

STORY SHARED TO SPARK CHANGE

Macaylah Johnson loves how she can tell the story of her family and her ancestors, right on her face – such is tradition in the oldest living culture in the world. The proud young Wadawurrung woman wants her friends and schoolmates to feel comfortable enough to ask her about her culture without worrying about what to say or how to say it.

A personal Welcome to Country at Loreto College's annual International Women's Day breakfast, with tributes to her mother and grandmother, allowed the wider community to really feel meaning in the ritual. Guests could feel Macaylah's passion.



Macaylah says education is the key to breaking down all stereotypes, not just views about Aboriginal people. So, Macaylah is prepared to speak up from what she knows and from her personal experience.

“School is all about fitting in and everyone's finding where they belong,” Macaylah said. “(My friends) are understanding and interested in my culture, but there's not a lot of education on what to say. I don't get offended, I want people feeling able to ask questions so they get a better understanding. Talking can help so everyone can move forward and get along.”

Macaylah's great-grandmother shut herself off from her culture for a long time in a bid to keep her children, including Macaylah's grandfather, safe and living with her amid the period of the Stolen Generations. This was a time when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children were removed from their families and placed in government or church care.

From a baby, Macaylah was raised to be proud and learn about her culture, mostly from her grandfather, who is an Aboriginal artist and archaeologist. Her mother has long worked in the field of Aboriginal health and welfare.

There was a time, early in high school, when Macaylah closed off her Aboriginal identity. White enough by appearance, Macaylah did not feel as stereotyped as other children by Aboriginal descent, but she was not sure about promoting her heritage either. This changed when teachers at Loreto College, where she is now studying Year 11, encouraged Macaylah to attend a camp with other young indigenous people from across the state. "I had been feeling too white to be black and too black to be white...I had been called an inside-out coconut," Macaylah said.

"I think it is important for young Aboriginal people to learn traditions and culture because it is the oldest living culture the world has known. It's so important to keep carrying on the oral history and emerging generations need to keep the culture going. Thanks to my granddad, who has made a conscious effort to pass it on."

Macaylah's grandfather taught her how to paint and dance with family in traditional ways. She is learning what to look for in Aboriginal scar trees. This is her grandfather's specialty – mapping and documenting sacred spots and the stories these can tell.

Gradually, Macaylah has been stepping up as a leader at school. There is a small group of Loreto girls with indigenous backgrounds who formally meet on indigenous issues. Together they helped to design the school's indigenous garden and reflection point, featuring native plants and a sculpture of creator spirit Bunjil. Loreto has invited Macaylah to perform Welcome to Country speeches at a couple of the school's important events now too.

There are words from a young Aboriginal woman, found on Instagram, that really resonates with Macaylah on her own journey to speak up more. The woman speaks of her hope for *Close the Gap Day* to be a celebration in 15 to 20 years' time for goals achieved. This takes working together. "There doesn't need to be any gaps or differences," Macaylah said. "We should all feel safe and comfortable as one community."

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