



# Taking the first step as a stockman

**LEX HALL**

WHEN Harold O'Keefe was a boy, his grandfather would enchant him with tales of life as a Northern Territory stockman.

Yesterday, Mr O'Keefe began a journey in his grandfather's footsteps as he became one of the first trainees to graduate from an indigenous pastoral training program at Waliburru Station, about 500km southeast of Darwin.

"Being an Aboriginal stockman makes my grandfather and my father really proud," the 32-year-old said. "I hope my kids will follow in my footsteps, too."

Mr O'Keefe and the 11 other trainees, all from the nearby community of Minyerri, now boast

nationally recognised skills in pastoral production. The training program at Waliburru Station, formerly known as Hodgson Downs, is part of a joint initiative between the federal government and the Indigenous Land Corporation, aimed at rebuilding the indigenous pastoral industry.

For older trainees such as Johnny Billy, 47, yesterday's graduation was a reminder of the historic Wave Hill walk-off in 1966 when Vincent Lingiari met a group of Aboriginal pastoralists in a protest against unfair wages and conditions. "Those blokes did it tougher than us," said Mr Billy, who graduated with certificates in beef production and marketing.

He said the training offered better prospects compared with

work-for-the-dole and community development employment projects. "This program is giving us an opportunity to learn more," he said. "Before this, I was picking up rubbish. That's the only work I had ever done."

The Waliburru project is part of a wider \$15 million indigenous training and employment package for rural and remote Australia, set up last year in an effort to increase places and stop the decline in the number of Aboriginal stockman.

The scheme aims to provide 550 certificate-level training places and jobs for up to 300 indigenous graduates in the pastoral, tourism and resource sectors and in ILC businesses.



Levi Farrell will graduate today with a qualification in agriculture from an indigenous pastoral training program at Waliburru Station, 500km east of Darwin

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