

Dr Charles Nelson Perrurle Perkins AO
Arrernte and Kalkadoon Man
1936 – 2000

Charles's grandmother, Nellie Ererreke Perkins, and his mother Hetti, were Eastern Arrernte women, born at Arltunga. Hetti's young life was spent around the mines and working on pastoral stations. During this time she had eight children, Percival, Bill, George, Nita, Margaret, Alec, Don and May. Nita and Margaret were taken away from her at a young age and sent to Adelaide. She never saw them again. In 1935, Hetti met Martin Connelly while living at the Bungalow near Alice Springs. Martin's mother was a Kalkadoon woman from the Mt Isa region and his father was Irish. Hetti had two children to Martin. They named their first child, who was born in 1936, Charles Nelson Perkins, and his young brother, Ernest. Charles did not meet his father until he was 33 years old.

In 1945, Father Percy Smith, an Anglican priest, took Charles and other boys to Adelaide, with the permission of their mothers, to further their education. While Charles tried to make the most of the opportunity offered to him, he recalled the harsh discipline of the boys home, particularly after the departure of Father Smith. At St Francis House, the boys formed a strong, life-long bond with Father and Mrs Smith and each other. It was during his years in Adelaide that Charles began to understand the extent of discrimination against Aboriginal people.

Charles's outstanding skills as a soccer player led him to England in 1957 to play for Everton. On his return to Australia, his soccer career culminated in him playing as captain/coach for Pan-Hellenic in Sydney. He was passionate about soccer and it helped finance his way through university after he married Eileen in 1961 and they moved to Sydney. In Sydney, Ted Noffs was to influence and support him in his endeavours. Charles entered the University of Sydney in 1963 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in May 1966. He was the first Indigenous Australian to graduate from university. At this time, he was also instrumental in establishing the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney and forged a lasting connection with the Sydney Aboriginal community.

In the summer of 1965, Charles organised a group of thirty students to travel to Walgett, Moree, Bowraville and Kempsey to protest against discrimination and poor living conditions. In his autobiography, Charles said "The Freedom Ride was probably the greatest and most exciting event that I have ever been involved in with Aboriginal affairs". This unprecedented protest exposed the apartheid of country Australia and gave him a national profile in the media. He recognised that the media was a valuable tool to inform Australians of the plight of Indigenous Australians. He used it adeptly. In Canberra in 1972, he joined other young Aboriginal men at the Tent Embassy and defiantly called for compensation and recognition of Aboriginal land and human rights. It was also in this year that Charles received a life-saving kidney transplant.

Charles dedicated his life to achieving justice for Indigenous Australians. His extraordinary achievements included appointments as Secretary, Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Chairman, Aboriginal Development Commission and Aboriginal Hostels Ltd. He was actively involved in Indigenous organisations wherever he lived. He was elected ATSIC Commissioner in both Alice Springs and Sydney. In 1987 he was awarded the Order of Australia.

But it was at the community level that he was a household name. He was a renowned activist and a fearless spokesman. The last 30 years of his life were made possible by the kidney donation. This miraculous gift made him determined to make a difference for our people and he did.

Later in his life, Charles proudly fulfilled his cultural obligations with his passage through law with his people, the Eastern Arrernte.

Charles loved his family. He and Eileen have three children, Hetti, Adam and Rachel and four grandchildren, Tyson, Thea, Lille and Madeleine. His spirit is with us all.

On White Australia:

‘My expectation of a good Australia is when White people would be proud to speak an Aboriginal language, when they realise that Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, philosophy, art, language, morality, kinship, is all part of their heritage. And that’s the most unbelievable thing of all, that it’s all there waiting for us all. White people can inherit 40,000 or 60,000 years of culture, and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it.’

On being a bureaucrat:

‘Tread new fields. Break new ground. Make mistakes in achieving objectives. That’s what it’s all about. You’ve gotta do things in the space of one year that takes normal bureaucratic mechanisms to do in five to ten years. So you’ve gotta break a lotta rules – not deliberately so, but the best way you possibly can – so you achieve that objective in the quickest possible time . . . You’ve got people out there you’ve probably never met sleeping under trees, bad health, no chance of employment and probably need a feed and a decent drink of water. So what are you doing about it?’

On being removed:

‘. . . we’re gone. Taken away. My youth was taken from me by Australia, White Australia. When Aboriginal children are separated it dies, it dies; gone forever, never return, the connection is never made again. You always stay a little bit different. You may want to look down on people, or you may want to act differently, or you may have different values, for good or for bad. But you are different. That’s the way it is and that’s the way it will always remain.’

On the Freedom Ride:

‘That’s the beginning. The eyes. The meaning of the eyes. The relationship, the eye conversation between people. The incident outside the RSL club, that was the most dramatic part of everything. A lot of things fell in place after that. We knew what we had to do. It set the pattern, the template. The eye conversation I had with hundreds of Aboriginal people. In the semi darkness, the fading afternoon and in the heat of the day. Just looking. Just looking. At something. And I was looking back at them. We were wondering what it was all about. One day I’ll be able to explain it all I suppose. That was the magic message I got from the Freedom Ride.’

On Aboriginal culture:

‘It’s just another world. There’s another world out there and I didn’t really understand it, but I do now. It’s the same as when my friend, who came from up Derby way, saw his first white man. He was about 18 and he saw the first white man he’d ever seen coming towards him on the first horse he’d ever seen. Imagine that. Everything changes straight away doesn’t it . . . you sit there at night, with the fires burning and maybe 200 people dancing: it was awe-inspiring . . . you’re going back 50,000 years in time. It writes new chapters in your brain.’

On my life:

‘I am a descendant of a once proud tribe from Central Australia – the Arrernte people. Today we number very few and own nothing. We cringe like dogs at the prospect of the ‘White backlash’. We pray eternally that the White authority structure will not turn on us and impede what little progress we have made. We ask for land rights with tongue in cheek knowing full well in our hearts that the land belonged to us in the first instance. We stagger and stumble into each other in confusion when our identity . . . is contested and thus allow ourselves to be moulded by others. Our land, our pride and our future has been taken away from us and our people buried in unmarked graves. We wander through Australian society as beggars. We live off the crumbs of the white Australian table and are told to be grateful. This is what Australia Day means to Aboriginal Australians. We celebrate with you but there is much sadness in our joy. It is like dancing on your mother’s grave.’

(Many thanks to the Perkins family for permission to include this extract from, “State Funeral” program, Sydney Town Hall, 25th October 2000).