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# COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 7

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# the social changeling

FROM TEEN REBEL to INVESTMENT BANKER to *pursuer of social change*, ANDREW PENFOLD is proof that when life takes an UNPLANNED turn, you should hang on for the ride.

WORDS: EMILY MORGAN

**Y**ou could say Andrew Penfold's transition from high-flying lawyer to indigenous education advocate was accidental. He hadn't planned to start up an indigenous education foundation, attract AU\$80 million from supporters, give thousands of students scholarships to the best schools in Australia or have a supporters' list comprising the who's who of business as long as his arm.

Yet his Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) is now paving the way for reducing indigenous disadvantage across the nation and the story of how it all came about strings together like a dot-to-dot drawing.

Growing up as the only male in his family, following the death of his father when Andrew was six, his mother worked multiple jobs waiting tables in the rougher Sydney suburb of Glebe to keep the family afloat while Andrew tested social boundaries, failed academically and spent

most of his time getting up to no good.

They moved between 12 different homes and Andrew attended five different schools before he turned 15.

Andrew's mother and grandmother saw his future prospects slowly waning and after pleading with the headmaster of elite boys school St Joseph's College, he was shepherded into boarding school, nine kilometres and a world away from his favourite haunts.

"I went from being very disengaged in education to suddenly being in a great school where I had great role models around me, healthy meals, an early night's sleep, and good teachers, where you had to do your homework at night," Andrew recalls.

"You're surrounded by mates and you form this camaraderie and sense of belonging, a sense of being part of something, rather than the sort of rebellious outsider. When you get this, the educational transformation is quite profound." It wasn't an immediate transformation though. He ran away from school four times in his first year, was suspended twice and spent most of his spare time in detention.

"I felt like a caged animal, so I lashed out at everyone around me and I wouldn't conform with anything," reveals Andrew. It was his boarding master-cum-rugby-coach-cum-mentor's decision to bump Andrew up to the A-grade rugby team in year 10 – in the school responsible for churning out the most Wallabies – that turned things around.

"Once I started doing well at school, I started to develop aspirations for wanting to prove I wasn't an idiot," says Andrew, who 10 years later as a freshly minted lawyer at the age of 23 was working on billion-dollar deals for iconic London firm Freshfields.

"When you are in London you are always really proud and nationalistic of your country but there was always this very uncomfortable, shameful embarrassment when it came to the situation of Aboriginal people in our country," he says.

Andrew adds that as a child he witnessed much inequality growing up in the Sydney suburbs of Glebe and Redfern, where there is a high proportion of Aboriginal residents and public housing estates. >

{life}



“Despite all of the appearances and the similarities you might see, if you look at a bunch of kids in a similar area, there was always a very different way that Aboriginal kids were treated to non-Aboriginal kids,” he says.

From London to the financial juggernaut of Hong Kong, Andrew left law for investment banking and soon discovered that his business acumen and legal expertise could achieve social outcomes.

While he and his wife Michelle were busy building the expat dream of great jobs and a strong network of friends in Hong Kong over a 10-year period, life had other plans.

In 2002, when a terrorist attack struck a Bali nightclub, killing 202 people (88 Australians) and injuring a further 240, Andrew was, in many ways, spared. All 12 of his rugby teammates were killed while on a rugby trip he had been unable to attend.

These were the mates he trained with mid-week, played rugby with on Saturdays, socialised with over beers and spent Sundays alongside their wives and kids. And in one moment, they were all gone.

“Everyone was feeling the grief... but we just wanted to do something; we couldn’t just sit around and cry. Trauma and loss and tragedy are acute tools. They are blunt instruments, they do make you think about things and reassess things, question things.”

Unable to rest on his grief, he borrowed his skills in business, finance, legal documentation, regulation and compliance and set about fundraising for the families of his mates who were killed and the Balinese people who had lost loved ones (38 Indonesians died in the attack).

“I had accumulated these skills along the way, which actually could be used for a different purpose. They didn’t have to be used to say, ‘How wealthy can I get and how quickly can I get that wealthy?’” he says.

Within six months they had raised AU\$3 million. In a world where innumerable charities vie for the philanthropic dollar,



Images:  
Andrew with AIEF scholarship students.



this was no mean feat, although Andrew makes it sound easy.

“You go out, harness the goodwill in the community, and if you do it well, you raise a lot of money and you really help those people improve their lives,” he says.

Life turned full circle when he stumbled across a scholarship program for indigenous students at St Joseph’s College, his old high school.

A short volunteering stint to raise funds for the program turned into three years and the eventual establishment of the AIEF in 2007.

“Most of the things I do are very heavily planned, structured, targeted and conceptualised. But this was just something I believed in and I wanted to do,” he says of founding the AIEF.

“I really didn’t go into it thinking I was starting a new career, it was the accidental career.”

And one with a big outcome: the AIEF will provide 7000 indigenous people with scholarships to the best schools across the country over 20 years with AU\$140 million, AU\$80 million of which is already secured; backed by a slew of notable Australian business people including chair of Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, and New South Wales governor and recognised indigenous health expert, Professor Marie Bashir.

And the stats show the program is helping: while on average only 47 per cent of indigenous students complete year 12 in Australia, 88 per cent of

students supported by the AIEF finish high school.

As Andrew reflects on his move from investment banking to the pursuit of social change, it becomes clear that this is not so much a case of “giving back” but rather “paying it forward”.

“I was fortunate to have an opportunity presented to me, which I then worked my arse off to make the most of and now I feel so strongly about the benefits of that, that I want other people to have the same opportunity because it’s fair, it’s right and they deserve it,” he says.

“How is it that we are able to achieve anything, punch above our weight, be on the world stage in business, sport... [In] any endeavour we engage in as a country we are up there with the big boys and playing in the A grade, but yet with this issue we have this shameful secret of our past history, which was embarrassing.” ■

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## and another thing...

### don’t jump at fireworks.

Be methodical, strategic and be guided by real, tangible, unambiguous drivers for everything you do.

### have hard heads, soft hearts and capable hands.

Ensure everyone in the business is there for the right reasons, they are passionate and they bring skills to the operation and are guided by business principles. Enthusiasm, commitment and personal drive are big parts of it but are not enough by themselves.

### fundraising should be your servant and not your master.

It’s not about luck, it’s how you make your own luck by working hard, taking the opportunity to seek the moment and doing things that feel right.