

EDUCATION \ JO DAVY meets the Victorian Koori student of the year

In 2002, Casey Atkinson became the first indigenous student to complete years 7 to 12 at the prestigious Goulburn Valley Grammar School in Shepparton. Growing up in a Koori community 180 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, the odds were against Atkinson making it to graduation.

"[Shepparton] is a small town with not a lot to do," he says. "If you're lucky enough to have positive people around you and positive pathways ahead, then you can try to use that to your advantage, but if you're surrounded by the wrong people, it's very easy to get caught up in a negative lifestyle."

Atkinson fell into the former category, encouraged by hardworking parents and an extended family that impressed upon him the value of education.

Fast-forward 11 years and Atkinson is devoted to giving

young indigenous students in Melbourne's northern suburbs the same support he says was integral to his schooling.

The 28-year old Heidelberg resident completed a diploma of community services work at Swinburne University of Technology in 2012 through his position as an early school-leavers worker with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association (VACSAL).

Atkinson's work with indigenous students at risk of leaving school earned him the Victorian Koori student of the year at the Victorian Training Awards on September 6.

He says winning the award was "a humbling experience" and an acknowledgement of his contribution to the indigenous community that he is proud of. Despite a long-standing appreciation of the importance of education, Atkinson started working in the field just 12 months ago. Before joining VACSAL, he spent seven years working in multimedia

Winning feeling:
Peter Coyne (left), executive general manager of HR at Crown Melbourne, presents Casey Atkinson with his award. (SUPPLIED)



"WE'VE GOT A LOT OF WORK TO DO"

A CLASS OF HIS OWN

and web design at non-profit communications agency Fraynetwork Multimedia. It was during that time that Atkinson's cousin committed suicide, and the tragedy prompted him to join forces with another cousin, Gary Saunders, to create a digital platform to tackle some of the issues facing indigenous youth.

The platform, Indigital Centre, helps indigenous people tell their stories through digital media.

With support from Fraynetwork and the Sidney Myer Fund, Atkinson and Saunders toured Victoria, drawing on their backgrounds in music and multimedia to engage young people.

"One of the things that stood out to me through the workshops was that many of the kids had too much spare time on their hands and not a lot of positive influences around them because they weren't going to school," Atkinson says.

After Indigital's funding ran out (they recently received more and have plans to start running workshops again), Atkinson worked in Aboriginal housing for two years before taking up the position at VACSAL, where he was encouraged to undertake a qualification in addition to full-time work.

"I wasn't so interested in going back to uni full-time and not working," he says. "But really learning the specifics of the area I was working in was very important to me."

The national rate of indigenous students obtaining their year 12 certificate or equivalent exceeded 50 per cent for the first time in 2012, according to Bureau of Statistics data released in March this year.

Victoria's rate of year 12 attainment for indigenous students rose by 5 per cent between 2006 and 2011, in the latest report on education by the Council of Australian Governments Reform Council.

But Atkinson says we still have a long way to go in closing the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students. "In some ways it's improving and in others we've got a lot of work to do," he says.

"A lot has changed in the mindset of kids [since I finished school]. They see a lot of young people on TV and the internet getting famous from partying, and that's definitely affected their views on the importance of school."

Atkinson works with up to 12 students from schools in Melbourne's north-west at any one time.

"The message that we're really trying to get across is understanding why you're staying at school ... that outside of learning the basics, you're also setting yourself up for a workplace environment. That 9 to 3 turns into a 9 to 5."

He says teachers can have a huge effect on a student's motivation, and so can parents. "Without that support network, it can feel like a lost cause."

Atkinson connects with students any way he can. "Whatever the kid is interested in, whether it be art, sport, music, public speaking or multimedia, it's important to utilise that for a potential future goal."

Racism, he says, continues to be a factor. "Coming from Goulburn Valley Grammar, it was more an elitist view on racism that I experienced - people looking down on Aboriginal people as being shitkickers. But a lot of Aboriginal students I'm working with are in public school so it's not about money, it's more just ignorant attitudes towards people they know nothing about.

"Dad always taught me that at the end of the day you gauge a person from the person they are and not their background. A good person is a good person and a dickhead is a dickhead."

As Victorian Koori student of the year, Atkinson qualifies for the National Training Awards, to be held in Perth on November 22. But accolades are far from the endgame. "The award was a milestone for me, and I feel like I'm getting places I want to be, but I'm also hopeful this will inspire or encourage some of our other young students to push forward and follow through with their own dreams."

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