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GRADUATION ADDRESS : ABORIGINAL TEACHER ASSISTANTS -
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, 1978



H. Allen

(Miss Heather Allen, having completed the Aboriginal Teacher Assistants Course, went on to The Guild Teachers College, and is the first of the ATA's who have followed this particular path, to graduate as a fully qualified teacher.)

Sir Herman Black, Lady Black, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

When I was first asked would I come along this afternoon to say a few words, my reply was, "I will think about it". The response was, "How long do you need to think?"

Well, here I am.

It gives me great pleasure to be here this afternoon, to take part in this occasion. An occasion that has been taking place about this time every year, since 1975.

1975 will always be a year to remember, for it was the year that the first group of Aboriginal teacher assistants graduated from the training program and were presented with their certificates by Sir Herman Black.

Since then I have watched many Aboriginal people go through the same well-earned procedure. I guess it was the same with most of the groups, not knowing anybody, but by the end of the year it was like one big family.

First, I would like to congratulate the people who have successfully completed another year of the Aboriginal Teacher Assistants Training Program. I am sure this will be another year, 1978, that will go down in history, where yet another group of Aboriginal people have progressed within themselves from doing such a program, and I wish them the best of luck for what they may do in the future. I hope there will be many more continuous ATA programs to follow.

I can still recall the very first day, a summery afternoon, when I was to be interviewed for the beginning of the ATA program. A certain gentleman arrived at a small country school, where we talked for about three hours. Well, Alan talked, and I said, "Yes", "No", "That sounds great". Finally, towards the end of the conversation, I agreed to give it a go.

After everything was arranged (what day I was to arrive in Sydney, and so on) I found myself arriving somewhere up near the University, very nervous of course, entering a place called the Mackie Building, and that's where it all happened. I am sure the people in front of me, and the previous assistants, know what I mean.

Remember those first two weeks Alan? I sure do. I thought - My God, what have I let myself in for? Still, as time passed, involving a lot of work, I enjoyed doing the course.

Secondly, I would like very much to thank all the wonderful people who are associated with the training program. It would take me ages to thank each one individually, but I am sure the people behind me could bow on behalf of everyone. Such fine people who are the backbone of this very special program - without them it would be most difficult - people who are willing to work with Aborigines; people who not only want to share their experience but also their knowledge.

And I think *we* should be grateful to have such people, who are not only willing, but also trying to give us a chance in this rapid society that we live in today.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Alan for giving me a second chance - a chance that one didn't complete at High School - a chance that enabled me to gain entrance into a Teachers College. An opportunity that came to me - an opportunity that didn't require a degree before one could enrol - an opportunity not just for me, but for any Aboriginal person out there right now, male or female. Whether they are in Sydney, Walhallow, or the back of Bourke, I am sure, if given the chance, he could track them down without any trouble for future ATA's.

What I am trying to say is, if it hadn't been for the Aboriginal Teacher Assistants Training Program, I don't think I would be standing here now talking to you, as a student who will, in one week and two days, have successfully completed three years at the Guild Teachers College.

Thank you for listening.
