

NORTHERN TERRITORY



Nicky Oosthuizen, Paddy McFarland, Tanya Heaslip and Dianne Roberts.

A star emerges from airwaves



STEPHEN SCOURFIELD and School of the Air alumni

For Tanya Heaslip, School of the Air was pure theatre. Sitting by her radio, mic in hand, using her call sign, and standing, with remote classmates spread across the Red Centre, to sing the national anthem, must have seemed quite exotic, in contrast to the isolated cattle station a day's drive from Alice Springs, where she was growing up.

"Monday news" was more than just children telling what had happened over the weekend — it was something the community tuned in to, to hear unfiltered gossip streaming from the mouths of infants.

Tanya generously comes in to Alice Springs School of the Air on a Sunday, to recount some of the stories and give insight into the real importance of School of the Air when I visit with my new friends on our recent Travel Club Tour.

She has also, very successfully, told those stories in her book *An Alice Girl*, published last year.

To have a book published by Allen and Unwin is a success, as is the book itself, with the engaging and insightful story of her childhood years recounted with skill, humour and honesty. But to

have three in three years, as Tanya has with *Beyond Alice*, released in May, and *Alice to Prague*, about the years when she went to work as an English teacher in the Czech Republic, is remarkable.

All of that traces back to her early education with Alice Springs School of the Air — the world coming to her home at Bond Springs cattle station, and inspiration coming particularly through teacher Mrs Hodder.

"A teacher can make all the difference in the world, and Mrs Hodder did for me," Tanya says. "She had a radio, a piano, and infectious love."

The first hints of the big, wide world came to Tanya through the static of her School of the Air radio.

Tanya became the first School of the Air student to achieve a law degree. For 23 years, she lived and worked in WA — as executive officer Aboriginal Affairs for WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy and group general counsel for Wright Prospecting, among other roles.

She says she returned to Alice Springs 4½ years ago as her father was dying. She is director of Landoptions Group, and also now president of NT Writers' Centre.

And her return reconnected her to the town, the country, and to her childhood.

Tanya studied with Alice Springs School of the Air from 1968 to 1974 — in a "tiny store room that was boiling in summer and freezing in winter."

"We'd get up at dawn and feed the horses and dogs and polish boots before breakfast at 7am and then school."

"I grew up with dodgy old roads and dad had dodgy Land Rovers, so mostly we didn't come into Alice Springs," she says. "My mother came in once a month. She fed 20 to 30 stockmen a day. Her entire day was spent running and cooking, and father was out all day working."



Tanya Heaslip with her books, at Alice Springs School of the Air. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield



Tanya Heaslip's teacher, Mrs Hodder.

"In the middle of that was the most fun part of the day — School of the Air. It was pure theatre in a life of great solitude."

HOMESCHOOLING ROOTS

Homeschooling and remote learning are buzz phrases in this pandemic world, but they're nothing new in Alice Springs.

This is the 70th anniversary of School of the Air — an Australian phenomenon that began in Alice Springs, and then spread to pinprick outposts across the continent.

First it was over a radio set, but now through the internet.

Former student Paddy McFarland gives a clever and engaging encapsulation of the story and history of "the world's largest classroom", covering more than 1.3 million square kilometres. Since 1951, it has taught, for example, children living on cattle stations, and in Aboriginal communities and national parks. As I write, there are 107 students and nine teachers — their lessons transmitted from three studios received through satellite dishes.

Teachers travel by four-wheel-drive for a few days a year, to meet face-to-face, and students come in to Alice Springs for school weeks.

For they are not just at school but part of a family that includes, in the Alice headquarters, Nicky



Tanya with her brother and sister on a station.

Oosthuizen, formerly WA State manager for Bench Africa, and Dianne Roberts, who also come in to meet us on our Sunday visit.

Book a visit to Alice Springs School of the Air at assoa.nt.edu.au.

TRAVEL TO THE NT

There will be quarantine-free travel for fully vaccinated Australians to the Northern Territory, regardless of hotspot classification, from Monday, December 20.

Fully vaccinated travellers arriving from a classified "red zone" by plane or car will need to return a negative PCR Test 72 hours before arrival and then a rapid antigen test on arrival. Everyone entering the NT will complete a rapid antigen test on arrival.

A spokeswoman for NT Tourism adds: "Travellers can also take advantage of the NT Summer Sale, offering savings of up to \$1000 for fully vaccinated holiday visitors. The NT Summer Sale is available until March 31."



Guests listening to Paddy McFarland explain the work of Alice Springs School of the Air.