

Embargoed: Until 6am Friday 16 March 2018

Turning the tide for Indigenous children earns educator national award

A passionate educator whose philosophy is that 'effective teaching and learning promotes equality and growth for the wider community' will receive an ASG National Excellence in Teaching Award (ASG NEiTA) on March 16 at a presentation ceremony in Melbourne.

Gina Evans-Colagiovanni, who taught preschool at Indulkana Anangu School in South Australia will join 11 other outstanding educators from across Australia in receiving the top awards. Indulkana is a low socio-economic community located in the Great Victorian Desert with a population of just 300 people. Gina will also receive the inaugural *Terry O'Connell Regional and Remote Teachers' Award*, which recognises the contribution of teachers in regional and remote areas and the work of the late Terry O'Connell.

In her four years at the school, Gina has built an open-air sensory space and uses animal-assisted therapy, by incubating and fostering a year-long chicken inquiry project to improve social, emotional and cognitive functioning. She has also installed mirrors across the classroom to encourage self-esteem and support each child's construction of positive self-image.

Gina delivers learning to her students and connects with Aboriginal education workers and families, speaking in their primary language Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara and English. For many of the families, English is spoken as a second or third language.

Gina says she creates an environment where students can walk proudly in both worlds and that effective education could make a tangible difference to their lives.

"Ninety five percent of my students have been exposed to domestic abuse or neglect and suffer from abuse related trauma. I create a safe and welcoming environment that is an oasis from, at time, a volatile home and community life.

"Essential to improved outcomes is the use of sound pedagogy such as continuity, predictability and routine for children who have experience trauma. Some of children also display symptoms of selective-mutism, an anxiety disorder."

Gina says the impact she's making sustains her motivation and that her children are central to her conviction.

"These students have transitioned into confident and articulate learners, developing their oral language and communication skills in English and their first language. The combination of having an inviting learning space, together with the foundation of positive relationships, aids children to self-regulate and as a result, they are more engaged in academic content.

"Preschool is not mandated but attendance has been consistently high."

Gina who is also passionate about physical education organised bush trips where the learning takes place on the desert floor. She films the trips to record and identify strengths and areas of improvement for each individual child.

"Taking learning to the community and creating partnerships with parents to enrich student learning is something I do well. I also make an effort to mentor mothers and local educators to support them with the skills to extend their child's learning.

At the entrance of her classroom Gina displays individual learning stories on a photo board to celebrate student achievement. She says this is pivotal in creating conversational prompts for children and their families when entering the classroom.

"Seeing what impact family and community have to a child's capacity for growth and learning, continues to inspire me."

The national recipients are selected by a panel of seven judges comprising Director of Early Learning, Ruyton Grammar School, Sarah Denholm; Director of Collegiate Institute, Julie Rimes; Zig Zag Public School and previous ASG NEiTA national recipient, Tiffany Sirisavath; Principal, Saddleworth Primary School and previous ASG NEiTA national recipient, Sheree Mader; Director of Leadership, The Southport School and 2016 ASG NEiTA national recipient, Keith Fennell; Emmanuel Christian School, previous ASG NEiTA national recipient and Space Camp leader, Drew Roberts and ASG NEiTA Chairman Allen Blewitt.

The selection process is rigorous, including a comprehensive nomination outline, a written paper and video presentation by the nominated teacher.

Parents, grandparents, secondary student councils, school boards, councils, parent associations, committees of management and community organisations throughout Australia nominated the 12 deserving and inspirational recipients.

ASG NEiTA Chairman Allen Blewitt says the national recipients have made their mark in local communities throughout Australia.

"It's so wonderful to see teachers being singled out by members of the community for their personal contribution to education. It's in local townships, villages and indeed larger, city centres where our ASG NEiTA recipients can be the heartbeat of these communities. For every student they teach, they could be impacting multiple lives as they establish relationships with parents, grandparents and connect the home and school life, creating an eco-system of continued and shared learning and support networks.

"The thread that ties our 12 ASG NEiTA recipients and brings communities together are their common values and educational aspirations. Motivating students to push themselves, creating inclusive spaces, identifying specific developmental and communication needs, and letting students take charge of their learning are the key drivers behind teaching strategies and innovative approaches happening every day in schools.

"I thank our ASG NEiTA recipients for their passion and persistence in teaching today's young people and for the communities who nominated them, in recognising their outstanding and inspirational qualities."

ASG CEO Tim Mitchell-Adams says the ASG NEiTA recipients are passing on one of the most valuable gifts a young person can receive.

"I congratulate the ASG NEiTA recipients for their significant and personal contribution in achieving better education outcomes for Australian school children. Teachers have an enormous responsibility and right from early childhood education, our ASG NEiTA recipients are putting the building blocks together so that young people are equipped to become confident and competent lifelong learners.

"As students navigate their educational and life journey, our ASG NEiTA recipients are going on a journey of their own. A journey of excitement and wonder as they see their students achieve, through taking risks, accepting challenges and breaking down barriers. Some of these teachers have seen students blossom on the world stage and have careers they love. Our ASG NEiTA recipients are a huge part of these success stories, encouraging, mentoring and leading students to map out their future and reach their full potential, regardless of what that looks like. This is why ASG NEiTA has thrived for the last 21 years. The community thanks and applauds you for the countless hours and dedication you put into teaching their children."

The 12 national recipients will each receive \$5000 professional development grants. For more information and to view their ASG NEiTA profiles go to: www.asg.com.au/neita

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Editor's notes:

The Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) is a member owned organisation, helping to create educational opportunities for children. ASG has been helping families and their children for more than 40 years. During this time, more than 540,000 children have been enrolled with ASG and more than \$2.8 billion in education benefits and scholarship payments returned to members.

The ASG National Excellence in Teaching Awards (NEiTA) started in 1994 in Australia and 1996 in New Zealand. Since inception, more than 35,500 teachers have been nominated by the community in the two countries. More than 1000 teachers have received \$1,000,000 in professional development grants, prizes and endowments.

For more information visit: www.asg.com.au