

Man on a mission

Educator and role model Chris Sarra is on a crusade to show teachers and students how Indigenous children can aim high and succeed, writes JULIE McCROSSIN

Dr Chris Sarra, Director of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute in the Queensland Aboriginal community of Cherbourg and former award-winning principal of Cherbourg State School, is a man on a mission. He calls it a “crusade” that he is “deadly serious about”.

His aim, he says from his home in Cherbourg, a former Aboriginal mission three-and-a-half hours north-west of Brisbane, population 2500, is to “change the tide of expectations about Aboriginal kids in schools”.

The seeds of his crusade were sown in childhood. He was a bright Aboriginal boy in Bundaberg in country Queensland. “I was in primary school when the principal walked in with the results of the statewide tests and said, with an element of surprise in his voice, ‘Chris Sarra got the highest score in the school’,” Sarra recalls. “And I remember very clearly in year 11 a teacher passing out a maths paper and saying, ‘Oh, Sarra got 75 per cent. It must have been an easy test.’”

These experiences still resonate for Sarra. “If my father had been a big-time doctor in the town or my mother a flash lawyer and I got 75 per cent, the message would have been, ‘What’s gone wrong?’ So I got the message as a kid I shouldn’t be aspiring too much beyond 75 per cent.”

A turning point came when he went to college to study teaching at what is now the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). “I met two men at college who really did believe in me,” he explains. “Dr Gary MacLennan, who became my intellectual mentor, and Clarrie Diefenbach, whose research on the importance of attitudes and expectations for Aboriginal children reflected my own experience.”

These mentors changed his life. He completed a diploma, a degree and a masters

in education, and last year a doctorate in psychology. He strives now to provide other Aboriginal children with the same life-changing experiences.

School principals are travelling from all over Australia to visit the school and attend Sarra’s educational leadership courses, which he runs in partnership with QUT. They come from places such as Broome, Kalgoorlie, Meekathara and Collie in Western Australia, from Birdsville and Mapoon in Queensland’s Cape York, and from Dubbo and the Hunter Valley in NSW.

They’re attracted by the success of Sarra’s “strong and smart philosophy”, which he “tested on the front line” when he took on the job as the school principal in Cherbourg between 1998 and 2005 after a career as a high-school teacher, public servant and university lecturer.

He told his very first school assembly: “The most important thing you’ll learn from me is that you can be Aboriginal and you can be successful.” Under his leadership, unexplained school absences dropped by 94 per cent in less than 18 months. Within three years, the percentage of Year 2 students reaching the expected literacy level for Queensland students rose from 13 per cent to more than 60 per cent.

How did he improve school attendance and performance? “Replacing the negative stereotype of being Aboriginal with the ‘strong and smart’ identity was the beginning,” he says. “And it was crucial to change staff and remove teachers who colluded with the negative perception of Aboriginal children by not bothering to ring the bells on time or by setting work that was too easy.”

Chris Sarra’s wife Grace, an education lecturer and teacher, also taught at the school and helped him “assess the lesson plans of staff and their approach to curriculum”.

He also strictly enforced some practical

“bribes” that turned out to be very effective. “We’d measure attendance every week and the class with the lowest number of unexplained absences got a packet of chips or an ice-block,” he explains. “But they had to be there at three o’clock to get it.”

“In term three of 2000, there were 1185 unexplained absences. By term four of 2001, it was down to 68,” Sarra tells me excitedly. His response, he says, was to raise the bar and talk about “real attendance”. He promised the students that “any kid with less than five days absent for a term would get a trip to McDonald’s in Kingaroy”.

He laughs as he tells me the result. “I had three busloads of black kids going to Kingaroy because 105 out of 160 kids had less than five days absent.”

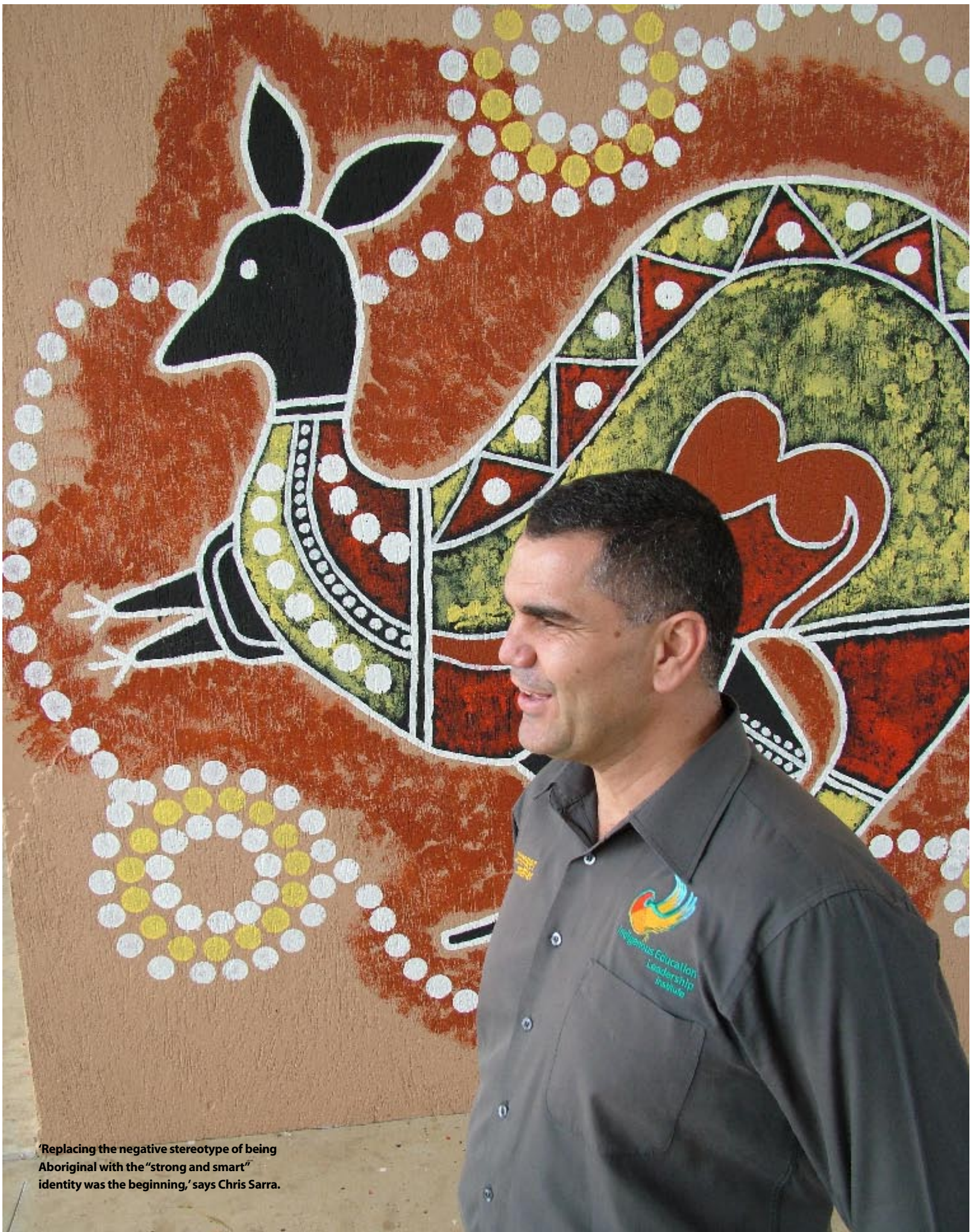
The story of a girl named Marilyn, he says, was also a “significant moment in my life”.

“She missed 87 days of school in Year 6 and I wasn’t prepared to tolerate that. By Year 7, she only missed seven days and she’s now in Year 11 at high school and she’s aspiring to study law. We not only changed her pattern of attendance; we created a new, stronger, smarter reality for the other five kids in her family because of what Marilyn did in partnership with us.”

Sarra won the Australian of the Year, Regional Local Hero Award for Queensland in 2003 for his work at Cherbourg and was named one of Australia’s Smartest 100 People in *The Bulletin* magazine.

After nearly six years as principal, he decided to set up the institute in Cherbourg to spread the word about the capacity of teachers to change the lives of Aboriginal children. “Part of my crusade,” he says, “is to get teachers to realise just how much power they’ve got.”

It’s a message that’s getting through. The Western Australian Department of Education and Training is so impressed by his results, they’ve provided four fellowships for school



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Life etc's Julie McCrossin with Chris Sarra and members of the local community.

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principals to visit Cherbourg and do the leadership course.

To get to Cherbourg, you drive through pumpkin- and peanut-growing country. You turn off the road at the small town of Murgon and it's a 10-minute journey to the all-Aboriginal community of Cherbourg.

All the shopfronts have signs with Aboriginal names and colours. It's a town visibly striving to improve the lives of its children. The hospital is advertising an immunisation program, a community noticeboard is promoting visits to a baby health clinic and the local TAFE, which houses Chris Sarra's Leadership Institute, displays signs spelling out restrictions by the local elders on the consumption of alcohol.

According to the latest Queensland government figures, 40 per cent of the Cherbourg population is aged between 0 and 14 and the median age of the whole town is 21.

Chris Sarra knows what it's like to grow up as an Aboriginal child in a crowded community. At 39, he is the youngest of 10 children. His oldest sibling is his sister

Amanda, who is now 54. There are 30 grandchildren.

"We grew up in a house where we were three to a room and two to a bed," he says. It was across the road from the Millaquin Mill. "If you look at the Bundaberg Rum bottle it says 'Manufactured in Whitted Street' and that's where I grew up," he smiles. Sarra learnt from his Aboriginal mother, Norma, and his Italian father, Peter, the value of education, hard work and pride in being Aboriginal.

"I was very lucky to have really strong parents," he tells me, tears welling as he speaks of his late father. "There were six boys and we worked alongside our father on farms until the sun went down. You'd never dare pull up early because you'd let other people down and you didn't stop until the job was done," he recalls.

While neither parent had the opportunity to complete primary school, they both encouraged their children to take school seriously. "Dad would tell me in his Italian accent to 'keep your brains in school' and work hard," Sarra says. His mother, Norma,

now 76 and still in Bundaberg, also encouraged her children's education. "She was savvy enough to know that this was a ticket forward."

It is essentially the message the institute is promoting. "We're working to build a critical mass of educators and school leaders who believe we can do this and to send them on their own trajectory to create good stories. If we create a proliferation of good stories, we can change the tide."

Later this year, stories will be posted on the institute's website. Sarra wants to spread the word about schools in places like Horn Island in the Torres Strait, where they've adopted the philosophy of "clever, confident and caring" as their version of "strong and smart". And places such as Woorabinda near Rockhampton, where they aim for "proud and deadly".

Lisa O'Malley, principal of the Mapoon Campus of Western Cape College 70km north of Weipa on the west coast of Cape York, completed the leadership course at Cherbourg in 2006 and came away "inspired".

"We have 42 students from Kindergarten to Year 6, all Aboriginal," she says. "It was really refreshing and positive to see an Indigenous school in Cherbourg that is succeeding. I learnt we must adopt an internal belief system about high expectations and teach the children that we have these expectations for them."

Charlie Serravite, principal of Amaro Primary School 200 kilometres south-west of Perth, where 11 per cent of its 440 students are Aboriginal, won a fellowship to go to Cherbourg.

"There are not enough Indigenous students achieving the WA standard benchmarks," he tells me on the phone from his office. "It was a brilliant week in Cherbourg. You had to reflect on your own practice and beliefs. It's all about no child being left behind."

Chris Sarra has covered a wall of the institute with pictures of black leaders "who have had the courage to shake the status quo". There's Vincent Lingiari, Eddie Koiki Mabo, Charles Perkins, Patrick Dodson, Michael Mansell, Anthony Mundine and many more. Future generations will add Sarra's picture to the wall in recognition of his refusal to let the underachievement of Aboriginal children in schools go unchallenged. ■

