

AIMEing for the stars

Jack Manning Bancroft is young, gifted and he aims to help other black kids realise their own potential. By **Marie Jacobs** with additional reporting by **Heidi Mortlock**

A simple idea and some dedicated volunteers are improving the lives and futures of indigenous high school students as well as imbuing a sense of community and respect between indigenous and non-indigenous participants.

"It's real, it's meaningful, it's so enjoyable, and it's more fulfilling than money or a night on the town could ever be," says 22-year-old Jack Manning Bancroft. "For those who don't take this chance, it's their loss. They will regret it in five or ten years when those involved reflect on being part of a program that has changed the nation."

A former University of Sydney student, Manning Bancroft is talking about Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), a unique mentoring program for indigenous high school students in Sydney, which he set up in 2005. The scheme is distinctive because as well as attracting some expert and well known participants, the mentors are all university students who have volunteered their time to the program.

Manning Bancroft (awarded the inaugural ANZ Indigenous Scholarship in 2003) was inspired to devise AIME by his own experiences growing up.

"I am passionate about my identity as an Aboriginal Australian," he says. "I'm black but my skin colour isn't. I have a white dad and my mum is Aboriginal. I've grown up in both worlds and I'm a product of harmony between the two, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Manning Bancroft's father is playwright and actor Ned Manning and his

mother is the artist Bronwyn Bancroft. And since his childhood he has been surrounded by Aboriginal people who are successful in the wider Australian community.

"I saw things my mother and her friends did as normal," Manning Bancroft says. "When I was at high school what got me through were a few different people that I looked up to who were good role models."

The idea began to grow on Manning Bancroft at Sydney University. He began a course at the University's Koori Centre and realised that the widespread indigenous community problems in health, education and living standards are

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interlinked with the absence of Aboriginal students in higher education and that stems directly from the failure to retain Aboriginal kids in the school system.

"I don't think it's the most mind-blowing idea of all time," says Manning Bancroft. "It's just based on a simple premise that some kids don't have strong role models or someone to show an interest in them."

He decided to instigate a program of positive role modelling – university students to mentor indigenous kids – hoping this would have the effect of influencing them to stay in school and, eventually, to go for a university place.

"There is something enchanting about the process of learning and the power that comes with knowledge," says Manning Bancroft. He aligned the AIME idea with projects and workshops for the kids, to try and re-engage their interest in schooling.

What started in 2005 as a 12-week pilot scheme for 25 Year Nine students at Alexandria Park Community School has now expanded to a four-stranded program involving more than 100 kids from five schools: Tempe High School, Leichhardt Secondary College, Balmain Secondary College, St Scholastica's College and the original, Alexandria Park.

Students have one hour a week face-to-face tutoring with their mentor. "In Year Nine, we try and get them re-engaged; in Year 10, we try and challenge them with a leadership approach and in Year 11 and 12 we help get them through it," Manning Bancroft explains.

For Year Nine students in 2006, the program was built on interaction, with workshops in drama, art, hip hop, racism and creative writing. The skill sessions included résumé building, goal setting and relationship building. Interactive workshops included a screening of the movie *Yolngu Boy* and a rugby league workshop at Telstra Stadium.

The 2006 intake was the inaugural year for Year 10 students, who worked

with their mentors on a major project over 18 weeks focusing on one of the skill subjects. The results have been encouraging, says Manning Bancroft, with all of the students who completed the program managing to finish their projects. One student produced a short play; others created their own t-shirt designs and fashion labels, while another created a comic book.

“Knowledge isn’t prejudiced towards anyone,” he says. “It can’t be. If people have the opportunity and the relevant skills, then they can access any form of information, decipher it and make it their own.”

For a simple idea, the results have been remarkable. The rate of attendance at school has shown a 40 per cent increase on days when mentoring sessions take place. But the most rewarding part for Manning Bancroft is seeing the results first hand.

“I am at every session and can see the kids growing in confidence,” he says. “A lot of the teachers say it’s really made a difference in the culture of the school.”

Another aspect is the positive feedback from the kids and mentors. “I’ve had uni students say it is the most fulfilling thing they have done at university and an opportunity to engage in something real and feel like they are making a difference,” says Manning Bancroft. “And some of the indigenous mentors have said they find it really inspiring for them to be thrust into a leadership position.”

One of the main indicators of AIME’s success is the calibre of people he has been able to involve, such as Marion Potts, associate director of Bell Shakespeare Company (who just happens to be married to his dad and has run the drama sessions). His mother, Bronwyn Bancroft, runs the art sessions, while hip hop is in the care of Street Warriors, a well known indigenous hip hop group from Newcastle. The National Rugby League and National Aboriginal Sporting Corporation Australia are also supporters of the program.

One of the most powerful effects of the program is the process of breaking down entrenched or unconscious discrimination and stereotypes. About 10-15 per cent of the mentors are indigenous but the rest are not and many have never met an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander before.



photo: Diana Simmonds

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“The effects are twofold, as many of the Aboriginal kids have never had a white person take an interest in them before,” says Manning Bancroft. “If not more importantly, we have non-indigenous mentors going back to their families and friends with a knowledge of Aboriginal Australia they’ve never had on a personal level – this helps create a sense of community and respect.”

Although the main goal on a public level is helping indigenous kids get to university, the reality is that many are struggling in terms of literacy and numeracy.

“We try and get them prepared confidently and socially for life as much as for university,” says Manning Bancroft. “That’s almost as important to me.”

He hopes the program will help

engender a culture where the kids see the value of education.

“We have Aboriginal people running most of our sessions and successful people from all walks of life saying – listen, we’re proud, we’re Aboriginal and we’re educated.”

The further potential for AIME is also something Manning Bancroft is determined to explore in the wider community.

“The potential is limitless,” he says.

“If communities around the country embrace the concept of education through this format we could have AIME operating at every high school around the country as a cross cultural education tool. Imagine what a non-indigenous student could learn from being mentored by an indigenous university student!” ■