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One teenage boy says it all

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A new generation of indigenous boys and girls attending elite secondary boarding schools on scholarships around Australia hold the key to turning around entrenched disadvantage. They are, as the Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson describes it, being "swept along in the tide of high expectation". They are also inspiring and influencing more pampered classmates for the better.

One of those indigenous boys is Cyril Johnson, a year 11 student at Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, on Sydney's North Shore, about whom I wrote a few weeks ago. Since then, Cyril has told his life story to a packed school assembly. It is an inspirational story, about the love he has received from strangers who took him in, and especially from his mother, who gave him the most selfless gift of all, his freedom.

"This is a story of my journey from Wilcannia to Riverview and a story of pain to hope," he told the assembly. "I was born in Broken Hill and spent my early years in Wilcannia in an Aboriginal community. Life was hard.

"My mum suffered a mental illness and I know now that she didn't understand what was happening to her but also had little support ... It was difficult for her to care for me ... and I often didn't know where to go. I would usually go to relatives and my pop to get food and stuff. They would send me on my way and I would just walk around on the streets at night not knowing where to go.

"I remember that it was often cold; I'd be wearing the same clothes that I had been wearing for the past two weeks; I felt lost, annoyed and scared. I can remember walking around crying and shivering. They used to send a bus around picking up kids and I learnt to hide from them, as we thought we'd get into trouble.

"I started getting into a bit of trouble. My mates and I started stealing from the shops, smoking, getting into drugs, being cheeky to the police and getting chased. We were bored.

"It's not easy being a black fella in Australian society at the moment. There have been many points in my life when I have experienced racism. Sadly, I've gotten used to this. For example, people have called me names based on the colour of my skin. You get treated differently."

Cyril didn't have a home when he met the couple who would adopt him, Bucky and Sue.

"Bucky was my cousin's boxing coach. He was good with all the boys and they all looked up to him like he was a god. He treated everyone the same no matter what their skin colour was or how they looked! I still didn't know where my mum was. I hadn't seen her for ages.

"Sue and Bucky kept looking after me and I became a part of their family and they adopted me, due to the thumbs up from my mum. I could tell Rebecca, my adopted sister, things I hadn't told anyone before and I wouldn't understand why she would get all emotional and start crying.

"I told her what it was like not to have eaten for two weeks. You start getting pains in your stomach, your head starts spinning and

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you feel dizzy and weak.

"I'm so grateful to my mum for recognising what would be best for me, and I know that handing me over to my new family was hard.

"It took me a while to see a new way of life. When Sue and Bucky had a few drinks at Christmas night I just thought it would turn to violence, but surprisingly it didn't. I'd just gotten so used to people drinking and being violent.

"I'm learning that the struggles of Aboriginal communities are complex. The Aboriginal community isn't as strong as it was, but it is, I believe, starting to move forward ... I thank my adopted parents for teaching me that we can stand up and fight racism.

"My first days at Riverview [last year] were difficult - I was so scared. I hated it so much. I hated everything ... It was so different. The city was big, flash, full of cars; the school looked like a castle. I went into the dorms and they were really small and I had this massive room to myself ... I felt so lonely, empty and frightened. I didn't move from that room for a week. I was shy. [Then] Ed McManus came into my room and I asked him for some help to fix my fan. He really helped me and I think that was the first friend I had made ...

"I then started meeting more people and was then right. I started coming out of my room and meeting people.

"Now I think this has been and is the best experience of my life. For me, Riverview is awesome. Ever since I came here, I've doubled my learning results. I now have a future, an exciting future.

"I have gone on to do a lot of things in my life. I have even taken a bus company on, when a group of Aboriginal kids including myself were kicked off a bus because of our colour. The bus company were found to be in the wrong by the Anti-Discrimination Board. We received an apology and the bus company had to change their policies. Now all drivers have to attend cultural awareness workshops.

"I have represented Australia at the Youth Friendship Pacific Games in swimming. I was elected captain of my swimming club for three years straight. I have travelled all over the country for swimming. I have travelled around with the Thankakali Spirit Catchers, a traditional dance group.

"I have moved away from my family to attend this fine school. I am the first person in my family to have received my School Certificate. I have travelled overseas ... I am determined to finish year 11 and 12. I will be the first person in my family to receive my Higher School Certificate and maybe even the first to attend university.

"It wasn't until I started going back over my life that I truly realised exactly how far I have come and how much further I can go.

"There are many disadvantaged children out there, living the life I used to. I really hope that in the future that I can give back and help all Australians, especially indigenous Australians."

Amen.

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This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/08/01/1217097525492.html>