



ABSTRACT FROM GENERATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Aunty Pearl Wymarra



My family story on my father's side are the Gudang people of Far Northern Cape York Peninsula. His mother was called Wandihnu and his father was a Scotsman, Jack McLaren, who lived among our people in the early 1900s. My mother's family roots, on her father's side, are from somewhere at Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory and her mother was from Borrooloola in Queensland. My mother's parents were

children of the Stolen Generation because of their mixed race of Aboriginal, Irish, Filipino and Indonesian.

There has always been so much talk about Aboriginal identity and I explain mine this way. I identify as Aboriginal and I tell my family story by saying I grew up on Thursday Island, where I was socialised in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and in the ways of other cultures, so my socialisation has been very multicultural. I grew up with my parents' people and at the same time, we were part of the extended family groupings from Thursday Island itself, so we connected with everybody. I tell young people to know their story, get it right in your heart, balance it in your mind and develop the language to express it. This is the way to enable us to hold our own within our own identified group and outside it.

Our father met our mother when he worked for the Presbyterian Church, delivering supplies by boat to their missions at Weipa, Aurukun, Mapoon and Mornington Island. I was born in 1945 at Mapoon on the west coast of Cape York. Our parents, two older brothers and I moved from Mapoon to Thursday Island when I was only a few months old. Thursday Island was where I lived until the age of fifteen when I left there for Charters Towers to attend Blackheath College, a Presbyterian and Methodist Girls boarding school.

Seven more children were born on Thursday Island so our family grew to twelve with Mum, Dad and ten children. We lived in a corrugated iron house, no insulation, just iron roof, walls and wooden frames, with two big verandas – one at the front and one at the back with a kitchen was attached. In the middle were the bedrooms and a family room. I recently found out from a long time resident of Thursday Island, that our house may have been used by the army during the war to ensure the safety of the Japanese men working as pearl divers.

About my name – my brother tells me that it is connected to a family from Saint Pauls Island where our father spent some time training as an Anglican priest when he was young. Our father also told me that before he married Mum, he worked as the skipper of a pearling lugger and one night when they were all sitting on the deck having a cuppa, he told his crew that when he married he would call his first daughter Pearl. I liked that story. When our mother wasn't raising us, she helped the Presbyterian Church ministry on Thursday Island and did laundry for the men working on the pearl culture farm on Friday Island. She also worked in the prawn factory on Thursday Island.

I grew up during the Protection era in Aboriginal history, when people had to live on missions. Then with the Assimilation policy, because of the work he did, my dad was given the 'free paper' or 'dog licence' (as it was known in NSW), that 'allowed' him to send his children to the state school on Thursday Island. Kids whose parents didn't have the free paper went to the

'coloured' school, which was the term used in those days for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who were still 'under the act.'

In those days, as an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander with a 'free paper' or 'under the act' we had to sit at the picture show in the open air on hard park benches. We couldn't sit under cover in the back seats, in the canvas deck chairs. We couldn't go upstairs, where all the Europeans and business people from other cultures would sit. There was that fine line of segregation at the picture theatre. That's a similar story all over Australia in those days. I can remember there were times when I had resentment inside, knowing that we were the bottom rung of the ladder and on reflection we, who identified as Aboriginal, were not even on the first 'rung' in the eyes of others. We were seen as not as good as the other people. It was the systemic policy that was in place that put the boundaries in where you were accepted, officially and socially. However, it's the way we dealt with that which helped us survive and maintain our sense of dignity, strength and resilience. Our parents raised us to just believe that no matter what, we were as good as anyone else. What happened inside our house was where I first saw the model of unconditional love. Our parents taught us humanity and that transcends everything.

After high school I worked between Thursday Island and Brisbane. I also became involved with OPAL (One People of Australia League), an organisation set up by Senator Bonner in Brisbane. I was part of the Younger Set. So I became involved in supporting the poor and helping people, especially those who lived in South Brisbane. Part of the attraction was being able to mix with other Aboriginal people in the city, but what really drove me to be involved was my passion for social justice. Charlie Perkins called into one of our functions during his Freedom Rides.

I was brought up with the Christian faith which strengthened me to stand my ground and follow my chosen life path. It's automatically part of my DNA. Living on the Thursday Island our isolation made us try harder to get on with one another. We were all in the same boat, and if we didn't form good relationships with each other, even amongst all the social and political divisions, then we wouldn't survive.

I was brought up to value family and community, to always bear your own burdens, not to worry people with your problems, to love others, to follow the teachings of the Gospels. I learned to read through old magazines like the Women's Weekly, (sent in mission bags from the mainland.) and comics. The Bible was the only book we had in our house. People think the Bible is only one book but it's a library of books and stories, and I learnt from all of them.

My first real paid job was working during my school holidays for the Department of Native Affairs. I also did various other jobs around Brisbane and on Thursday Island. I met my first husband on Thursday Island. We married in 1966 and made our home in Penrith and raised our two children, Rodney and Cheryl.

In 1977 I applied for mature age entry to Nepean College of Advanced Education, which is now the UWS Penrith campus. My husband and children were supportive of my application. I was accepted and graduated with a Diploma of Primary Teaching in 1980.

My first job was at Braddock Primary School, a newly established primary school in Cranebrook. At that time the Aboriginal Education Policy was launched and they needed trained Aboriginal teachers to support the

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different programs in the regions and at the state office. I worked in a part-time position in the Metropolitan West Region with another education consultant, then in a full-time position in the aboriginal education Unit in Sydney. In 1986 I became the first full-time aboriginal education consultant in the Metropolitan West Region. This was the time I learnt about the original Aboriginal custodians, the Darug people. It was from a booklet called *Aborigines of Western Sydney*, which was produced through Nepean CAE. Together with Aboriginal education Assistants, Teachers and Aboriginal Students, we developed a Social Studies Unit, with the question, 'Who were the people who lived in the area before 1788?' The program was launched and distributed in the Department of Education's Metropolitan West Regional schools.

In 1989 I left the job and Penrith and went to live on Thursday Island and work in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which later became the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). My son Rodney came to live with me on Thursday Island and he took his life in there 1990. I decided to return to Penrith to support my daughter Cheryl, because she had just started her teacher training at UWS.

Thanks to supportive friends, I was able to get a position at UWS. In May 1990, UWS Macarthur employed me as a trainee coordinator of the Social Welfare students in the Aboriginal Rural Education Program. The position helped me heal, it was a new path. The Aboriginal students, Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal staff in the program were very supportive and we developed good, mutually respectful relationships and became a very strong caring and close community.

In 1992, a position was created at UWS Hawkesbury, my application was successful and I worked there in charge of the Indigenous Australian Education Unit until 1999. In 2000 UWS made me an Honorary Fellow and in 2001, during a critical time for UWS, I returned for a short time as the Acting Director of the Aboriginal Centre. As an Honorary Fellow, I have

been invited to graduation ceremonies. My association with the University of Western Sydney is a long and cherished story and I reflected much on this when I graduated with a Masters in Health Science (Primary Health Care). I am impressed with their Aboriginal Employment Strategy and Generations of Knowledge program. The Elders on Campus invited me to meet with them and I have assured them of my support for their vision and of my availability to help in any way.

In my time working at UWS, I appreciated the respect both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and staff showed me and how they willingly joined in as we contributed our voices together in the circle around our symbolic campfires. The student bodies and academics supported the work we did through the Aboriginal Unit and The University of Western Sydney became a 'belonging and healing place' for me. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to UWS for their leadership in recognising and respecting the contribution that Aboriginal people have made to education as a whole, inside and outside institutions. UWS is to be commended for this and my prayer is that they be given the necessary support in every way and always to further develop the vision into the future as they continue the journey of 'Bringing Knowledge to Life'.

Penrith has become for me a place I can now call home. My children were raised here. My daughter Cheryl and husband Shane are raising their children, Rhiannon and Daniel, in Penrith. I have lived for forty-eight years in this community and I am committed to continue to work together with people of all cultural backgrounds in the area. We can make a difference if we work collaboratively and in mutually respectful relationships, valuing what everybody brings to the table as no one person has the answers – we all have some of it. This way we will make it a better place of belonging for the future generations. This includes all our children, young people and families from all cultural backgrounds and ways of life, who are here now and all those yet to come to live, work and call Penrith, 'home'.

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