



The Search Light Inc. story

From a teacher's concern to a community legacy

1. Origins: A Teacher, Seven Young Women, and a Need That Couldn't Be Ignored (1997–2001)

The story of Search Light Inc. begins long before the organisation had a name.

In the late 1990s, Colleen Mitrow, a special needs teacher at Holland Park High School, noticed a troubling pattern, that vulnerable young women - many experiencing homelessness, trauma, or mental health concerns were being expelled from mainstream schooling. A group of seven former students were living together in a house in Tarragindi. When Colleen visited them, they expressed a simple but profound wish - they wanted to continue their education, but in a place that understood their lives.

Colleen acted. With the Baptist Church willing to auspice the idea, she established a small school designed specifically for young women needing additional support, not available in mainstream education.

In 1997, Southside Education Centre (now Carinity Education Southside) opened its doors. It became an approved school in 2000 and moved to Sunnybank in 2002, with Colleen as its first principal.

Many students were homeless, pregnant, and without family support. Staff and volunteers spent countless hours connecting students with community services to meet their needs for safe accommodation, clothing, food and health services. It quickly became clear that young mothers attending the school needed a safe place for their babies while they studied.

This need would become the seed of Search Light Inc.

2. The Birth of Search Light Inc. (2001–2006)

In 2001, a group of committed volunteers formed Friends and Supporters of Southside Education Centre to support the school and its students.

A pivotal figure entered the story: Jenny Medland. With her legal expertise, determination, and passion for education, Jenny led the process of formalising the group. In 2004, the organisation was incorporated as Women for the Well-being of Young Women Inc.

In 2006, a strategic review set new goals and a clear future direction for the organisation and resulted in a change of name to Search Light Inc. Jenny became its inaugural president.

From the beginning, Search Light Inc. was entirely volunteer-run - a group of women who refused to let vulnerable young mothers fall through the cracks.

3. Meeting a Critical Need: Early Learning and Family Support (2005–2014)

In 2005, Jenny secured funding from the Department for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (JET) to establish a crèche for the babies and children of Southside students. It began in a church hall, but quickly outgrew the space, later moving to leased premises at 58 Gager Street, Sunnybank, becoming a lifeline for young mothers completing their education.

In 2014, the service moved from Gager Street into a purpose-built facility - the Numberlee Kunerra Learning Place - on the Southside campus. Having the crèche co-located at the school strengthened the partnership between the school and Search Light Inc. and provided many benefits for young mothers, who were able to spend more time with their children, breastfeed when needed, and participate in parenting and family support programs delivered by Search Light Inc.

4. A Major Transformation: Accreditation and a New Funding Model (2006–2019)

From 2006 to 2018, Search Light Inc. operated entirely through Australian Government funding, supported by:

- the Department of Social Services (DSS)
- the Department of Education

This funding allowed the organisation to provide early learning, family support, and trauma-informed care to young parents without financial barriers.

In 2019, the introduction of the Jobs for Families Child Care Package reshaped the national early childhood funding landscape. Rather than stepping back, Search Light Inc. undertook a significant organisational transformation.

Accreditation as an Approved Child Care Service

In 2019, the crèche became the Search Light Early Learning Centre, formally accredited under the Education and Care Services Act. This accreditation:

- recognised the service as a regulated early childhood education and care provider
- enabled families to access the Child Care Subsidy (CCS)
- strengthened governance and compliance
- ensured long-term sustainability

A New Hybrid Funding Model

Following accreditation, the Early Learning Centre transitioned to a blended funding model:

- Community Child Care Fund – Restricted (CCCFR)
 - subsidised early education and care services
- DSS funding for:
 - the Parenting Program
 - the Child Development Program

This transformation ensured that Search Light Inc. could continue providing specialised, accessible early learning and family support for young parents well into the future.

5. The Vision for an Indigenous School (2005–2008)

With the Southside model meeting a clear need for marginalised young women, Search Light Inc. member Colin Mackenzie posed a question that sparked a new vision: “What about a school for troubled boys?”

The idea evolved into something larger and more visionary: a K–12 Indigenous School of Excellence for boys and girls.

Search Light Inc. began exploring the possibility of establishing a culturally grounded school based on the successful Southside model.

By 2006, meetings with government ministers - including Henry Palaszcuk - confirmed strong support. The Springfield Land Corporation later offered a generous gift of land, creating a real pathway forward.

The Work Behind the Dream: Feasibility, Governance, and Determination (2008–2010)

The establishment of Hymba Yumba was not a simple project. It required:

- Feasibility studies
- Constitutions
- New companies
- Accreditation processes
- Land negotiations
- Funding applications
- Community consultation
- Political advocacy

The **Searchlight Education Springfield Board** was established to govern the new school, with membership from respected Indigenous Elders and community leaders, including **Uncle Albert Holt**, who later proposed the name **Hymba Yumba** - meaning *Listening and Learning Place*.

By **2010**, operational funding was secured, and the first sod was turned by the Federal Treasurer, Wayne Swan.

6. The Opening of Hymba Yumba Independent School (2011)

In **January 2011**, **Hymba Yumba Independent School** opened its doors. The school has grown from a cohort of 50 students to today's population of almost 300 students along with 60 staff.

It was, and remains, a groundbreaking educational model deeply committed to the traditions of Indigenous culture, spirituality and identity. It stands as one of Search Light Inc.'s most significant legacies.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Courage, Compassion, and Community Leadership

Search Light Inc. began with one teacher's refusal to give up on seven young women. It grew into a volunteer organisation that changed the lives of hundreds of young mothers and their children. It helped establish an Indigenous School of Excellence that now serves generations of jarjums. And it continues to stand beside two schools that embody hope, opportunity, and cultural strength.

This is a story of women who saw a need and acted.

A story of community.

A story of persistence.

A story of belief in young people.

Search Light Inc. continues to support both Carinity Education Southside and Hymba Yumba through:

- funding for end-of-year events and graduation gifts
- emergency financial support for families
- contributions to special projects
- fundraising events
- the annual Jenny Medland Bursary

The organisation remains entirely volunteer-run - a testament to the dedication of its members.

Impact: Changing Trajectories for Young Families

Over two decades, Search Light Inc. has:

- supported hundreds of young mothers to complete their education
- improved developmental outcomes for children
- strengthened family wellbeing
- reduced intergenerational disadvantage
- created a safe, inclusive community where young parents feel seen and valued

Many young women who once felt education was out of reach have gone on to complete Year 12, pursue TAFE or university, secure employment and build stable, nurturing homes for their children

Search Light Inc. has been central to these outcomes — a quiet, steady force behind countless success stories.



Figure 1: Search Light Inc. Management Committee – Performing Arts Festival fundraising event - Nov 2010
Left to right: Elizabeth Mackenzie, Vicki Lomax, Nicola Free, Di Heidke, Jenny Medland