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**DR ALICE (ALITYA) RIGNEY** is a strong Aboriginal woman who is a retired school principal. She is a very strong advocate for the advancement of her Aboriginal people. Over many years, education has been a very important focus for her and this has been where she has seen, and been involved in, the many exciting changes for students' achievements. This then, has brought great pride to her Aboriginal community, for which she works so tirelessly.

There have been roles that Alice has undertaken to 'demystify', in many systems, enabling Aboriginal people to advance into positions where change can happen for the good of all people. Alice has been the initiator in outstanding

leadership roles which include:

- Early 1960s first in a group of Aboriginal people to work for the Education Department
- 1985 first Aboriginal person to join the administration ranks in the Education Department in SA
- 1986 first Aboriginal female principal in SA
- 1991 Australia Day Honours Public Service Medal
- 1998 received Doctorate from University of SA
- 2000 Ambassador for Dare to Lead and the Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR)

Alice's other interest has been in bringing people together. This was the beginning of the Reconciliation



process in which many people seek to heal issues of the past. This has been done not only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but also between Aboriginal and Aboriginal groups. This has been achieved through carers groups, Elders groups, Aboriginal language groups, Native Title groups and education committees.

This strong advocate for the rights of ALL people, but particularly Aboriginal groups, believes that caring, sharing and coming together in a world which considers the rights and interests of ALL people is mandatory for a secure future, for a continued peaceful co-existence among ALL.

## Dr Alice (Alitya) Rigney *Fulfilling the Dream*

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My name is Doctor Alice Rigney. I am also called 'Alitya' which means 'Alice'. I'm a Narungga Kurna person and I was born on Yorke Peninsula at Point Pearce. I grew up in an apartheid situation and education there was not really as we see it today. Because of some good luck, we were educated at school and then went on to further education. There were really significant people in my life in my growing up years that I'd like to comment on, because they had a lot of influence on the directions I took in life and the journey I took from the mission on Point Pearce, South Australia.

My great grandfather was a lay preacher in the Anglican Church and he was a very big influence in my family's life. His name is John Milera. It would have been very difficult for him, but also very empowering because of the leadership that he undertook in the community. My grandfather, Herbert John Milera, was a prolific writer who had a lot of issues with the government and I've seen records of the letters he wrote to them about Aboriginal affairs. He had a big collection of pens and pencils and he used them all in writing his papers and letters. My mother, Nellie Richards/Wanganeeen (nee Milera), was a very proud Narungga woman and also a great influence on me. Our lives were never simple. We were always oppressed but even through that we survived. My mum was a real survivor

and a very powerful woman in my eyes. There were fifteen children in the family and I am the oldest. I was always in awe of how she managed in that situation. Her life wasn't easy and I'm very proud to be her daughter.

There have been lots of other significant people in my life, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. When I was growing up on Point Pearce, it was a family set up. Everyone knew everyone else's business and what you were up to. You could never get up to anything that wasn't considered appropriate to the family and the culture—what was deemed the right thing to do and the right way to behave. There were always uncles and aunts looking out for you and looking over your shoulder, so you had to do the right thing. But you wanted to do that anyway because they gave you so much love and support and assistance, so you wanted to do the right thing by them. My leadership development started when I was growing up and before I took up a career in education. I decided I wanted to leave and just be by myself and do my own thing but I wasn't permitted to be a loner because I had leadership and responsibilities in my community. I was very fortunate that I had Elders who guided and taught me the responsibility of giving back to my community and a sense of importance about what was owed and the importance of giving something back, because you've been given something. Whatever direction you might take, you must always give something back—it's a two way sharing commitment. It was a magic time for me and I had some excellent role models who were absolutely wonderful.

I was working for the local Aboriginal Council, Point Pearce Aboriginal Community Council Inc, on the Mission. I had to ensure that these people, who were my Elders who I had to look up to and respect, got the attention they deserved or they would let me know where I was failing—and they did! I worked hard for my uncles, but we worked and

grew together and that's what it's all about. We must do the right thing by people; I have always believed that to have a strong vision we must all walk together in the same direction to be successful.

Education in the Mission initially stopped at Year 3. Later it concluded at Year 7. We weren't permitted to go to the local school that non-Aboriginal kids went to. This was in my lifetime and I still see myself as a young person!

Anyway, a wonderful man named Ron Neilson came to our community as principal of our school and because of his strong social justice views, he did a lot of wonderful things for my people. He opened a co-op and he had Aboriginal people working in it, providing a service as shopkeepers. He also negotiated with some of the Adelaide schools to take students from the Mission. This wasn't heard of before he came. So there were fourteen girls who were given permission to go away to Adelaide to continue their education and I was one of them. We boarded at a little place in Millswood just off Goodwood Road and we used to walk to Unley Girls Technical High School, which being a girls school was a great advantage for us. We used to walk past Goodwood Orphanage and we built up a relationship with the Aboriginal kids there. We made friends with them and we used to give them sweets and talk to them through the hedge. I took a leadership role at the high school and I ensured that the Aboriginal girls were given support and if there were arguments they were sorted out and had a good outcome. Leadership roles seemed to come my way and I wondered then if that was what my life was going to be about. I loved it there and lots of us girls got our Leaving and Matriculation Certificates and came out well, job wise. Many of us were very successful. There were lawyers, principals, nurses and social workers.

I wanted to be a doctor, a medical doctor. I'm a Doctor of Education

now, but back then my ambition was Medicine. However I was counselled that because I was a black female I couldn't become a doctor. That was alright because that was the way the world was then. So I became a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Ayers House was our dormitory. We had role models in there like Lowitja O'Donoghue, Audrey Kinnear and Margaret Lawrie. Many of us worked as nurses at other hospitals as well, but nursing wasn't really what I wanted. As I said I wanted to be a doctor. I had good grades at school and I'd done well, but it wasn't to be.

So I left nursing and I went back to my community and got married to Lester Rigney and had three children, Eileen Wanganeen (nee Rigney), Tracy Ritchie (nee Rigney) and Lester-Irabinna Rigney. When my son was four I became interested in his education and I went to Kindy with him. Eventually I became his teacher and he didn't like that very much! He believed I didn't pay him enough attention, but of course I certainly did and I had to consider all the other Aboriginal kids in the Kindy as well. Elizabeth Newchurch and I both became co-directors of the Kindy. This was because the Kindergarten Union of SA couldn't get teachers to work in the community, so we were given the leeway to become teachers.

However, when the Education Department took over responsibility for education in our communities across South Australia, we were relegated to another position, similar to school support officer status. So I then went to work in the school as an SSO. Now they are called Aboriginal Education Workers, and the title is changing again! It was a time when there were lots of changes. The principals were really nice. These were the non-Aboriginal principals who came into our community and they were very sensitive. I'm still friends with some of them. I really loved Ron Neilson as a principal, and when I graduated I was appointed to his school at Taperoo. That was the most magic day! Unfortunately he has passed on

and I went to his funeral. I'm still friends with his children. He was such a lovely person.

Another principal, Murray Willis was an outstanding person in our community. He was very dedicated to the students and to the whole Aboriginal community. He got them involved in things like spear fishing. Our men used to go out with spears, now they have modern technology like spear guns! Our boys are still involved in that. I worked in the school with Murray for quite a few years and then I decided I would go to Maitland Area School.

Maitland was not a community that was conducive to good relationships in my time, so I went in there with apprehension and trepidation. I was nervous about how I was going to be treated there. My reason for going was that I knew that the Aboriginal kids in the school needed support to achieve good educational outcomes. I already had a good relationship with the school librarian because she used to be the Kindy teacher in Maitland and I got to know her when I was the Kindy teacher at Point Pearce. So I knew at least one of the staff members and that made me feel a bit better. My son-in-law was a student while I was there and I really wanted the kids to be successful. Many of them were, particularly my son-in-law who worked really hard and deserves his success.

Sometimes you have to go to difficult places and you have to know whether or not you have the stamina and the strength and support to cope in that particular setting. Throughout my journey I've had this in mind and I've had a good grounding in strength and stability, and the good advice that people have given me. I believe that if you go out into unfamiliar territory you have to consider whether or not you are going to be successful in it. How are you going to cope? What support systems will you have? You have to think about these things if you are going to achieve

your goals.

Anyway, I stayed at Maitland for quite some time, and then the Education Department contacted me through John Coker and he told me that he wanted me to go back to the Mission because they needed me in the school. So I went back to Point Pearce and became a Kindergarten teacher again. The Teacher Registration Board gave me teacher status, but only to work on the Mission, not in mainstream schools. That wasn't good enough for me. I then left for a period of time and went to work for the Aboriginal Council, where I had to be really careful and respectful of my uncles. I did all of the Point Pearce Council's daily administration work and organised their meetings. I got VIPs to come across and meet with them and it was exciting because it was a changeover time in regards to self-determination for Aboriginal people. It was a magic time. It was when we lost the term 'Mission' and we became open communities. I was there when they took down the Aboriginal Mission sign. It was exciting but it was also a challenging time because now we were determining our own lives and future.

However education has always been a drawcard for me so I went back to the school again and worked in the Kindergarten, but I knew being there wasn't what I really wanted. I had teaching qualifications but they were limited to the Aboriginal communities such as the Anangu Tertiary Education Program program. I wanted to get full qualifications but that meant moving to Adelaide and I had my family to consider. My girls were boarding at high school in Adelaide at Walford Church of England Girls Grammar School. My son was with me and my husband who had never been off a Mission in his life. Could I uproot them? I talked it over with my family and they decided that we would do this so that I could get my formal teaching qualifications. We had no house to come to and we



were coming to Adelaide on a whim and a prayer. I had family in town so there was some support, but my husband didn't have a job and had to find one. I moved in with my sister and we lived in one room. It was a very challenging time for us.

I decided to try two things. I would try to get into the Aboriginal Task Force as a way to progress to becoming a teacher and I would also apply to the university system to do my teacher training. I went to a man who looked after Aboriginal Affairs and told him what I wanted to do and he told me I wasn't ready! He told me to go back and finish high school. So there was a block straight away, but I didn't listen to him; because I knew I was ready. I could feel it in my bones. This was what I wanted to do. I got into the Aboriginal Task Force at Adelaide University but I also got accepted to do teacher training which was where I really wanted to go. I went to the De Lissa Institute at the South Australian College of Advanced Education in North Adelaide and I was the only Aboriginal person in about four hundred students. Fortunately there were other mature age students like me and they became my support mechanism through my uni studies. We still see each other and have a good relationship.

The staff there were wonderful too, but I missed the intrinsic cultural stuff that was important to me. I needed my own mob around me too. Luckily for me the Aboriginal Community College was just around the corner in Brougham Place. So if I felt I needed my people around me, I went to the College and soaked up all the culture and support there that I needed and then back to De Lissa to do the job that I was there to do. I was there for three years, and then I was absolutely terrified because I was going to be placed in a school! I was wondering about what the white parents would think about me. I was an Aboriginal person going in to teach their kids! Fortunately the placement was at the school where Ron

Nielson was Principal, so I knew I could handle it. But as I said earlier he passed away. That was in 1980. The other principal, Peter Langford, was great as well. I had my own classroom and it was like a United Nations! I had all these kids from many different backgrounds with many problems, successes and ultimately great outcomes. It was a tough area back then, however it's changed a lot since.

I absolutely loved it. I loved teaching. I loved imparting knowledge into those little brains. I used to get government agencies to come and work with me on some of the problems that the kids had and we worked together on behaviour modification for the kids that needed it. We worked well as a team.

Some of the Aboriginal kids there were my relatives and for them to call me Mrs Rigney was something that they weren't used to. They decided they would call me Auntie Rigney, combining Auntie with my last name. It was a magic time. I used to do the home visits and I looked after the Vietnamese kids too. I used to get really upset though when I'd be at the shops or in the street after school and I'd see other staff members walk on the other side of the road. But then I realised that I had to allow people their own commitments to do what they believed in, and not be too upset about it. I had to have people I could talk with and relate to as well. I never told those staff members how disappointing it was. It was something for them to deal with in their own way!

Anyway, I stayed there for three years and then the Department's Aboriginal Education Unit, namely John Coker, asked me to come and work with them. I told him that I needed another three years to concentrate on developing my teaching practice, then he could come to me after that if he still needed me. John Coker was the head of Aboriginal Education at that time and he agreed to do what I wanted, but at the end of three years

he was back again and asked me to come and work in the Department. I told him that there were no Nungas up there, so why would I want to work there? I was worried that I wouldn't be able to survive on my own. He convinced me to give it a try, so I became the Coordinator of Aboriginal Education Workers across the state.

It was a very supportive role that I played. It was also a recruitment role and I absolutely loved it. I was the only woman with five or six men but they were lovely and they were there because they were committed to Aboriginal Education. I was the only Aboriginal person in the whole Department and the leadership role was good because I was able to demonstrate leadership at a different level for Aboriginal people. I then got involved in the Department's recruitment of Aboriginal teachers. I worked really hard with the universities' teacher training program to encourage Aboriginal people into the education system. However I found that a lot of the graduates were snapped up by other organisations and this was a shame because we weren't having our people at the chalkface. Kids weren't seeing the role models in schools, even though there were role models in other areas which was excellent.

Then in 1983 the Aboriginal school was being set up at Elizabeth and we were busy with lots of meetings. I was amazed at the racism that came through at that time. We held open forums and met with local schools and teachers and students. These open forums were a real eye opener for me. People complained that if lots of Aboriginal people moved into the district there would be overcrowding in the homes and crime would escalate. All these negative things came out and I realised we had a lot of work to do. We tried to reassure them, for fear of the unknown is something we all suffer from and this was coming out loud and clear. I realised we had to do something to alleviate the fear that they had. We

told them that the school kids would only be from the local area which was where lots of Aboriginal people lived in the community already. There were law enforcement people if a criminal problem did eventuate and lots of other services as well to deal with the perceived problems.

At that stage DECS didn't have a school set up for us so we went into surplus buildings at Fremont Elizabeth High School. It was survival time I can tell you! We had grotty old buildings with no heating or cooling and I remember it was so hot. Our kids had no designated play area and so playtime was horrific. The kids would go into the toilets and splash themselves with water to cool off. I went into the toilets one day and spoke to the girls. They were all much bigger and taller than me but I told them they had to stop all the splashing with water because someone could slip and hurt themselves. They didn't argue because they respected me as their Auntie and there was no issue with that for which I was culturally thankful.

When they were building what is now the Kaurna Plains Aboriginal School, the kids from across the road would look after it and tell people to keep away from the wet concrete and so on — ownership from day one. The day we moved in was the most beautiful day. We had no problem with playground duty because the kids, staff and I just loved having our own place. They had ownership of it almost immediately and it was so good to just get in there and relax and not have to worry about all the things we had to deal with previously. The building was beautiful. It was set up in colours that reflected the earth and what our people could identify with.

Once we had the environment set up, we had to think about staffing it. I went in there as a teacher and in the same year the principal's position was advertised. I asked myself a lot of questions. Could I do it? What support would I need to be successful? Why would I want to do it? You

see, it was very political. I talked to people about applying and some told me that I wasn't ready, because I was a woman and I wouldn't be able to do the job. But I decided I wanted to do it because there were no Aboriginal principals around and our kids needed role models. They needed to know that this could be done and we needed our place in history, and our kids could be part of that. The system also needed to be demystified, for success to follow.

I applied for the job and I got it. There were about seven people on the panel, but it was great. So once I got the position I had to think about the teachers. It was so important that we had one vision and we all needed to be in that vision together to get the best outcome for the kids and the community. We decided on the name Kaurna because it was about country and that is so important. But we also had kids from several different Aboriginal Nations and that should be reflected in the staff as well. So we had Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff from the global community being represented. We had to ensure that the culture was in the curriculum so that students had a two way education—the education of the system and the education of their culture. The two had to be marinated together if we were going to do the best by our kids.

I presented the Aboriginal Dreaming with the kids and we had lots of stories that came from within our own community. The kids loved this because it came from them and it was an incredible resource to have in the school. I actually targeted people who I knew would be good to have on staff. I negotiated with the University of SA because they didn't want Aboriginal student teachers to do their practical teaching at Kaurna. I knew this because my daughter Eileen was a student there at the time. There were also mature aged students there whom I grew up with, namely Alma Ridgway, and one of them came from the Northern

Territory, namely Pilawuk White. I targeted them and I negotiated with the University for them to do their placements with me at the school. They had the main lecturer from the Uni come to do the observations and they could see how we all interacted and worked with the students. We were doing the best that we could, just like all schools do. The teachers were strong women and they did outstanding work. It was the greatest thing that ever happened!

I also had to think about continuity because I wanted the school to be around forever and it was important that it had stability. It had that in the 13 years that I was there along with my staff. We appointed non-Aboriginal male teachers in the secondary section along with a Singaporean woman teacher, Pathma Iswara and a non-Aboriginal female teacher named Jenny Burford. The secondary school kids went over to Fremont Elizabeth for their lessons and we had to work with the high school to make sure that our kids were looked after while they were over there.

There was a lot of work to do and it was a hard job, but the kids were going to be the beneficiaries, so it had to be done. The teachers at the high school as well as at Kaurna Plains wanted the best for our kids because their results would reflect on the schools, so we worked together and it all worked very well. Fremont Elizabeth High School have to be thanked for their input, especially the principals Bev Rogers and Lea Stevens.

It wasn't easy as there was so much work to do being a new school in a new area. Whenever we held a function in the school I always invited the people who lived on our street to attend because I wanted them to see first hand what had changed and what we were doing. I wanted them to see how important it was that we all worked together. At the time, it was my understanding that the local Member of Parliament didn't want us there so I included him to ensure that he saw all the activities and the good work

that we were doing. Every time I saw him at a function I went up to him and made myself known to him and talked about the school. It was all so time consuming and it was a hard job but I loved it. I loved the politics and I loved the way that people responded and how they helped with their time and commitment to the school. Thank you all!

I remember one of the students didn't like the way he was penalised twice. If he did something wrong at the high school he got punished over there and then also had cultural punishment from me at Kaurna Plains School R-12. We talked about it and negotiated discipline and penalties. I wanted the best for him, just like I wanted the best for my own kids. He was an achiever as well. We had a big meeting about discipline and developed a good open policy that the community contributed to. Discipline was a huge attribute to our school because many of our kids came from other schools where they'd had some pretty horrific experiences. We had to settle them down and ensure they got the best that they could for themselves culturally and a good education achievement. It came from open, honest and up front discussions.

Not only did I stay there for 13 years, but so did the staff. It was a magical time and many of them still talk about their time at the school. I wanted the staff to understand my role in the school and what it was like to be a principal—sometimes being the meat in the sandwich between the Department and the community, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I thought it was important that as a leader they understood what I was going through. I let the staff, through delegation, have a go at being the principal and they still laugh about it. I think it's really important to let people walk in your shoes so that they can understand you and where you're coming from.

We used to talk to the kids about what makes a good role model and

we'd encourage them to be good role models for other children. We'd tell the Year 1 students that they were Elders and role models for the Reception children coming through. This worked well and it alleviated upsets in the school yard because there was respect for others. It was an 'Eldership' that they took on board. So that's how we incorporated some of the cultural aspects to make sure that behaviour was manageable and everyone was Auntie and Uncle in the school. This was cultural respect for all!

In leadership, you have to walk hand in hand with people and all work together for the future. It's important that this happens because I had a vision that incorporates culture and education, people and respect. We all walked in the one direction for the kids who will be the beneficiaries. I've always believed that you have to give people a go in leadership and to be part of the life that you would like for them. I got my doctorate in 1991, along with Nelson Mandela and Bob Hawke. I wanted to go to South Africa to get mine with Nelson Mandela, but the University wouldn't come at that! It was an honorary doctorate bestowed on me for the work that I had done in Aboriginal Education, and I have worked hard for this. My kids used to see this and they'd say they'd never be teachers because of the workload. I told them that if they really want something out of life, they have to work hard for it. Of course they knew this and did.

My son, Dr Lester-Irabinna Rigney, is a professor at Flinders University First Nations Unit, and its Director. One of my daughters, Eileen Wanganeen, has currently been appointed principal to our home community at Point Pearce School. My other daughter, Tracy Ritchie, has been working for abused children for many years. One of my granddaughters, Tahlia Wanganeen, is a lawyer and another granddaughter, Illira Alitya Wanganeen, works with the University of Adelaide. Another granddaughter, Kalari Lanta Ritchie is training to be a social worker and



the others are doing very nicely thanks!

If I was to give advice to young Aboriginal people coming through school today, it would be the same as what I told the kids at Kaurna Plains. They can be anything they want to be, even Prime Minister. They can fulfil their Dreams but they have to work hard. They have to be very strong in their own identity and have their culture intact; otherwise they would be letting themselves down. They have to get support from others. Wherever I've been I've always made sure that I had support around me, because you can't achieve in isolation. They have to have good role models and there are lots of them out there who are only too happy to give assistance. The world is their oyster, but they must have a good education as their basis to be the outstanding achievers—which is their right!!