

Aunty Fay Mary Green OAM

Fay Mary Green has shown a lifelong commitment to fostering education and forging cultural and social cohesion in the indigenous community. She is a deeply loved and respected elder of the Walgett community and has been indispensable to the establishment of Aboriginal language programmes in the schools of her town and district of Walgett.

Aunty Fay was born in Walgett, a small town on the Barwon River in northern New South Wales, in 1944. One of eight children, she grew up on Gingie Mission outside the town. Sometimes the family lived in tents and her chores included carting water for the cleaning and cooking. Aunty Fay remembers it as a hard life, but not an unhappy one.

Young Fay Dennis, as she was back then, loved school and loved learning but at the age of 14 she was made to leave school and go to work on a station as a farmhand and a maid. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, Aunty Fay understands the potential power of education and the difference it can make to the life of every child. She has devoted her own life to helping her people recognise and understand the value of a good education.

Aunty Fay married Harry Greene, a shearer and fencing hand. Together, they travelled around the country for work before finally returning to Walgett where Aunty Fay worked as a cleaner to help put her four children through school.

Aunty Fay began her work in education as a bus driver for preschool pupils, driving out to the missions and to the homes of the aboriginal kids of Walgett to make sure they attended. As her work and her influence with the community came to be recognised by the teachers and school staff, Aunty Fay became more involved with St. Joseph's Primary School where she has now worked for many years as an education assistant and aboriginal liaison officer.

John Wright, principal of St. Joseph's in the '90s, speaks of the social malaise at the school when he first arrived. He went to Aunty Fay for advice and she spoke to him of the problem of low expectations for the

aboriginal children at the school. She became a liaison officer with the parents and a counsellor to the children. With her characteristic quiet persistence, Aunty Fay changed the culture of the school so that attendance numbers of aboriginal students increased by more than 300 per cent.

Those who know her often speak of Aunty Fay's empathy and wisdom and the atmosphere of quiet dedication she brings to a classroom.

A passionate advocate for the revival of indigenous languages, Aunty Fay has been instrumental in the recovery and revival of the Yuwaalaraay language and culture around the Walgett region. She organised and implemented the community consultation that led to the setting up of a Yuwaalaraay Language program at St. Joseph's Primary School. She was also involved in setting up a similar program at Walgett High School. She has continued to involve herself in language development activities, helping to write and publish a local cookery book and working with students on a performance in Yuwaalaraay at the opening of the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial.

Aunty Fay is also an accomplished artist. Her work reflects her culture and heritage in a highly original style, often depicting the meeting of Catholic and Aboriginal traditions.