

From the sandpit to systems change: Floyd Leedie's lifelong mission to give back



UniSQ alumnus Floyd Leedie was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2026 Australia Day Honours for his contribution to Indigenous health.



FOR University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) alumnus Floyd Leedie AM, the moment that shaped his life didn't happen in a boardroom or a lecture theatre. It happened in a school sandpit as a young child.

"I experienced having to ask my little non-Indigenous classmates if I could borrow their toy cars to play in the sandpit with them," he recalls. "This is when I told myself, 'When I grow up, I'll never let my kids have to ask for toy cars.'"

It's a simple story. But it carries the weight of a childhood shaped by systemic disadvantage. It set the direction for a career focused on changing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Leedie's early years were defined by movement and resilience. After his family gained exemption from the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act in 1953, his father's work on Queensland's railway lines took them across regional towns.

One of those stops, near Kilkivan, is where Leedie completed his early schooling and where that defining sandpit moment occurred.

Raised in a large family on a

fettler's income, he speaks with deep respect for his parents' efforts. "For a family of 10 surviving on a small fettler's income, my parents did an unbelievable job raising me and my seven siblings."

What stayed with him was not a fixed career ambition, but a clear understanding of what education could unlock. "I didn't know what it was I wanted to be when I grew up, but I did know that I needed to give myself at least a half a chance with my education if I had any chance of succeeding."

That belief would eventually lead him to UniSQ, where he found not just academic support, but a community that reinforced the value of persistence and care.

"Most of the UniSQ staff that assisted and influenced me were those from the Indigenous Support Unit," he says.

"They showed me they cared that I understood the material and passed. The most important thing I learnt from them all was that you don't just throw in the towel. If you kept thinking about the questions long enough, the right answers would eventually come."

It's a lesson he has carried into leadership. Leedie was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2026 Australia Day Honours, having

built his career around improving outcomes for his community, particularly through his work with Goondir Health Services.

His approach is grounded in a philosophy that rejects narrow definitions of health.

"To me, a 'holistic' Model of Care not only addresses the physical wellbeing of the individual, but also the spiritual and cultural wellbeing, social and emotional wellbeing, family wellbeing and community wellbeing," he says.

"It requires having services, programs, and activities that address the social determinants of health, such as education and training, housing, government systems, environmental health and so on."

He is blunt about where the system continues to fall short. "In my opinion, there are three key issues," he says. "Measurement of success, policy, and holistic health care."

"Governments tend to emphasise quantitative outcomes, but qualitative outcomes are just as important. There's also not enough emphasis on programs that actually work. And if you take a piecemeal approach to addressing issues, you'll only ever get a piecemeal outcome."

It's the kind of critique that comes from lived experience as

much as professional insight. Leedie has spent decades navigating the gap between policy intent and on-the-ground reality.

One of the most persistent challenges, he says, is the complexity of health needs in Indigenous communities, particularly in regional and remote areas.

"The majority of our clients have at least one or multiple chronic conditions, and rural and remote communities have a bigger problem getting our clients to the care they need. Both these issues need to be considered by policymakers when it comes to how we are funded to allow us to be efficient and effective."

Despite these challenges, Leedie points to tangible progress and innovation within his organisation. Two initiatives stand out as defining achievements.

The first is the implementation of virtual health services, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic but now embedded as a long-term solution.

"This system allows us to monitor our clients with chronic conditions, assist them with health literacy, and teach them how to better manage their conditions from the comfort of their own homes using technology."

The second is the Big Buddy Program, a youth initiative

focused on shaping future generations.

"Our Big Buddy Program is designed to empower our youth through four key pillars – social inclusion, mentoring, providing life skills, and education, or SIMPLE."

The link between these programs is intentional. "In 2022, I told two Federal Ministers that there were two strategies that would help close the gap – innovation and intergenerational change by changing the mindsets and mentality of our youth. Both of these programs relate to those points."

That long-term view is central to how Leedie defines leadership.

"I keep it simple," he says. "Being able to give our communities of interest everything they need so they can live a good quality of life. Learn from others as well as teach others. And understand that you will never please everybody."

It's a grounded, pragmatic philosophy – one shaped by experience rather than theory. While his career has evolved, his definition of success has not.

For Leedie, success isn't measured in titles or recognition. It's measured in whether the next generation has to ask for the things he once did.

The boy in the sandpit never left. He grew up and decided to change the system around him.