

# New language courses reclaim the mother tongue

Sydney

## NATIONAL

IT can be a "mind blowing" awakening when Aboriginal people first learn an Indigenous language, teacher Ken Walker says.

Language acquisition, even later in life, can instill a sense of wellbeing and belonging for many Indigenous Australians who have lost ties to their culture, said Mr Walker, a NSW North Coast Gumbaynggirr Aboriginal language teacher.

Singer Casey Donovan, the 2004 Australian Idol winner, and former Senator Aden Ridgeway joined dozens of Aboriginal people and a handful of European descendants last week for the start of two intensive Indigenous language courses, which were held for the first time as part of the University of Sydney summer school.

Mr Walker said he was eager to encourage Aboriginal people to reclaim their mother tongue.

"It's a new sort of thing for a lot of people. It's an enlightenment and it's an aspect of themselves that they didn't know about," Mr Walker said.

"They often don't even know that the language is still strong and people speak it. When we show that to them it just blows their mind."

Mr Walker said he was delighted Indigenous languages were being embraced with the introduction of Gamilaraay and Gumbaynggirr short courses.

At the time of white settlement there were about 70 Indigenous languages spoken in NSW and 270 throughout Australia, with more than 500 different dialects.

The threat of losing thousands of years of cultural history prompted a group of NSW north coast Aboriginal elders to begin recording their language and passing on the knowledge, Mr Walker said.

Sydney University already offers courses in the north-west NSW language of Gamilaraay, which

teacher John Giacon said had been researched for more than a decade.

"There is a growing interest and there is growing research going on in east coast and south-eastern Australia languages," Mr Giacon said.

"I think that when these courses become something that people can do fairly readily through TAFE ... there'll be a lot of potential there for more people to do them."

He said there had been a big increase in the number of people who were using Aboriginal words for their children's names.

Course spokeswoman Anna Ash said traditional stories were used in teaching. "The courses don't assume knowledge, but it is about teaching in the right cultural context," she said.

The Summer School in the Gamilaraay and Gumbaynggirr languages was held at the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney earlier this month. - AAP