The Vernon Scholarship
Ongoing commitment to Indigenous education at St Philip’s College.

The Vernon Trust’s generous annual donation provides selected disadvantaged Indigenous students support via the Tania Smith Scholarship Fund.

Mary Vernon was, in many ways, a pioneer. As one of the first women to become a member of the Sydney Stock Exchange (later to become the Australian Stock Exchange), she blazed a trail through a male-dominated industry at a time when women’s emancipation was not at the forefront of Australian workplaces.

Mary didn’t have an easy life. Tragedy struck on more than one occasion but she rose above it to make her mark on the world and provide for those she loved and the causes she cared about.

Born in Beecroft on February 4, 1923, the eldest child of Harry Gordon Vernon, a dentist, and his wife, Millie (nee Rogers). She had a brother, John, who died in infancy and a sister, Kearney, who died of rheumatic fever, aged seven. Mary’s other sister, Margaret, known as Marg, had severe learning difficulties and received institutional care throughout her life.

Mary was forced to leave high school at 14, when her father died, leaving the family destitute. Quick to understand her responsibilities and without complaint, Mary headed out into the world of work to provide for Millie and Marg.

After a preparatory stint at Miss Hale’s Secretarial College, Mary worked at Rydges Business Journal before joining stockbroking firm J & J North as a junior in 1941. It proved to be a savvy career move as she stayed for 49 years. Always first in the door and the last to leave, Vernon would sit tapping away at her typewriter until late in the evening. She ably dealt with many influential clients and industry leaders, providing them with detailed analysis and always paying fastidious attention to their needs.

Vernon was utterly committed to her work and was much respected and admired by her clients and colleagues. In 1976, she was named Stockbroker of the Year – a first for a woman and a demonstration of the high regard she was held in by her industry peers.

She never married but did come close when she was in her 30s. She was engaged to someone she called the “boy next door”, a Beecroft jeweller named Kingsley Poulton. However, as they were preparing for their wedding, he developed cancer and died. Vernon, left alone again, could have chosen to give up. But, displaying a steely determination, she threw herself into her work and continued to climb the corporate ladder and build a different life for herself.

In 1990, Vernon left J & J North and moved to Potter Warburg, later UBS. She always said that she never wanted to retire but finally did in 2000, aged 77, when she left Potter Warburg. She took her typewriter – probably one of the last remaining in a Sydney office – with her and embarked on a new phase in her life.

Over the next few years, Vernon devoted herself to philanthropy. She remembered the hardships of her early life and she was passionate about helping others in similar circumstances. Her private charitable foundation has supported more than 24 charities to date; many of them focused on children and the disadvantaged, and will continue to do so for decades to come.

Her sister Marg lived in a home for most of her life and Vernon would faithfully visit every week. She was devastated when Marg died in 2011 but after that, Vernon started to enjoy more freedom. She began to explore the world, travelling widely in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Faith was also important and Vernon loved attending St Stephen’s Church in Macquarie Street every Sunday. Her legacy will live on through her foundation, which will continue to support many charities each year including endowing scholarships for indigenous students at St Philip’s College in Alice Springs, a cause Vernon felt particularly strongly about. (Excerpts from © Amy Ripley – Sydney Morning Herald – 22 January 2015)