



# RHODES TO THE TOP

It's a long way from the Riverland to Oxford for Rebecca Richards, the first Aboriginal Rhodes Scholar  
 WORDS AND PICTURES JAMES HOWE

**WHEN** Rebecca Richards was a young girl her father led her on a long hike to show her a rock art site in the Flinders Ranges. Bored and tired, she soon decided she wanted to turn back. "But he said, 'no, this is your culture, you have to come and see it,'" she recalls. "So we walked all the way up this big creek and found it, and it was so beautiful."

It was typical of her father. Leroy, an Adnyamathanha Barngarla man from the Flinders grew up in a hut made of flattened kerosene tins and left school at 14, but he had an extraordinary amount of knowledge that he wanted to pass to his daughter.

Leroy died about eight years ago when Rebecca was 16, but he left her his passion for wanting to know more. That love for learning has taken Richards even further. I meet her at a café on the High St in Oxford, England's most famous university city, where she has arrived only recently to study as Australia's first Aboriginal Rhodes scholar. I offer to pay for the coffees, but embarrassingly my hand of change comes up two pounds short. When my debit card is declined, she comes to the rescue, tipping a monster-load of bronze and silver coins on to the counter from a bulging leather purse. "I don't even know what all this stuff is," she says. She plucks a jagged-edged 20p coin from the heap. "I mean, what's this one? I don't even use them." It is possible she isn't familiar with the complexities of British small change. But I also get the sense she is trying to ease my embarrassment by aligning herself with my hopelessness.

Perhaps it's just the unpretentiousness of a country girl who went to an ordinary country school and grew up doing ordinary country things; her hobbies were netball, horses, motorbikes and swimming in the Murray. The remarkable in Rebecca you won't see at first glance: on the surface she's small and quiet, with an unobtrusive dress sense and intermittent eye-contact. Nor will you find out about her achievements: I had to discover them all from third parties. But the list is long. Richards is a member of the Ministers' Youth Council, the Rotary Health Research Fund, the Young Indigenous Professionals Group and the Indigenous Youth Mobility

Program. She's attended the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues, has interned at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and is mid-way through a cadetship at the National Museum of Australia. Last month she was named Young Australian of the Year for South Australia.

So how did this unassuming girl from the Riverland become Australia's first Aboriginal Rhodes Scholar? The scholarships are difficult to get. Each year dozens apply but only nine are selected; one from each state and three from Australia at large. And Western-style education doesn't run strongly in the Richards family, especially among her Aboriginal relatives (though her mother is a school teacher). No one on her father's side had finished school before her. "In my father's generation, if a non-indigenous parent complained about having an indigenous person in the school, they had the right to take the student out," Rebecca says.

Rebecca's own schools were a far cry from the esteemed institutions Rhodes Scholars usually hail from. She split her time between Winkie Primary School on the outskirts of the Gerard Aboriginal community in the Riverland and the Adnyamathanha primary school in Nepabunna Mission. She was one of just a few Aboriginal Glossop High School students ever to finish Year 12, despite the school being placed in an area with a high indigenous population.

She describes the Rhodes Scholarship selection process as "crazy". "It was like *Big Brother* ... you have cocktails and dinners and you have to pack your bags - if you don't get it, you have to leave straight away," she says. "I think in that way a private school education helps because you have to be able to know which knife and fork to use in those situations. But really in the end it doesn't matter; they just want to know that you're a genuine person and that what you've done is real."

Rebecca does have one asset even kids from the best private schools don't always get: a loving and supportive family. Perhaps it's this that has endowed her with her palpable self-assuredness: she doesn't doubt her abilities or report the feeling of being torn between the

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Rebecca Richards, Christ  
Church College, Oxford.



white world and the Aboriginal world. Rebecca seems perfectly at home in both.

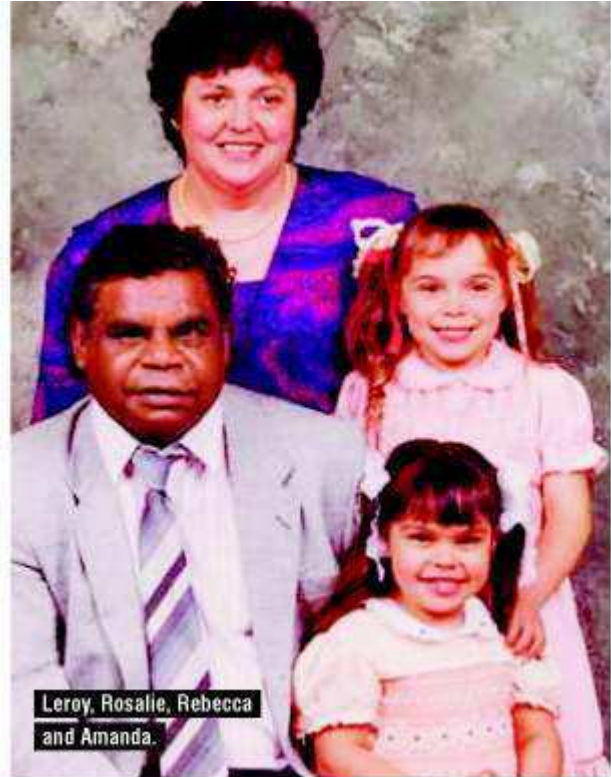
Her mother Rosalie descended from German Lutheran immigrants who settled in the Adelaide Hills in the 1800s, later moving to the Riverland. Her father Leroy descended from the Adnyamathanha and Barn-gala people of the Flinders Ranges and grew up speaking the Adnyamathanha language. From the age of 14 he worked on fencing gangs and as a stockman on sheep and cattle stations. Riding through his native country, he honed his knowledge of the land and its stories, which he gleaned from the older Aboriginal stockmen. When Rosalie and Leroy met at Nepabunna Mission, they hit it off quickly. Leroy was working at Leigh Creek Station at the time, and Rosalie was teaching at the primary school in Nepabunna. "I think they were just at a party and they sat down to get a drink and tea," says Rebecca. "And then basically the whole community went and match-made both of them." Rosalie and Leroy moved to a fruit block in the Riverland and Rebecca and her younger sister Amanda were born.

Rebecca's happy childhood was shattered by the premature death of her father. He suffered a heart attack and died as she and her mother tried frantically to revive him. "It was just a big shock," says Rebecca quietly. "I don't think you get over things like that – just that physical pain lessens."

From Australia, her mother Rosalie says the death hit Rebecca hard. "There was so much she wanted him to be there for – things she wanted to learn from him, and the experiences as she got older that she wanted to share with him," she says. She regrets that Rebecca didn't have time to properly mourn her father. Leroy died just before Rebecca's Year 11 exams, so she pushed

herself to keep studying. "Because she has been someone who always challenges herself to do as well as she possibly can, she wanted to do well," she says. "She didn't really take a lot of time and it probably wasn't so good that she didn't."

But before he died, Leroy passed on an extraordinary amount of knowledge. With Rosalie a school teacher, the family had plentiful holidays which they used to explore the Flinders Ranges. Leroy made the most of these opportunities to teach the children their culture. "He would just start telling us the stories," says Rebecca.



Leroy, Rosalie, Rebecca and Amanda.



"I do feel like you could always have more time, but I think he passed on his passion for knowing more. And I know that I'll probably spend the rest of my life (seeking knowledge) so that's the most important thing."

When Rebecca was 14, anthropologists from Adelaide travelled to the Flinders Ranges to speak to Adnyamathanha people. Information they gathered in these trips was later used in the 2009 Native Title decision which gave the Adnyamathanha partial rights over 41,000 sq km in the Flinders and Gammon Ranges. Leroy was often invited to share his knowledge and he made sure to bring his daughters along on these occasions. It was a key experience in shaping Rebecca's interest in anthropology. She played with a string of career ideas after school, even studying to become a church minister for a year, but eventually settled on studying a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Anthropology from Adelaide University. At Oxford she has just commenced reading a Masters of Philosophy in Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography.

Although she downplays her 'bookishness' (she concentrated on "artier" subjects such as drama and visual arts at school), Rebecca's family testifies to her love of books. "Our family had a hard time getting her nose out of books – she was always reading," says sister Amanda. "When she was pretty young one summer holidays she read all the volumes of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* ...

she'd be reading *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and I'd be going up the block and eating jelly crystals."

Rebecca has always been protective of Amanda, and as the girls grew older, the need to protect became more serious. Amanda looks more obviously Aboriginal, so would often find herself a victim of race attacks. "Sometimes my sister would just be waiting at the bus stop and people would yell a name at her and throw bottles at her", says Rebecca. "My main experience of racism would be waiting at home wondering is she going to be OK ... It's worse watching other people experience racism and not being able to do anything about it – that is the worst thing ever."

I ask about Rebecca's own experiences. "I get some weird ones – like 'she shouldn't get the Rhodes Scholarship, because she's not black enough,' or, 'she only got the Rhodes Scholarship because she was Aboriginal'," she says. "You just have to be confident in who you are. Particularly if they're young, I try to talk to them and help them understand that it's who you are – it's your background as well. And I try to be friends with them."

It's typical Rebecca; quiet, thoughtful, confident and kind. As we drain our hard-won coffees and go our separate ways, I can't help but think that the journey which began in that Flinders Ranges creek is going to lead to even more rewarding destinations. ■