

## He was told he was a nobody. Isaiah grew up to become somebody

By [Julie Power](#)

April 18, 2019 – 6.53pm



From two months to 18 years of age, Isaiah Dawe lived in a succession of 17 foster homes where he was subjected to daily physical and verbal abuse, racial slurs and neglect.

"Isaiah, you are a nobody, and that's why your family abandoned you," a foster carer told him when he was seven. That continued for years.



NSW Governor David Hurley has mentored Isaiah Dawe for the last year. WOLTER PEETERS

For the past four years Mr Dawe, now 24, has been visiting his mentor, NSW Governor David Hurley, in the "big fancy castle" for advice on how to ensure other Indigenous youth don't suffer like he did.

In his last reception at Government House before his term ends on May 1, Governor Hurley launched Mr Dawe's new Indigenous mentoring program.

Governor Hurley said fondly that Mr Dawe was a "persistent pest", someone who was determined to make a difference for the next generation of Aboriginal youth.

Mr Hurley, who has mentored many Indigenous programs and supported groups like Tribal Warriors, said the launch of the program was as important as the first event he presided over four years ago, the Chief Scientists' Awards.

"What we are witnessing today is part and parcel of creating a better future for us all," he said.

"To see Indigenous people speak in language confidently and know their own cultures is what the country needs to heal itself and to make itself great."

With funding of \$220,000 from the NSW Department of Community Services and Health for a year, Mr Dawe's new program [ID. Know Yourself](#) will initially provide twice a week mentoring after school for eight Indigenous youth in foster care.

Aboriginal children account for 38 per cent of the 2157 children in care in NSW. The state has the lowest rate of Indigenous children in care throughout the country.

Mr Dawe, a Butchulla and Gawara saltwater man, was the fourth generation of his family to have been placed in care, a cycle he wants to break.

"I didn't know anything about my biological family," he said. "My identity, my sense of worth, was stripped from me through no choice of my own. I'd have terrible nightmares, wake up in a sweat, scared that I'd be abused again."

---

***“My identity, my sense of worth, was stripped from me through no choice of my own.”***

Isaiah Dawe

His great grandfather and great grandmother were among the stolen generation who had been taken from their families and placed in the Cherbourg Mission in Queensland. His nana- who attended the launch - was taken and placed in a girls' home, while his mother also grew up in foster care.

"This trauma has lasted four generations, and this is the generation when it will stop," he promised.

ID. Know Yourself is run by Indigenous youth. It includes cultural identity, yarn time, health, and giving back to the community. It also prepares the children for life after care - equipping them with skills involved in looking for a job, planning a career and cooking for yourself.



An emotional Isaiah Dawe. WOLTER PEETERS

Mr Dawe doesn't want other youth to experience the lack of identity he felt. Mr Dawe, who was fostered with his sister, said they were told lies that their family had abandoned them. "We were brainwashed," he said.

He is highly critical of foster care. After his sister's fingers were smashed in a door, a neighbour complained. But a case worker said "if they are not dead, or in hospital, there is nothing we can do".

After being thrown out of his last foster home, Mr Dawe was fortunate to end his school career as a boarder at St Gregory's College in Campbelltown where he completed the HSC.

Mr Dawe was TAFE NSW Graduate of the Year 2017, and went on to work at the Australian Human Rights Commission, Lendlease, the AFL and Tribal Warrior, which is where he met Governor Hurley.

Governor Hurley's term ends on May 1. He will take up his new role as Governor General in June.



**Julie Power**



Julie Power is a senior journalist at The Sydney Morning Herald.

---