

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS OF AUNTY FAY GREEN OAM

Australian Catholic University, May 9, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ELDERS

I would like to acknowledge with honour and respect our Elders past and present and acknowledge our living culture and its unique role in the life of Australia today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF DIGNITARIES

I would like to acknowledge the Chancellor, the Honourable John Fahey, the Chief Operating Officer and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dr Stephen Weller; members of Senate of the Australian Catholic University; Acting Associate Vice-Chancellor, Associate Professor Patrick McArdle, distinguished guests and the graduates.

MY STORY

As you know my name is Fay Mary Green. I am a Gamilaroi woman. I was born in Walgett on 27th February 1944. I was born into a family of nine. I had two sisters and six brothers. My parent's names were Joanne and Dudley Dennis. I have never met my grandparents but I do have some photographs of them.

The family lived out on Gingie mission in my early days, about six miles from Walgett. We lived under the control of the welfare people and the mission manager. Our land had been taken from us and we were forced to live on missions or reserves. When I was growing up I remember the old people speaking language but this too was taken from us and we had to just learn English. I remember the old people being punished by the mission manager if they publicly spoke our language. When I was young my people were still hunting and fishing. Government rations were not enough for our family to live on.

It was on the mission that I went to school. I finished school at fourteen years of age and that was the saddest day of my life. I was told by the mission manager I was too old at that age to go to school. There was no conversation with me or my parents about leaving school. I loved school; I didn't want to leave. But that is how it was in my day, so at the age of fourteen I was sent out to work on a sheep station. I was away from home and worked without pay until I turned 18.

When we were living out on Gingie we would come into town once or twice a week or on weekends with our parents. Our parents always supervised us. Sometimes they would give us money to go to the pictures. We had a theatre in the main street. That's what we used to look forward to doing, it was a real treat. There was a café next door and we used to go there for milkshakes at the interval. You know even though we were separated inside the theatre, because Aboriginal people had to go downstairs while the white people had to go

upstairs, it was still enjoyment for us as kids. We thought separation was just part of our way of life and we accepted it.

When I was sent out to work I was lucky because it was a good family I worked for. I looked after the house. For meals, I used to sit on the veranda at a little table they put out there for me to eat on. It was okay and I used to have a shower out back. I used to go around with white people, with friends, but some white people used to look down on us. We learnt just to ignore it, but you still got a bit hurt about it.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

I met my future husband out on that station. I continued to work at the station for a while after we married. But then we went and worked on many different stations. We moved to lots of places for work and then finally settled in Walgett where we built our first home on the riverbank. We built our home from tin and wrought iron gathered at the local tip. I'd started to have children at that stage so it was pretty hard going. It was a fair hike to go to the river and fill the 44 gallon drums and roll them back up the river bank and home. My mother-in-law affectionately known as Granny Green also lived with us.

We eventually moved into a home in town. We were happy when we moved into town. I had four children going to school and would take my youngest with me on cleaning jobs in town. I got a job as a bus driver and assistant at the Walgett Save the Children Fund Pre School. In this job I was able to be involved in the education of our children. I had the opportunity to go for workshops, learn more about working with people. This job connected me to many of our families and community members as we picked up the children for pre-school. This job also helped me to observe what was happening to my people as a result of changes on stations and in our town. Changes such as unemployment, alcohol abuse and continuing prejudice. At the same time I continued to do voluntary work at St Joseph's School.

MY WORK

The most important role in my working life has been as the Aboriginal Liaison Officer at St Joseph's School Walgett. Aboriginal children have attended St Joseph's School since May 1964. My two nieces, Diane and Edna Dennis, were the first Aboriginal students enrolled at St Joseph's School. This provided the first opportunity that we as Aboriginal people could choose for our children to attend St Joseph's Catholic School.

In my role, as the Aboriginal Liaison Officer I have comforted and supported both our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. I have welcomed and supported School Principals and staff members in maintaining a real connection with the local community in particular through encouraging Aboriginal parents to be part of the conversation in localising the curriculum.

LANGUAGE

In cooperation with Brothers John Wright and John Giacom I was instrumental in setting up the Yuwaalaraay Language program at St Joseph's School. At this point I would also like to acknowledge Ted Fields (senior), John Brown, Lawrence Dennis, Tracy Dodd, Julie Miller and Karen Flick whose knowledge and support was vital to the language program. An important part of the work involved organising the community consultation leading up to the setting up of the program. The language program has been extended to Walgett High School, Primary School and pre-school. I have been involved in the teaching of our language through support to the children in the language centre, excursions to significant Aboriginal sites in the local area, preparation of children for performances at local and regional celebrations such as the opening of the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial.

I cried the day our language was officially introduced into the education system. It was the happiest day because for so long people did not want to know about our language and culture. Today all children at the St Joseph's School learn and speak our language. All children at the school sing in our local language. The knowledge of our language and culture builds the self-esteem of our children, enables them to express themselves and participate in the life of the community through language, song and dance.

The use of the language in the school shows an appreciation for our culture, valuing and respecting us as people with a living culture. Valuing and respecting the parents, the elders and the wider Aboriginal community. All children, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal now speak our language. It is really good. When I hear the children, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal at St Joseph's say 'we speak our language' I am really proud. To know that our language is part of the life of all children at our school is a sign of the friendship and mutual respect that has been built up through the language program.

There was a really hard time when we could not get non-aboriginal student participation at our school celebrations. If it was an Aboriginal celebration day at school e.g. NADOC Week, Harmony Day we were hurt that the attendance of non-Aboriginal students on the day was lower than on other days. Parents would keep their children at home. To overcome this negative response we chose not to advertise the particular celebrations and have them as part of the school activities for the day. All children joined in the celebrations at the school and over time the participation improved so that we now have good celebrations because everyone joins in.

TO GRADUATES

To all who are graduating today and who will go into our schools I encourage you to build positive relationships with your students. Take the time to get to know your students. Be slow to judge a child because you don't have the full picture of what might be happening for the child.

Take your time to get to know the parents, the school community and the wider community. There is so much to learn about my people and our communities. Ours is a living culture and we are working to protect and restore our culture through language, song, dance, documenting our history and experiences and protecting our special sites.

The acknowledgement and recognition of our culture is appreciated by our elders and community members and helps to build good relationships. When people show interest in learning and wanting to know my people are more giving.

NAIDOC THEME

The theme for the 2018 NAIDOC week is “Because of her, we can! This theme recognises the important role women have played and continue to play in families, communities, our history and our nation. Today I would like to give particular mention to the women of our community who were the holders of our language and culture. The women I honour today are Granny Green, Pauline Dennis, Muriel Dennis and Rose Flick.

I would like to acknowledge with honour and respect these Aboriginal women who guided me with wisdom and knowledge and were the first language and culture teachers at St Joseph’s School.

- Because of these cultural women I can stand before you today and share with you a little of my life experiences.
- Because of these wise women I can continue to stand up for our culture and make a contribution to restoring our language.
- Because of the strength of these women I can challenge the racism and prejudice that we as Aboriginal people still experience today.
- Because of these women, because of all our mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, aunties we can make a difference to the educational outcomes for our children.

INVITATION TO LISTENERS (CONCLUSION)

Today I ask you to walk with us as friends so that our children continue to grow strong and proud in their Aboriginal identity. Friends who acknowledge our cultural identity as Aboriginal people; friends who respect and support our efforts to restore our language; friends who value our efforts to work together for the good of our children, families, communities and our nation.