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Indigenous voices ring out across ancient hills

ACROSS the vast Red Centre, every hill truly does have its own story.

And for 40 years, the Central Land Council has been at the forefront of helping the region's Aboriginal people have these tales heard and preserved.

With battles for less red tape and self-determination still being fought, getting those voices heard is more important than ever before, as ANDREA JOHNSTON discovered.

LAST week Anangu traditional owners declared more than five million hectares of their land an Indigenous Protected Area.

Marked by a ceremony, this achievement has been five years in the making, and is a timely demonstration of work supported by the Central Land Council in its 40th year.

Formed following a Royal Commission recommendation by Justice Edward Woodward in 1973, the CLC has grown to cover nine regions in the southern half of the Northern Territory, some 776,000sq km.

A recent launch attracted hundreds of people, eager to hear the yarns of those whose collective memories have created the book, *Every Hill Got a Story*.

It's the CLC's oral history collection and features 127 eminent men and women, including chairman Francis Kelly, deputy chair Sammy Butcher from the Warumpi Band, and executive members Teddy Long and Michael Jones who were all present for the launch at the Telegraph Station on September 2.

Addressing the crowd, CLC director David Ross said you couldn't read the book and not feel the storytellers' ownership of this representative body.

The foreword is written by filmmaker Rachel Perkins, daughter of the CLC's first chair, Charlie Perkins.

Mr Ross read an extract that addressed Ms Perkins's admiration for the stories of triumph over adversity.

"This is a history truly written by its victors, and the challenge before us is to follow in their footsteps," Ms Perkins wrote.

Mr Ross went on to reiterate the story of the council's creation.

"In 1975 representatives of Aboriginal communities throughout Central Australia elected Rachel's father as the first chairman of the CLC," Mr Ross explained.

"Forty years on, they can look back at their outstanding collective success in winning native freehold title for more than half of Central Australia and managing the land for the benefit of this and future generations."

ALSO present were some of the people to whom the CLC has made



LEFT: Four generations of family, Deanella Mack, 36, Colleen Mack, 57, Shaniah Satour, 17, and Jean Mack, 81, celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Central Land Council on at the Telegraph Station in Alice Springs.

TOP: A section of the large crowd that attended the ceremony.

RIGHT: Wednesday's book launch at the Telegraph Station signified the 40 years of CLC in Alice Springs.

Pictures: JUSTIN KENNEDY



such a difference, like 81-year-old Jean Mack, who, smiling, described the CLC's work as "good".

Her yarns are among those featured in *Every Hill Got a Story*.

"I told all my stories about where I come from, family stories, I had three sisters and five brothers, and I'm the only one left," she said.

Three other generations of Jean's family were in attendance, including daughters Colleen and Dawn, granddaughters Deanella and Hannah and great-granddaughter Shaniah Satour, who had just started working for the CLC.

"I've read nanna's stories and they're stories I've never heard before," said Ms Satour.

Deanella Mack delivers cultural awareness training programs, and she said she was often surprised by the greater public's lack of knowledge about Aboriginal people, and described her will to play her part in rectifying that.

She also gave her thoughts on 40 years of the Central Land Council.

"It's a long time, and they have a lot of history and knowledge about our people and connection to country and, for me, that's very important to know," Ms Mack said.

"I appreciate that they've brought this collection of stories together."

Her mother Colleen echoed the importance of the Central Land Council, explaining how she grew

up in town, but was eventually able to move back to her country, Iwupataka (Jay Creek) thanks to the council's work.

"The CLC was instrumental in helping us get our land titles so we can live back on our land out there," she said.

"My late brother sat down out there until we got the land rights."

Her late brother's story was mentioned in a speech by Arrente custodian, Doris Stuart, during the book launch.

Recording those memories and lessons of earlier generations is an obvious benefit of a collection of stories like *Every Hill Got a Story*, but Colleen said it would also help younger generations to learn about culture.

"We weren't allowed to learn culture when we were young," she said.

"It was denied us in school. We just had to learn English.

"But culture can be learnt and taught."

And how better to learn culture than from your own family?

Deanella Mack, 36, said it was remarkable that her grandmother was still around to enrich the cultural identity of the generations below.

"If you look at the life-expectancy gap, it's pretty huge compared with non-Aboriginal people, the fact she's still here and she's 81," she said.

"We treasure every day with her."

STORYTELLING in oral or book form aside, the CLC plays a key role in informing communities through its publication *Land Rights News* which comes out three times a year.

Produced by the council's media team, Australia's longest-running Aboriginal newspaper is distributed free to Aboriginal organisations and communities across Central Australia.

It covers council decision-making as well as general news affecting the bush, delivered with the audience in mind.

Big news for the next edition will include the creation of the Katiti Petermann Indigenous Protected Area.

It's a tangible example of many of the services and aims central to the CLC's role.

IPAs support Aboriginal landowners, in agreement with the Australian Government, to promote biodiversity and cultural resource conservation, according to the Department of Environment website.

Central Australia's new IPA, which is the size of Switzerland, marks the completion of a "conservation jigsaw", according to the CLC, forming part of a network of nine protected areas in the NT/WA/SA border region.

Katiti Petermann is the traditional land of the Pitjantjatjara people, surrounding the community of Docker River.

There are still challenges for the CLC in dealing with governments, 40 years into its existence.

In his speech at the book launch, Mr Ross alluded to the fight against the "relentless increase of government control over every aspect of people's lives".

"From the Aboriginal people's point of view they'd like the CLC to continue doing what it has done for the last 40 years, but we're in a difficult spot at the moment with so much red tape covering what we do. The level of reporting required is just unimaginable," Mr Ross said.

If fighting is intrinsically linked with passion, then the Central Land Council would appear to be operating with the intensity of purpose that it should.

Every Hill Got a Story was described by Mr Ross as "truly a labour of love", and such a large and diverse audience attracted to its launch on a weekday lunchtime can only be a good sign.

The CLC is the self-proclaimed "strong voice from the bush" and its success in producing a book to coincide with this 40th anniversary means there is now a tangible way for important stories to have reach far beyond the remote communities of Central Australia.

* *Every Hill Got a Story* is available at retailers now.