

# Closing the Gap in Far Northern Region

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In 2012, the Innisfail Rural Fire Service Queensland Area Office, worked tirelessly with Mount St Bernard College to introduce the Senior School firefighter program. Now beginning its fourth year, the program has successfully graduated some 25 Indigenous registered Junior firefighter`s. Approximately 70% of these young students have been female.

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In 2015, the program extended to Ravenshoe High School with the Mount St Bernard College students travelling to Ravenshoe weekly. This year`s enrolment is eighteen students.

These young community minded persons have shown time and again, their invaluable presence upon the fire ground alongside veteran rural firefighters. They have showed dedication and often replenished crews on fires at remote stations and also in their local brigade areas. These include some of the more recent larger `campaign` fires around Herberton, Wondecla and Ravenshoe.

Importantly these young firefighters (grades 11 &12) have acted as ambassadors for their school, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), the Rural Fires Service Queensland and their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures. This has been achieved through their interaction within the wider community from attending various school functions and community displays, through to promoting the merits of an equitable and culturally appropriate ethic within the QFES.

The benefits of the program also extend beyond the fire service in that, year after year, these young people have demonstrated great personal development and often a renewed interest in furthering their education.

The graduation ceremony every year in front of 300 of their peers is a special moment, and 'self-esteem' is sky high. The students return to their communities to become fire management 'leaders' and as community protectors. These communities extend north to Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands, communities on Cape York and west to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

During the 33 week program, participants are made aware and encouraged to take action on career options, which are made more achievable after having completed the Cert II in Public Safety Fire-Fighting Operations. Throughout the year

the School Program Coordinator Natalie Vanderzant and Principal QFES Instructor Michael Spartalis, place strong emphasis in promoting the students into future career pathways. These include community policing, armed services and ranger programs, to name but a few.

2015 saw the introduction of the Mount St Bernard Outdoor Recreation Program that sees students from year 10 enrol in a suite of Vocational Education and Training Certificate courses to further their career aspirations. The program has been designed around the success of the Certificate II in Public safety.



The Outdoor Recreation Program includes:

- year 10 – Certificate I in Conservation Land Management
- year 11 – Certificate II in Outdoor Recreation
- year 11 – Certificate II in Sport & Recreation
- year 12 – Certificate III in Sport & Recreation
- year 12 – Certificate II in Public safety (firefighting Operations).

With the above qualifications, graduates from Mount St Bernard College are equipped with training assisting them to follow their chosen career pathway, or they have a substantial foundation to continue on with further study.

In 2016, the program will explore future pathways to a certificate III in Public Safety or via a Conservation and Land Management component with Department of National Parks Recreation and Sport (QPWS).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students that participate in the Certificate II in Public Safety (Firefighting Operations) course learn much more about themselves than they learn from regular schooling. It is under the guidance from Trainers from the QFES that the students learn to step out of their comfort zone, to face their inhibitions and fears and to learn responsibility and leadership. The Certificate II in Public safety (firefighting Operations) provides the students with a solid foundation to leave adolescence behind and enter the world of adulthood with self-confidence, self-respect and pride in their own self-worth.

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