**World Teacher’s Day Podcast**

**Serena Burnett**

Announcer: This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

Virginia: Every day Queensland teachers make a difference in the lives of students in diverse communities across the state. There are more than 50, 000 teachers in more than 1,200 state schools, teaching more than 543,000 students a day. Teachers make a difference, and teaching can make a difference in your life. Teaching is a profession with incredible opportunities to take you to amazing places.

2019 Education Careers Ambassador Serena joins me to talk about the job she loves.

Serena: Hi, I'm Serena. I am one of the education career ambassadors for 2019. My role is at the moment to go throughout Queensland and interstate, talking to teachers about all the incredible opportunities that we have in Queensland state schools in metropolitan, rural, and remote.

Virginia: Serena, why did you choose a teaching career?

Serena: I chose teaching, I was a change of career teacher, so I completed a Bachelor of Science from the university of Queensland initially, and then while I was working in industry for a while, I realized that the way that I really wanted to be able to make a difference was through education. I feel like that was the way to change the world and the way that I wanted to change it. I was working at CSIRO Ecosciences Precinct, which is a highly collaborative environment at Dutton Park in Brisbane.

Serena: We were sharing some of our research with school groups that came in and I just saw these students, their little faces lit up in a way that I guess adult faces just don't, and I realized that that was one of the ways that I was really passionate about changing the world and changing sciences for young students.

Virginia: So how long have you been teaching now?

Serena: So I've been teaching for about five years. This is my sixth year since graduating. I've been really fortunate in that time to teach in a whole range of different contexts. So I was teaching metropolitan for a few years and then internationally, Vietnam and most recently in a remote indigenous school in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Virginia: And what made you choose to go to a remote community?

Serena: I thought initially that I had a bit of a unique story. When I graduated, didn't want to go remote. I had decided already that that wasn't something for me. I kind of had a preconception of being in a dusty school by myself in the middle of nowhere. So I'd already switched off to that and, but I was really seeking adventure and that's what took me overseas to Vietnam.

Serena: But before I went, I went to the Teach Queensland Careers Fair in Brisbane, just on a whim, took my partner along. Met this principal I really connected with on a values level, but also pedagogically. And he sold this idea of family and of a group of colleagues who really had each other's backs and it was something I wanted to be part of. But the catalyst was when he said the was a guarantee this experience will make you a better teacher, and I was hooked. That was it. I was going to go.

Virginia: Did you go and teach in his school?

Serena: Yeah, it did. It went and taught in Mornington Island in the Gulf with Peter, and he was so supportive throughout the whole process, answered all our questions. It was the best decision I've ever made.

Virginia: And how long were you there for?

Serena: So we were there for two years. We would have stayed probably a lot longer, and we're looking at going back next year. If not there, certainly another remote community because the experience that we had there were far beyond anything I've ever had in metropolitan.

Virginia: And can you explain what you mean by that? How is it so different?

Serena: I think, certainly that thing I touched on before, about the collegiality and the group of really passionate, dedicated, inspiring teachers who are all working together, but also just being part of a community. I think what I was learning there, it was a two way street, you know, I was learning a lot from community.

Serena: I was able to incorporate indigenous perspectives into my curriculum in a really meaningful way. We had the local elders would come into the classroom and you know, if I was teaching evaporation, we would make [inaudible 00:03:47] in the backyard or food going out and learning about the stars. We could do that and tell traditional stories, counting turtle eggs on the beaches. Everything was happening in a very hands on, meaningful way, in a way that I could never have done in another context.

Virginia: Sounds fantastic. Sounds like a really amazing experience.

Serena: Yeah, it's hard to come back.

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Serena: So I was teaching science from prep all the way through to year 10, which meant that I got to teach every single one of the 284 kids in the school, which I love. I'm a primary teacher by trade, but teaching high school students and particularly year 10 boys., I've realized that behavior management for prep students in year 10 boys is pretty similar.

Virginia: So how big is the Mornington Island community?

Serena: So there's about 1200 people living on the Island. As I said, about 280 of those are children at the school. So you really do get a chance to meet everybody and their families. The Island itself, the land mass is quite large. It took us a couple of hours to drive from one end to the other, but it just meant that we had a lot of area to explore and go camping and fishing and have adventures on.

Virginia: Yeah, that sounds like a wonderful opportunity.

Serena: Yep.

Virginia: So what was a typical day for you when you, when you worked up there?

Serena: One of the best parts about teaching for me is there is no such thing as a typical day. And particularly in science, it's always changing, it's always dynamic. When you're working with children, you never know what's going to happen. So I might get a chance to play a hundred different roles in my most recent position teaching science. So I would, you know, be rapping about the biological adaptations of camels or I bring in my Miss Frizzle costume to teach about the planets or I'd have parents not thrilled with the amount of slime that their students ended up taking home at the end of the day, you know, every day was very different. Again, the biology units up there, as I said, were phenomenal because we'd go out and track turtles and and count turtle eggs and do marine debris surveys on the beach. You know, it was very hands on. Every day was different.

Virginia: With such practical experiences, did you see that science and or teaching was something that the children really became interested in?

Serena: Yeah, so hands on experiences. I think of the way that we all learn best if everyone from children to adult learners, but I think that particularly for indigenous culture, it's a very hands on practical culture that there's a lot of storytelling through oral speech or through songs. And I think that, that made it so much more fun for me as a teacher, being able to utilize all those experiences, but also so much more fun for the kids. And I think the creativity that you can incorporate into a classroom is the best part about it.

Virginia: What will your expectations before moving to Mornington Island?

Serena: That's a good question, I don't think I really knew what to expect. I think it was so far beyond my day to day that any expectations I had would've been incorrect anyway. I know I was expecting an adventure, and I certainly got that and I knew that I wanted to be able to learn from it, education from indigenous Australia and be able to embed that knowledge in my teaching in a really meaningful way.

Serena: But beyond that, I don't think I expected to have such strong relationships with community and such strong relationships with my teaching colleagues. And that's something I'm really grateful for.

Virginia: And how many other teachers were there?

Serena: So we had a teaching team of about 25, including the leadership team.

Virginia: And is that more than what you expected or did you go in knowing that that's what it would be?

Serena: I think that was more than what I expected. It's one of the things in my current role that I talk to teachers a lot about is, you know, obviously it's for graduates and for young teachers, having a really large support network is a great thing. We have this misconception that maybe some of these schools are just small schools, but a lot of these communities, even though they're quite remote, you have a large number of people to work with.

Serena: Isolation is a bit of a funny thing because, obviously Mornington Island is one of their most remote and isolated communities in Queensland. I don't think I felt that isolated because we had such a strong community of teachers and students and colleagues to work with, and I think that isolation actually in the city can be a very different thing because you can feel more isolated here without having all that support.

Virginia: What were the biggest challenges do you think in moving up there?

Serena: There were a lot of challenges. It's funny because as [inaudible 00:08:11] as we will talk about teaching in rural and remote contexts, and the challenges are actually the things which at the time were hard. We reflect on really positively and so things like, you know, getting food delivered. We'd only get the barge delivered once a week. But that turned into being a really amazing experience because we'd go down to the shop together, everyone get really excited about what would be delivered on the barge that week.

Serena: You know, maybe we'd get blueberries, everyone would leave school at three o'clock and we'd get ice cream. And it turned out to be one of the positive experiences, even though at the time, it seems like a challenge. And another one would be because we had to buy bulk. So a lot of the young graduates we talked to about going to rural and remote communities are worried about not being able to get hummus, or something. So we'd get Cole's delivered as well. So that was fine. I had one delivery, had 12 two liter tubs of ice cream delivered at once, put them all in the chest freezer and then sure enough, a couple of weeks later we lost power. So I lost all my ice cream. But turned to a positive, I think we all just sat there and ate ice cream all night. So it was okay.

Virginia: That sounds great.

Serena: Yeah.

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Serena: The biggest challenge actually for me and my partner was leaving, and for a lot of the teachers I've spoken to since, they found that leaving the Island was the hardest part of the whole experience. On the very last day, that our students all have a tradition where they stand around you and they sing a traditional song. And just the tears were phenomenal. I was a hysterical, blubbering mess. And I think the students also see so many teachers come and go. Obviously with two years you invest a lot in your community in that time. But, every single time the students welcome you with open arms and they invest so much. And I think that's a really hard part is, to know that you're there for a short time, but they've invested a lot in you in that time.

Virginia: Can you stay there longer?

Serena: Yeah, of course. And I think that's why we want to go back. So, for some of these very remote communities it's two years, but a lot of time teachers end up falling in love with it and staying, they plan to go for the two years, but some, we had a teacher there who was there for seven.

Virginia: So how did you cope being so far away from your family and friends? Did you have lots of visitors?

Serena: Yeah, I was very fortunate to have my incredibly supportive partner with me. One of the things that we talk a lot about is getting teachers up there together. So if you've got family, take them with you. If you've got a teaching bestie, or partner you want to take up with you, take them. I think being away from family and friends was hard initially. But again, as I said, the fact that we had this really strong support network, that teaching colleagues became my family and friends.

Serena: So we'd have pizza nights and Game of Thrones nights and campfires and board games and there's always someone to bake you a cake on your birthday. And I knew that if I've had a rough day, there was someone there with a sympathetic ear and we'd go down to the shops and get ice cream. So, it was hard to be away from family friends as it always is, but because you're in such a small community, people have got each other's backs and they become, they become family.

Virginia: Sorry, I think we probably know the answer to this question, but would you encourage others to teach remotely?

Serena: I would absolutely a hundred percent recommend that everyone considers having some sort of teaching adventure. It doesn't have to be a place like Mornington Island. I think asking the right questions and getting the right fit and the right community for you is a really good thing to do. So one of the ambassadors taught Proserpine as her first job, in the great barrier reef. I've got a friend who's been in Mount Isa for the last five years and and has loved it. Two of our colleagues were an Emerald, you know, these are all very different places with very different kinds of experiences, but all of them have spoken so positively and all of them just want to go back really.

Virginia: So teaching really can take you to amazing places.

Serena: Absolutely. Yeah. I'm looking forward to my next adventure.

Virginia: How do you think we can inspire other young people, especially those still at school, to value and pursue a career in education?

Serena: Yeah, so I read recently somewhere that instead of focusing on what we want to be when we grow up, we should be focusing on what we want to do and what problems you want to solve, and then go do that. And I feel like we all have something that we're really passionate about and young people particularly have things they're passionate about. And I think, knowing that education is the way to solve those problems is a really fantastic motivator to get people into the field and see the kind of difference they can make.

Virginia: Great. Thanks Serena, thanks for your time.

Serena: Thank you so much, Virginia. This has been a lovely talk.

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