

## **Ask Her Anything**

Michelle Penfold is founder and director of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation. In Future Women's latest Ask Me Anything, she opens up about the Foundation, its partnership with Future Women and the importance of femininity.



### **How do you see your role in educating young men and women as part of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation?**

As a founder, I feel like my role is a guardian of our mission – to empower young Indigenous people to build a brighter future for themselves and for the nation.

### **You have more boys than girls in the program. Why?**

When we started we were 100 per cent girls but over time as we've partnered with the best schools across Australia it has inevitably led to more boys. Our growth matched the opportunities.

### **Can you address it over time?**

Yes, but where we are seeing growth is in girls going into university and applying for careers that weren't traditional pathways - like our tertiary scholarships with BHP.

### **Do you ever miss your high-flying life as GM of the Hong Kong Australian Chamber of Commerce?**

It was an amazing role but who says not-for-profit work isn't high-flying? And I also am privileged to spend time with the future leaders of Australia – amongst our Alumni we might have the first Indigenous PM!

### **Is there one 'ahh' moment where it suddenly all seemed worthwhile?**

Every single day I have one of those moments; when a student is making their Nan proud for being the first in their family to finish Year 12; when a graduate wants to give back for the opportunities they received and mentor another young student coming through our programs; when an Alumni finishes his apprenticeship and buys his first home; or when the kid who thought university wasn't an option then graduates and gets a role in the highly competitive graduate program at HSBC!

**You have incredible retention and success rates. Why?**

We partner with the best schools in Australia who provide culturally-inclusive and aspirational, high-achieving environments for young people who have a passion for education and the support of their families. We and our partners then support those young graduates into further education or the careers of their choice.

**What is your advice to anyone wanting to do something similar?**

It's really easy – just work 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, forever! No, really, my advice is to surround yourself with equally passionate people who believe in what you believe in but also live and work with the same values. Authenticity, passion, best practice, loyalty, tenacity and audacity are ours. It's basically, "Go hard or go home".

**You are a prolific traveller. What are your tips for getting off a long-haul flight and doing a full day in the office?**

Easy, just fly Qantas. I start about 12 hours prior by getting myself into my destination time zone. I use eye masks and noise-cancelling earphones and just tell myself to sleep when it's time – and I'm doing it in economy!

**When back in Hong Kong, where are you most likely to book Sunday lunch?**

I wish I could book the old M at the Fringe but now I have to go to Shanghai to do that, at M on the Bund. Run by Michelle Garnaut, the most generous, classy and engaging Australian woman in China.

**What is the thing that most surprises people about you?**

I've sung Khe San with Jimmy Barnes on stage.

**You are very much part of a 'team' with husband Andrew Penfold. Like you, he is a force of nature. How would you describe him?**

Loving, loyal and my best friend. We started dating when I was 16 so we've grown up and grown together.

**Person you would most like to meet?**

My grandchildren.

**Woman you would most like your girls to meet?**

Australia's first Indigenous Prime Minister.

**Is there one bit of Indigenous culture which never fails to move you?**

The GARMA Festival hosted by the Yolngu people of the North East Arnhem Land every August. Life changing. The red dirt not only gets into every orifice and piece of clothing - it gets into your heart!

**How did you come to be a part of Future Women?**

Helen McCabe is a friend and supporter and one of our fabulous Board Members at AIEF. Anything she is a part of is going to be fun, interesting, successful and worthwhile.

**What would you most like to see change for the next generation of women?**

So many things but I also don't want us to lose our femininity in the battle for equality.

**Check out the Future Women website [here](#).**