**World Teachers Day podcast series – Vanessa Stevens**

**Vanessa Stevens**

*Vanessa Stevens is a proud Mbabaram and Yidinji woman with 35 years experience in the education sector. Vanessa is currently lead principal (locally known as Lead Head of Campus) at Tagai State College in the Torres Strait. She supervises five remote island campuses and coaches and mentors, teaching principals.  Her experience includes time as a kindergarten supervisor, P-10 classroom teacher, coordinator of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education program at James Cook University, a lecturer in education, principal, curriculum developer, a reading recovery tutor and literacy and numeracy coach. She has worked in the State, Catholic and Independent education sectors. She is passionate about ensuring Indigenous perspectives are embedded in all tiers of education.*

**Announcer:**This is Queensland Department of Education Podcast.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
World Teacher's Day is a special day on the school calendar. And we would like to take this opportunity to thank all Queensland teachers. 2020 has been an extraordinary year. During these unprecedented times, our Queensland teachers, school leaders and wider school support staff have all continued to show their professionalism and resilience striving every day to do their best for Queensland students.

Commemorating World Teacher's Day gives us the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the wonderful work of all teachers across our state. I'm Virginia Bowdidge from the Department of Education, and I'll be talking to some of Queensland's extraordinary teachers about what drives them and what they value most about their role as a Queensland teacher. Today, Vanessa Stevens, lead head of campus at Tagai State College joins me to talk about her love of teaching. Hi Vanessa. Thanks for joining me today.   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Good morning Virginia. Thank you very much for inviting me to this podcast.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I live on the Sunshine Coast, but I work up in the Torres Strait. And I've been up here for about eight years now. I identify from my father's country, is Mbabaram, and that's on the Tablelands and my mother's people, she comes from Yidinji. So she's one of the indigenous Cairns people. I'm not final Queensland girl, but I live on the Sunshine Coast and work in the Torres Strait.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
How exactly does that work? Sounds complicated.  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
It works for us. Yeah, my husband's a teacher as well. We've moved around a bit within our teaching years and we've found ourselves on Indigenous Aboriginal communities in the Cape. And then we decided to come to the Torres Strait. We like to go wherever we can lend our capacity and capabilities to helping students grow. We're privileged to have taught right across Queensland and Torres Strait is where we're at the moment.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
What inspired you to choose teaching as a profession and what was it that first attracted you to the profession?   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I don't really think I was inspired by anyone, but I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be a teacher. I proclaimed that to my dad who was a single dad at that time, my mother had passed away early. So he made blackboards and gave me chalk and I'd draw all over the place. I knew I wanted to be a teacher.

The attraction was that it looked like a very important job to me and I felt my destiny was going to be different to the other female members of my family. And most of them had gone into domestics, itinerant workers, and moms and wives, and I just thought I want something different. Then the teachers along the way during my education, my self education, they left an impression on me. And that helped me confirm that teaching was what I truly wanted.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
And how long have you been teaching?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I've been teaching for 35 years now and in that time I've served over 20 years in the classroom and over 10 years in leadership and administration.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
That's a fabulous story, isn't it?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Yeah. Oh, it's been long and it's been worth it. It's what I was born for. It's something that I've stuck at and that I've really loved.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
Can you tell me a bit about the various roles you've had over the years?   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I've had the privilege of working in different regions across Queensland and it's different levels of education, from being a kindergarten supervisor, classroom teacher, P-10 that is. A coordinator of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education program at James Cook Uni, a lecturer in education, principal, curriculum developer. And I ensure that indigenous perspectives are embedded, a reading recovery tutor, literacy and numeracy coach. There's all these different hats across different jurisdictions, whether it's Catholic stated, private. I've had a varied career. Everything along the way has helped me. Currently I work as a principal in the Torres Strait with Tagai State College and I supervise five campuses and I lead in the professional growth of teaching principals and their staff.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
And what do you love about your job?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I love the kids. I love the children and working with the staff to make a difference. I love the privilege of traveling around the Torres Straits here. It's so exciting because you have the opportunity to travel in a charter. So the planes get really smaller. That can be scary at times, but that's okay. I'm used to it now. And helicopters and when you're flying over, you see dugongs in the ocean. It's beautiful. That's the privilege of being up here in the Torres Strait and seeing all these beautiful scenery, meeting community members and working on the ground at these most remotest schools of Education Queensland and working with the staff to ensure that student goals are being met at the same standard as any other school. And that's what I love.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
That sounds like a great job.   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
It is. It's making a difference and that's my whole driving force is to always make a difference.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
And 2020 has been an extraordinary year, how have the events of this year impacted on you as a teacher and your teaching practice?   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
2020 has taught me, teachers are the most resilient people. We are driven by ensuring this continuity of learning and this has happened in very creative ways. And personally, my ICT skills have developed so much and I've been able to connect remotely via Skype, Zoom, online learning. Also, it revealed a more closer relationship with parents, because on our little islands, staff walk or drive around to deliver these lessons, meet and talk one on one with parents and carers. Having that teacher going to homes is something that I think is really important and kids love that connection between the teachers and their parents from their homes. And it put a big smile on their face.

It showed to me that education was very important to these indigenous communities. We had parents for example, and carers who had their children dressed for school. Even though they were staying home and doing their lessons, they had their primary and secondary children dressed in uniform, sitting out on the veranda doing their home learning packs. That was inspiring, it was so good, and parents discovered, I found, a true appreciation of the teachers and principals at their schools.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
What have you learned this year about teaching and what changes have you put in place that you would take into the future?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I've learned that I still love teaching after 35 years, and my learning continues. The changes have been in attitude to delivering education, so that's something that I'll take forward in the future. COVID has showed that the concept of the traditional classroom learning has changed and can be changed.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
Do you have any memorable moments in your career that you'd like to share with us that have impacted on the teacher you are today?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
There are many memorable moments that I have, but the two that stand out is, one, I had a historical achievement where I was the first indigenous teacher at Rasmussen State School back in the early '80s and that was a great experience. It opened my eyes to a lot of things. The other memorable moment is I was on a remote Indigenous Aboriginal Community in the Cape and I was in the library one day and a young Year 9 Indigenous boy came up to me and he said, he just took a book off the shelf, and he said, "Miss, can you read this book?". And I said, "Yeah, I can read the book". And then he took a couple more off and he kept asking me, "Can you read this one? What about this one?" looking at the big books and the thin books and whatever.   
  
And I kept saying, "Yeah, I do. I can read that but I only read books I'm interested in. You don't have to read every book in the library". And then he put all the books back and he turned to me and he said, "Miss, I can't read". And I said to him, "You know my boy, that's not your fault, but it doesn't make you any less". And I said to him, "Nobody is born to read and that you have to be taught the secrets of reading". And I asked him, "Do you want to learn how to read?”. And he said, "Yeah.", and I said, "Okay. If you really want to learn how to read, here is the plan. When I have my non-contact, I'll arrange with your high school teachers that you can come over and work with me during that time".   
  
And then after three weeks little guy's testing results went from zero to level seven. He worked hard. I turned up early, I talked to his nan or even the afternoons when I stayed late, his granny agreed to things like that too. Then his level grew and grew and grew. And by the time I left the school, he was sitting comfortably on probably a level 18 or 19. During that time, he also brought other boys to me and said, "Can you teach my friend? Because he can't read either Miss, and can you teach my brother because he can't read either?”.

Out of all that experience, I think the little memorable part out of that, so that I knew what my impact was on him, was not only the scores, he was suspended for unacceptable behaviour. The boy tried to plead to the principal that, 'No, you can't suspend me because I had to work with Miss and I can learn how to read”. Which was to me quality assurance that I had engaged him in this exercise, that he over the previous 10 years, he hadn't learned how to read, and in that short time he was engaged enough to learn to read. He was very proud of himself and that's what stood out to me.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
That's a beautiful story.  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Yeah. It impacts on me. The impact of these memorable moments reinforced that respectful relationships are important. Whether it's staff in your first school, students, parents, always strive to break all the stereotypes and the low expectations that might exist out there.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
And what was it like being the first Indigenous teacher at that school?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
That was interesting. At that time, even having Indigenous students at teacher's college, because we had gone through a teacher's college, was a brand new concept. And it was the first time that students, and even the lecturers had the opportunity of having Indigenous students in the class. It wasn't something that was common. So by the time you graduated and you went out there, the world still was pretty much the same that, these folks here were teachers did not really know how to interact with diverse groups, and especially Indigenous peoples, well I found in that school.  
  
So you had to face a lot of those thinking, my actions, my words was all about educating, trying to break stereotypes and doing the best job that I could possibly do with the class in front of me. It was tough. It was really tough on all of the graduating Indigenous teachers at that time. In the '80s, we definitely felt different. And I think the department has grown so much now that you're not seem as something different in these work environments.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
So you're a trailblazer?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Yeah. And that stands out to me as an achievement because I not only was the first Indigenous teacher at that school, but I was the first in my family to reach achievements. Year 12, going through university and doing all those types of things that wasn't in the family to have those role models.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
And I bet your father was extremely proud of you when you graduated as a teacher?   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Well, the sad thing was that my dad had passed away just before I was accepted into university. Well, he didn't know or get to know that I had reached my dream of becoming a teacher or the beginnings of becoming a teacher. But tell you what, with him passing just before university my head was down, that's all I kept my eye on, was that goal and was to make him proud by the end of graduating. I'm proud that I completed it successfully and I have done really well in my career and everything that I do, I always make sure that I keep his name going. Yeah, it's important to me.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
How do you want to inspire your students in your role as a teacher?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
To be able to inspire them, I want to know them and I want to know their starting points. I want to know their cultural background, know their parents and empower them to love themselves, their culture, their language, their family and their learning. And especially out on these Torres Strait Island islands, I want them to be proud that they're learning on their country. In the Cape, those kids there, and even those kids in Cairns who are Yidinji kids, they're on country learning. Be proud of who they are and carry that forward in all their learning.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
What do you think are some of the most valuable qualities of a teacher?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
I think there's only one. The most valuable quality is love, to love and everything must be driven and manifested in your roles as a responsibility as a teacher and in your role. Love means teaching and learning, being prepared for the day, arriving on time, professionalism, having high expectations for kids, that all, I think, stems from love.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
What are your aspirations for your career? Although I think you may have reached many of them already.   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
My aspiration is to keep on making a difference in children's education. That's my aspiration. Just making a difference.   
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
How will you be celebrating World Teachers' Day this year?  
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
Toasting all the teachers in our school and around the world for all of their dedication and hard work that they do every day and every night. That's what I'll be doing.  
  
**Virginia Bowdidge**:  
Thanks for your time today, Vanessa. I really appreciate it.   
  
**Vanessa Stevens**:  
No, thank you, Virginia. It's been great having a talk with you over this podcast. Thank you very much.   
  
**Announcer:**  
You have been listening to Queensland Department of Education podcast.