

Ngunawal Cultural Warrior's Dreamtime Gift

Donald Thomas Bell

Born: October 5, 1935

Died: March 16, 2008

Don Bell was a true Ngunawal Elder, a man of integrity who would treat all he met with an open heart and mind. It was because of this faith that he was admired, loved and respected both as a person and as an Aboriginal Elder who stood proud of his cultural heritage. Don's wife Ruth and his seven children, nineteen grandchildren and two great grandchildren survive him.

Don was born on Hollywood, an Aboriginal mission in Yass, 56 kms from Canberra. He was the first child to be born on the mission, the son of James (known as Eppie) and Christina Carroll (nee Brown). After James died, Christina remarried and Don took the surname Bell, after his step-father. He was the second youngest child of a family of eleven children who were all born at Yass or in its surrounding districts.

Don began his schooling at the Hollywood mission school, then at Nowra for a short time, before returning to the district to school at Bowning. However, family circumstances forced Don to leave school without completing a full education, beginning his working life at the tender age of twelve to help provide for his sick mother.

Starting work at such a young age he had to take whatever was available: travelling with the boxing tents, working on the railways, construction worker, abattoir worker and general labouring jobs. After much travelling, mainly around rural New South Wales, he returned to his own country to live at Jerrawa and work once again on the railways. Changing jobs, he then worked for the NSW Electricity Commission, now known as Transgrid. From there he was forced to retire early due to a medical condition.

He found it hard to retire, and eventually moved away to Wagga Wagga. His outgoing personality enabled him to gain casual employment mowing lawns for the elderly. At this stage he became more pro-active, involving himself in community groups and sitting on various committees. Don, being a Ngunawal Elder, realised that the culture he held so dear was not being recognised and treated with the respect it deserved.

Deciding that it was time to return to his own country, Don and his wife Ruth moved to live in Canberra. Together they became active in the local community, attending a whole range of functions that would allow Don to influence community attitudes by teaching people about his culture. This led him to sit on the ACT Older Australians Advisory Council and later its national body. The respect that was afforded to the depth and wisdom of Don's cultural knowledge, by all levels of the community, meant that he was widely consulted on all aspects of Ngunawal cultural heritage, its protection and conservation.

Don lived his life as a Ngunawal elder by example. Don once said, "I take pride in the fact that I have made many achievements during my time. The most memorable was being the first Aboriginal person to be permitted into a club or hotel in Yass. I was a keen cricketer who played in the winning team for the championship for Jerrawa and Yass districts. I was also a champion boxer for the region which led to my assisting young people to learn how to box through the Yass Police Boys Club."

Beyond his sporting endeavours Don also guided the deeper cultural life of local Aboriginal people. In his words, "I chaired the Buru Ngunawal Aboriginal Corporation, an organisation set up to make the wider community aware that the Ngunawal people do still exist and to protect our cultural heritage from being lost or destroyed. To aid in this task I have authored and published Aboriginal Dreamtime stories for use in schools and for the general public. My books are "Mununja the Butterfly", "The Swan", "Dyirri the Frog" and my next book, about how the cod and the perch were named, is nearing completion".

Don's commitment to the future of Aboriginal peoples meant that he liked to visit schools to speak to the children about Aboriginal culture and tell dreamtime stories. His own words best sum up what he set out to achieve. "I would like to be able to do some things now that in the long term will be of benefit to the younger generation of Aboriginal people that hopefully will follow in my footsteps and carry on the culture that I hold so dear. I can only hope that my small contribution can make it just a little easier for them to achieve their goals". Don was a proud teacher with a true sense of reconciliation.

[Not included in this obituary is that Don Bell was the first Aboriginal JP in the Yass area.]