



Alumni in Focus:

Jessica Singh

In her grandmother's footsteps



Jessica Singh at Parliament House

Iris Clayton grew up on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River at the Darlington Point Police Paddock Aboriginal Reserve in south-west New South Wales.

At 13 years of age, she was taken from her extended family by the Welfare Board and placed in the Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls' Training Home where she was prevented from seeing her mother and punished for speaking her Wiradjuri language.

At 15, she was sent to Canberra as a domestic servant. It would be another three years before she was reunited with her mother.

Driven by these early experiences, Iris went on to become an outspoken champion of Aboriginal rights – a researcher, writer, historian, poet, story-teller and activist – whose ashes were scattered at the Aboriginal Embassy in front of Parliament House when she died in 2009.

“What I remember most about my grandmother is her determination,” says recent Bond University graduate, Jessica Singh.

“She would never let anyone be treated unjustly and always supported autonomy.

“I loved that she would speak her mind, especially when it came to Indigenous issues and how to overcome the challenges being faced.

“She propelled me into the world of politics and really being passionate about my culture; and she’s a big part of the reason why I decided to study Social Science.”

Jessica is the second of Iris Clayton’s granddaughters to complete a degree at Bond University. Her older sister, Sinead, became the first person in their family to complete a university degree, graduating with a bachelor and master’s degree in International Relations in 2015, and going on to join the Department of Defence in Canberra.

A year later, Jessica completed her Bachelor of Social Science studies and is now working for the Attorney General’s Department in Canberra.

“I was definitely influenced by my sister’s positive experience at Bond.

“Our mother, Narelle Urquhart, was also working on campus as the Indigenous Cultural Support Officer at the Nyombil Centre so it was very much a family affair.

“But what really stood out for me was the respectful nature of everyone who works at Bond. It’s one thing to have a multicultural campus but Bond really goes the extra mile by actively pursuing ways to make people feel welcome and comfortable.

“The Nyombil Centre gave me an opportunity to connect with other young Indigenous people from all different clans and tribes so you get to experience your culture in a different way.

“Even though the cultural connections have always run deep in my family, I found that building a support network with other Indigenous students really helped to strengthen my own sense of identity.

“The Nyombil Centre also gave us a platform to share our culture with non-Indigenous students from around Australia and all over the world. Between events like the Jingerrri barbeque which is held on campus every semester, and the amazing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks on display in all the Faculties and offices, Indigenous culture is very much a part of everyday campus life at Bond.”

Like her grandmother, Jessica is committed to improving the lives of Indigenous people.

“Education is definitely the key,” she says.

“During my time at Bond, I learnt that I can have anything I work for. My tutor, Caitlyn, taught me this in the hours she spent pouring over my assignments, editing my work and encouraging me to keep going.

“I make no excuses for myself anymore. I know I can always work harder and do better.”

Jessica also hopes to follow in Iris Clayton’s footsteps by steering social change – albeit using the advanced technologies of big data modelling.

“I didn’t get to spend as much time with my grandmother as I would have liked but the most important lesson she taught me was to always be myself and to never let others define my identity.”

After undertaking a research cadetship with CSIRO in the final year of her Bachelor of Social Science, Jessica was selected for the Policy stream of the Graduate Program at the Attorney-General’s Department in Canberra.

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