



## The skills to change a nation

*Andrew Penfold explains how he used his legal skills to create the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), which provides scholarships for around 600 disadvantaged children each year*

“We are going to achieve something astonishing. As a group, we will prove to people that we are going to do something great.” These are the words of AIEF scholarship graduate Kobe See Kee, speaking at his year 12 graduation ceremony. In 2015, 60.3 per cent of Indigenous students completed their schooling to Year 12, compared with 85.6 per cent of non-Indigenous students. But AIEF students achieved a 93 per cent retention and Year 12 completion rate. This is the most successful Indigenous education programme in Australia, and Freshfields alumnus Andrew is the man behind it.

### **Hi Andrew. Tell us a little about what the AIEF does.**

The gap between Indigenous and other Australians is extremely large on every single social measure in Australia, from youth suicide rates, unemployment and domestic violence to education, housing and health. A quality education is the absolute silver bullet in terms of breaking that cycle of disadvantage and yet in Australia, like in many other parts of the world, the most disadvantaged kids are often forced into the worst schools so the cycle is perpetuated not broken.

Our model turns that on its head and aims to help the most disadvantaged children get access to the best schools in the country. We have a strong collaboration between the Australian Government and the corporate sector and have raised about \$110m in the last eight years.

### **Has your experience as a lawyer come in handy?**

The skills you develop in legal practice translate into many different sectors but the non-profit sector isn't one that people often think about. When you are exposed to top notch firms like Freshfields, with the sort of career and interactions you have between senior people and companies, you develop the confidence to just pick up the phone, knock on the door or write a letter to someone and present your case as to why you'd like to have a conversation with them.

### **What about negotiating the government funding?**

When the Prime Minister announced that he was going to give us the funding, it took six months to negotiate the contract. We went for a 20 year contract, which is unprecedented in

Australian government funding. At one point in the last week of negotiations we sat around a conference room with ten lawyers and a lot of government policy advisers and went through it line by line. No one was allowed to leave Canberra until we all agreed.

So the experience of negotiating contracts and getting a robust contractual structure has been a critical part of our success. But general technical knowledge also helped – things like compliance, governance, systems procedures and policies.



*Picture courtesy of Jack Harlem Photography*

### **What took you from law and finance to setting up the Foundation?**

While I was in Hong Kong, I played rugby with a close group of friends at the Hong Kong Football Club. In 2002 I missed the team trip to Bali. Twelve of my team mates were killed in the bombing. It was a hugely traumatic experience. A few of us set up a charitable trust to raise money for their wives and children, and for children in Indonesia who had lost a parent. Later on, I was in Sydney and heard that St Joseph's college had started enrolling Aboriginal kids. After what happened in Bali, I realised I was passionate about doing practical things to change lives for people who need a hand. I quit my job and spent the next five years establishing an endowment fund for the college, which now has enough money to support about 30 or 40 Aboriginal children every year. We then had a conversation with the prime minister about expanding it on a much more national basis.

### **Wow. And how far has it come since then?**

We have nearly 600 kids a year on scholarships at leading schools. Every child has a case manager, so we also help them navigate their career pathway after they complete their schooling. Our case managers continue to work with a network of over 300 graduates, which will grow to over 400 this year, and we provide scholarships that support about 50 students a year at university, studying things like engineering, law and teaching. Ultimately, we aim to provide quality education and career opportunities to 7,000 Indigenous students.



**Thank you, Andrew. Keep up the frankly amazing work.**