



Speech by

**Dr LESLEY CLARK**

**MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER**

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Hansard 15 September 1999

### **Kuranda Aboriginal Community Deaths**

**Dr CLARK** (Barron River—ALP) (11.08 p.m.): The Aboriginal community of the Cairns region is mourning the loss of three much-loved and respected people, all gone within the space of just seven days. Tiger O'Shane was the first, followed by Esme Hudson. But just as relatives were preparing to bury dear Aunty Es, her brother-in-law, Lionel Levers, suddenly died, dealing a double blow to the Kuranda Aboriginal community. Attending the funerals and sharing the grief of their children, amongst their friends I have known for many years, it made me appreciate even more the strength and courage that Aboriginal people demonstrate in the face of adversity and the close family ties that support them through difficult times.

In the short time that I have available to me tonight, I would like to pay my respects to those three special people and extend my deepest sympathies to their extended families—in particular, to Sonny, Sandra and Dawn, who lost both their father, Lionel, and their aunty, Esme, and to Rose, who lost her dearest sister and former husband, Lionel.

Both Lionel Levers and Esme Hudson were born in the 1920s on the Mona Mona Mission outside Kuranda. While both had fond childhood memories of the mission, they applied for exemption certificates, leaving to accept the challenge of making their way in the outside world. They moved with their families to Kuranda, working hard at whatever jobs were available, raising their families but also dealing with racism and discrimination.

In documenting Esme's achievements, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of her niece, Sandra Tanna. Recognising that equity was not a reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Esme became involved in social justice issues and developed her personal motto: "There is no such thing as can't". Aunty Es—as she is affectionately known by many people—and others were instrumental in forming the very important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the Cairns area. Organisations that she was involved in at their formation included the Woompera-Muralug Housing Society, the original North Queensland Land Council, the Wuchopperen Medical Service, the Boopa-Werem Kindergarten, the Njiku Jowan Aboriginal Legal Service and the original Mona Mona Cooperative.

But Esme Hudson's most important contribution to her community came as a co-cook/co-carer of Mookai Rosie-Bi-Bayan, and with Bonnie Simpson she lived on site, meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who would come to stay at the house to await the arrival of their child or to visit a specialist at the Cairns Base Hospital.

Funds were scarce and Esme and Bonnie would sacrifice their age pensions to ensure that nutritious food was on the table, that fuel was in the vehicle to take any client or patient to the hospital, and that there was always plenty of love and laughter on the premises. Esme has also been the greatest influence in her son's career as performer and entertainer. David Hudson was a co-founder of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre and his mother was often seen delivering brochures and pamphlets for the company. When David was little, his mother could be seen doubling him on her bicycle, taking him to drum, singing or dancing practice. Her dedication has paid off because David has now gone on to bigger and better things, performing in many of the world's most famous venues.

I first met Esme when we worked together at the Cairns TAFE College in 1982. I also came to know her through David, who was studying at the college. I was very privileged to be present in Brisbane last month when Esme's work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was recognised

and she received the 1999 Premier's Award for service to Queensland from Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh. Her photograph taken with Premier Beattie is one that I will treasure.

Mookai Rosie's other two founders—her sister Rose and friend Bonnie Simpson—were recipients of the Premier's Award in 1997 and 1998. Last month's ceremony was particularly timely to honour these three exceptional women.

Lionel Levers, like Esme, experienced discrimination and he fought it in his various workplaces because he was a man who stood his ground when he knew he was right. After working in the cane industry he became a respected and valued employee of Queensland Rail, where he worked until his retirement in 1994. Lionel loved his family, and their deep love for him was expressed in an account of his life and in moving tributes in song and poetry and in paintings on his casket by his children and grandchildren. Sonny—Lionel's son—demonstrated great strength and courage in delivering the eulogy for his aunt and father and in supporting other family members and friends in their grief. I seek leave to table a poem written by Nicky Dorante in memory of her grandfather, Lionel. I feel sure that it will bring comfort to others who are grieving for their lost loved ones.

Tiger O'Shane was a larger than life Irishman who travelled to Australia as a 14 year old and who was also renowned as a worker—shearer, seaman, wharfie, boxer, canecutter, and a man with a passion for life. He married Gladys Dawn, an Aboriginal woman from Mossman, and lived in Freshwater—my home—before settling at Holloways Beach in 1947 where they raised their five children—Pat, Terry, Margaret, Danny and Tim. I never had the privilege of knowing Tiger well, but he instilled into his children the same values as did Lionel and Esme because, according to his daughter Pat, he taught them that all human beings are the same and that they were as good as anyone else at a time when prejudice and ignorance prevailed.

The legacy of these three special people lives on in their children and while the community may have lost three of its elders, their children will undoubtedly become the elders of tomorrow demonstrating as they do the intelligence, passion, commitment and courage of their parents to make a better tomorrow and serve as role models for the next generation and who are living testament to Auntie Es's motto, "There is no such thing as can't." God bless you for that gift and may you rest in peace.

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