

M (KUNMANARA) WILSON

The Pitjantjatjara Woman Who Stopped the World

by Maggie Kavanagh who was the Co-ordinator of the NPY Women's Council from 1988 - 2003.

Many in Central Australia were shocked and saddened by the death of significant Pitjantjatjara leader, Mrs. M. Wilson, in Adelaide on 10th October.

Her death is a tremendous loss for many - black and white - locally, nationally and internationally. We all looked to her for guidance and strength.

She was truly an extraordinary woman. She has left behind an enormous legacy that is testimony to her great intellect, unwavering leadership, depth of traditional knowledge and authority and irrepressible personality.

Many regarded her as a formidable life force - a trailblazer - who opened many doors, particularly for Aboriginal women and children.

Many Australians will recall her powerful and moving interview about child sexual abuse on the ABC's Lateline in June 2006.

Moved to tears, she spoke openly about the extent of these serious problems that were devastating communities, including within her own family.

She was born in 1944 near Pipalyatjara in SA, in the heart of Pitjantjatjara country.

Her name in Pitjantjatjara means of the land.

No other person has this name.

As a young girl she led a very traditional life with her family travelling widely in the cross border region of WA, SA & NT and going to school at Ernabella Mission.

Her first job was in the Ernabella Art Centre making floor rugs and moccasins out of kangaroo skin.

She was also an original member of the famous Ernabella Choir.

She worked in the clinic as a health worker before she moved to Kalka, SA, where she spent her early adult years with her husband and two young sons.

As an experienced health worker she played a pivotal role in establishing the Pitjantjatjara Homelands Health Service in the 1970s.

She was influential in setting up many other organisations in Central Australia including the Pitjantjatjara Council in 1976, Nganampa Health Council in 1983, the Alukura Women's Health Council in 1987 and the Central Australian Advocacy Service in 1990.

She was also a highly valued Aboriginal liaison officer at the Alice Springs hospital in the early 1990s.

Arguably one of her greatest achievements was her role in establishing the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council.

Mentored by senior women like Nganyinytja Ilyatjari and Myra Watson she too was greatly concerned that men were excluding women from the Pitjantjatjara lands rights debate in South Australia in the 1970s.

The older women were saying they needed their own council and she was listening.

As part of a delegation of women from the tri-state area she attended the ANZAAS Aboriginal women's conference in Adelaide in May 1980.

Convened by Professor Fay Gale, it was the first Australia-wide meeting of Aboriginal women at an ANZAAS conference. Her political awareness was rapidly developing and following the conference Mrs Wilson was ready to act.

Her desire for women to have a voice was the passion that would constitute her *raison d'être* for the rest of her life.

She made a cassette tape of her thoughts and asked the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs to make copies and send them to communities in the tri-state region where her female relatives resided.

Her heralding call resulted in a major gathering of women at Kanpi on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia in November 1980.

With the support of long time friend and community development worker at Pipalyatjara, Dianne James, the NPY Women's Council was formed.

From that time she led the way in all the significant work of the organisation.

continued next page



**Above top: Part of the enormous crowd of mourners at the funeral
Middle: Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council members and staff lead funeral procession
Bottom: An outpouring of grief at the service**

M WILSON

continued from p22

In the early days she played a major role in supporting the protection of women's sacred sites, working closely with anthropologists and lawyers from a number of Aboriginal organisations.

Later she would stand side by side with Arrernte women to oppose, successfully, bulldozers set to destroy major sacred sites for the damming of the Todd River just north of Alice Springs in 1994.

She fought tirelessly to curb the devastating flow of alcohol from the Curtin Springs Roadhouse, in 1989 leading 300 women in a protest march down the Lasseter Highway and finally saw an agreement brokered between the licensee and the Women's Council that has continued for a more than a decade.

She spearheaded the establishment of aged care and disability services in the communities.

She raised her voice for the old people at times when they were in distress, far away from country.

She made extensive national and international links with other Indigenous women and travelled widely to speak at conferences and meet with countless government people.

She was invited to speak overseas and travelled on a number of occasions to New Zealand, Canada and the USA. Former NPY Women's Council chairwoman and friend Yanyi Baker remembers: "She was someone who was not afraid to speak to anyone, different states, different languages, different cultures. She was a strong fighter for Land Rights.

"She was 'the lady who made the road', small road to a bigger road with women and children following behind. Just the way Moses led the people to the Promised Land. She is like a hero."

At great personal cost she advocated for the NPY Women's Council to establish a domestic violence service and guided it in its early days.

Whilst living at Mutitjulu community she provided refuge to many women and kids at a time when the police would not attend domestic violence incidents.

She is widely acknowledged by women for being the courageous woman who stood up to men in communities and challenged their positions of power and privilege.

She did not shirk away from the difficult subjects and was, in her own words "not scared of anyone".

Tragically, in recent years she lost both of her sons through alcohol abuse.

She was devastated that in spite of

all her hard work and years of advocacy about substance abuse, domestic violence and child sexual assault she could not protect her own close family members from their horrendous effects.

From her colleagues she commanded absolute respect and admiration.

Many will remember her ferocious loyalty to and protectiveness of 'her' workers.

Not surprisingly, she was a talented and prodigious artist.

She created an outstanding series of dot paintings over many years depicting modern narratives of social and political issues important to her - including domestic violence, child protection, substance misuse, the needs of the aged and people with disabilities and the importance of Aboriginal women's Law.

We loved her mischievous humour, her quick wit, her strong spirit, her ability to be 10 steps ahead of everyone else and to make us laugh raucously.

Many of us were lucky to bear witness to her vast ceremonial knowledge.

When she danced, the Two Sisters or sang one of the countless verses from Kutungu, the hairs would stand up on the back of your neck.

She was so graceful and commanding when she took the desert stage - her magnetism always drawing you into her world.

To countless Aboriginal women in Central Australia she is remembered for her prodigious ritual knowledge and her generosity in sharing it.

On a personal note I am proud to call her my malpa - friend - for the past 22 years.

I regard her as one of the most significant influences in my life.

On the night of the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000, I sat on the ground of the stadium next to her in the dark. The 327 Aboriginal women from Central Australia filed past us for the start of the Awakenings Ceremony.

She softly spoke into a loud hailer coaching the women to keep their lines straight, not to be nervous and to hold their heads up proud.

Suddenly a magnificent soaring voice pierced the darkness with an intense series of spine tingling notes.

It was Mrs Wilson intoning the Seven Sisters to the universe.

For 15 seconds her voice alone reverberated in the still air in front of 100,000 people.

As I held her hand I whispered "That's you. The whole world can hear only your voice."

These moments will remain one of the highlights of my life.

Her name we cannot yet utter but we will always treasure her in our hearts.

She was our fearless leader with the unforgettable voice.

A WOMAN OF INFLUENCE

TRIBUTE TO J EGAN

The recent death of J. Nungarrayi Egan, a Warlpiri woman who fought for years to improve life for Warlpiri children and young people is a devastating loss for the people of Yuendumu and the wider Central Australian community.

Central Land Council Director David Ross said Ms Egan's contribution to education in the Warlpiri region was enormous.

"Ms Egan worked at the Yuendumu School for many years and she had a long-term commitment to bilingual education and the importance of learning Warlpiri culture," Mr Ross said.

"She was a long time member of the Land Council and always made a valuable contribution to discussion.

"Her concerns were always for young people and equipping them to cope in a rapidly changing world

without losing their Warlpiri culture.

"With her husband, she was also a founder of the Jaru Pirrjirdi Program after working for many years with Mt Theo," he said.

"They often took young Warlpiri men and women to Dreamtime sites to sing the songs and stories of that area and teach them the proper way of doing things.

"Now, thanks to their inspiration, many young men and women are taking their place as the future leaders of Yuendumu," Mr Ross said.

Ms Egan represented Central Australian people at the highest levels, most recently at Kevin Rudd's Summit.

Mr Ross said she left a "lasting and priceless legacy to us all".

"On behalf of the CLC members and staff, I offer our most sincere condolences to Ms Egan's family.

We are all deeply saddened by her passing," he said.

CLC ELECTIONS 2010

Between February and April 2010, the CLC will be visiting communities to hold secret ballot style elections for new Council members.

The CLC will put out public notices when a meeting is due to be held in your region.

Elections for the Chair, Deputy Chair and Executive will be held at the CLC's meeting in April supervised by the Australian Electoral Commission.