New mayor brings a wealth of experience

By AARON SMITH

PHILEMON Mosby, the mayor of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC), believes it is his connection to culture, community and his faith that won him the local government election earlier this year.

Born in Sydney to a family of nine children, Cr Mosby’s political life would never have happened if it wasn’t for a serve of his grandmother’s scones when he was six years old.

“We were staying with my grandmother on Poruma in what was then still traditional coconut woven huts,” Cr Mosby told Koori Mail from his remote island home of Poruma, a small sandy coral cay in the central Torres Strait.

“Mum had brought us back to get baptised at the Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church, my dad's local church.

“So, they took off and I stayed. I was really excited. I was still having breakfast and Mum said, ‘Hurry up we have a plane to catch.’

“My grandmother said, in our traditional Kukulkaeg Ya language, ‘No leave him to finish his kai ka,’ like I only lived a dinghy ride away and not in Sydney.

“But, they took off and I stayed. I wasn’t reunited with my parents until I was 17 years old.

“Now when I look back, it seems it was predestined for me to stay to be raised by my grandmother, who immersed me in language. She reinforced where I came from. She taught me Alan Kastom and to respect our Elders.”

Only 40 years old, Cr Mosby has spent nearly half his life working for local government in the region.

Starting out in 2002 as a clerk for the former Poruma Island Council, Mosby briefly served as a councillor in 2004, before all the island councils amalgamated to form TSIRC in 2008, where he then served as Poruma’s council representative for TSIRC’s first two terms.

Prior to TSIRC’s formation, he worked for eight months in Sydney for ATSIC in the human resource department.

TSIRC, the country’s most northerly municipality, is the only council in Australia that has an international border and all its 14 communities are separated by sea. It exclusively services Torres Strait Islander people on their traditional lands.

“TSIRC is not just about the three Rs of roads, rates and rubbish, I want our three Rs to be about reconnecting our people, reclaiming our region, and regaining our destiny,” Cr Mosby said.

“The campaign trail I used a quote by Abraham Lincoln reinforcing the need to have our council refocus and rethinking that it should be ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’.

“Culture and language are really at the core of the region and because I came from that background, I believe that is how people have embraced me.

“This has been an important element that I have carried with me through my journey.”

However, Cr Mosby’s journey has not all been smooth. In 2004 his council position on Poruma Island Council was challenged as he had not lived in community for two continuous years prior to the election.

“This matter found me in the Supreme Court in Cairns and we could have won but then my father talked to me.

“My mother, who is an Ugaramle from the Stephen family, has a reputation of being outspoken and having a courageous spirit.

“She told me to accept it and move on. I would often get a harsh talking to from my mother – even in community meetings when she was living on the island – if she didn’t believe what I was doing was the right thing, whereas my father would have a quiet word with me after.”

Tragically, the same year Mosby had to stand down from council, his father was lost at sea and soon after his mother suffered a heart attack.

“It was a really hard year for me. But, as my mother was being medivaced off the island with tubes and machines attached to her, she told me to go back to Poruma to work. ‘Show people who you are. They think you are from the city but they forget you were raised an Alan boy and had the best of both worlds – your heart is here with your people.’

“Cr Mosby continued to work on Poruma as a community services officer and was also involved in the consultation process that led to the formation of TSIRC.”

Later in 2016, Cr Mosby suffered another setback when he failed to win a third term in the TSIRC council election as the representative of Poruma.

“It was a kick in the guts because of the amount of work that I had done. I was really gutted,” Cr Mosby said.

“After the election Mum rang me from Cairns, where she was on dialysis suffering renal failure. She said, ‘The people have spoken but there are bigger and better things waiting for you.’

“I think she knew I would be mayor before I even knew I would run for it. As my sister says, it was our mother’s intuition.”

“From 2016 to 2020, Cr Mosby worked for TSIRC in several roles, as housing officer, public and media manager and events and campaign coordinator.

“I have been blessed to secure roles to see things from inside of the structure, to see what worked and what didn’t, and to be involved in the consultations with community and at the leadership level as well as in the engine room of service delivery.”

Cr Mosby only decided to run for mayor in February this year, but said: “I had been asked by cultural and spiritual leaders to run three years earlier.

“Serving as the second mayor since TSIRC formed in 2008, Cr Mosby said he learned a lot from his predecessor, and cousin, Cr Fred Gela.

“Fred is an intelligent man. I learnt a lot from him, especially seeing how he engaged with ministers and how strategic and articulate he was with the reports we were putting through,” he said.

“Fred is a man for whom I have a very high regard as a leader.

“When TSIRC was going through its teething issues with amalgamation, at that time he was the right man for the job. He was the man people could relate to and that they could trust.

“Fred served a purpose and a time, but now leading into uncertain times with Covid, constituents decided they wanted someone who has a close relationship with community and that message came across very, very strong.”