

ALICE SPRINGS SCHOOL OF THE AIR TURNS 70!



This special school has been teaching outback kids for seven decades



Principal Kerrie says there are strong relationships among the teachers and students.



Year 5 student Stephen has a best friend in Queensland, thanks to School of the Air.

radio, current School of the Air principal Kerrie Russell, 51, couldn't be prouder of the school's ability to adapt over the past seven decades. "Being able to see the teacher and classmates as well as the work the teacher was talking about was the most amazing change," says Kerrie.

"It really does feel like a family. We're all very close, obviously not geographically, but there are really great, strong relationships between teachers, students and parents."

And student Stephen Fennell can attest to how a school covering 1.3 million square kilometres can still foster strong friendships.

The Year 5 student lives on a cattle station in South Australia, 75km outside Marla but thanks to his unique schooling, his best friend Charlie lives in Queensland. "My favourite part of school is seeing my friends every day at 9am," shares the 10-year-old, who also loves the freedom his unique life gives him.

"I really like not having to sit in a classroom all day. You can walk around - I can visit my horse. It's pretty cool."

Tanya attended the School of the Air in the late '60s and early '70s. Students met their teacher once a year.



For Tanya Heaslip, hearing the crackle of the radio as it started up was her favourite part of the school day.

Living with her family on a Northern Territory cattle station, Tanya, now 58, was one of a hundred students from across the country who attended Alice Springs School of the Air, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year.

"For half an hour we got to talk on the radio to these voices we didn't know but felt like best friends because we were from the same outback world," says Tanya, whose classmates lived on stations and settlements across the country.

BEST TIME OF HER LIFE

"I could paint pictures around their voices and imagine their faces, which was so exciting. It was one of the best times of my life," she says.

From age five to 11, Tanya, now an accomplished lawyer and author, completed her studies by correspondence in the schoolroom on her family's property. From 7.30am until 1pm each day Tanya and her siblings, M'Lis and Brett, would do their written work while waiting for their turn on the radio for

their daily 30-minute lesson. Then, when school was done, they would race to the horse yards, saddle up and ride to meet their father and help muster cattle or mend fences on their property.

"The mornings were study, and the afternoons were work," Tanya explains. "We had a lot of freedom and I loved it!"

And while she couldn't see her classmates' faces, they became lifelong mates. "To this day we are all such great friends. We may not see each other very often, but that connection is still there," says Tanya, who has written three novels

'It really does feel like a family. We're all very close'

about her experience growing up in the Northern Territory and attending the school. "We all still address each other through our [radio] codes," she adds with a laugh.

Now fostering new generations of friendships online rather than by two-way



Charles and Diana took part in a lesson at Alice Springs in 1983.

70 years of history!

- The world's first School of the Air was officially opened on June 8, 1951.
- Thirty students attended the school the year it opened.
- Now, the school teaches more than 100 students from across Australia and overseas.
- In 2000, the school started to use the internet.
- The last radio lesson was taught in December 2006. All classes are now conducted by telephone and internet technology.

Classes were 7.30am to 1pm so the outback kids could help out on the farm afterwards.