2014 VICTORIAN INDIGENOUS HONOUR ROLL
WARNING
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this publication contains images of people who have passed away.
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I am extremely proud to introduce the 15 inductees to the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll for 2014.

The Honour Roll recognises and records for posterity, the breadth of achievement and scale of endeavour within Victoria’s Aboriginal community. This year’s inductees cover a period that ranges from the mid-19th century to today.

Among them will be names you recognise and some you may not, but all share a commitment to fairness and equality, and have undertaken passionate work in fields as diverse as health, education, justice, civil rights and military service.

While the Honour Roll celebrates these inspiring individuals, it also provides an opportunity to learn more about Victorian Aboriginal history and culture, and in doing so strengthens understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

I would like to sincerely thank inductees and their families for allowing these stories to be shared and for being such important role models for future generations.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Honour Roll Advisory Panel, which once again met the challenge of selecting and recommending this year’s inductees from the many deserving nominees.

Finally, this was the second year that the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll left its permanent home in Parliament House to complete a successful tour of regional communities. The enthusiastic reception it received at each stop attests to the interest and admiration Victorians have for these exceptional people.

The Hon Tim Bull MLA
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs
A LEADER WITH A VISION FOR HIS PEOPLE

Simon Wonga was an important Aboriginal leader, who became ngurungaeta, or ‘head man’, of the Wurundjeri people in the mid-19th century, at a time when their future was uncertain. He helped his people face the loss of their traditional way of life, and achieved his vision for an Aboriginal settlement at Coranderrk.

Born around Healesville in 1821, Simon was the son of Bilibellari, another highly respected ngurungaeta. The qualities he displayed as a child saw him identified early on as a future leader; however his traditional upbringing was disrupted by the arrival of European settlers in 1835, shortly after his initiation ceremony. Simon was 13 years old when his father and seven other Wurundjeri Elders met with John Batman. At this meeting, he and his cousin, William Barak, another future Batman. At this meeting, he and his other Wurundjeri Elders met with John Batman. At this meeting, he and his cousin, William Barak, another future Wurundjeri leader, witnessed the signing of a historically contentious ‘treaty’ by the Elders and Batman, which heralded the establishment of a ‘treaty’ by the Elders and Batman, signing of a historically contentious Wurundjeri leader, witnessed the cousin, William Barak, another future Batman. At this meeting, he and his other Wurundjeri Elders met with John Batman. At this meeting, he and his cousin, William Barak, another future Wurundjeri leader, witnessed the signing of a historically contentious ‘treaty’ by the Elders and Batman, which heralded the establishment of an Wurundjeri initiation ceremony, held at Hanging Rock. In an unprecedented gesture of reconciliation, Simon invited two English boys, Willie and Tom Chivers – who along with their father John were among the only settlers to Wurundjeri people – to accompany the party. In 1852, Simon also brought Woi wurrung language of the Wurundjeri people to – accompany the party. In 1852, Simon also brought together the people of the Kulin and other nations for one final corroboree at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. It was a huge two-week celebration of traditional culture, including music, ceremony and traditional games such as mangroom, a version of football, which attracted many curious non-Aboriginal people. It took two months for Simon’s foot to recover, during which time he stayed with Thomas and gained useful insights into non-Aboriginal society. It was Thomas who noted two of Simon’s unique gifts – his talent for mimicking animal calls and his ability to communicate with horses.

After his father’s death in 1846, 25-year-old Simon was chosen to be the next ngurungaeta. He did not take over the leadership immediately, but instead worked in jobs that would teach him about colonial life. One employer was so impressed by Simon’s skill at mustering cattle that he renamed his station Wonga Park – today a locality within greater Victoria. Simon also negotiated contracts with settlers to cut timber, employing other Aboriginal men to assist him.

He did not allow himself to be exploited, as one publican learned when his attempt to short-change Simon resulted in the threat of legal action from William Thomas, to whom Simon had complained.

In 1851, Simon officially became ngurungaeta. By this time, he understood that his country had been permanently altered by European colonisation, and that Aboriginal people would have to adapt to survive. In recognition of what this meant giving up, he organised two significant events. The first was the last Wurundjeri initiation ceremony, held at Hanging Rock. In an unprecedented gesture of reconciliation, Simon invited two English boys, Willie and Tom Chivers – who along with their father John were among the only settlers to learn the Woi wurrung language of the Wurundjeri people to – accompany the party. In 1852, Simon also brought together the people of the Kulin and other nations for one final corroboree at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. It was a huge two-week celebration of traditional culture, including music, ceremony and traditional games such as mangroom, a version of football, which attracted many curious non-Aboriginal people. It took two months for Simon’s foot to recover, during which time he stayed with Thomas and gained useful insights into non-Aboriginal society. It was Thomas who noted two of Simon’s unique gifts – his talent for mimicking animal calls and his ability to communicate with horses.

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When he was 19 years old, Simon seriously injured his foot while hunting in the Dandenong Ranges. He was taken to the home of William Thomas, the Assistant Aboriginal Protector appointed by the British Colonial Office to oversee the care of the region’s diminishing population of Aboriginal people. It took two months for Simon’s foot to recover, during which time he stayed with Thomas and gained useful insights into non-Aboriginal society. It was Thomas who noted two of Simon’s unique gifts – his talent for mimicking animal calls and his ability to communicate with horses.

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After he recovered, Harry rejoined his unit and was promoted to lance corporal in early 1917. During the battle of Bullecourt in April that year, Harry was wounded in the shoulder, but returned to duty a month later. His injuries did not diminish his abilities as a footballer or as a scout, and within his unit he was noted for his skill at both.

In October 1917, during operations to capture Broodseinde Ridge during the third battle of Ypres in Belgium, Harry displayed tremendous courage and leadership while clearing the dugouts and concrete guard posts, known as pillboxes, of remaining enemy resistance. He was promoted to corporal and awarded the Military Medal, although he was originally recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal. The military citation commended Harry’s “disregard of all danger” and described him as an inspiration to his men.

The 7th Battalion went on to fight in the Flanders region until they were moved forward to join the great allied offensive at Somme in mid-1918. During an advance on 9 August 1918 at Liéons Wood, south-west of Vauvillers, Harry was wounded in the stomach. He was found by a stretcher-bearer and taken to a dressing station, but died shortly after. Harry was 34 years old and was buried at Heath cemetery in Harbonnières, France.

Today, the name Harry Thorpe is inscribed on the cenotaph in Lakes Entrance, where a street called Thorpe’s Lane is also named in his honour. For his family, Harry’s is a story of courage and sacrifice that transcends time and will never be forgotten.

“Lest we forget.”

HENRY ‘HARRY’ THORPE
(1886-1918)
A BRAVE SOLDIER WHO FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM

William Reginald Rawlings – known to his family today as Uncle Reggie – was a courageous Aboriginal soldier who was awarded the Military Medal for his bravery in battle during the First World War. He was sadly killed in France just three months out from the end of the war, on 9 August 1918.

Born at Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve, near Purnim in western Victoria, the exact year of William’s birth is unknown. Most records put it at around 1890–91. He was the son of William Rawlings and Elizabeth Mary (née Gorrie) and had one sister. William is thought to have attended the local state school and came from an athletic family – his father was a runner who competed in the Stawell Gift.

William’s family spent many years fighting to remain on Framlingham. When the Board for the Protection of Aborigines attempted to relocate them around 1890, they joined others in refusing to leave.

Excepting a period between 1898 and 1900, when the family was removed to the Lake Condah Aboriginal station, Framlingham always remained their home.

On 14 March 1916, William enlisted in Warrnambool as a private in the Australian Imperial Force. His occupation was recorded as horse breaker and his age as 25 and three months. William embarked from Melbourne in August 1916 with the 8th Reinforcements to the 29th Battalion and arrived in France in November. Within his first year he was evacuated to England to recover from trench foot, a potentially debilitating medical condition affecting soldiers’ feet, caused by damp and unsanitary conditions experienced in trench warfare. He rejoined his unit in late 1917 and went on to distinguish himself as a soldier.

William was awarded the Military Medal for his role in a successful advance made by the 29th and 32nd Battalions on Morlancourt Ridge in July 1918. In the position of first bayonet man in the bombing team, he led an attack on a communication trench during which he “brushed aside all opposition”.

The military citation read that he displayed “rare bravery” and set a wonderful example to his team with “his irresistible dash and courage”.

On 9 August 1918, the 29th Battalion participated in the capture of Vauvillers. As William left the trench and started the advance he was hit by a shell and killed instantly. He was buried at Heath cemetery in Harbonnières, France. Back home, the local community paid tribute to his bravery, with the Warrnambool branch of the Returned Services League (RSL) describing him as “a fine soldier”.

Today, William is remembered by his descendants for having paid the ultimate price in the defence of freedom. His story also serves to remind us of the contribution made by hundreds of Aboriginal service men and women during the war years.

“Lest we forget.”
Jack Patten was one of the great Aboriginal leaders of the 20th century and set the agenda for the civil rights movement in Australia. The Yorta Yorta man spoke out against Aboriginal inequality with such vigour that his words resonated across the land.

Born at Cummeragunja Mission, just across the Murray River in New South Wales, Jack was the eldest son and maternal grandfather of John James Patten and Christina Wales, in 1905, Jack was the eldest son across the Murray River in New South Wales. He fought under the moniker ‘Ironbark’. While travelling around, Jack met his future wife Selina Avery, a Bundjalung woman. The Bundjalung people lived in poverty at the Clarence River Aboriginal settlement in Baryulgil and their plight had a profound impact on Jack. Upon learning that the community’s children were excluded from the local school, he gathered together a group of men, physically relocated the schoolhouse and only had it returned when assurances were given that the children would be educated.

Jack and Selina married in 1931 and had seven children. During the Great Depression they moved to Salt Pan Creek, an Aboriginal squatter’s camp in south west Sydney. Jack’s father and younger brother George were also living there. Jack gained a good grounding in politics from his father, who was well informed and enjoyed lively discussion around the campfire.

By 1936, Jack and his family had settled in the Sydney suburb of La Perouse. Jack was introduced to many notable political figures, including Michael Sawtell and Percy Reginald Stephensen. He saw in them an opportunity to bring to people’s attention the disadvantage endemic to his people. A persuasive public speaker, Jack addressed crowds at the Domain each Sunday and also became a prolific letter writer on matters concerning Aboriginal rights.

Jack developed a close working relationship with another Aboriginal leader, William Ferguson, who launched the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) in 1937. Jack was the organisation’s first president. He travelled from southern Queensland to western Victoria, visiting Aboriginal reserves and attracting a loyal following.

Along the way, he collected and published stories in an effort to highlight the suffering of Aboriginal people and the inaction of the bureaucracy. Jack gave evidence to a Legislative Assembly select committee examining the administration of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, which the APA sought to have abolished.

On 26 January 1938, Jack and William Ferguson organised the first Aboriginal Day of Mourning, based on an idea by the Aboriginal leader William Cooper, who also took part. Jack also wrote and edited a short-lived Aboriginal newspaper – the first publication of its kind in Australia. Importantly, he drafted a ‘10 point plan for Citizens Rights’ and led a deputation to present it to Joseph Lyons, the prime minister of the day. It is a historic document that did much to galvanise support for Aboriginal rights. Today it is exhibited at the Melbourne Museum.

Jack played a key role in the famous Cummeragunja walk-off in 1939. Having returned to the old mission in 1938, he was dismayed by its poor management and food shortages. Despite appeals to the government, the situation deteriorated further and Jack encouraged the residents to leave. Around 200 people did, and although the event resulted in Jack’s arrest, it became a powerful symbol of Aboriginal defiance.

Prior to the Second World War, military regulations officially excluded Aboriginal people from enlisting in Australia’s armed forces. While many still served during World War One, this often required them to conceal their heritage. In 1939, Jack successfully campaigned to have the rules changed, before enlisting in the army himself.

He went on to serve in Palestine and Egypt as a private, until a piece of shrapnel damaged his knee. Discharged in 1942, Jack joined the Civil Construction Corps. After the war, notwithstanding his military service, the Aborigines Protection Board removed six of Jack’s seven children from where the family was camped in northern New South Wales. His five daughters ended up in the Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls, however Jack mounted a daring retrieval of his son – who was taken to the town of Bomaderry – and escaped with him to Cummeragunja.

By 1946, Jack was suffering from post-war depression and had separated from his wife. He relocated to Victoria, eventually settling in Melbourne, where he worked for the Aboriginal community in Fitzroy, ensuring that Aboriginal people had adequate representation when appearing in court.

In the last years of his life, Jack established the Australian Aboriginal Elders Council of Victoria, of which he was president, and reunited with William Ferguson to oppose the British atomic testing at Maralinga in South Australia. Sadly, he was killed in a car accident in 1957. However, Jack left behind a rich legacy that inspired a new generation of Aboriginal leaders to carry on the fight in his name.
Edna Brown
(1916-2006)

A BELOVED ELDER WHO GAVE DIGNITY TO OTHERS

Aunty Edna Brown was a popular Fitzroy identity whose kindness touched the lives of the most disadvantaged. The Gunditjmara Elder was the driving force behind the Aboriginal Funeral Benefits Fund, Victoria’s first Aboriginal funeral fund, believing in the right to a dignified burial for her people.

Born in Hamilton in 1916, Edna was raised by her parents George Clarke and Mary-Anne (née Lovett) Brown in 1934 and had four children. She also raised her sister’s daughter as her own.

The family faced many hardships but Edna’s strength of spirit and unflagging work ethic always prevailed. To support her children, she worked long hours as a cleaner, including for many years at Melbourne’s Customs House. Edna’s house was the first stop for those who couldn’t afford it were also supported. Eventually a hearse was purchased with the help of another Aboriginal leader Stewart Murray OAM JP. It was proudly emblazoned with the Aboriginal flag.

The funeral fund relied solely on fundraising and received no government support. Only once did Edna seek government assistance, when she and Stewart Murray petitioned for funds to purchase land in Fawkner Cemetery. Edna strongly believed in the need for a place in Melbourne where people could be buried together. The request was denied, however many years later Edna’s niece Lorraine ‘Bunta’ Patten rediscovered Edna’s letter and led negotiations that resulted in the establishment of Weeroona Aboriginal Cemetery at Greenvale – the spiritual successor to Edna’s funeral fund.

As the fund developed, Edna worked to build partnerships with funeral parlours across Victoria, securing discounts, establishing payment schemes and dealing with coffin manufacturers. She would personally handle funeral arrangements on behalf of families. Many would make monthly contributions to the fund, but those who couldn’t afford it were also supported. Eventually a hearse was purchased with the help of another Aboriginal leader Stewart Murray OAM JP. It was proudly emblazoned with the Aboriginal flag.

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Outspoken and honest, Edna was a much-loved figure in the Fitzroy community and a vocal supporter of Aboriginal rights, from the campaign that brought success at the 1967 referendum to the subsequent push for Aboriginal self-determination. As Aboriginal people increasingly took charge of their own interests, Edna’s ability to unite people came to the fore. She had time for everyone and was particularly fond of the homeless men who spent their days in Fitzroy’s parks and laneways. She was also a faithful supporter of the Fitzroy Stars Football Club.

Edna was proud to be associated with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), which she helped establish with her daughter Alma Thorpe in 1973 (Alma was inducted to the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll in 1975). She travelled Australia and remained politically engaged, attending the bicentennial protests in 1988. Her colourful knitted blankets became treasured possessions to many.

Aunty Edna passed away in 2006, having given so much to so many. She often said she learnt something new every day of her life. Now her spirit lives on in her many descendants, who continue to be inspired by the values Aunty Edna lived by.
A BORN ENTERTAINER WHO BROUGHT JOY TO COUNTELESS LIVES

Aunty Alice Thomas was the most senior Gunai Elder in Victoria, who could bring a smile to the sternest face with her warmth, generosity and remarkable talent for playing the piano. A born entertainer and bona-fide legend, she lived every one of her 95 years to the fullest.

Alice was born at Lake Tyers Mission Station in 1919, outside the church that her father and grandfather had helped to build. She was the only child of John ‘Jack’ Connolly and Alice (née Thorpe). The policies of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which administered Lake Tyers, contributed to Alice’s family leaving the mission when she was six years old. They lived with Alice’s maternal grandparents near Lakes Entrance for many years, with Alice’s maternal grandparents when she was six years old. They lived to Alice’s family leaving the mission administered Lake Tyers, contributed to the Protection of Aborigines, which she was the best known. She performed regularly at fundraising concerts, community functions, socials and the Aboriginal cabarets. Alice had people on their feet at Friday night dances and Sunday church services. She also formed an all-female band. Many likened Alice to the Trinidadian pianist Winifred Atwell, a popular performer in the 1950s.

After her first marriage ended, Alice met Frank Thomas. Frank’s four children joined Alice’s ever-growing family and the couple also had a son together: Several moves followed, including a stint picking beans in Gippsland, before the family settled in Broadmeadows. However Alice always remained connected to Fitzroy. In her lifetime, she played at hundreds of Aboriginal funerals, many held at St Mark’s Church. Alice was 94 years old when she played her last funeral.

In addition to raising her family, Alice worked as a waitress on Smith Street; a social job that suited her outgoing personality. She took great pride in her appearance and was considered a fashion icon in the community. However, it was for her spirited piano playing that Alice was best known.

Her music was always uplifting and it is testament to her gift that she could raise people’s spirits on even the most sombre occasions. Alice also had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy. In the late 1980s, she won a variety show organised by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited after playing the piano for so long that her great-granddaughter, who was the dancer in the double act, gave up exhausted.

Alice was never idle, nor was her home ever empty. She provided food and shelter to untold numbers of people over the years, and her door was always open to those seeking care or advice. A confidante and a sage, Alice was entrusted with secrets, comforted the heartbroken and could diagnose someone just by looking at them. She was also the life of any party, her naughty sense of humour. Alice did experience heartache in her life – but she always carried on for the sake of those around her.

Above all, Alice was passionate about her community. Her pride was never more apparent than when Lake Tyers Reserve was handed back to her people in 1971.

Throughout her life, Alice participated in every community event, flag raising ceremony and NAIDOC ball she was invited to. Wherever she went, people flocked to her, and the reaction to her impromptu performances – all but guaranteed if there was a piano in the room – was nothing short of euphoric. It is no exaggeration to say that people were unanimous in their love and respect for Aunty Alice.

In 2012, Aunty Alice received a regional NAIDOC award for Elder of the Year. The next year, a striking portrait of her, painted by her son Ray Thomas, won the Victorian Indigenous Art Award. Aunty Alice is thought to have been Victoria’s oldest living Aboriginal person. To her more than 266 descendants, she was the treasured family matriarch, who was still playing piano from the confines of her bed until her final months. She passed away in 2014, aged 95 years. Feistiness and determination were the hallmarks of Aunty Alice – she was truly one of a kind.
They lived on the banks of the Murray River with William Cooper and his wife Sarah (née McCrae), whom Boydie called his grandmother.

After his grandparents relocated to Melbourne in 1933, Boydie was sent to live with them in their house in Footscray. He attended school there and also became acquainted with his grandfather’s political activism, watching him address crowds from a soapbox by the Yarra River on Sunday afternoons. The house was the venue for meetings of the Australian Aborigines League, attended by such Aboriginal leaders as Margaret Tucker and Bill Onus. Boydie came to greatly admire his grandfather who, despite his ailing health, cared for three other grandchildren to avoid them ending up in state-run homes.

In the late 1930s, Boydie rejoined his grandmother. At 23 years of age Boydie married Amy Briggs. They settled in Mooroopna and had three children, but sadly lost a daughter in infancy. Boydie continued to make a living from seasonal work, until becoming a plasterer with the help of his uncle Lynch Cooper, a noted athlete. Several years later he found a job at Shepparton Plaster Works and was employed there until his retirement. Between work, raising a family, and participating in the Yorta Yorta and Shepparton communities, Boydie found life highly satisfying.

After suffering the loss of his wife in 1995, Uncle Boydie focused his energy on Aboriginal affairs. He was the longest serving board member of the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, serving board member of the Rumbalara Aboriginal Corporation to broker land management agreements with state authorities. All the while, it was his grandfather’s values that guided him.

For many years, Uncle Boydie has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of William Cooper and his achievements. He has brought to prominence two significant events that represented unfinished business for his grandfather.

The first is the 1938 march that William Cooper led from his house in Footscray to the German consulate in Melbourne, where he attempted to deliver a letter condemning the treatment of Jewish people in Nazi Germany. In 2008, Uncle Boydie worked with members of the Australian Jewish community to organise a special event at Victoria’s Parliament House to commemorate the 70th anniversary of what is seen as one of the first international protests against Nazi persecution. It set in train events that took Uncle Boydie to Israel in 2009 and 2010 for the unveiling of two memorials to his grandfather – 70 trees planted in his honour at two sites, and an Academic Chair in his name at Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Then in 2012, Uncle Boydie decided it was time for William Cooper’s now famous letter to finally be delivered. On the 74th anniversary, he re-enacted the walk from Footscray to the site of the former German Consulate, accompanied by a group of supporters that included Holocaust survivors and their descendants. The German Consul General met Uncle Boydie and received a replica of William Cooper’s letter, in an emotional moment for all present. William Cooper also initiated a petition intended for King George V in 1934, calling for Aboriginal representation in Parliament. He spent several years gathering signatures, but the government of the day refused to send the petition to the monarch. In 2012, Uncle Boydie embarked on a symbolic campaign to deliver his grandfather’s petition to Queen Elizabeth. Over 18 months, he and others collected new signatures on a copy of the original document. Uncle Boydie even discussed the project with Prince William when the two met.

In 2014, Uncle Boydie presented the replica petition to the Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove in Canberra, who in turn handed it to the Queen at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. After 80 years, Uncle Boydie had fulfilled his grandfather’s wish.

That buildings and bridges are today named after William Cooper is due in no small part to the efforts of Uncle Boydie. A sought-after public speaker, he continues to share his grandfather’s story in the hope of inspiring others. However, it is Uncle Boydie himself who is now an inspiration, teaching new generations – including his own grandchildren – to stand up for what they believe in.
A Respected Voice for the Wurundjeri People

Aunty Winnie Quagliotti (née Terrick) was a prominent Wurundjeri Elder who fought for the needs of the Aboriginal community in Dandenong. Also known by her traditional name ‘Narandjeri’, she spoke resolutely of the need to preserve cultural heritage in Victoria and was admired for her pragmatic solutions to the issues affecting her people.

Winney was born in 1931 at Bayswater, near Healesville, where her father was a truck driver. As a young girl, Winnie would catch the bus into Melbourne with her cousin and stay with relatives in Fitzroy. There she witnessed the birth of the Aboriginal civil rights movement. She also attended the technical college in Collingwood.

Winnie married Edward Mullins, whom she met on a rabbiting trip to Deniliquin, New South Wales. The couple had two children before separating. Winnie fostered many more children over the years. While in Sydney, she met Paul Quagliotti, a man from Trieste in Italy, and the two settled in the Melbourne suburb of Doveton in 1968. Two years later, Winnie and her brother Johnny Terrick helped form an association with other local families to deliver housing, welfare and employment services to the Aboriginal community in Dandenong. It was incorporated as the Dandenong and District Aboriginal Co-operative Society Ltd (DDACSL) in 1975. Winnie was the organisation’s first chairperson, a position she held until 1988.

Earlier, in 1972, a hostel called Gunai Lodge was set up in Dandenong to address the shortage of temporary accommodation for Aboriginal boys. Winnie played a crucial role in aligning the concerns of the property’s neighbours. She worked as a cleaner and cook alongside the hostel manager Walda Wald. Winnie also managed the William T Ghss Hostel in Northcote. Her caring nature made her popular with all the residents.

During the 1980s, as the DDACSL expanded, Aunty Winnie was instrumental in developing several family support programs, including the Burrai Child Care Centre – one of the first multifunctional Aboriginal childcare centres – and the Aboriginal Family Aid Support Unit. She was also a founding member of the Camp Jurgi Co-operative at Rubicon, near Thornton, which was established in 1973 to teach Aboriginal culture to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. It is still in operation today and there is a conference room on site named ‘Aunty Winnie’s Meeting Place’.

Aunty Winnie campaigned tirelessly to improve housing for Aboriginal people. She chaired the Narrogin Co-operative Housing Society, which provided home loans to Aboriginal people – its success was testament to her ability to negotiate with banks. In 1981, Aunty Winnie was one of the first people appointed to the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria (AHBV). She represented the Western Port region and chaired the board in 1987–1988, tackling many issues including property maintenance. Unafraid to speak her mind, Aunty Winnie was highly critical of government’s tendency to fund services for Aboriginal people without consulting communities on how the money should be spent.

As a great supporter of Waraw Aboriginal College, Aunty Winnie served as vice president of the council and was involved in negotiations to secure the school’s present site in Healesville in 1983. In 1985 she was the founding member of the Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Incorporated and was elected as its Chair and spokesperson, in recognition of her ability to build united fronts on issues such as land rights.

As the highly respected Elder spokesperson for the Wurundjeri people, Aunty Winnie was called on by members of local councils, state and federal ministers, business leaders and even had an audience with the Queen. She educated communities on the need to preserve and revive Aboriginal culture. Aunty Winnie’s contribution to the Victorian Archaeological Survey included efforts to protect sacred sites such as Balin Balin Bilabong in Manningham and the Corroboree Trees in St Kilda and Burnley Park.

In her lifetime, Aunty Winnie significantly raised the profile of the Wurundjeri people as Traditional Owners. She participated in popular events such as the Melbourne Moomba Parade – she entered a float featuring a rainbow serpent and another bearing the image of an Aboriginal man with a tear in his eye. Aunty Winnie hosted people from Pacific nations and journeyed through Arnhem Land to establish links with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. She also had an audience with the Queen. Aunty Winnie’s contribution to the Victorian Archaeological Survey included efforts to protect sacred sites such as Balin Balin Bilabong in Manningham and the Corroboree Trees in St Kilda and Burnley Park.

In 1988, Aunty Winnie suffered a stroke. She passed away at only 56 years of age. An inquest found that she was the victim of professional negligence.

In 1988, Aunty Winnie protested against the arrival of the tall ships in Melbourne as part of the nation’s bicentenary celebrations. The image of her standing defiantly in her possum skin cloak was a powerful one and inspired a mural commissioned by the International Labour Organisation, which reflected Aunty Winnie’s image on a building in Wall Street, New York. Sadly, that same year Aunty Winnie suffered a stroke. She passed away at only 56 years of age. Obituaries ran in newspapers and on television, and hundreds attended her funeral. The next year, her image once again adorned a Moomba float in tribute. Aunty Winnie is buried in her beloved Coranderrk Cemetery.

In the Canberra suburb of Bonner, a street is named after Aunty Winnie. The AHBV (now called Aboriginal Housing Victoria) posthumously named their office building ‘Narandjeri House’ in memory of her dedication to better housing provision – just one area in which vast improvements were made as a result of Aunty Winnie’s leadership and vision.
BESSIE YARRAM
(BORN 1938)

A RESPECTED ELDER OF UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENT

Aunty Bessie Yarram is a Noongar Elder whose involvement in Aboriginal affairs spans more than three decades. She has given a voice to many Aboriginal people throughout Gippsland and is highly regarded in the fields of justice and community development at a local, state and national level.

One of seven children, Bessie was born in 1938 on an Aboriginal mission in Western Australia. Her mother was denied entry to businesses and hospitals left their mark.

Bessie was close to her siblings and they enjoyed a childhood of homemade board games, music and holidays to Bremer Bay. However, the family was not spared the racism of the day and incidents where Bessie’s mother was denied entry to businesses and hospitals left their mark.

Bessie’s awareness of the negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people increased while attending the local state school, where she was one of the first Aboriginal students. She completed her secondary education at a boarding school in Perth, where she excelled at sport, including hockey. Bessie went on to train as a nurse and worked at several hospitals in the city.

In 1957 Bessie married Noel Yarram, also of the Noongar nation. They would go on to have six children together. Noel joined the army and was posted to Malaya in 1958. Bessie accompanied her husband and for two years used her nursing skills as a volunteer for the Red Cross. After briefly returning to Western Australia, the family relocated to the Puckapunyal army base in central Victoria, where they lived for 20 years. During this time, Bessie became a kindergarten assistant.

At the end of the 1970s, the family settled in Sale, where Bessie and Noel quickly devoted themselves to helping the local community. A back injury forced Bessie to give up kindergarten work and she turned to volunteering, resulting in her time to organisations such as the St Vincent de Paul Society. She and Noel also provided a loving home to vulnerable young people in the region, welcoming many into their ever-growing family.

In 1988 Bessie joined one of the first Aboriginal Community Justice Panels in the state and thereafter was on call 24 hours a day to assist Aboriginal people taken into police custody. Sadly, the following year saw the sudden passing of Noel. Bessie returned to work to support her children and extended family. She took a job at the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative, where she helped implement successful projects, including employment initiatives, a long-running annual camp for Elders and seniors, and the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place in Bairnsdale.

Before he passed away, Noel had begun planning for an Aboriginal corporation in Sale. Together with her family and other community members, Bessie set out to realise her husband’s vision. Years of hard work followed, resulting in the Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation. It grew from a makeshift office in a bedroom to become an incorporated organisation in 1992. Bessie was influential in securing funding for Ramahyuck and has held various positions on the board over the years. Today the corporation provides health and community services across Gippsland and employs over 130 people.

As a long-time member of the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee for Gippsland, Aunty Bessie is considered indispensable. Currently serving her third term as Chairperson, her leadership has positioned her as a trusted intermediary between communities and policymakers. Aunty Bessie has sat on many of the men serving time at the centre. It complements her ongoing efforts to build cultural awareness within the police and other social services.

During her three-year tenure as Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Home and Community Care Reference Group, Aunty Bessie also volunteers at the Fulham Correctional Centre, having been a cultural advisor during its development. Considered a mother figure, she has had a positive influence on many of the men serving time at the centre. It complements her ongoing efforts to build cultural awareness within the police and other social services.

Without hesitation, Bessie is considered indispensable. Currently serving her third term as Chairperson, her leadership has positioned her as a trusted intermediary between communities and policymakers. Aunty Bessie has sat as an Elder on the Koori Court since its establishment and successfully lobbied to bring the Koori Children’s Court to Bairnsdale and Morwell.

It was Bessie’s passionate advocacy that won support for the Wulgungo Ngulu Learning Place in Yarram, which opened in 2008, and runs holistic programs for Aboriginal men who have been given community correction orders. Aunty Bessie also volunteers at the Fulham Correctional Centre, having been a cultural advisor during its development. Considered a mother figure, she has had a positive influence on many of the men serving time at the centre. It complements her ongoing efforts to build cultural awareness within the police and other social services.

Despite several attempts to retire and indulge her love of gardening, Aunty Bessie shows no signs of slowing down. As committed as ever to her people and to Gippsland, she will continue to help others just as others value her help.

This has resulted in contributions to numerous committees, including Ministerial Advisory Committees for seniors and dementia, the Commonwealth Games Seniors Working Group, the Victorian Government’s Aboriginal Justice Forum, the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation and the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group in Sale.

In 2001 Aunty Bessie was awarded a Centenary Medal. In 2008, she was inducted to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women and has since been invited to join the selection panel. In addition, she has received several local community awards. Bessie is a treasured source of wisdom and common sense to her close-knit family, including her seven grandchildren.
MARGARET ‘DHARRUL’ WIRRPANDA

(1939–2013)

A WARRIOR OF THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Margaret ‘Dharrul’ Wirrpanda was a warrior of the Yorta Yorta people who spent a lifetime fighting injustices. Spiritually enlightened and politically astute, she campaigned tirelessly to advance the rights of Aboriginal people, empower women and children, revive traditional culture and support native title.

Both parents were heavily involved in the Aboriginal rights movement. Her mother, in particular, dedicated her life to improving the lives of others and was an influential role model to Margaret. (Geraldine Briggs was an inaugural inductee to the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll in 2011.)

From an early age, Margaret would visit Aboriginal families with her mother and hear their stories of struggle. She also inherited her mother’s love of the Yorta Yorta dialect, and had a profound connection to her grandmother Theresa Clement’s country on Ulupna Island, which is bounded by the Murray River and Ulupna Creek in Barmah National Park. There was a sense of inevitability to Margaret’s future as a political activist – her relatives also included Aboriginal luminaries such as Margaret Tucker MBE(C), Jack Patten and Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls KCV OBE. The family home hosted meetings of the Aborigines Advancement League and Margaret assisted with its fundraising activities.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Margaret became involved with the Federal Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATS), campaigning alongside her mother and sister Hylus Maris on issues such as equal wages and land rights. Their efforts contributed to the success of the 1967 Referendum, which amended the constitution to allow Aboriginal people to be counted in the census and for the Commonwealth Government to create laws for them. Although historically significant, Margaret always viewed the referendum as just one small step in a long journey.

The FCAATS conferences brought together Aboriginal women in an exchange of ideas. As a result the National Council of Aboriginal and Islander Women formed in 1972. Margaret was a member of the executive, serving as secretary for 10 years. The council lobbied government on a range of issues affecting Aboriginal people, from health to housing, and was a staunch supporter of the Aboriginal tent embassy in Canberra. The women travelled Australia attending meetings and were resourceful and independent – if their car ran out of petrol on a long distance trip they simply got out and pushed.

The overwhelming feeling among the communities they visited was that with these women around, things were going to be okay.

Though Margaret received no formal high school education, with her gumption and inquisitive mind she could more than hold her own in meetings with senior figures across government and the private sector. She and other hardworking Aboriginal women were at the forefront of a push for self-determination in Victoria. They saw how mainstream services were failing their people and established community-run, culturally appropriate alternatives. Margaret was a founding member of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in 1972 and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service in 1973.

A few years later Margaret became the first female president of the Aborigines Advancement League. She was appointed to the Victorian Aboriginal Advisory Committee by the Victorian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and, in the 1980s, served as secretary and president of the National Women’s Consultative Council. Later, Margaret was elected to the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

After marrying David Wirrpanda, a Yolngu Djapu man from north-east Arnhem Land, Margaret and her children divided their time between the Northern Territory and Victoria. She learnt to speak fluent Gumatji, a local dialect, and connected with the Elders, who added to her already encyclopaedic knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Back in Victoria, Margaret was a proud supporter of Worawa Aboriginal College, which she helped her sister Hylus to establish in 1983. She played an important role in running the school for many years.

Margaret believed in the endless potential of young Aboriginal people and liked to remind them that it was character and not colour that counted. A fervent campaigner for Aboriginal land rights, Margaret was integral to an early claim lodged by the Yorta Yorta Tribal Council in 1994 for traditional ownership over Barmah Forest. She went on to become a plaintiff in the long-fought Yorta Yorta native title claim heard by the Federal Court, attending every proceeding and appeal between 1996 and 2002.

From 2004, after the Victorian Government signed a ground-breaking co-operative land management agreement with the Yorta Yorta people, Margaret sat on the committee that handled water issues. She was devoted to her mother and grandmother’s country her entire life.

In her early 60s, Margaret suffered a heart attack, but continued to participate regularly in community activities, whether leading cultural seminars, teaching language or speaking at special events. In 2003, Margaret was inducted to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. In keeping with family tradition, Margaret’s children are active within the Aboriginal community, Margaret passed away in 2013. She is remembered for her keen intuition, great strength and as the custodian of her family’s cultural heritage.

Aunty Margaret always held her hand out to anyone who needed help and stood up for themselves. She was not just a great warrior; but also an authoritative leader whose voice still speaks for her people today.
A SELFLESS VOICE FOR THE COMMUNITY’S MOST VULNERABLE

Aunty Beverley Peter – known as Aunty Bev – was a woman of selfless dedication, whose contribution to the fields of justice and community services made a difference in many lives, particularly around Mildura and Robinvale. A proud Wiradjuri Elder, she was always compassionate and forthright in standing up for society’s most vulnerable.

Born in Sydney in 1940, Bev was the eldest child of William Henry Packer and Madeline Isabel (née Mitchell). The family lived at Wattle Hill, a settlement near Leeton, New South Wales, that accommodated many of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers at the nearby canneries. Bev grew up in a loving home with her parents and eight siblings, enjoying simple childhood pleasures such as hot damper with butter and jam and evening sing-alongs around the campfire.

As a young girl, Bev collected bottles to earn money, before entering the workforce with jobs at the Yanco Agricultural College and Research Station and a local cannery. A popular employee, she made friends no matter where she worked. At 16 years of age, Bev married Jimmy Ingram. The couple had four children and raised their young family on Wattle Hill until the settlement, located on Crown land, was disbanded. While undertaking seasonal work in Cowra, central west New South Wales, Bev met Frank Peter. They later moved to Mildura and had two children. After the relationship ended, Bev returned to Leeton. In the 1970s, Aboriginal people were offered incentives to move to rural centres under the New South Wales Government’s Aboriginal Voluntary Resettlement Scheme. Bev took advantage of the scheme to relocate to Wagga Wagga. There she met Joe Sokol, with whom she formed a lifelong bond. The couple eventually settled in Mildura.

In the 1980s, Bev began working for the newly established Sunraysia District Aboriginal Corporation – known today as Mallee District Aboriginal Services – and was appointed Koori Group Manager of its Family Group Home, Biralee Paringa. Bev was responsible for the welfare of Aboriginal children ranging from new-born babies to young adults. She opened her own home to many of them, providing foster care for more than 20 years. Bev and Joe also adopted a baby boy. Many of the children Bev cared for remained close to her as adults. She loved her home to be full of people and it always was.

Beverley Peter (1940–2014)

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A tireless campaigner against family violence, one of Aunty Bev’s most hard-fought battles was to establish a safe place for victims in the region. Her efforts helped secure state and federal funding for the establishment of Memerin Ngarr Gimb ; of which she was made patron. The name means ‘women who dwell here’ and Aunty Bev turned the first sod on the $2.5 million refuge in 2011. Today, it provides a range of support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children affected by family violence.

Between 2005 and 2013, Aunty Bev sat as an Elder on the Mildura Koori Court and the Mildura Children’s Koori Court, where her contribution was highly valued. She was also a member of the former Murray-Darling Basin Commission’s Indigenous Support Group and as an Elder, supported the Aboriginal Family Decision-Making (AFDM) program run by the Victorian Government’s Department of Human Services. Aunty Bev never turned down an opportunity to participate in the planning and development of local projects and was committed to ensuring that her people were given a voice.

Many of the initiatives Aunty Bev advocated for had a state-wide or national focus. To that end, she held positions on the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee and the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Senior Victorians, as well as serving two terms as councillor for the Tumbulka region on the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Aunty Bev sat on the board of Koori Women Mean Business and was a member of the Victorian Interdepartmental Committee for Justice. She was also an Elder in residence at Deakin University’s Institute of Koorie Education and chaired the Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group.

Although tough when she needed to be, Aunty Bev loved to laugh. She was known for her somewhat flamboyant fashion sense, including her fondness for wearing animal print. Never one to do things by halves, Aunty Bev brought great energy to all she did, but was not one to seek recognition or reward for her efforts. Instead she celebrated the achievements of others, no matter how big or small. Adored by her seven children, 22 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren, many more were proud to call Aunty Bev a friend and mentor.

Aunty Bev passed away in 2014. She is remembered as someone who embedded herself in her community, ensuring she was always there to lend a hand when needed or to speak out on behalf of those who could not.
A ROLE MODEL
EMPOWERING THE YOUNG

Auntie Walda Blow is a Yorta Yorta and Wemba Wemba Elder who has been working to deliver services supporting Aboriginal people for more than four decades. Through her leadership, she has inspired many young people to become active participants in their communities.

Born in Echuca in 1941, Walda grew up in Cummeragunja Mission. Her mother, Hilda (née Day) passed away when Walda was only a few months old. Walda and her three brothers were cared for by their father Fred Walker and paternal grandparents Herbert Walker and Florence (née Hamilton).

Walda has many positive role models as a child, none more so than her beloved grandmother Florence – a woman unafraid to stand up for what was right, who once turned a hose on government officials threatening to take her grandchildren away. Music was also a big part of Walda’s childhood; her father played the piano and there was no shortage of singers in the family to accompany him. Walda attended schools at Cummeragunja and across the Murray River in Bambar.

As a teenager, Walda moved to Melbourne, taking jobs in factories and also working as a nurse. She later spent time with friends in Brisbane where, in 1962, she met Reg Blow, a Kombumerri and Gureng Gureng man from Rockhampton. The two married the following year, thus forming an enduring team, which would go on to make a significant contribution to Aboriginal affairs in Victoria (Reg Blow was inducted to Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll in 1975. When, in 1972, Reg secured government funding to set up a hostel for Aboriginal boys, the director of the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Reg Worthy, asked Walda to manage it. The request came by telegram and Walda remembers having to call from a payphone to accept. She managed Gunai Lodge, as it was named, for five successful years. One of Walda’s colleagues there was Winnie Quaglotti, who is a fellow 2014 Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll inductee.

Walda followed her time at the hostel with an administrative role at Monash University’s Aboriginal Research Centre. She went on to work as an Aboriginal liaison officer with the Uniting Church Synod for nine years, facilitating the handover of church properties to Aboriginal communities around Victoria.

While living in Dandenong in 1970, Walda and Reg formed an association with others in the community to deliver housing, welfare and employment services to struggling Aboriginal families. It was incorporated as the Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Society Ltd in 1975. When, in 1972, Reg secured government funding to set up a hostel for Aboriginal boys, the director of the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Reg Worthy, asked Walda to manage it. The request came by telegram and Walda remembers having to call from a payphone to accept. She managed Gunai Lodge, as it was named, for five successful years. One of Walda’s colleagues there was Winnie Quaglotti, who is a fellow 2014 Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll inductee.

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Seven properties were donated in this time, including the site of Berrimba Childcare Centre in Echuca. Walda was also involved with the church’s Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

In 1991, Walda was appointed manager of the Margaret Tucker Hostel in Fairfield; a role she remained in for the next 21 years. The hostel cares for vulnerable Aboriginal girls, providing them with a safe, nurturing and culturally respectful environment in which to heal and develop. Walda was a mother figure and a mentor to the girls at the hostel, forging close relationships and teaching them about self-respect and resilience. To many in the community, she will always be synonymous with the Margaret Tucker Hostel, where she continues to help out.

Descended from a long line of women possessing great fortitude, Walda has dedicated much of her life to empowering other women. In this spirit, she founded the Women’s Interfaith Network Foundation. This organisation brings together women of different faiths and diverse backgrounds in an exchange of ideas, cultures and traditions. Walda is an accomplished public speaker and has delivered moving talks about the history of her people at forums in Australia and internationally, including America, Europe and Indonesia. It is a skill she also employs when lecturing on Aboriginal health issues at the University of Melbourne.

Walda has contributed to the work of many organisations and committees, including the Aboriginal Advancement League, Elizabeth Hoffman House, the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) and the Victorian and National Councils of Churches. She sits on the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation’s Council of Elders, representing the rights of the Yorta Yorta people over the waterways that run through their land – a position she holds in honour of her grandfather, who cared deeply for the environment.

Walda has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. However she has been able to draw strength from pain, including the loss of two brothers at a young age. 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ROBERT ‘JUMBO’ PEARCE

(1947–2013)

There they struggled to eke out a living among the tin dwellings and tents that housed people on the banks of the Murray River. When he was nine years old, Jumbo was taken into care and placed with a non-Aboriginal foster family. The experience was never forgotten. As a teenager, Jumbo qualified as a road tester. In 1965 he met and married the love of his life, Marion Solomon. The couple moved to Bairnsdale in 1966, where they raised their four daughters. Over the years, Jumbo worked hard to provide for his family. At various times he was a plant operator for Victorian Railways, a seasonal picker, a fitter and turner and a gardener at Bairnsdale Hospital. He also had a job drilling for oil. Whether working or playing football on weekends, Jumbo’s engaging personality always won him friends. From the day they arrived in Bairnsdale, Jumbo and Marion helped those in the Aboriginal community who were unable to access basic services. Jumbo regularly volunteered to drive the sick to hospital and, in the absence of any alternative, transported the bodies of those who had passed away.

In 1972 he and Marion joined other local Aboriginal leaders such as Nessie Skuta in setting up a dedicated Aboriginal medical service. Through years of tireless unpaid work, they nurtured the fledgling organisation to success. It became the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC) after its incorporation in 1975. A board member of GEGAC for more than 25 years, Jumbo contributed to the expansion of its range of services, including youth, sport and recreation programs. He strongly advocated for better education and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and built partnerships with the local council and employers to create them. Today, GEGAC employs more than 100 people and has provided many more with a pathway to future employment.

When sections of the Bairnsdale community objected to the location chosen for GEGAC’s new premises in the 1980s, Jumbo led a successful four-year campaign with other Elders to dispel misinformation and win public support. It was in this spirit that Jumbo later helped establish the East Gippsland and admired for his influence. For nearly 50 years, through the highs and the lows, Uncle Jumbo always led by example. When Uncle Jumbo passed away in 2013, many people came out to celebrate his life. Of those who knew him, many attribute their belief in the value of education, a strong work ethic and pride in their heritage to his example. In 2004, Jumbo completed an alcohol and drug counsellor qualification at Swinburne University. He went on to run regional workshops for Onemda and the Victorian Aboriginal Health Unit. Uncle Jumbo credited all he achieved to the support of his wife and family, his fellow Elders and his community, as well as the decision makers he worked with. When Uncle Jumbo passed away in 2013, many people came out to celebrate his life. Of those who knew him, many attribute their belief in the value of education, a strong work ethic and pride in their heritage to his example.

Krowathunkoolong Keeping Place, believing in the need not only to preserve Aboriginal cultural heritage on country, but also to share it with future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Between 1985 and 1988, the Victorian Government employed Jumbo as a community development worker. He was well known across East Gippsland and admired for his ability to solve problems. Considered a ‘go to’ person, Jumbo could always be relied upon, whether assisting a young Aboriginal person taken into police custody or speaking publicly on behalf of his people. As well as raising their daughters, Jumbo and Marion provided foster care to more than 200 Aboriginal children. Jumbo helped as many of them as possible to develop a strong sense of their Aboriginal identity.

Uncle Jumbo was a long serving board member at several prominent Victorian Aboriginal organisations, including the Koorie Heritage Trust, which he chaired, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

He was an executive member of the Bairnsdale Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and a regional councillor for the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. More recently, Uncle Jumbo mentored a group of young people to complete a trek along the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea as part of the Gippsland East Young Aboriginal Journeys project.

Considered by many as a visionary, Uncle Jumbo realised one of his dreams when he co-founded and chaired the Gippsland School for Aboriginal Health Professionals at Monash University. The school supports the development of Aboriginal health professionals, including doctors, nurses and paramedics and was developed in collaboration with Elders such as Uncle Jumbo and the younger generations they had inspired. Uncle Jumbo was thrilled when Gippsland welcomed its first Aboriginal doctor as a result.

Although he received little formal education as a child, Uncle Jumbo dedicated his life to acquiring the knowledge necessary to better assist his people overcome their struggles. He took in everything from government policies to land rights law.

Jumbo later helped establish the A LEADER WHO ALWAYS LED BY EXAMPLE

Uncle Robert Pearce was a respected Aboriginal leader in Gippsland, whose life was fuelled by an ambition to bring about positive change in his community. Affectionately known as Uncle Jumbo, he was a big man with a big heart and a role model who embodied persistence and personality always won him friends. Whether working or playing football on weekends, Jumbo’s engaging personality always won him friends. From the day they arrived in Bairnsdale, Jumbo and Marion helped those in the Aboriginal community who were unable to access basic services. Jumbo regularly volunteered to drive the sick to hospital and, in the absence of any alternative, transported the bodies of those who had passed away.

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Graham Atkinson (born 1948)

A LEADER IN LAND RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Graham Atkinson is a community leader committed to social justice and empowering individuals. The Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta Elder is an untiring advocate for Traditional Owner groups and was one of the architects of an alternative system for settling native title claims in Victoria.

Born in Echuca in 1948, Graham is the son of Iris (née Nelson) and Clive Atkinson. His father was a shearer who was absent for long periods and battled with alcoholism, leaving Graham’s mother to raise her children on her own.

She worked many jobs, including one as a cook at the Echuca Hospital. Graham was close to his seven siblings. They were one of the few Aboriginal families in town and rallied together when confronted with racism. Education was important to Graham; a value he inherited from his mother and his maternal great-grandfather, Thomas Shadrock James, a teacher. Graham attended Echuca State School and Echuca Technical College until he was 15 years old, but financial constraints prevented him from continuing his studies. He became an apprentice fitter and turner, gaining his trade certificate in 1968. At the age of 20, Graham was called up for national service training. He served in the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers for almost a year, as an armament fitter at Australia’s army base at Nui Dat in South Vietnam.

The experience in Vietnam was a formative one for Graham. The racism he encountered in the army and the human rights abuses he witnessed overseas brought him to focus the disadvantage endemic to his own people. Once discharged, Graham returned to Echuca and married Francis Hynes, with whom he had two children, Mason and Melanie, but later separated.

Unfilled as a toolmaker, he indulged his love of music outside work and was drummer for The Shades. The band enjoyed notable success, however Graham found himself moved by a desire to influence social change. In 1972, he used his army benefits to relocate to Melbourne and return to study.

After completing his Higher School Certificate, Graham enrolled at the University of Melbourne. At the time he was one of only three Aboriginal students there. While studying, Graham became involved in Melbourne’s Aboriginal community. He was elected to various community-based service boards, including the Victorian Aboriginal Housing Cooperative, Camp Jungai and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. During the summer holidays he worked part-time at the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and then as a community advisor for the newly established Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

In 1977 Graham graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work, becoming Victoria’s first tertiary qualified Aboriginal social worker. He joined the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) in 1978 as its senior social worker, eventually becoming its program director. Together with VACCA founder Mollie Dyer, he drafted the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which still governs the practice of child protection services today. In 1982 Graham was recruited to a regional director role with the Aboriginal Development Commission. He also served as chair of the Aboriginal Advancement League, helping to raise funds for its new premises in Thornbury, and embarked on a Masters in Business Administration. In 1984 Graham married Kay Norris and had a further two children, Kiah and Nehak.

As an exponent of Aboriginal self-determination, Graham became increasingly disillusioned with the lack of Aboriginal representation amongst government policy makers. In 1986 he left the public service and risked his own money to establish Yuruga Enterprises, an Aboriginal-run consultancy that was the first of its kind.

Today, Atkinson Consulting Group, as it is now called, specialises in Indigenous social reform strategies in areas such as health and social justice and economic development. Graham remains the director and principal consultant.

On the issue of land rights, Graham has been a leading activist since the mid 1980s. Working alongside his brother Wayne and others, he helped steer the land rights claim of the Yorta Yorta people to the Federal Court. The experience taught Graham many valuable lessons and he became a key advocate for the development of an alternative agreement-making model, one that bypassed the Federal Court system. Over many years, Graham helped broker an agreement between Traditional Owners and the Victorian Government, resulting in the landmark Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010. The Dja Dja Wurrung people have since been recognised as the Traditional Owners of lands in central Victoria under the Act. Graham is a founding member and chairperson of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation.

Recognised for his leadership qualities, Graham has served on the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Aboriginal Heritage Council of Victoria and the Victorian Traditional Owner Land Justice Group. He chaired Native Title Services Victoria and was director of the National Native Title Council. Graham sits on the Indigenous Land Corporation board of directors and is deputy chair of its subsidiary, the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence. He is also a board member of the newly established Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners and chairs one of its subsidiaries, Barpa Pty Ltd.

In 2001, Graham was awarded the Centenary Medal. He was a state finalist for Senior Australian of the Year in 2013. A highly respected role model, Graham remains as committed as ever to enacting positive change to help build a better society for his people and the community.
His parents, fearing that Phil and his five siblings would be taken away from them, often moved in an effort to evade the authorities. The family lived on eight missions, from Lake Tyers in Victoria to Brewarrina in New South Wales, often staying with relatives. The upside was that Phil grew up surrounded by extended family, but this existence also posed challenges, such as having to attend more than 14 different schools.

As a young man, Phil held down a variety of jobs. At different times he was a farm hand, worked in sawmills, canneries and factories, drove trucks and was a labourer. Phil also played football well enough to represent Victoria three times in an all-Aboriginal team. By the mid 1970s, he was living in Melbourne and involved with Fitzroy’s Aboriginal community. Phil formed a close-knit group of mates who participated in political and social activities together. Among them was Alf Bamblett, whom he continues to work closely with today. (Alf was an inaugural inductee to the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll in 2011.)

At the time, the Aboriginal community was establishing many of its own services and advocacy groups. Phil was a founding member of many of these, including the Yappa Children’s Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (later incorporated as Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.). He had a long association with the latter, serving as president and as specialist representative to the Victorian Government’s Adult, Community and Further Education Board.

Education has remained important to Phil – he contributed to the first national Aboriginal education policy, as a member of the National Aboriginal Education Committee, and was involved in establishing programs for Aboriginal students at Deakin University, where a student residence is named after him.

For his first job in Aboriginal affairs, Phil was employed by the Victorian Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency and later worked there as a field officer, covering an area from Echuca to Mildura. He was also its acting Chief Executive Officer in the 1990s.

In the early 1980s, Phil was appointed as Administrator of the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative. He followed this with a stint at the federal Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, implementing programs to support Aboriginal trainees. After that, Phil joined the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, where he worked his way from field officer to executive director. This period coincided with the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and Phil was a member of the national committee. Continuing his support of culturally appropriate legal assistance for Aboriginal people, he has also been a member of National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Services, a peak national body. For 15 years, Phil was also a White Ribbon Ambassador and was a finalist for Ambassador of the Year in 2011.

A skilled manager, Phil headed the Aboriginal Advancement League and was co-chair of the Victorian NAIDOC Committee and the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, and currently co-chairs the Northern Metropolitan Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group. Phil is also a White Ribbon Ambassador and was a finalist for Ambassador of the Year in 2011.

Much of his work has centred on providing support and resources for dealing with family violence, particularly preventative programs focused on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal men. Phil helped establish VACSAL’s Aboriginal Centre for Males and runs camps aimed at strengthening families. He has contributed to whole-of-government strategies through the Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee and the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum and, currently co-chairs the Northern Metropolitan Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group.

Phil also worked closely with today. His work for the latter earning him a Victoria Police NAIDOC Community Award.

Uncle Phil Cooper is a stalwart of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria and has helped deliver services to meet the needs of Aboriginal people for nearly 40 years. An advocate for using the skills and knowledge available within his community when developing programs, he has worked in areas ranging from education to family violence, at both state and national levels.

Born in Moorabinda in 1950, Phil is the son of Emmanuel Cooper, a Yorta Yorta man, and Alice (née Colger) a Mutti Mutti and a Yorta Yorta woman.

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“The range of green leaves represent the diversity of Traditional Owners throughout Victoria and the shields that float inside them represent the resilience of our people over thousands of generations that we have been here. The concentrated line work represents our unique symbolism that we use to explain our connection to country here in Victoria. The wavy blue lines represent the ocean and inland waterways that surround and run through Victoria. The subtle arcs that run through the water bodies represent the importance of water and our relationship and responsibility to it.”

Our Culture, Your Culture
Mick Harding