



GIVING BACK THROUGH THE SMITH FAMILY'S KOORIE LEARNING CLUB

Every Monday after school a small but important gathering takes place in the dining room of the St Patrick's College Ballarat boarding house. Twenty indigenous primary students from across Ballarat and volunteer tutors come together for the Smith Family's Koorie Learning Club.

Some of the volunteer tutors are boarders at St Patrick's, where the learning club moved to earlier this year after meeting at several different venues since it was founded in 2013. They help the younger students with basic numeracy and literacy skills, social interaction and providing a safe and welcoming environment.

"Indigenous students are traditionally behind educationally," said Koorie Learning Club founder Leslee Jackson from The Smith Family. "The kids love it, they really love it. We've got a number of kids who have come for quite a while and they make a really lovely little community. They are kicking goals when they come, and they'll often come and tell us they got an award for their maths this week ... and that's what it's all about.

"For some it's the social stuff, and for other's it's a really positive place to be. You don't know what happens in their home lives and sometimes it's just a safe space to be ... but we are also seeing educational outcomes," she said.

The partnership with St Patrick's came after the program had existed in several venues including Phoenix College, Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative (BADAC) and the Ballarat Library, but had had to move on from each.



Staff from BADAC pick up many of the pupils from their schools and bring them to the learning club, then drop them home, while some come with their parents. BADAC Executive Manager of Early Childhood Services Rick Balchin said the collaboration between the Smith Family, St Patrick's College and BADAC offered a positive environment for the young aboriginal students to learn and develop with the support of the dedicated volunteers and staff.

"The young students are able to build positive connections with their tutors, being older St Patricks College boarding students or older volunteers, which helps them to connect and develop positive relationships with people outside of their normal family and school circles," he said. "It enables the children to socialise with young aboriginal students from other primary schools in a positive and engaging environment."

Primary school pupils Bilyana, 11, and Charli, 10, said they liked coming to learning club to be with friends and learn different things. "We really appreciate the boys who help out. They help us do lots of things - like reading and writing - but they also make it fun," Charli said. "I look forward to it every week".

"They help us with our positives at the start of every learning club, as well as with our homework and the activities that we do together," Bilyana said.

Volunteer tutor and St Patrick's boarder Patrick Rea said the experience had improved him as a person. "We start every learning club with everyone going around the room and saying what we are thankful for... everyone's positives from the weekend. The kids are so funny, so there are always a few good laughs," he said.

"I remember when I was young and at primary school, I always looked up to those older students or work experience kids who came and helped out. As a student, you always wanted to be around them and to learn off them - so it's nice to think I'm giving back now."

The Smith Family run five learning clubs in Ballarat and are always looking for volunteers. Contact leslee.jackson@thesmithfamily.com.au



Article courtesy of Ballarat Courier, text by Michelle Smith and Photos by Kate Healy

Top photo: Bilyana and Charli love their time at the Koorie Learning Club at St Patrick's College with volunteer tutor Patrick.

Bottom photo: Grade one pupil Nigel works through some questions with volunteer tutor Stanley who is studying year 11 at St Patrick's.