



## Yarnteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation IT with a soul

Microsoft supports Yarnteen College by providing a culturally empowering environment where indigenous Australians can learn vital IT skills.

“If you don’t know where you come from, you can’t know where you’re going,” says Yarnteen Aboriginal College IT trainer Paul Gordon. That is the bedrock belief that informs all courses taught at the College. Successful IT training is aligned with cultural identity, which provides the underlying motivation for its Indigenous learners. “Our Aboriginal past has, historically, been dismissed,” says Paul. “Many of our people feel they are without a past – and that effects our soul. Everybody knows the pressing problems of health, housing and education, with IT as a crucial part of education. But it means little to our essential spirit without giving us our history – our culture.”

Paul begins his IT courses by talking about the traditional past – traditional beliefs. Then the period of European contact. “Many of the young adults who come here don’t have families who can talk about their heritage. They know they’re Aboriginal, but they don’t know what that means. By giving them back their past – their soul – we give them pride and confidence. We can then relate IT skills training to culture. Cultural pride and sense of achievement become connected.”

Steve, one of Paul’s students, already had a head start on the rest of his class in the IT Certificate 1 course. Steve is a deeply cultural person, with a strong Aboriginal identity. He has been involved in Aboriginal tradition all his life, dancing traditional dances since the age of 8. He worked as a builder’s labourer until several years

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ago when he helped put in a claim as a traditional owner on his grandmother's people's traditional land at Stockland Beach. The claim was successful and subsequently they turned the land over to National Parks and Wildlife. Steve was appointed to the Worimi Conservation Lands Board in charge of managing the land. He had the position and the passion to do important work for his people, but he lacked the IT skills he needed. "I really needed to learn about IT to do the cultural work I'm interested in. Everything came together for me with the Yarnteen College," he says. "They had much better equipment than TAFE, and the latest software from Microsoft. I knew I wouldn't get it straight away, but with a lot of repetition it became second nature. I even helped some of the Elders through the course by translating some of the computer language into traditional language and expressions they understood. I was so proud I could actually do that. You can't buy that kind of feeling. We laughed more than we cried."



Steve now has as much confidence in his IT skills as his cultural knowledge. "I'd love to teach computers now," he says. "I think I could even build one!" But what is most important to him is now having the IT skills needed to teach cultural courses at TAFE as an Aboriginal Education Officer. His dream is also to use IT to develop enough archaeological knowledge to manage the burial sites located at Stockland Beach. From time to time these sites become revealed in the shifting sands. Steve wants to use IT to trace the genealogy of the sites and manage their proper relocation.

Learning IT has allowed Steve to deepen and strengthen his cultural work. "I feel the same way about computers now as I do about culture. I can't give it enough respect. I look at computers like that. The more you give to it the more you can take from it. I say that from my heart. Sometimes I think about my grandfather, and how he couldn't speak his own language at work or else he could lose his job. Now I can download my language from the Internet! That's such a huge difference in just two generations. 'From lap lap [*loincloth*] to lap top' – That's not my expression, but I love it!

"Learning IT has planted Steve on his feet," says Paul. "Now he's ready for his career."

#### For more information:

Yarnteen - <http://www.yarnteen.com.au>

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