

Entry type: Person
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Cullen, Ngingali

(1942 - 2012)

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| Born | 1 January, 1942, Maralinga South Australia Australia |
| Died | 10 May, 2012, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia |
| Occupation | Aboriginal rights activist, Community development worker, Health worker, Nurse |

Summary

Ngingali Cullen, who was formerly known as Audrey Kinnear, was a co-chair of the National Sorry Day Committee that worked to achieve wide recognition of the wrongs suffered by Aboriginal people across Australia. Although scarred by the policies of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, it was healing those wounds that was her constant preoccupation. A proposal initiated by her led to the Journey of Healing campaign launched by the National Sorry Day Committee in 1999.

Details

Born at Ooldea Soak in Maralinga lands, in the south-east corner of the Nullabor Plain, Ngingali Cullen (formerly Audrey Kinnear) was the youngest of four children born to May Cobby, a Yankunjatjara woman. ‘Born into the oldest culture in the world,’ she explains, ‘I had the honour of a traditional Aboriginal birth; no doctor, no birth certificate.’ (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*) When she was four years old, she was wrenched from her family and placed in the Koonibba Lutheran Mission Home near Ceduna on the coast, over 300 km from the lands. Her brother was one of fifty other children in that home, her sister Mabel was in a different home in Ooldea. Loran, her older sister, escaped the attention of the police and native welfare officers by hiding under rugs or hollow trees whenever they came calling. She grew up with her mother on her lands and became a woman of status, who eventually helped Ngingali back to contact with her family in her lands.

Life at Koonibba, a so-called ‘half-castes’ home, was dormitory based, disciplined, institutionalised but, on a daily basis, ‘reasonably happy’. (*Interview*), Religion provided the platform for their education, but Ngingali bears the Lutheran missionaries no ill will. ‘They were simply carrying out the wishes of the Government,’ she says, claiming that the Lutherans were amongst her strongest supporters and best friends as her career developed and her quest for identity progressed. (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*) The Lutheran church did provide her with things that she still appreciates – a love of music, education, social skills and friendship. ‘But the loneliness and knowing your were different was inescapable.’ (*Interview*),

Ngingali shone at school and after completing primary school went to boarding school in Adelaide. She was the first Aboriginal girl to attend Concordia, a Lutheran boarding college. She then went on to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital where Lowitja O’Donoghue was a charge nurse, moving on to work in South Australian Hospitals, the Trans-Australian Rail Health Clinic and the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS). She enjoyed her training, liked living in Adelaide and navigated her way through the world of white people, accepting that to be like them would be ‘the way to happiness’. (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*)

When she graduated in 1964, she felt drawn to work in the hospital at Port Augusta, one of only two Aboriginal people on staff. It was here that the reality of race relations in Australia hit her. The discrimination against aboriginal people who lived on the mission five miles out of town, the unnecessary deaths of Aboriginal babies who were denied basic health services; the attitudes towards Aboriginal people on Port Augusta were markedly different from what she has experienced in Adelaide. She was married, rearing a family of her own, working in a job she loved but a crisis of identity that she had managed to keep repressed for several years came to the surface. ‘I was working in a doctor’s surgery at the time, accepted by the white community, a success. But inside I was so fragile. There was a big part of me missing,’ she recalled some years later. ((*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*))

Ngingali was already suffering when she learned that her mother was alive and living on the reserve outside Port Augusta. ‘After all those years without seeing her I was a nervous wreck, I couldn’t go to her. It was my [first] husband, Laurie who made the first contact.’ (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*) Slowly and emotionally, Ngingali reconnected with her mother, extended family and her lands.

But a year later, tragedy struck and the outcome proved to be the catalyst for Ngingali's turn to activism on behalf of her people. Her mother disappeared in unexplained circumstances from outside a road house near Port Pirie and Ngingali used her knowledge of the system to force a coronial inquest to highlight the lack of police action in the search for an elderly Aboriginal woman. 'It nearly sent me over the edge to lose Mum so soon after finding her again,' she says. 'This is when I got off the fence and started speaking out for my people.' (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*)

This decision has led to a long list of achievements. Ngingali Cullen brought RFDS to remote communities, managed welfare train cars, and Aboriginal alcohol rehabilitation units. She worked for the Drug and Alcohol Services Council of South Australia and for crisis-counselling services in the Port August jail and as a part-time commissioner in the South Australian Health Commission. She was instrumental in setting up a centre for Aboriginal women in Port Augusta and established regional health programs in northern South Australia. She was the linchpin for the Aboriginal community in Port Augusta.

When she was elected a member of the Nulla Wanga Tjuta Regional Council (a part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)) in 1990, her focus began to shift to the national scene. When she was offered a job in Canberra in 1992 as a health policy officer for ATSIC she was ready for the challenge and took the offer, despite the difficulties associated with leaving Port Augusta. She was important to the community, as it was to her. But her children were grown and she felt it was time to do something new, for her sake and for the Aboriginal community at large. Her work with ATSIC now took her all over Australia, evaluating the national Aboriginal health strategy.

When Sir Ron Wilson and Mick Dodson inquired into the separation policies that affected the lives of people like Cullen and published the *Bringing Them Home* report, the media sought stories from the stolen generations. Ngingali was one of those they turned to. She was seconded to the Office of Indigenous Affairs, to the National Sorry Day Committee and was at the forefront of Canberra's preparations for the first 'sorry day', on May 26, 1998. The campaign caught national attention, and nearly a million people signed 'sorry books'.

After the first sorry day, many of the stolen generations met in Sydney, and Cullen urged that they seize the moment to heal the wounds caused by the separation policies. She found a warm response, and the Journey of Healing was launched across Australia on May 26, 1999. When the Sorry Day Committee's co-chair, Carol Kendall, became too ill to continue, Cullen was elected to take her place. This campaign brought thousands of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians together in initiatives for healing and provided a mechanism by which the stolen generations' voice was heard throughout the next decade.

After 250,000 people walked for reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the government agreed to remember the stolen generations at Reconciliation Place, Canberra. Cullen was vital to the process of helping indigenous groups and government reach consensus over the design of the memorial and the text to accompany it. 'This memorial could be healing if it is created properly,' she told the then Minister, Philip Ruddock. (*Champion of Healing*) She proposed that teams travel the country, seeking the views of the stolen generations on the text of the memorial, and also seeking the views of the non-indigenous people who had staffed the institutions to which Aboriginal children were removed, and those who had fostered the children. The process resulted in text that the government did not prefer but, confronted with consensus, had no option but to accept it. Kevin Rudd's apology offered in 2008, and the generally positive response of the Australian community owes much to her inclusive approach and commitment to healing.

Although she spent most of her life in South Australia, she came to love the city of Canberra and the opportunities it created. She loved coming to work and seeing Parliament House outside her window a building that gave her 'a magical feeling, like Uluru.' (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*). She died in a Canberra nursing home in 2012, survived by her second husband, Derick, her three children, and a legacy of healing. As she said quietly, of herself, in 1996, Ngingali Cullen 'came a long way for a kid who was born in the desert.' (*Standing Tall and Feeling Proud*)

Published resources

Article

Champion of healing and Sorry Day, Bond, John, 2012,

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/obituaries/champion-of-healing-and-sorry-day-20120525-1zajh.html#ixzz2Kv1rGWl0>

Newspaper Article

Standing Tall and Feeling Proud, Levy, Wendy, 1996

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Audrey Ngingali Kinnear interviewed by Francine George in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

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