

21st WITH A DIFFERENCE

When she was seventeen Sandra Connors had no reason to expect that her 21st birthday would be much different from the others. Celebrating in a rusty-iron, out-of-town shanty is quite a bit less than gay. But in the past 4 years her life and expectations have changed so much that now the early years must be just a bad memory.

Mr D. G. Yates, Armidale area welfare officer, says, at the risk of embarrassing Sandra, that he first met her in 1961 when she was a scrawny young girl. "She was trying to make the best of life," Mr Yates told *Dawn*, "living in an iron shack, with few if any conveniences, in Sheep Station Gully, outside Inverell.

"Now, she is a very beautiful, composed and sophisticated young lady, highly thought of by the Inverell people and particularly by her employers, Mr and Mrs Devine."

The transformation began in 1964, when the Christian Youth Council built a house on Aborigines Welfare Board land in Hindmarsh Street. And the Connors family were chosen to make the house a home.

At the time the Inverell people who lived near Hindmarsh Street were apprehensive; there were all sorts of rumblings, and grumblings.

"With unswerving faith in the Connors family by people (such as Dr K. Whish and Mrs W. Brown) in the small but very dedicated Inverell Aborigines Advancement Group, we pressed on to what has become a success," Mr Yates said.

"Mr and Mrs Connors have so impressed the people of Inverell that I am sure there would be quite an uproar if the family ever thought of leaving the town.

"Sandra's sister is training at Inverell Hospital and one of her brothers has started at Inverell

Sandra (fifth from right) with some of the 40 people who helped her celebrate. In the group are Sandra's mother, Mrs Celie Connors (third from right), and Mesdames Devine, Brown and Hoyt

High School with the aid of a Welfare Board education grant."

Party

Mr and Mrs Devine, who have employed Sandra in their photographic studios for the past four years, gave Sandra her 21st party in their house.

Forty of Sandra's friends, workmates and family celebrated with her, and enjoyed seeing part of Mr Devine's unusual collection of photographic slides, between the many competitions and games at the party.

Mr Yates considers it a pleasure to visit the well-kept Connors home in Hindmarsh Street and look back on old times with Mrs Connor.

"The Connors story shows what can be done if an Aboriginal family wants to move to town and if the community helps them settle in," Mr Yates said.

Sandra cuts her cake in the lounge room of Mr and Mrs Devine's house. It is now 4 years since Sandra began working in Mr Devine's photographic business

