

# WAKAKIRRI

## NATIONAL STORY-DANCE FESTIVAL

# BUILDING RECONCILIATION, EMPATHY, AND UNDERSTANDING THROUGH WAKAKIRRI

### 2022

Sara's work to include Aboriginal voice in classes but specifically in Wakakirri began in 2020, however, due to the global Pandemic and then Maternity leave this performance never eventuated. Returning to work in Term 2, Sara approached Tamia, the new Aboriginal Community Education Officer at Christies Beach to see if she would support renavigating this vision with her through the 2022 Wakakirri program. Tamia was onboard immediately and advocated for digging deeper, pitching a story related to truth-telling and the stolen generation. Hesitant about how our students would deal with such a complex topic, Sara was impressed by the maturity and understanding our students showed when approaching the story and the emotions this brought up. This story helped with the aim we had to create a sense of belonging and to open opportunities for our students and community to build strong understandings in our school around the importance of acknowledging that although we are standing on Kurna land, our students and families come from many different places and have many different stories to tell. It has been important for us to highlight the importance of embracing diversity, not only through reconciliation but to understand the significance of coming from different language groups and communities yet being and learning together as one school community.

Focusing on cultural identity and creating space for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families allowed a sense of belonging to grow. We did this by using our story to acknowledge the impact, the Stolen Generations had and continues to have on the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and how the intergenerational impacts such as the loss of language, knowledge, and culture effect the identity of a person. Using Wakakirri we were able to share with our students a deep understanding of this generational trauma, which is still being felt today and why it is so important as a part of Reconciliation to learn about our true/shared history. We used dance and storytelling to shine a light on the intergenerational impacts of the stolen generations with 'Always Was. Always Will Be' which received a Wakakirri National Reconciliation award and a National Story Award, letters from the council, local schools, History Trust SA and significantly improved attendance and engagement for students involved. We were invited to perform our story-dance at a Curriculum Leaders Conference and Portfolio 3 network day and again at our local Reconciliation in the South event during Reconciliation week in 2023. Finally, we were asked to submit our performance video to be played as a part of Nunga Screen which screens Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander films during Reconciliation week across Country Arts SA venues.



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In 2023 our inspiration started from the Briggs version of “the Children Came Back” which highlights strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. This linked to the NAIDOC theme 'For our Elders' and Reconciliation theme 'Be a Voice for Generations' and continuing with this journey our focus became 'Racism' for their 2023 performance 'Learning from the Past. Changing for the Future.' This performance explores how racism impacts pride in identity and the lead character draws strength from the dreaming and elders/leaders who have faced these challenges and paved the way. We had a surge of boys want to be involved in this performance and using sport to link with these understandings allowed them to engage in an authentic way. This year was also 20 years since Nicky Winmar’s stand and was an iconic moment to tie into our performance. To reinforce the importance of our story we organised a yarning session with Thara Brown from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program “Culture is Life” along with Christine Anthea from Port Adelaide F.C Power Aboriginal programs and Fabian Francis parent and past Port Adelaide F.C player who shared about their experiences with Racism in sport. The session served as an opportunity to deepen our understanding of racism experiences and the impact it has had on cultural identities. We were also able to perform this story at the local NAIDOC event, for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander STEM congress where Premier Peter Malinauskas was part of the audience, and the performance was then brought to the attention of the team developing the DfE Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) who used this initiative as a part of the RAP launch which was held at CBPS in Term 3.

Due to the interest in our Wakakirri program we were able to make performing arts the focal point of Reconciliation Week this year. This included a cultural beats program run by Carclew with Aboriginal artists teaching students in dance, song writing and how to record music. One of the amazing opportunities we had was to teach the year 2 class our Wakakirri piece during a lesson. They each shadowed a year 5/6 student and learnt their part. Watching some of our quieter students engage with and shine doing this and the pride they showed to tell stories that resonate with them was very special. Through the choreography process we were fortunate enough to spend time with Adrienne Semmens from the Australian Dance Theatre who has spent time in our community delivering workshops, to ensure our portrayal of experiences was culturally appropriate and who supported our students with her collaboration choreographing sections pertaining to being “A Voice for Elders”. We also had the privilege of hosting the SAVAGE program ran by Adrienne and a group of ADT First Nations dancers. SAVAGE delved into themes of power, myth, and identity, shedding light on the consequences of forgetting history, stories and really encompassing the purpose of our Wakakirri story this year. Year 5/6 students also investigated key Aboriginal figures, especially those replicated and mentioned in our story, how they responded to racism and how we can gain inspiration from these moments. Through immersing ourselves and ensuring Aboriginal voice is prioritised whenever the opportunity arises, our school celebrates Aboriginal culture and highlights the importance of learning from the past, to create change for a reconciled future.

We ensured learning was interwoven into every session, providing students to engage in respectful conversations about prominent Aboriginal leaders through highlighting their achievements and celebrating Blak excellence. Our students were involved in a Yarning circle with members of the community who shared their stories and experiences with them in relation to their experience of racism. Students were asked to reflect on stereotypes, scenarios, and differences of experiences and how we can stand up when we see or hear something that is wrong. To ensure the music we utilised was authentic and relevant to our story, we carefully selected songs that resonated with our narrative of Racism in Sport and were suitable for our community. One of our songs chosen was written by Katie Aspel, a local Ngarrindjeri artist who visited our school in Reconciliation week and watched a preview of the performance and spoke to students about the meaning and importance of her song. Educating our students throughout the entire process of choreographing and reflecting on the lyrics of our songs we used was a priority. The music we chose played a pivotal role in creating a learning environment that not only acknowledged historical injustices but also celebrated and embraced the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have faced these challenges and paved the way. Tamia was able to share her traditional dances of the Kitehawk and Kondili from dancing with Ngarrindjeri/Kaurna elder Uncle Moogy Major A.M and seek approval for using those dances, ensuring we followed all cultural protocols.

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### 2024

In 2024 Tamia completed her Bachelor of Education and moved on to become a teacher at Aldinga Payinthi College. Still discussing Wakakirri we both realised we had the same idea and that if we were to continue our journey of utilising the Wakakirri program as an opportunity to foster a greater understanding and appreciation for First Nations people, history and experiences. The next step would be to focus on the recent Referendum and the Uluru Statement of the Heart and the impacts this has had on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. After reaching out to Wakakirri and then through some strong advocating with our leaders, we were granted permission to join our schools in a combined item. The connecting of 2 schools to work together was a huge undertaking, however when we began to discuss the possibility of working together across sites we were encouraged by Natalie Gentle that Reconciliation does not happen in isolation and by working together across two sites we have been able to educate more people, open more discussions and grow more opportunities as well as sharing resources and a larger cast to tell our story with. Wakakirri has helped to create a sense of belonging and encouragement of cultural identity for Aboriginal learners at our sites. Having a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students learning about Aboriginal voice and experiences alongside each other, fosters reconciliation and develops understanding through empathy and we hope that by learning and understanding more about the Uluru Statement from the Heart they can be a positive part of conversations in the future. Our sites have begun to recognise the Wakakirri program as an opportunity to drive cultural awareness and model a willingness to listen and learn. This has allowed us to unpack the what and why around the Uluru Statement and create a culturally safe space to dissect each of its recommendations, voice, treaty and truth. Through doing this we have been able to contextualise these recommendations for our community, inspiring voice, advocacy and strength, recognising and acknowledging the Aboriginal people who have walked before us to allow this, including but not limited to those a part of the statement's creation. We were privileged to have Melissa Clarke, a proud Ngarrindjeri, Narungga and Wirangu leader and signatory of the Uluru Statement, for a yarning session with our students. Melissa watched an early preview of our performance and shared feedback, encouraging us to persist in our call for change and action. She described the session as a powerful reminder that our future rests in capable hands and expressed admiration for our groups commitment to carrying and sharing such a compelling message.

As with last year, we aimed to align our story with this year's Reconciliation theme 'Now, more than Ever' and NAIDOC 'Keep the Fire Burning. Blak, Loud and Proud', to drive the focus of our story, along with this year's Wakakirri motif of 'belonging'. We aimed to produce an immersive and thought-provoking piece, that is guided through an authentic culturally appropriate and meaningful learning experience leading up to, during and beyond the performance night. When asking students what they hope to achieve from those who witness their performance, they responded with understanding that it might not encapsulate everything about the Uluru Statement but hope, that it will open a dialogue and have people walk away with a willingness to learn. Prioritising sensitivity in the wake of the recent referendum for a voice to parliament result, was the first step in our journey of creating this piece. Recognising the significance of this event and the hurt and defeat felt amongst Aboriginal communities, we committed to conducting meaningful consultation to ensure our story was delivered with cultural respect and sensitivity. Above all, we wanted to acknowledge that our story needed to be shared and that the fire needed to be re-ignited, even stronger, through the voices of our young people, our future leaders. Both Christies Beach Primary School and Aldinga Payinthi Colleges, Aboriginal Community Education Officers have been actively involved in the program, conscientiously supporting our Aboriginal learners as they engage with stories that may resonate closely.

As we developed our story line, we engaged with leaders from our community including Catherine Cavouras (Director of Taikurrendi Children's Centre) and Natalie Gentle (Reconciliation SA, Education Consultant). Catherine and Natalie both stressed the importance of amplifying the voices of our young people, restoring hope for our shared future. Again, we were fortunate to be visited by Australian Dance Theatre First Nations group, led by Barkandji woman Adrienne Semmens. During their visit, they delved into themes of belonging and community, guiding students in exploring diverse cultural expressions of storytelling through dance. Students performed their piece for the group and received feedback and words of encouragement for carrying their story with strength and pride.

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### 2024 Continued

To create the heart of our piece, we wanted to create something that each participating student could contribute to, prompting the idea of a heart connecting student weaving pieces. In our holiday rehearsal, we were grateful to be joined by Ange Giles, to support students to create their own piece to contribute to our 'heart' at the core of our story. We understood the significance of acknowledging past elders and leaders but also recognised the importance of paying tribute to our current leaders who are still fighting for change and justice. We engaged and sought permission for the use of images and narrative inclusion in our piece from Ngarrindjeri elder Uncle Major (Moogy) Sumner, Doug Clinch (member of SA First Nations Voice), Ngarrindjeri, Kurna, Wirangu woman Melissa Clarke and Torres Strait Islander woman, Catherine Cavouras (Taikurrendi Children Centre, Director) all who were also integral in speaking to our students about the Uluru statement, its importance and the strength of their storytelling. In our school holiday rehearsal, we were honoured to have Natalie Gentle (Education Consultant, Reconciliation SA) and Jason Downs (CEO, Reconciliation SA) join us for an Uluru Statement creation workshop. Collectively, we created our own 'statement' of commitment to Makarrata. This workshop aimed to reinforce the ongoing journey of sharing, understanding and learning beyond our performance, exploring how this is possible within our own communities. To conclude our journey of creation, we have organised a Wakakirri Roadshow, visiting both schools to celebrate our piece. We invited all Aboriginal families and significant community members who have been pillars of strength in our communities. This event allowed us to celebrate our journey, showcase our piece and pay tribute to the journeys of Aboriginal people who have profoundly influenced our creation. A highlight of this was both pre-schools (attached to our respective schools) brought their students along to watch. Learners as young as 3 and 4 were exposed to and talked about the performance and what it meant throughout the rest of their day with educators. During the holidays we will also share this year's performance as part of the Department for Education's Recognition of service ceremony for their employees.

These efforts to go beyond just the creation of a story-dance and create endless opportunities to engage with our community not only to celebrate First Nations culture but foster a school with understanding, respect and reconciliation. The many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices we have engaged with are so important to work with, but the voice of our community is also integral. Yarning Sessions that include our students and relate to our focus have supported all of us in our efforts and by ensuring we utilise First Nations songs/artists/stories/performances we create a culturally safe space and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel represented. We believe that by engaging our students in these themes through Wakakirri we are able to allow them to embody emotions, to give them a deeper understanding, develop empathy and provide opportunities for them to be leaders for change, especially due to the many opportunities Wakakirri students have been given to continue to share their performance to inspire conversations and hopefully change in the wider community.