

Humble library proves a fitting place for learning

I FIRST fell in love with public libraries as an undergrad university student.

By that stage I already had a PhD in procrastination and was continually frustrated that my more organised and motivated fellow students had taken out the books required for assignments from the university library.

On the weekend before due date the public library saved me on many occasions.

This love affair continued through to parenthood when I discovered that there was a local safe, warm and stimulating environment for young people to develop a love of books.

Lately I have become reacquainted with a wonderful collection of BBC production videos and DVDs.

They may seem like placid forgotten places but libraries have played a role in revolutions.

Years ago I came across records of a library that had been established in the strikers' camps as shearers waged a struggle for justice in Western Queensland in the 19th century.

It is an ageless axiom – knowledge is power.

Noel Pearson maintains that revolution was fomented in the Reading Room of the British Museum.



HUMBLE BUT SIGNIFICANT: The library at Pirlangimpi on Melville Island, Northern Territory. PICTURE: CONTRIBUTED

And the great thing about libraries is that they are entirely democratic and free for all. From the toddlers to the aged pensioners there is something for everyone.

If you are walking past the Queensland State Library in Brisbane after 10pm you may find backpackers huddled close to the doors using the free wireless internet connection to send a message from their laptops home.

If you can't afford a paper or need to access the internet a library is the place for you. There are no "specialists" here. If you fill out the form and call yourself a "researcher" you can don the white gloves and touch the documents of our ancestors.

Libraries are not confined to one space either.

You will often see the mobile library on the streets of Toowoomba bringing the joys of the printed page and multi-media to the house-bound.

I have a few favourite libraries. One is the grand old lady - the Mitchell Library in Sydney which turned 100 years old last year.

To sit in the reading room and take in the thousands of books with light filtering in through the stained glass windows knowing that there are secrets still to be uncovered is a special thing indeed.

Another is the Northern Territory Library – built on the site of the Darwin Post Office which was bombed on February 19, 1942.

You can grab a book and sit in air-conditioned comfort looking out to sea from where those planes

would have roared all those years ago.

But it does far more than that. In 2007 the library was presented with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Access to Learning Award.

This award was given for nurturing and supporting learning and culture throughout the Northern Territory.

When you head to a remote Aboriginal community in the Top End the last thing you expect to see is a library – and yet more than 14 communities now have knowledge centres and libraries.

As territory elder Theodora Narndu stated, "We want to be people living a normal life in our country as Australian citizens. We want to give our children a chance."

In June this year I stumbled across a library in the small community of Pirlangimpi on Melville Island, 90km from Darwin.

A little more humble than the sandstone Mitchell Library in Sydney or the Northern Territory library in Darwin – but no less significant.

I believe it is no coincidence that the local school has the lowest truancy rate in the whole of the Northern Territory.

Strong Libraries Build Strong Communities.