

Journey of a Lifetime: From the Sticks to the State Library— An Aboriginal Editor's Story

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This paper is a multi-layered sharing of personal, cultural and professional journeys that has led me to becoming an Aboriginal Editor with the black&write! program with the State Library of Queensland. There are a lot of firsts and many significant events that have happened to me, most of which I would never have dreamt about, let alone actually experienced.

My cultural heritage is Bungalong (North Eastern New South Wales) and Butchulla (Hervey Bay and K'Garee also known as Fraser Island). I was raised in the blue collar working class suburb of Zillmere, a northside suburb of Brisbane. Between 1954 and 1955 my parents, Lambert and May McBride, had been living at Victoria Park at Herston (which is now Victoria Park Golf Club) in a Housing Commission hut alongside hundreds of other families waiting for Queensland Housing Commission vacancies. Finally, the Housing Commission advised my parents that a house was available at Zillmere and they moved there in 1956. Zillmere, in those days was a place—literally—'*in the sticks*.' There were more scrub turkeys and possums than humans.

My older Brother, Billy, and I attended Zillmere North State School. When we walked to school we went through scrub where we would see wildlife such as a variety of birds, frilly lizards, butterflies and so on. We'd go over a creek where we would sometimes stop to catch tadpoles or frogs, past a dairy farm, where we would sometimes pull a nice fresh bunch of grass and feed and pat the cows, and past the Catholic primary school, St Flannan's, on the corner of Handford and Beams Road.

Beams Road was a narrow dirt road and at sunset as it started to get darker us local kids would dare each other to walk down it to prove we weren't scared of ghosts. I always politely declined the offer and quite happily accepted the expected name-calling where the words chicken and coward were popular adjectives.

Three generations of the McBride family have remained in that same Housing Commission house, which my parents turned into a loving home and sanctuary. And in 2016 the McBrides will celebrate 60 years in the one home, which brings an ironic smile to my face. The irony? Anthropologists claim that pre-colonisation Aboriginal people were nomadic. Hmmm! Obviously the McBride family never got that memo.

I was the first Aboriginal student at Sandgate District State High School to go onto Grade 11 and 12. Unbeknown to me, my parents had gone to the Principal and found out I had enough academic 'points' to go onto sub-Senior and Senior. But they didn't discuss this visit with their fifteen year old daughter—*Moi*.

So, I was asked to sit at the kitchen table with my parents as they had something important to tell me. They made their expectations of furthering my education very clear. I was going to start

grade eleven the following year. They seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of what my reaction was going to be and they were right, sitting through a marathon session of my teenage hysterics. I threw everything I had at them—of course not physically—but verbally—of course not swearing—but things like; ‘*I’ve got no friends,*’ ‘*I won’t have any money because you won’t let me go and get a job,*’ ‘*I’ll be the only blackfella there*’ and so on. But they stood their ground, both united and unbreakable, so I reluctantly raised the red, black and yellow flag of surrender and accepted my parents’ decision. I got with the program.

I was terrified on my first day when I walked into a classroom full of white students. My Aboriginal friends had left school at grade ten and the initial feeling of isolation and being so alone was reflected by my heart racing like Phar Lap and my head lowered looking at the dusty floor of the classroom, not daring to glance up at the sea of unfamiliar white faces.

As I had deliberately dawdled to my homeroom, when I arrived all the seats were taken. I mumbled my arrival to the home teacher and then she did something outrageous. She asked one of the boys to get up and give me a seat. I was absolutely mortified. I literally slithered to the vacant seat and at all times kept my head and eyes to the floor. I was thinking and feeling shame job.

Gee, thanks Mum and Dad, not one blackfella in sight! Good on ya! Who am I going to talk to and sit with at lunch? But, you know, my initial fears were just that—and also unfounded. On that same day, some of the girls came over to me and said hello and asked me if I’d like to join them. I accepted this unexpected invitation and became good friends with a small group I felt comfortable with. Those friendships lasted the two years in high school and a few post-high school. What was I thinking? Well, I can only answer this by saying I was a scared, shy, 16 year old student—who happened to be Aboriginal. Not that my new friends cared.

Later in life, with the predictable assurance of 20/20 vision, I realised my parents were right. They were visionaries even though they had limited education. Neither of them had the opportunity to attend high school. They both had about a grade five or grade six education and yet they were the smartest people I knew.

There is a saying that behind every great man is a great woman. That’s my Mum. That’s my parents! I adored them; however, I was Daddy’s baby so I had a special bond with my Father. He was tall, dark and handsome. Six feet, one inch tall, Aboriginal, and handsome enough to catch Mum. Dad had been a bullock team driver; a timber cutter; a wharfie; a bridge carpenter; a sugar cane cutter; a railway fettler and had a brief stint as an amateur boxer with the well known and respected Snowy Hill Boxing Club. He was also a World War II soldier.

During the War, Dad was in Townsville when it was bombed by the Japanese. He served as a transport driver and worked on providing essential services wherever and whenever the Army dictated. The unit would provide support for airstrip construction, repairing or building bridges along with many other essential services when needed.

He was awarded the Australian Service Medal and the War Medal. A brief consideration of Dad’s World War Two Medals story: he was presented with them more than 50 years after the war ended.

In 1997 at Government House, Dad was presented with the war medals by the then-Queensland Governor, Peter Arnison. The Governor also served in the Australian Army. He was Major General Peter Arnison and in what one could refer to as a serendipitous revelation, he was born in Lismore—and Dad was born outside of Kyogle—both born right in the heart of beautiful Bungalung country.

Here was Arnison, a white man, presenting medals to a black man, McBride; the former a graduate from Duntroon Military Academy and the latter a man who went to grade six at the Risk Public School in the mountains of the McPherson ranges; the former a high ranking Commissioned Officer and the latter a Private; the former living in a Governor's mansion and the other a Queensland Housing Commission mansion . . . err house; the former automatically born a citizen of Australia and the latter given citizenship in 1971 at the age of 53. The two couldn't have been more different and yet the genuine respect both men had for each other at that ceremony and in that moment was clearly evident and confirmed by a long strong hand shake, deeply locked eyes and the widest beaming smile between them transcending all these differences. It truly was a magical moment for all.

The reference above to Australian citizenship plays out like this: in the 1967 Referendum, approximately 92% of Australians said 'Yes' to three questions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human rights. The one I'd like to focus on was the political mandate to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the population census.

A population census was held in 1966, and as they are held every five years, the next one wasn't until 1971. On Sunday 25 April 1971 the entire McBride family was, for the first time, counted as citizens. I was 14. What a sad (or some would say shameful—and rightfully so) state of affairs. Australia, diligently recording statistics of how many sheep and cattle were being farmed and how much iron ore and wheat was exported, was not remotely interested in how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in the country. Indigenous people were invisible until 1971. If I'm asked where I'm from or who I am, I answer, 'I'm an Aboriginal Australian' in that order.

My parents also fought for Aboriginal rights with a wonderful group of people, with a passion and determination for a range of social justice issues, black and white united. They practised reconciliation long before it became a buzz word or a formal policy. The membership base was diverse. There were suburban battlers; solicitors; members of federal parliament; artists and writers, and, notably, the respected poet and story teller Aunty Kath Walker, now known as Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Dad was the President of the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI). QCAATSI was the State Chapter of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait (FCAATSI).

I always looked up to my Dad in every sense of the word. I came to the conclusion that he was very well educated, just in a different way. He had a PhD in life and used and shared his lifelong knowledge and skills with all people, especially his three children.

After high school I had a year at a commercial college, Nunn and Trivetts, learning typing and shorthand—the latter now an 'extinct' skill. At the end of that year I was advised by an

Aboriginal Employment Officer that the University of Queensland was advertising a position specifically seeking Aboriginal applicants to work as part of a mobile hearing team.

I was interviewed and got the job. The University of Queensland's Aboriginal Hearing Team was based at the Medical School at Herston. I worked with the Hearing team for two years and absolutely loved it. I was trained as an Audiometrist and worked with a team which included an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist, a Registered Nurse, an Audiologist, a Speech Therapist, and another Aboriginal Audiometrist.

We travelled all over Queensland visiting and testing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for hearing loss and speech difficulties, identifying people who required ENT surgery. We drove and flew in jets, light planes—one of my favourites was a wonderful old DC3 based in Cairns. The name of the airline was Bush Pilots. Despite the name, the pilots and air hostesses all wore crisp uniforms and friendly crisp smiles.

After I left the Hearing Team I had a short break, then I was successful in being recruited as a permanent Public Sector employee with the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA).

After a settling-in period with DAA, I decided to pursue a degree. I was accepted into the prestigious University of Queensland. After a few trials with Sociology and Social Work I changed to Politics and History. But a strange thing happened to me one day on my way to a political science lecture, which stopped my academic journey.

One weekend, during National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Celebrations (NAIDOC) I met an African-American serviceman on military exercises with the Australian military. I felt it my duty to provide some cross-cultural awareness training and so did he. To cut a long story short, I dropped out of Uni (much to the dismay of my parents and family) flew to Hawaii on a fiancée visa, got married at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii and then flew to his next posting at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

I lived in the United States for approximately twenty months and was desperately, pathetically, and inconsolably homesick. Where am I going to run into an Aboriginal Australian in the deep south state of Georgia? Their state emblem is the Peach but there was nothing 'peachy' about my homesickness. And Men at Work's song, 'I Come From A Land Down Under,' which was popular at the time, made it worse. I actually cried every time I heard that song.

Also, Americans just could not figure me out. I spoke with an English accent but looked Hispanic or Latino and with a Spanish name like Linda I often heard, '*Hola como estas senorita?*' I'd reply in my distinct dry Aussie accent, 'I'm Ausstraaylian.' Then, when I added an extra cultural dynamic of saying I was an Aboriginal Australian that took the conversation to a different level.

This triggered what became a regular and draining routine of a combination of geography, history and cultural lessons explaining my Aboriginality. To this day, I don't know if they ever got it, or me, for that matter.

My then husband's next military posting was Colombia, so I said to him with all the positiveness I could muster in my voice, 'Darling, have a nice time in Colombia dodging machine gun bullets from drug cartels shooting to kill.' I had a 'hard' choice—Zillmere or Bogota?

I returned to my beloved housing commission house/sanctuary in Zillmere thanking God and all that that part of my journey was behind me. I returned to my studies, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in Political Science and a major in History.

My parents sat in the Great Hall and watched me receive my degree. Being a university graduate was another first in my family (on both sides). I have cherished photographs of me in my graduation gown, degree in my hand, taken with my parents. I still get quite teary as I remember this night and I can only imagine what they were thinking and feeling. All the hugging, kissing and smiles capture it the best.

I fully optimised my Political Science major and ended up working in the Public Sector for twenty-three years before I took a Voluntary Early Retirement (VER) package. I had worked ten years for the Commonwealth Government and thirteen years for the Queensland Government. After a short break I commenced work as a Case Worker for Link-Up (Qld) Aboriginal Corporation whose core business is finding and reuniting members of the Stolen Generation.

What a revelation that job was! Here I was, blessed and lucky to come from an intact family, knowing who I am and where I'm from and all the luxuries and benefits this situation bestows on a person like me.

Although there were 'professional parameters,' the relationships developed between caseworkers and clients were intrinsically intertwined with a myriad of human emotions. Feelings of being lost, anxious, scared, regretful, angry, indifferent, searching, happy, grateful, lucky, unlucky and known and unknown. The emotional and psychological journey lasted only two years. I resigned.

After leaving Link-Up I finally had time to complete a job that I had been procrastinating over for years. My parents kept everything! I mean everything that I still have at the house today. They kept our Housing Commission rent book receipts recorded both in pounds, shillings and pence and later dollars and cents; Walton's receipts; letters and cards from my Grandmothers, Aunties, friends of the family; and hundreds of QCAATSI and FCAATSI documents and papers.

My parents would drive all over South East Queensland during the 1960s and especially before the 1967 referendum, encouraging and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to not only register with the Electoral Commission but also exercise their right to vote.

At last, I collected all their QCAATSI and FCAATSI papers that had been kept in an old, dark-red port at home. I presented all those years of papers, minutes of meetings, correspondence between QCAATSI and various Unions, Ministers of both the Queensland and Federal governments to the Queensland State Librarian. It was astounding from an archivist's and historian's perspective. The papers were in very good condition, considering they had been lying all those years in that old red port.

How ironic it was that shortly after this formal presentation to the State Library I was told by my good friend and mentor, Dr Jackie Huggins, that she had heard on the Aboriginal red, black and yellow grapevine that the State Library of Queensland was looking for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander candidates for a new pilot project, to be trained as an editors.

I met and was interviewed, twice, by Sue Abbey and Theodora Le Souquet, who were the visionaries behind this project called the black&write! Indigenous Writing and Editing Project located within the State Library of Queensland. It was a national recruitment process. I got the job.

My editing training was provided under the guidance and mentorship of the Director of the Project, Sue Abbey, who began as a trainee editor with University of Queensland Press (UQP) in 1981, and was a Poetry Editor for 14 years. As a Senior Editor at UQP she managed the David Unaipon Award and was Series Editor of the Black Australian Writers series until she left in 2005. She also worked with established and emerging authors across the spectrum of UQP's publications and built a working relationship with many Indigenous writers during that time. Over the next couple of years, I would be the recipient of this knowledge and extensive editing experience, which provided the training platform for this wonderful new world of creative industry I had so willingly entered.

In February 2011 my black&write! journey began.

I was joined by my fellow Indigenous editor Ellen van Neerven-Currie who belongs to the Mulunjali nation located in the Beaudesert region inland near the border of Queensland and New South Wales. Ellen and I found out we had a connection to each other. Her Grandfather, Cyril Currie, was best man at my parents' wedding and his name appears on their wedding certificate. But Ellen and I had never met until the first day of work with the project. Now that was a common and proper Aboriginal experience.

Prior to our commencement as trainees we were assigned compulsory reading of five books—*Bitin' Back* and *Her Sister's Eye*, both by Vivienne Cleven; *Legacy* and *Home* both by Larissa Behrendt, and *smoke encrypted whispers* by Samuel Wagan Watson.

We had to provide a reader's report on all five books. To complement this process we were able to meet and talk to two authors, Samuel Wagan Watson and Larissa Behrendt, who shared with us their inspiration for their stories and their journey through the 'publishing minefield.'

The personal insights they shared were very enlightening. Sam stated he was a second generation writer who initially wanted to be a film-maker. He said that his freedom of expression isn't restricted to his poetry and you don't have to reach for every star. In her book, *Home*, Larissa provided historical references relating to Aboriginal issues such as the 1967 Referendum and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra during the 1970s.

The next main challenge was our responsibilities in coordinating the inaugural *kuril dhagun Indigenous Writing Fellowship 2011*—a national writing competition for Indigenous writers. The writing fellowship requests works of fiction from both published and unpublished writers in a range of categories such as poetry, adult, young adult, short story collection and children's book.

Our two winning Fellows for 2011 were unpublished emerging writer Sue McPherson from the Sunshine Coast in Queensland who wrote a young adult novel entitled *Grace Beside Me*, and published author Ali Cobby-Eckermann from Adelaide who wrote a verse novel entitled *Ruby Moonlight*.

I commenced my editorial debut on *Grace Beside Me*. My goal was to contribute to the process of developing a raw manuscript to publication standard.

I love language. My training as an editor exposed me to prose and poetry, and words and sentences that I found to be lyrical and descriptive in a way I had not read or felt before. As part of our allocated reading list we read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I found wonderful lyrical sentences such as, ‘The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life’ (2) and ‘they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing’ (3).

The language in *Grace Beside Me* was targeted at a young adult audience. The training cues for my part in editing was to ensure that the main character—Fuzzy—a Grade 12 high school student, stayed in character and spoke as such, to the end of the manuscript. The use of traditional Aboriginal language, Aboriginal English, Torres Strait Islander languages, foreign languages and accents is a central part of the editing and reading process. In *Grace Beside Me* there were Aboriginal words used, such as ‘yandi’ (4).

For Aboriginal accents, from Vivienne Cleven’s *Bitin’ Back*: ‘They weren’t focussed on the right bloody issue. It’s like bakin’ old Auntie Marg’s plonky Christmas cake, you gotta focus on the task at hand. If you don’t, you may as well throw it out to the bloody dogs, cause no other bugga is gonna eat it’ (5). In Anita Heiss’s book, *Paris Dreaming*, there were many references to Aboriginal words and language style and of course French phrases such as, ‘My dear tiddas’ (6); ‘Sounds *très* deadly,’ I said (7).

Many other important creative journeys have substantially influenced me. They are:

- An internship in Broome with Magabala Indigenous Publishing House
- The National Indigenous Writers and Educators Conference in Wollongong
- The National Editors Conference in Sydney
- Residential Editors project at Varuna Writers Centre in Katoomba
- WordStorm in Darwin
- Melbourne Writer’s Festival
- Adelaide Writer’s Festival
- Queensland Society of Editors
- Queensland Writer’s Centre
- The Brisbane Writers Festival
- First Nations Australian Writers Workshop

Summarising my life journeys I've shared in this paper, I feel blessed to have found my true calling. Working as an editor to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors with their manuscripts and see their glow of satisfaction and appreciation when the final manuscript is sent to the publishers is professionally and culturally very satisfying for both parties. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind—an epiphany in fact—that having an Indigenous editor working with Indigenous authors is best practice.

Oh, and what happened to the areas of Zillmere I shared with you earlier?

They cut the trees and scrub down and built houses. They filled in the creek to provide more land for developers. The dairy farm was sold and is now a caravan park and Beams Road is now a fully bitumen road, well-lit, and has double lanes in some places where it connects to the number one highway at Aspley.

And who are the two remaining survivors of this development-driven *coup d'état*?

The good old Catholic Church in the form of St Flannan's and the ghosts!

Author's Note:

Some aspects of this paper have been written in my own culturally appropriate style. That is, I honour my parents, older siblings, and Elders by capitalising their status in my life such as Mum, Dad, Brother et cetera.

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