

May Lorna O'Brien – 20 May 1933 – 1 March 2020

May Lorna O'Brien came into each of our lives in a different way. For some she was family by blood, for others she was family by choice. But to almost everyone, she was the trail-blazing woman from, the Goldfields who we both admired and were inspired by, in a life that included three decades of outstanding service to the Western Australian Education Department, and by extension, to our State.

Over a 34-year period from the early 50s to the late 80s, May performed a variety of roles for the Department. She was the Superintendent of Aboriginal Education for a period and she was the Head of the Schools and Community Relations Unit for some time as well. There were also the years she worked tirelessly as a consultant informing Aboriginal education both here in WA and at a national level, but before all of this, she was a classroom teacher for 25 years.

Mt Margaret Mission Government School was May's first teaching appointment in 1954, and thus began the remarkable career of this extraordinary woman.

May O'Brien was born at Patricia, about 70km north-east of Kalgoorlie. Her birth was not recorded but information from the community indicates that she was born on the 20th of May, 1933. 'Loona' was her given name at birth but her family called her Lorna. It was when May spent a short time with a family that she thought might adopt her that she was given the name 'May'. This name stayed with her upon her placement in Mt Margaret Mission in 1938.

May was given several other names in her early years in order to hide her identity from the police. May was born in the days when the police removed light-skinned Aboriginal children from their parents.

On one occasion, the authorities - including the Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr Neville - came to Mt Margaret Mission looking for a young light-skinned Aboriginal girl called Lorna. They were suspicious upon seeing May and asked her several times to give them her name. Each time she replied "May". Even at that young age she knew what was really happening during this type of inquisition, for she recalled the police coming into the camps looking for Aboriginal children. When this happened, all the kids would go to the bush and hide but if it was too late to run, the adults would hide the children by wrapping them in their swags.

Mr Neville and the police left her alone when the missionary Mr Schenk confirmed that her name was May. He truly didn't know her by any other name, and May wasn't about to tell him differently! Thus May remained at Mt Margaret Mission and hereafter was known as May Lorna Miller.

May was at Mt Margaret Mission from 1938 until 1950, having been placed in the mission when she was just five years and three months old.

In 1950 May had the opportunity to go to Perth and further her education, along with three other girls from the Mission. They lived at Alvan House in Mount Lawley and attended Perth Girls' School. May was 17 years old and very excited about going to the big school even though she wasn't so keen on the ugly school uniform with its box pleats and belt in the middle.

Early in the school year she was informed by the principal that she was the oldest pupil in high school in WA and furthermore, due to her low results in the IQ test, she would be sent back to Mt Margaret. May was devastated but she was not about to have her dreams of becoming a teacher shattered just like that! She broke all the rules, and borrowed some money and went to the 'off-limits' phone booth and called Dr Robertson - the Director-General of Education whose details she

had seen one day and cleverly put in her prized telephone book! Her phone call had the desired effect and May remained at Perth Girls' School for two years.

In 1952 May commenced teacher training at Claremont Teacher's College where she successfully completed her junior primary teaching qualifications. May loved being at Claremont because for the first time in her life she was able to make her own decisions and do the things that she wanted to do. May became the first Aboriginal female teacher in Western Australia. She returned to Mt Margaret Mission and taught there for five years before being transferred to the Methodist Mission School at Mogumber.

After two years at Mogumber; May broke new ground and in 1961, she transferred to Mount Hawthorn Infant School and for the first time taught non-Aboriginal children - which was a significant moment in the history of education in WA. May taught at Mount Hawthorn for 10 years and then at Nollamara Primary School for eight years.

May's interest in politics really grew in 1972 when the Whitlam Labor Government came to power with Kim Beazley Snr the Minister for Education. May took the opportunity to provide advice to the Federal Government through the Aboriginal education portfolio of the School's Commission. Every second Friday she flew to Canberra attending meetings on Saturday and Sunday before flying home on Sunday night.

The Education Department supported May's role on the Commission and the important work she was doing. As a result, in August 1978 she stopped teaching at Nollamara Primary and became an Aboriginal education consultant for the Department. May then began rapidly climbing the ranks, progressing to Senior Education Officer and after that Superintendent of Aboriginal Education from 1985-1988.

In 1983 May was awarded the Churchill fellowship and spent four months in the USA, Canada and England.

In 1988, restructuring was taking place in the Education Department. Redundancy packages were being offered and May saw this as a good opportunity to explore her passions outside of teaching - in particular recording Aboriginal language and writing children's books of which she wrote 10 including the Badudu Stories which are anecdotes from her own childhood; and the Bawu Stories which are five traditional stories of the Wongutha people of the Eastern Goldfields in WA.

May sat on, and chaired, many committees, too numerous to list all of them. She actively participated in committees or boards that were about education, justice, child protection and reconciliation. From 1996 - 2002, she chaired the Aboriginal Education and Training Council, a ministerial council which provided independent grassroots advice to the WA Minister for Education.

May worked actively in education at the local, regional, state and national levels. She was a foundation member of the National Aboriginal Education Committee and actively contributed to Aboriginal education on countless national committees. May was appointed as one of seventeen Aboriginal Ambassadors whose role it was to promote the benefits of the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

May believed teaching was one of the most rewarding jobs on earth because of the opportunity it provides to mould the lives of students.

May received many accolades over the years, which she always received with her typical grace and humility. In 1977 May was awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) for her service to education

generally and to Aboriginal Education specifically. In 1991 she was made a Fellow of Edith Cowan University. May was inducted into the Education Department's Hall of Fame in 1998.

May was a proud Wongutha woman who lived a full and wholesome life. Her strong Christian faith had its foundation in her formative years at Mount Margaret Mission.

May married the love of her life, "her Charles Bronson", John (Jack) O'Brien in January 1972. May and Jack did not have any children together but remained happily married until Jack's passing in October 2017.

They were reunited in heaven on 1 March 2020.