**DoE Podcast**

**Premier’s Anzac Prize**

Premier’s Anzac Prize recipient Alex Cashin discusses her experiences as a teacher chaperone for the 2023 Anzac Prize. The Premier’s Anzac Prize is an annual program that provides a life-changing opportunity for Queensland high school students to engage with the Anzac tradition first-hand and explore how the Anzac legacy relates to modern Australian life. Teacher chaperones support the students throughout the program and on tour. Applications for teacher chaperones for the 2024 prize close on 17 July 2023.

**Announcer:**

This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

The annual Premier's Anzac Prize provides a once in a lifetime opportunity for Queensland students and supervising teacher chaperones to visit important memorial sites and war museums in London and the Western Front in Belgium and France. The 16-day tour is an initiative of the Queensland government and sponsored by RSL Queensland. It's a unique life-changing opportunity and global learning experience for the students and chaperones selected.

The 2024 prize is now open to all teachers and all secondary students in years eight to 11. Alex Cashin, a teacher chaperone on the 2023 Anzac Tour, joins me to talk about her experience with the Anzac Prize. Thanks for joining me, Alex.

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, thanks for having me.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Can you tell me a little bit about your professional life to date?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, sure. So I actually always wanted to be a teacher. Earliest memories of my first day of grade one, I came home and told my mom I wanted to be a teacher. And since then I've sort of made that my career path. I studied at uni straight out of high school and probably a bit of a history nerd always. Loved always watching history documentaries, and so I've taught a number of subjects since then in a number of different school settings, and I just love what I do. So I think I'm pretty lucky to do the job I love to do.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

So you're a history teacher?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yes, I've taught history for many years from the beginning of my teaching career, actually.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

So what was it about the Anzac Prize that interested you?

**Alex Cashin:**

I guess the thing about the Anzac Prize that interests me the most was learning about World War I in the Western Front. So lots of Australians, including myself, know a lot about Gallipoli, and we teach it in schools and we teach it to students. But I knew a little bit about what happened in the Western Front, but I didn't have a good picture of it all together. So the idea that I could go and see and experience that, I really thought that might change my teaching, might change how I operate in the classroom and what I teach to my students.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

It is an amazing opportunity, isn't it?

**Alex Cashin:**

Oh, I feel so lucky and privileged to have been selected to go and to have learned what I learned over there.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

And what did the application process involve?

**Alex Cashin:**

So, it was a pretty big application, but I would really encourage people not to be put off by that. There's a pretty long document to fill out, lots of selection criteria, but it's really asking you about the things you know about. So why you like teaching history, why you want to go, what it is you've done in the past, as well as an interview. Again, pretty tough, but they're trying to determine how successful you'll be and what kind of chaperone you'll be, and so whether you can look after the students. It was tough, but it was definitely worth it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

So, you found out that you had been selected to participate in this year's Anzac Prize. What else did you have to do as part of winning that prize?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, there were a lot of great things the chaperones and the students had to do to sort of get us ready for the trip, and one of those was some soldier research. So, we had to select two soldiers to research, and we researched a bit about their background and what happened to them. And part of that was then that we would deliver some eulogies either at their grave or at a memorial. And so, the two soldiers I picked, Edith Blake was the only Australian nurse who was killed in action in World War I and I picked my great-grandfather who died of his wounds in France.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

And can you tell us a little bit more about the story of your great-grandfather?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, I'd love to, actually. There was a lot of things I discovered during the research before we went, but also whilst I was over there on the trip. So my great-grandfather was a young man who enlisted pretty early on in the war, and he enlisted with his friend. So my great-grandfather is Leslie Ray Wood, and he enlisted with his best friend Leslie Bug, and the two of them went off to war together.

What I knew before I left was actually that he died and he left a pregnant wife, my great-grandmother, which is why I'm still here today. And the tragedy of that, I thought, that was the tragic part of the story. And I knew he died two days before the Battle of Fromelles. And I always wondered, again, was that a tragedy that he died before the battle and what would've happened if he'd gotten to the battle?

But we were actually went to the Battle of Fromelles, and we could see why it was so devastating and why it was so lethal when we were standing there in terms of the geography of the landscape. The Germans had the ridge, and the Australians and the allies were in a pretty awful position. And so that was never going to be a good situation, never going to be a good battle. But what I found out probably in the tragedy of my great-grandfather dying of shrapnel wounds, was that he was actually pretty lucky, or our family was quite lucky that he died two days before the Battle of Fromelles, because he was taken back to a dressing station and he died of his wounds there. But that was known, that was recorded, and so his widow was able to find that out pretty fast, and she wasn't left wondering what might have happened to him.

He also has a grave, which I was able to visit. The first time anyone in my family's been able to visit his grave. And that's, again, something that's probably pretty lucky. And I only know that's lucky because of what happened to his best friend, Leslie Bug, who died at the Battle of Fromelles two days later. Well, that was what the court of inquiry determined what happened because his body was missing and he's still never been found. So, he died in that battle along with five and a half thousand other Australians, but his body was never found. He was missing.

His family in Australia, sent lots of letters over to the Red Cross to try and find out what happened. And so they still don't have a grave. He's listed as missing still, at the V.C. Corner Cemetery at the Battle of Fromelles. And so knowing that about him and my great-grandfather was something that I could probably only learn over there. I really couldn't learn that in Australia. I couldn't understand why these things were more tragic and why that battle was so lethal. Going there, experiencing that really gave me some family history that I just couldn't understand or learn about in Australia.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

That would've been an incredibly moving experience for you?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, it definitely was. Seeing his grave and learning some things too about his grave, so the headstones that are very common that most people would know from the Commonwealth War cemeteries have lots of different engravings on them and things like that. And I was able to discover, so my great-grandfather has his name and some of his details, but has nothing else. And some of them have little bits of information from their family or prayers or things like that. And I discovered too that why certain gravestones don't have a lot of information, and it's because it costs money. And so my great-grandfather was an orphan and he just widowed a wife, pregnant, so there was not a lot of money to go around. So his gravestone is particularly, I don’t know what the word it, is empty or simple because they couldn't afford to get it engraved with anything on it. So again, something I wouldn't have learned, but really felt pretty powerful standing there at his grave, realising the tragedy of what had happened to him, but also what he had left behind in Australia.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Yeah, that's an incredible experience. Were there any other stories you discovered while you were over there that you would like to share?

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, there was one in particular that I heard a lot about. So, I live in Kingaroy, and there was a story about two brothers from Nanango, which is a small country town, just about 20 minutes outside of my small country town. And it's a pretty amazing story as devastating and tragic as most of them are. There's two brothers, went off to war and one died, and his brother buried him and said he was going to come back at the end of the war, dig him back up and take him home.

Anyway, at the end of the war, he couldn't find him. And as you can imagine, the landscape there is pretty awful. There's not a lot of markers that are left. And he looked and looked and looked and couldn't find him. So returned home without his brother. Many, many years later, there were people living in that area and this one gentleman had dug up a road near his house to sort of extend his property and how he could get in, and he found five Anzac soldiers' graves. Four of them were quite unidentifiable, and one of them was wrapped up. And so his body was actually well preserved. A short time of investigating later, and they actually found out this was one of the Nanango brothers.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

That's amazing.

**Alex Cashin:**

Isn't it? So almost 90 years later, they were able to identify this man as one of the Nanango brothers. Unfortunately, his other brother had since passed at an old age, but this gentleman whose land this was on created the Brothers in Arms Memorial. There were lots of stories of brothers in war, lots of devastating stories of brothers lost together or family members, some returning, some not. And so he was able to, through all these investigations, actually find the family in Nanango, they were able to come over to the grave to see their great-uncle. And so that story of two brothers and the Brothers in Arms Memorial was created just because a gentleman was digging up a road near his house and found an ANZAC grave.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

That's such an interesting story.

**Alex Cashin:**

It is, and it's such a common story that lots of brothers didn't want to leave other brothers to go to war by themselves, similar to my great-grandfather and his friend. They didn't want to leave someone to go to war, so they went together. They went in friendship groups or family groups, and that's why it was so devastating when one or both of them, or many of them didn't return.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

It sounds like the whole experience of being over there is really, in some ways, life-changing.

**Alex Cashin:**

Yeah, I think it is. It's putting, I guess, a heart into some of those stories. Because when you go somewhere and you can see the landscape and you can see that environment, it really does make what you read in a book come to life, what you understand from a history textbook or a journal or a diary from a soldier actually come to life when you can see it there yourself.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

And what was the experience of traveling with the students like?

**Alex Cashin:**

That was probably the highlight, and when I think about the things I learned and I talk about with the other chaperone, the highlight for us was watching these young people, age 13 to 18, learn this like I was learning it, but grow and change. You change as a person once you experience these things, you can't be the same person. So, watching them grow up and understand and mature, being curious and interested in our history, but then learning about the devastating and tragic and lethalness of it all really did change them as young people. And I know they're still so hungry to learn more about our history, inspired by what they learnt on the trip.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What a privilege to be part of that.

**Alex Cashin:**

Certainly was.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What do you think you brought back from the trip that you'll share with your students?

**Alex Cashin:**

I think the most important thing I brought back is that there's a sense of understanding now of the Western Front and the battles in the Western Front, and what happened with our ANZAC soldiers across lots of small little towns. Why some battles were so lethal and others weren't. The fact that we, Australian soldiers, the legacy of what they did still holds true today. There are so many towns, small little towns that have real love for Australia because of how they helped to liberate them during World War I. And I just can't wait to share some of that understanding of what happened in World War I on the battle fields of the Western Front, to what I teach about what happened in World War I in Gallipoli. I feel like I can now share both of those parts of the war equally.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What advice would you give to any teachers thinking about applying?

**Alex Cashin:**

Firstly, I would say go for it. Oh, my goodness, it was such an amazing experience. Everyone should throw their hat in the ring. But have a think about what it is you really want to get out of it. So, I knew about my family's history, and I knew a small amounts of that. So, exploring that was something I really wanted to get out of it, as well as my own knowledge and development of what happened. But I think when you're passionate about learning something or you're really interested in that, that comes across in what you write and how you speak. So, I would say, yeah, know what you want out of it and be prepared to share that with some passion.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

That sounds like wonderful advice, Alex. Thanks so much for your time.

**Alex Cashin:**

Oh, thank you so much for having me. It's been a great privilege to share my story and my experience with you.