

Joel Schreiber has a passion for the Pilbara

Photography by Margaret Bertling

BRIGHTENING THE PILBARA'S FUTURE

With a love of the sea and a desire to give back to society, this IPA member is finding fulfilment teaching accounting to Indigenous Australians in the Pilbara.

by Chris Pritchard

Sometimes it doesn't hurt to have an outsider cast a beady eye over a situation and offer a candid assessment.

Take 54-year-old, transplanted American Joel Schreiber, for instance. His experience in the Pilbara convinces him that more Indigenous Australians should sign up for accountancy courses, and he forecasts a bright future for the region's Aboriginal community.

An outsider? Schreiber may bristle at this description. Having spent 15 years inculcating enthusiasm for accounting among the local Pilbara population – and living in the region for much of that time – he's become as Aussie as the red dust wafting across the outback.

Born and raised in Hawaii, Schreiber graduated from the University of Hawaii and later became a student at California State University. A well-travelled accountant, he left the US to work on Pohnpei island, in the Federated States of Micronesia.

It was in this North Pacific paradise that he met his Australian wife-to-be, Violette, and yielded to her desire that they settle in Australia. Violette is also an accountant and, like her husband, an IPA fellow.

For the past three years, home has been Perth, where the couple's 17-year-old son David and 15-year-old daughter Shirin attend secondary school. Schreiber admits he would like David to be

an accountant but doesn't push it. "We'll see what happens," he laughs.

Living in Perth not only provides more specialised schooling options, but also means relatively quick and easy travel to the Pilbara – "a two-hour flight versus long road travel".

"But we love Western Australia as a whole and nowhere more so than the Pilbara," adds Schreiber. "We plan to return there to live after the children finish high school."

Unlike many IPA members, Schreiber has neither clients nor an accountancy practice. Primarily an educator, he commutes frequently to work at Karratha's Pilbara Institute, which has 8,000 students and is the largest training provider in the vast state's north-west. While normally based at Karratha, he's sometimes

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sent to the Institute's Newman and Port Hedland campuses.

A lecturer in advanced skills, Schreiber specialises in accounting and business management. Often, he finds himself visiting students at home or in their workplace, because they're prevented by employment commitments from attending on-campus classes.

"They crave skills in accounting, bookkeeping and management," says Schreiber of his Indigenous students. "I try, as best I can, to help them achieve their goals ... it's always a thrill to discover they've been promoted into management, as commonly happens in the Pilbara."

Students visited by Schreiber at their workplaces are typically based in one of the region's towns, rather than in isolated communities, "because that's where the jobs are".

Though lamenting the absence of larger numbers of Aboriginal students in his courses, he recalls "a sudden spike in numbers when the GST was about to come in.

It was clear that people wanted to know as much as possible about it and how it would work."

During his 12 years living in the Pilbara, he's seen "about 200" West Australian Aborigines awarded certificates or diplomas. "It makes you feel you're doing something worthwhile," he reveals. [Pilbara Institute programs range from basic certificates to advanced-level diplomas. Not a university, it doesn't confer degrees.]

Non-Indigenous students enrolling in his courses are generally from the smaller businesses that sub-contract to the mining giants. "Typically," he says, "they're people aiming to climb the ladder into

management who realise that, if you're managerial, you need to understand what accounting is about and how it works."

Past students have also included long-distance freight train drivers with ambitions to switch to management roles.

Schreiber's advice to students wanting to succeed in accounting careers? "Join a respected professional body such as the IPA – it'll keep you abreast of current developments, you'll know what the hot trends are in an ever-changing field and you'll be expected to stay within ethical guidelines. Bookkeepers, too, should make it a priority to join a respected association."

Despite Schreiber's great fondness for the outback's aridity, the ocean is also an irresistible magnet. "I need the sea to relax," he confides. "It's a complete change from work. I suppose it's this – plus my Hawaiian background – that draws me to the water.

"When I was a kid, I surfed a lot. Now that I'm older, I don't ride the waves nearly as much – but I'm down at the beach at least weekly, wherever I happen to be."

As well as the lure of the nearby ocean – be it at Perth or Karratha – the Pilbara town of Dampier sits at the edge of the famed Dampier Archipelago, "a magnificent, super-scenic part of the world" providing total escape from number crunching.

When Schreiber isn't at work in Perth and elsewhere to voluntary audits and workplace training. "I've always been attracted to voluntary work. You have to put back into society what you get out." 🌊