letters written by Kurna children from an Adelaide mission to German missionaries in the 1840s, brought the language back to life.

Rigney decided that, since her school was on Kurna land, that should be the language taught, although before teaching the students, she and the staff had to learn the language themselves. The students were also introduced to the idea of cultural as well as conventional school discipline. An Elder of the Kurna and Narungga Aboriginal nations, Alice taught more than 5000 Aboriginal students during her lifetime and mentored and inspired many more.

Rigney's pioneering work was recognised by many awards during her lifetime, including a Public Service Medal in 1991 and the state's NAIDOC Elder of the Year award in 1997. The following year, the University of South Australia awarded her an honorary doctorate for her services to Aboriginal education.

After teaching, she also took on a significant role in South Australia's Guardianship Board and the Aboriginal Education, Training and Advisory Committee, while nationally she was ambassador for the Commonwealth government's National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy strategy.

Her family also benefited from her huge educational legacy, with all three of her children now involved in education.