



Speech By  
**Julianne Gilbert**


**MEMBER FOR MACKAY**

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Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2022

**MOTION**

**Australian South Sea Islanders**

 **Mrs GILBERT** (Mackay—ALP) (5.35 pm): I rise to support the minister's amendment to the motion. Blackbirding is a shameful part of the sugar industry's history in the Queensland. People from the South Sea islands like Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands were forced or tricked into indentureships to work on the cane fields. I will talk about my experience with South Sea islander people in Mackay. We are talking about real people. We are talking about good people.

The first ships dropped their passengers off on one of the islands close to Mackay and they were brought to shore in small boats. Eventually when ships came up the Pioneer River they would land at the Leichhardt tree. This is where South Sea islanders marked the 150th anniversary of the first blackbirded people landing in Mackay. South Sea islander recognition day is also held each year. It is something I look forward to. Ship travel was not easy and many lives were lost. Life on the land was not easy and more lives were lost prematurely.

South Sea islanders who were not buried on farms were buried in the Mackay cemetery. It is the same history as Bundaberg. They are in unmarked graves. In 2016 with Work for the Dole program funding and community donations Starett Vea Vea and Elton Backo set about detecting the graves with metal detectors and placing headstones on each grave. Each headstone has a cane knife etched into it. The rows of little white headstones will ensure that the history of these people will not be lost. Sadly, not every grave was able to be named.

I was honoured to be invited to participate in the unveiling of these graves. This is one project that has embedded so much history into the lives of both the South Sea islander people and the wider community. The ceremony was bittersweet—remembering those who had been laid to rest and recognising the depth of talent that has descended from these ancestors such as doctors, nurses, a dancer in the Australian ballet, artists, musicians, teachers, principals and just about any career we can think of. The breadth of talent talked about at this ceremony and also the 150th anniversary was amazing. The talent continues on.

I had the pleasure of sponsoring Taleiyah Miniccon as the youth member for Mackay—a proud South Sea islander woman. She was also on the inaugural Premier's regional forum for Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday. Not forgetting, she was also the school captain of Pioneer State High School and Mackay Youth Citizen of the Year.

Mabel Quakawoot, also a Mackay Citizen of the Year, was the first female South Sea islander of heritage to join the Women's Royal Australian Air Force in the signals department. She had a stellar career in teaching at Mackay District Special School and rounded off her teaching career in TAFE. She also told me that she was a great Rugby League player in her day and she played in the Rockhampton women's team against Mackay.

Elizabeth Warren was a recipient of a citizen of the year award and is a sister to the late Greg Sutherland. Greg, a Mackay great, was one of the team that was instrumental in getting funding for the Mackay Rugby League stadium in 2007. Greg championed education and training for disadvantaged youth. Sadly, Greg lost his battle with a long history of ill health in 2015. His commitment to the Mackay community was recognised with the major bridge crossing on the Mackay Ring Road being named in his honour.

Marcia Eves is passionate about preserving and marking South Sea islander history at the Rowallan Park trail with burial mounds. I have had the pleasure of having a tour through this area. Also, Marion Healy, a respected educator and talented artist, is teaching South Sea islander history in our schools. She has written a curriculum that can be easily picked up by any school. She was also a member of Mesh & Knots, who travelled to Brisbane in 2017 with me for an award ceremony. They won the highest award—the minister's award, which was awarded by Minister Grace Grace at the time. It was not just about the art; it was about the way that this group gathers the community together. I have so much to talk about but, unfortunately, I have run out of time.

*(Time expired)*