**NAIDOC Assembly 2018**

**Denise Lofts**

***‘Because of her we can’***

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land, the Murramarang Peoples, and also to pay my respects to the Elders past and present and any Aboriginal people here today.

I thank all our special guests and our Aboriginal Community, Elders, returning students and teacher who have taken time to join us today. Your support of our school and students in the celebration of this significant event, and your recognition, has more power than you know. I am grateful.

**Because of her we can…** This theme resonates so deeply in my understanding of where we are today.

It is hard to imagine our school without the strong connections we have with our local Aboriginal Elders and community people and all our Aunties. The significant contributions they have played in our understanding of culture and tradition sits deep in our psyche. The pathways they have laid for all of us, and particularly our Aboriginal students, is significant and life changing. It is a ‘way of being’ for each and every one of us.

**Today we have, I believe, one of the strongest and most effective AECGs across NSW.** The way in which our AECG works alongside each one of our schools is authentic, collaborative and significant. The focus is always directed strongly at bringing excellence in education and powerful, meaningful learning for our Aboriginal students so that they achieve the highest aspirations and attain educational excellence. This enlivened vision has been built through the strength of the President [Aunty X], Secretary [Aunty Y], [Aunty Z] and all the members of the AECG past and present. It is their determination and focus on education that has been the pivot of success for our Aboriginal students and our community.

Along with our AECG, there is our Aboriginal Homework Centre that operates every week, with its focus on the connecting of our students to learning success through the provision of unrelenting opportunities of support to our students, so they can become whoever and whatever they choose to be. To dream big and achieve their passions.

**Every time I see our students’ success beyond school**, their incredible achievements, the happy lives they are living, I am so very grateful for the passionate commitment of our Aboriginal Elders, AECG, the Homework Centre, and the many significant initiatives we as a school and a community have provided to our students so that they go on to live lives 'well lived'. And also to see them, as a result of that support, go into the world as proud Aboriginal Young People.

**It hasn’t always been that way.**

There was a time when our Elders were the bravest of brave. Aunty X tells me of the time in the early 1980s when she knew she had to do something for the Aboriginal students in our community. She arranged to see every principal in ourcommunity and asked them: *“What are you going to do for our kids?”* Initially they were not receptive. Aunty was brave and insisted and insisted and explained in clear language: **We can do better.**

Aunty X and [Name] convinced them, by their sheer persistence, that our kids needed a place to go and work on their schoolwork, a place to feel supported, a place where they knew about their connections to country and their people – and that was the beginning of the Aboriginal Homework Centre, alongside [three names] and many others, teachers like [two names] and many others who supported our students.

**Here we are today. How far we have come!**

It was because of this incredible courage that we can celebrate today. They had to abandon their fear and head off into the wilderness to face the uncertainty. To find true belonging, to be courageous for a belief.

The courage they found to stand alone, to say what they believed in despite the criticism and fear, was incredible. They braved the wilderness. They stood alone. Today we are thankful.

Their strength many years ago to brave that wilderness changed them and us, and we are painfully aware of the choices moving forward. Their journey tells us. Once you have stood up for yourself and your beliefs, the bar is higher. And your wild heart will never be the same.

Your ability to be tough and tender, excited and scared, brave and afraid – all in the same moment. It was your ability to show up and take on the system. Showing up in your vulnerability and incredible courage. Being both fierce and kind. *(Brene Brown)*

We, the students and the school are incredibly thankful. And because of you… we can today.

Today we are joined through an inextricable connection. We are here to celebrate together both the pain and the joy. This is deeply human when we cut through our differences and tap into our hardwired nature. These experiences tell us what is true and possible about the human spirit.

Every time we come together as a community, we share our joys together. The connections of ‘holding hands’ with strangers in a moment of joy, undeniably brings us all closer together.

How and when will you be brave, stand up for what is true and go into the wilderness with courage, to stand alone for your beliefs like our Elders?

Because of her… we can.

**Contributor details**

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Denise has been Principal of Ulladulla High School since 2013, previously Principal of Marsden High School. Currently she is a member of the SPC Executive with particular responsibilities for Health and Safety and Aboriginal Education. Her current interests also include future focussed learning, particularly authentic cross-curricular project work, mindfulness and principal wellbeing. In addition, Denise is currently working on her Doc Ed with UNSW with a focus on rural and remote school leadership.