

Ceremony to sing a beloved uncle home

By WOOLOMBI WATERS

HOW do you even begin to explain to non-Aboriginal people that the last true language speaker you have left in your family has just passed?

His ochre was brought up from home in Toomelah near Boggabilla in north-west NSW for a final ceremony as family and friends sang our dearly beloved Uncle Reg/Roy Knox home, led by Buddy Hippi (Knox), his great nephew.

Known in his early years as Reginald Roy Knox (McGrady), Uncle later settled in Logan, Queensland, more than 40 years ago, where he became known by immediate family and community as Uncle Reg. But he was always known as Uncle Roy back home in NSW and in particular by his Toomelah family.

We are blessed to have many traditional Gomerioi/Gamilaraay/Kamilaroi dancers and language speakers today – yamma nginda Gomerioi winnunguuldah dhirriaa yumbuli – but we have had to relearn how to speak our language and to practise our culture after the evils of colonisation.

This Old Fella, he was born speaking Gomerioi and had to learn English. He was the last gayaangal (child) rolled in the ash, covered in the charcoal while buried in the sands of Boobera lagoon, traditional way – proppa way, after he was born.

How do you compensate this loss? No remuneration could ever compensate for what we felt on Monday, April 20. An entire nation woke up in mourning after hearing the news our beloved Uncle had passed away the day before.

The tributes starting flowing immediately as grief poured out on social media with heartfelt testimonies from family, friends and community across Australia. This included many non-Indigenous students whom Uncle had taught art to in schools across south-east Queensland. Such was his influence and acceptance.

The comparison of so much love conveyed is in complete opposition to what we observe with people hoarding food, essential items and turning on one another in our current crisis.

How would this mob have survived if they had suffered the way our mob did? These people have privilege and wealth today. But 90% of our people died through disease, poison and the guns brought by the colonisers.

For this is when our Uncle was born. There is a famous old photo taken at Boomi with the survivors of this atrocity. Uncle's mother, my great Aunty Carrie, is standing out front with my



Reginald Roy Knox (McGrady), known as Uncle Reg by some and as Uncle Roy back home in NSW, is revered as the custodian and last true speaker of Gomerioi language.

grandfather and his brother held in the top hand corner by their mother Amelia and grandmother Florence Wightman.

To then try and say it happened so long ago, when we only danced a few weeks ago for my Uncle, who was born from this time, only maintains the hurt, the trauma we feel today.

Rather than fend for themselves and hoard possessions, our mob shared all that they had, built communities based on hard work, love and caring for one another and from this our Uncle was born and carried his legacy. We know his knowledge and his love have passed on and with his passing we have been left with the hurt

and grieving and pain these intruders built.

But as did our Old People, we will continue to survive and we will build on our Uncle's legacy, and in his memory we will continue to find strength, love and compassion.

Uncle Reg/Uncle Roy was raised in Toomelah, along with my grandfather, his first cousin-brother Len Waters. My grandfather would go on to become a war hero, a fighter pilot; Reg/Roy Knox, a world-famous artist who taught tens of thousands of children of all colours and races and religions, never judging a single soul. His artwork now hangs in the Vatican in Rome, where we have Leonardo da Vinci,

Michelangelo and Reg/Roy Knox all hanging out together as the old masters.

And during his passing we had politicians and governors-general messaging the family their personal condolences.

Uncle was formally recognised as Logan City Citizen of the year, NAIDOC Aboriginal Elder of the year and our knowledge-keeper and last true Gomerioi language speaker.

He built bridges to cross the chasms of race, colour and creed to bring us all together as people and carried love as his philosophy. He would always say, "We can't go back into the past but we can use our experiences to build a better future together and we should

He built bridges to cross the chasms of race, colour and creed, to bring us all together as people, and carried love as his philosophy.

all move forward together."

Uncle never showed any hate, never asked you for ten dollars you didn't have, but would let you know he could change the ten into a fifty on the horses – many an electricity bill and car rego was paid this way.

He would never raise his voice in anger and we are blessed in carrying on his legacy.

He was softly-spoken, loving, caring and understanding in carrying the grace and dignity of his Elders.

As a young man growing up in Toomelah, Uncle became the custodian of our language.

He was destined to become an Elder (a term we use all too often today) and he carried this title with the highest calibre and would always say "I am just Reggie Knox, an old Blackfella from Toomelah, 4th-grade dumb" to inspire others to make the most of what they were given.

"You learn for you," he would always say.

His grandson Laroi, 13 years old, said to me as we painted up, getting ready to dance to send his Poppy home: "Poppy was no myth Uncle. He was a legend and as a legend he will live on in our hearts forever."

For now, he is still with us and with every memory contained within the tears of our heart we hold onto the thousands upon thousands of years his love represented, the ways of our old people – and we will hold onto those memories and simply say we love you and we thank you and safe journey home.

Ngiyani ngiima yilaadhu yalagiirray ngiyani gimiyandi gaalanha yilaalu-gi gi (We are here today as we were yesterday and will be forever) Uncle Reg/Uncle Roy Knox.

● *Woolombi Waters is a regular Koori Mail columnist.*

 **Judith Neilson Institute** for Journalism and Ideas. This article is supported by the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas.