

Meet Luke McKenzie, 2013 IMP Graduate

I was born and raised in Murray Bridge, South Australia which is Ngarrindjeri land.

My family connection comes from Central Australia with my Dad being a West Arrernte-Gurindji man. Dad was taken from his family when he was very young and grew up in Colebrook Home in the Adelaide Hills. Dad then spent most of his life in South Australia.

It is a great honour to be an ambassador for the 2016 Warrior Run where we celebrate strong men in our lives on Father's Day.

For me growing up I always idolised my dad. Dad was a good footy player and cricket player growing up. I would always have people coming up telling me how good Dad was back in the day, which made me feel proud and like I could achieve things of my own one day. Dad always encouraged me to aim high and chase my dreams no matter how big they were.

It was that kind of mind-set that was installed in me from a young age, and has played a big part in my life.

As a kid I followed in my sister's footsteps and developed a love of basketball and wanted to play district basketball.

However at the age of 11 I become sick and was diagnosed with Leukaemia, which was a very hard time for me and my family.

I spent the first week in intensive care and about three months in the Women's and Children's hospital in Adelaide.

In total, I received treatment for about two years and experienced depression and anxiety before getting the all clear from Leukaemia.

From there I started back playing basketball, which was hard at first because my body was so weak from the Leukaemia and treatment. I used my love of basketball to get myself fit and strong again and eventually achieved my goals of playing basketball at a high level.

From that point I was always playing basketball or football and was always really fit.

As I started getting older I suffered some bad injuries which affected my sport.

I went through a few years where I was always injured and couldn't perform the way I wanted to. This then started to change my enjoyment for sport. I then started going out more, drinking more, eating a lot of junk food and continued in that cycle where I eventually ended up putting on a fair bit of weight and stopped playing sport all together, and didn't really have any direction in my life.

In 2011 my wife Samara gave birth to our first son Jaxon which had a huge impact on my life.

Becoming a father made me realise, I wanted to become a good role model to my kids. I wanted them to be able to look up to me and be proud of me, like I did to my dad.

So I started running just to try and get fit and lose some weight. I then decided to get back playing basketball and football again, and it was around about the same time that I learnt about the Indigenous Marathon Project.

I followed the progress of the IMP squad and how inspiring they all were.

In 2012 I was able to work with a few other people in Murray Bridge to establish the Murraylands Deadly Fun Run Series, which is an initiative of the IMP to promote healthy, active lifestyles in Aboriginal communities around Australia. Through organising and participating in the series, my love of running increased and I started to think about applying for the 2013 IMP squad.

Attending the tryouts was nerve wracking; I never expected to be selected in the squad.

I expected to go to the tryouts, miss out and then keep running and have another crack the following year. As it turned out I received the call a couple weeks later to say I had made it into the 2013 IMP squad and would be training for the New York Marathon.

The following six months would completely change my life.

I had always been a quiet guy. I never put myself out there in front of people. I could never speak in front of people.

However I wanted to be a good role model for my family and community.

IMP really pushed me outside of my comfort zone through by doing media interviews, telling my story through public speaking and encouraging me to develop as a role model.

The physical side of training for a marathon was also hard.

It challenged me every day and pushed me to work harder than I ever had before. To add to my motivation, my second son Levi was born while training for New York.

Running became a lifestyle for me that encouraged me to be a more positive person and be the best that I could be for my family.

After completing the New York Marathon I have continued to run the Murraylands Deadly Fun Run Series and continued with my running.

Following on from my achievement, fellow Murray Bridge local, Daniel Lloyd was inspired and motivated to take up running and also set his sights on New York. He was selected in the 2015 IMP squad and I was honoured to be his mentor. It was fantastic to watch his progress and achievement, and his personal growth during that time, and working together to continue the IMP legacy in the Murraylands.

I have also gained a number of fitness qualifications and am a registered Recreational Running Coach.

For me, my whole motivation for the changes I have had in my life have been from the things that were installed in me from a young age.

The encouragement and seeing things my dad had achieved, and then becoming a father myself to my two boys and wanting to encourage them to be the best that they can be growing up.

I believe that being a father or a strong man in the community means leading by example so that others can follow in your footsteps, or create new pathways for themselves.

As a father myself I will always try to be the best that I can be for my boys.