

Book Warrior

A new reading program from New Zealand is getting the literacy message out there.

New Zealand author Alan Duff's best selling novel *Once Were Warriors* first hit bookstores back in 1990, and was later adapted into an acclaimed motion picture.

Following the success of his book, Alan went on to establish a program that has been successfully promoting reading and literacy in Indigenous communities across New Zealand for the past 10 years.

The program Alan founded is known as *Books in Homes*, and it has now begun to reach schools in Indigenous communities in Australia as well.

"After 10 years in New Zealand, the program has reached 440 schools and over 85,000 students, made up predominately of Maori kids from low income backgrounds," says Alan, who has been busy helping to establish the *Books in Homes* program on this side of the Tasman.

"In 2001 we ran a pilot program in schools across Queensland and the response that we got back was tremendous. There had been nothing before it that was so successful."

The program operates by offering primary-level students free books which they select from a brochure throughout the school year. Students also have the opportunity to win extra books as a reward for good behaviour, referred to within the program as "Caught Being Good".

"We've had great support from Federal Minister for Education Brendon Nelson," says Alan. "At the moment the program has really taken off in his electorate, which is the Murdi Parki region of New South Wales."

Currently, the *Books in Homes* program has taken root in schools across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, most predominantly in the Murdi Parki region. Overall, 57 schools are now participating in the *Books in Homes* program, with up to 90,000 free books being handed out to over 6800 students so far.

"We are also using role models to help encourage the children to get into reading," Alan explains. "Recently we've had football players such as the Swans' Michael O'Loughlin and the Eels' Dean Widders visit schools to help raise awareness about the program and the importance of reading."

Being an author himself, Alan knows the importance of books and literacy in the education of young people and the community in general.

"Like in New Zealand, *Books in Homes* here in Australia targets young Indigenous people and aims to encouraging them to develop an interest in reading," he says. "Reading and literacy is important to any society. Greater knowledge equals greater opportunities."



Michael O'Loughlin congratulates a young reader; and (inset) signs his autograph for a fan.

