



DR CHARLES PERKINS AO

Annual Memorial Oration
and Memorial Prize

Thursday 22 October 2009

Program

The University of Sydney
in collaboration with the Koori Centre

PROGRAM

- 6:00pm** **Event Commences**
Great Hall
- 6:30pm** **Official Proceedings Begin**
Mr Neville Perkins OAM
Master of Ceremonies
- 6:40pm** **Welcome to Country**
Mr Charles Madden
Director, Aboriginal Medical Service
- 6:45pm** **Vice-Chancellor's Address**
Dr Michael Spence
Vice-Chancellor and Principal
The University of Sydney
- 6:50pm** **Professor Gordon Briscoe AO
PhD, MA, BA (Hons Hist)**
Research Fellow at the
Australian Centre for Indigenous History
(Australian National University)
- 7:25pm** **Vote of Thanks and Introduction to
Dr Charles Perkins AO
Memorial Prize**
Ms Janet Mooney
Director, Koori Centre
The University of Sydney
- 7:30pm** **Presentation of the Dr Charles Perkins AO
Annual Memorial Prize**
Ms Janet Mooney
Director, Koori Centre
Prizes to be presented by the
Vice-Chancellor and Principal and
Ms Hetti Perkins
- 7:45pm** **Summation and Close of Proceedings**
Mr Neville Perkins OAM
Master of Ceremonies
- 8:30pm** **Event Concludes**

DR CHARLES PERKINS AO ANNUAL MEMORIAL ORATION

In 2001, the University of Sydney, in collaboration with the Koori Centre, launched the Dr Charles Perkins AO Annual Memorial Oration.

The establishment of the Oration began as a recommendation of the Committee to Review Aboriginal Education at the University of Sydney, of which Dr Perkins was a member. The University, in consultation with the Koori Centre, adopted in principle that the University establish an Annual Oration,

“to be given by an internationally high-profile race relations leader...as a demonstration of its continuing commitment to fostering excellence in education and leadership among its Indigenous staff and graduates.”¹

The University, in consultation with the Koori Centre, believed it would be fitting to name the Oration in honour of the University's first Indigenous graduate, Dr Charles Perkins AO.

The Dr Charles Perkins AO Annual Memorial Oration was established with the full support of the Perkins family and in acknowledgement of Dr Perkins' tireless dedication to human rights and social justice for Indigenous Australians.

¹ Vice-Chancellor's Preliminary Response to the Report of the Committee established to review Aboriginal education at the University of Sydney, 2000.

PROFESSOR GORDON BRISCOE AO

As an Aboriginal person, Gordon Briscoe's early education was affected by the racial policies under which he was born. He grew up in the same half-caste Aboriginal Boy's Institution as Kumantjay [Charlie] Perkins where they both suffered from poor education. Nevertheless, study liberated Gordon even in the face of adversity. He went to England in 1961 to play professional soccer, returning to Sydney later that decade. During those early years in Sydney he studied at night and matriculated to the Australian National University in 1969.

In 1971 Gordon established the first Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern alongside the late well known ophthalmologist Fred Hollows and the late Shirley Smith - an equally well known Aboriginal matriarch of Redfern, Sydney. In the mid 1970s he worked as a Commonwealth Public Servant in the Departments of Aboriginal Affairs, Health, Prime Ministers and Cabinet and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission. While working in the Health Department, Gordon and Fred Hollows instigated the National Trachoma and Eye Health program. Throughout the program he worked as Fred's Assistant Director.

Gordon returned to academia in the early 1980s completing an Honours degree in history, an MA and went onto to gain a PhD in 1997. His PhD thesis investigated the way Aboriginal knowledge on health and well-being crumbled under the coming of British and Australian colonialism. He published this work as *Counting, Health and Identity: A history of Aboriginal health and demography in WA and Qld, 1900-1940*. Gordon's post-doctoral work has focused on developing the importance of Aboriginal history and encouraging Aboriginal people to use this discipline as a means of reconstructing their past for themselves.

In 2004 he was appointed an Officer of Australia in the General division for service to the Indigenous community in promoting access to social justice, improved health, education and legal services and by raising public awareness and understanding of cultural heritage. He remained in the History research program at ANU until his retirement in 2006, publishing his 'magnum opus' and various other publications on Aboriginal health and demography. Gordon currently chairs a program on historical demography in RASS, establishing a database on Aboriginal literature and statistics.

DR CHARLES PERKINS AO ANNUAL MEMORIAL PRIZE

Established by the Koori Centre in 2000, the Dr Charles Perkins AO Annual Memorial Prize commemorates the lifelong achievements of Dr Perkins, the first Indigenous Australian graduate of the University of Sydney. The Prize is awarded annually to Indigenous Australian students who have completed a Bachelor or Honours degree and have achieved outstanding results during their studies. The single prize was increased to three in 2005, with the support of the The Charlie Perkins Trust for Children & Students, the Koori Centre and the Pro-Vice-Chancellors of the University of Sydney.

Previous winners of this prestigious prize are listed below.

- 2001:** Ms Tracey Sharon Kickett
- 2002:** Ms Llewellyn Williams
- 2003:** Mr Christopher Davis and Ms Jodie Wellington
- 2004:** Ms Yvette Balla-Gow, Ms Cheryl Davis and Ms Simone Nelson
- 2005:** Mr Percival Knight, Ms Kate Makin and Mr Victor Wood
- 2006:** Mr John Henderson, Mr Dylan Hughes and Ms Stephanie Walton
- 2007:** Ms Kerry Wallace-Massone, Ms Jade Swan, and Mr Nicholas Beeton
- 2008:** Mr Paul Gray, Ms Naomi May Cook, and Ms Alana Moffett

DR CHARLES NELSON PERRURLE PERKINS AO (BA '66)

Arrernte and Kalkadoon Man
1936 – 2000

Charles's grandmother, Nellie Errerreke Perkins, and his mother Hetti, were Eastern Arrernte women, born at Arltunga. Hetti's young life was spent around the mines and working on pastoral stations. During this time she had eight children: Percival, Bill, George, Nita, Margaret, Alec, Don and May. Nita and Margaret were taken away from her at a young age and sent to Adelaide. She never saw them again. In 1935, Hetti met Martin Connelly while living at the Bungalow near Alice Springs. Martin's mother was a Kalkadoon woman from the Mt Isa region and his father was Irish. Hetti had two children to Martin. They named their first child, who was born in 1936, Charles Nelson Perkins, and his young brother, Ernest. Charles did not meet his father until he was 33 years old.

In 1945, Father Percy Smith, an Anglican priest, took Charles and a number of other boys to Adelaide, with the permission of their mothers, to further their education. While Charles tried to make the most of the opportunity offered to him, he recalled the harsh discipline of the boys home, particularly after the departure of Father Smith. At St Francis House, the boys formed a strong, lifelong bond with Father and Mrs Smith and each other. It was during his years in Adelaide that Charles began to understand the extent of discrimination against Aboriginal people.

Charles's outstanding skills as a soccer player led him to England in 1957 to play for Everton. On his return to Australia, he married Eileen in 1961 and they moved to Sydney. His soccer career culminated in him playing as captain/coach for Pan-Hellenic in Sydney. He was passionate about soccer and it helped finance his way through university. In Sydney, Ted Noffs was to influence and support Charles in his endeavours. Charles entered the University of Sydney in 1963 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in May 1966. He was the first Indigenous Australian to graduate from university. At this time, he was also instrumental in establishing the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney and forged a lasting connection with the Sydney Aboriginal community.

In the summer of 1965, Charles organised a group of 30 students to travel to Walgett, Moree, Bowraville and Kempsey to protest against discrimination and poor living conditions. In his autobiography, Charles said "The Freedom Ride was probably the greatest and most exciting event that I have ever been involved in with Aboriginal affairs." This unprecedented protest exposed the apartheid of rural Australia and gave him a national profile in the media. He recognised that the media was a valuable tool to inform Australians of the plight of Indigenous Australians and he used it adeptly. In Canberra in 1972, he joined other young Aboriginal men at the Tent Embassy and defiantly called for compensation and recognition of Aboriginal land and human rights. It was also in this year that Charles received a life-saving kidney transplant.

Charles dedicated his life to achieving justice for Indigenous Australians. His extraordinary achievements included appointments as Secretary, Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Chairman, Aboriginal Development Commission and Aboriginal Hostels Ltd. He was actively involved in Indigenous organisations wherever he lived. He was elected ATSIC Commissioner in both Alice Springs and Sydney. In 1987 he was awarded the Order of Australia.

But it was at the community level that he was a household name. He was a renowned activist and a fearless spokesman. The last thirty years of his life were made possible by the kidney donation. This miraculous gift made him determined to make a difference to Indigenous Australians and he did.

Later in his life, Charles proudly fulfilled his cultural obligations with his passage through law with his people, the Eastern Arrernte.

Charles loved his family. He and Eileen have three children, Hetti, Adam and Rachel and six grandchildren, Tyson, Thea, Lille, Madeleine, Charles and Remy. His spirit is with us all.

ON ABORIGINAL CULTURE:

“It’s just another world. There’s another world out there and I didn’t really understand it, but I do now. It’s the same as when my friend, who came from up Derby way, saw his first white man. He was about eighteen and he saw the first white man he’d ever seen coming towards him on the first horse he’d ever seen. Imagine that. Everything changes straight away doesn’t it . . . you sit there at night, with the fires burning and maybe 200 people dancing: it was awe-inspiring . . . you’re going back 50,000 years in time. It writes new chapters in your brain.”

ON BEING A BUREAUCRAT:

“Tread new fields. Break new ground. Make mistakes in achieving objectives. That’s what it’s all about. You’ve gotta do things in the space of one year that takes normal bureaucratic mechanisms to do in five to ten years. So you’ve gotta break a lotta rules – not deliberately so, but the best way you possibly can – so you achieve that objective in the quickest possible time . . . You’ve got people out there you’ve probably never met sleeping under trees, bad health, no chance of employment and probably need a feed and a decent drink of water. So what are you doing about it?”

ON THE FREEDOM RIDE:

“That’s the beginning. The eyes. The meaning of the eyes. The relationship, the eye conversation between people. The incident outside the RSL club, that was the most dramatic part of everything. A lot of things fell in place after that. We knew what we had to do. It set the pattern, the template. The eye conversation I had with hundreds of Aboriginal people. In the semi darkness, the fading afternoon and in the heat of the day. Just looking. Just looking. At something. And I was looking back at them. We were wondering what it was all about. One day I’ll be able to explain it all I suppose. That was the magic message I got from the Freedom Ride.”

ON HIS LIFE:

“I am a descendant of a once proud tribe from Central Australia – the Arrernte people. Today we number very few and own nothing. We cringe like dogs at the prospect of the “White backlash’. We pray eternally that the White authority structure will not turn on us and impede what little progress we have made. We ask for land rights with tongue in cheek knowing full well in our hearts that the land belonged to us in the first instance. We stagger and stumble into each other in confusion when our identity . . . is contested and thus allow ourselves to be moulded by others. Our land, our pride and our future has been taken away from us and our people buried in unmarked graves. We wander through Australian society as beggars. We live off the crumbs of the white Australian table and are told to be grateful. This is what Australia Day means to Aboriginal Australians. We celebrate with you but there is much sadness in our joy. It is like dancing on your mother’s grave.”

Many thanks to the Perkins family for permission to include this extract from “State Funeral” program, Sydney Town Hall, 25 October 2000.

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

MR NEVILLE PERKINS OAM (BA '74)

Born in Alice Springs, Mr Neville Perkins is the nephew of the late Dr Charles Perkins AO. Neville followed in the footsteps of his uncle and attended and graduated from the University of Sydney. He continues to be active in Aboriginal Affairs and is currently Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Aboriginal Development. Prior to this he was the Manager and Company Secretary for National Indigenous Television Limited. He has also been the Director of the JABAL Centre, the Australian National University, Director of the Kumbari/Ngurpai Lag Centre at the University of Southern Queensland, Director of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs in the NSW Premier's Department, Registrar, NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act, Secretary of the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, and Deputy Opposition Leader and Member for MacDonnell in the Northern Territory Parliament. He was also the first Aboriginal General Manager of Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, and Imparja Television.

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Mr Charles 'Chicka' Madden

A respected Elder, Mr Charles Madden has lived in Cadigal country in the Sydney region for most of his life. For over thirty-five years he has served as a Director of the Aboriginal Medical Service, Redfern, and is a Life Member of the Redfern All Blacks Junior Rugby League Football Club. Charles is also a board member of the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council.

PERFORMERS

Mrs Megan Hanlon

Torres Strait Islander – Stephen Island (Ugar)
Aboriginal – Kukuyalantji

Bachelor of Music and Performance
Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Major: Bass guitar

Mr Che deBoehmler

Certificate in Contemporary Music
Many years experience in composition,
performance & tuition

Major: Guitar

Mr Wayne McIntyre

Certificate in Contemporary Music
Australian Institute of Music

Major: Guitar



The University of Sydney appreciates the generous permission of the Perkins family and The Charlie Perkins Trust for Children & Students for the use of his photograph. Photograph © Robert McFarlane.