Cloisters and clapsticks

An indigenous Oxford graduate is making her mark in health, writes David Wilson

Kerrie Doyle has gone far from the red dirt of West Queensland to money Oxford. Doyle's employer, the University of Canberra (UC), touted her as the first Aboriginal Oxford University graduate. Explaining what Oxford taught her, 55-year-old Doyle, who graduated last November with a scholarship-linked Masters degree in social intervention, says she could just state that she never succeeded by herself — we stand on the shoulders of giants.

"But the thing I really learned at Oxford was: it's going to sound silly — but it's how big the world is; you're mixing with so many different sorts of people," she says, mentioning her supervision; social intervention expert Lucie Clover. "You think you don't realise how many people there are in the world — you don't realise how many people are out there making a difference. And you come back realising that your problems are just small compared to what other people overcome. I mean, it's a privilege to hang around with some of these people over there," she says.

A downside of her time in Britain was the climate that meant she was often trapped indoors. "It thought it would just snow and then go away, but that's not how snow works," she says. Now back at UC, Doyle is on a good wage, about $85,000 a year. The indigenous health lecturer, who has worked for the World Health Organisation, explains what it takes to succeed in nursing: "You need to be curious. I think you need to have good core values; you need to know who you are, in terms of integrity, social justice. You need to have a thick skin, you need to have good real training — and the biggest thing is you need empathy."

Plainly, you also need grit, because of "social determinants" — eventually your patients will return to poor, unhealthy conditions, irreversibly. "I can't fix everyone. You want to fix people — you want to make them well, you know?" she says. "Sometimes you can't. Sometimes patients die. Now I find that a heartache," she says, adding that handling sick children is harrowing. "I don't cope well with that either," she says and notes that some people are born- Gefühl nurses. "Not me."

Despite this, Doyle, or "Kerrie Kerrie," has a nice line in humour. Witness her story of the geneticist who reckoned she had three DNA types: Aboriginal, Viking and Irish. "And I thought, well, that explains why I've always wanted to interface to Wagner playing clapsticks," she says, referencing the traditional Aboriginal instrument.

More serious about music, her Maori husband "Papa" Ronnie Pella, is involved in the performing arts. The couple have "an easter island pole" and three sons. Kerrie would also like grandchildren, so if anyone cares to wed one of her sons, get in touch, she requests.

A mission-born member of the Big wide world: Kerrie Doyle says, "You don't realise how many people are out there making a difference". Photo: Alex Ellingsenan

Winningmill — "an Aboriginal mob from West Queensland" — she grew up in New South Wales in Darkinjung country. Her mother was a teacher's aide; her artist father worked as a driver and moved his children to Darkinjung to stop them being "taken away" as he was. He protected Kerrie especially, because she was a "yella fella" — a "mocha" blonde. Because she had two younger brothers and scant resources, she left school at 16, and trained as a general nurse at Gosford District Hospital for three years, and was hooked. "Nursing is a great career if you have a need to serve others, and I think I did. And I know there's a lot of job security and it's always interesting — and in those days they took you and fed you and clothed you and housed you. And I thought that was a pretty good deal," she says.

She went on to earn multiple nursing qualifications from institutions including the University of Newcastle (bbt/MH/BSc/BSc), where she attained a psychology degree. Still hungry to learn, now she is pursuing an Australian National University doctorate in Aboriginal social inclusion, acutely aware of how the reverse feels. One example: being shunned during meal breaks in the past because nobody would "eat with the Abo".

Still, she is upbeat. As a growing Aboriginal nursing cohort emerges, discrimination will surely wane, she says, and describes her UC team as "amazing".

Besides "world peace", her dream is to intervene more Aboriginals in nursing. While more than 1000 nurses and students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait backgrounds exist, her community still needs to improve its mob's health, she says. Only if she can make a difference or even a contribution, will she be a success, she reckons. She refuses, as she puts it, to "big-note". For more information on indigenous nursing, visit CATSINM (catsinm.org.au).