

## **Citation for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of the University (DUniv)**

### **Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien**

Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien was born at Point Pearce mission, on the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, on 25th March 1930. Although born on Narungga country, Uncle Lewis is Kurna. His family relocated there in the nineteenth century, after the loss of the land-holdings of his great, great grandmother, Kudnarto, in the northern-most reaches of Kurna country, near the Clare District.

Uncle Lewis terms his childhood "difficult", a euphemism for a weakening jaundice till ten, being separated from most of his siblings and becoming a ward of the state at twelve. From then, until eighteen, he passed through a succession of foster homes, boy's homes and hostels. In 1946, despite barriers erected by foster parents and the 'Welfare' - Uncle Lewis gained his Intermediate Certificate. He then succeeded in a competitive process to gain an apprenticeship as a fitter and machinist with the South Australian railways. Taking off for up to three months at a time - to undertake sufficient grape-picking, bag-sewing or 'rabbiting' to supplement a meagre apprentice's wage - meant that he took an extra year, but finally qualified. At twenty-two, he was ready to join the merchant navy.

Uncle Lewis' grasp of culture, credited by him to his systematic instruction by Elders and relatives during the years at Point Pearce, is matched by a rare ability to locate Aboriginal philosophy in relation to, and in juxtaposition to, Western ways of knowing. All education is valuable to him, and he has spent as much of his life supporting Aboriginal children's attainments – beginning his work in schools in 1977 – as weaving Aboriginal knowledge and values into contemporary Australia.

As a Kurna Elder, Uncle Lewis has provided three decades of cultural and pastoral support to Aboriginal children, families and inmates. His face-to-face work has been complemented by substantial contributions to scholarly and creative domains, particularly with respect to the maintenance and promotion of Kurna language and culture. His body of work, however, includes significant political and community contributions that range from Aboriginal Advancement League involvement in the 1960s to leading organisations or committees concerned with heritage, arts, sport, reconciliation and all levels of education. His tertiary-level contributions have involved Kurna language support at the University of Adelaide, research support at the University of South Australia and student support, as a visiting Elder, at Flinders University. At the University of South Australia, he consulted on integrating Indigenous knowledge into science and engineering programmes, an Australian first.

His Flinders University activities have included being involved in reviews of Flinders University Centres; as Elder on the Indigenous Health Professional Education Advisory Committee; and as Patron/Elder-in-Residence to the Indigenous Preparation for Medicine Programme. As a panel member, he has provided valuable input to Non-Indigenous students of the Faculty of Health Sciences grappling to connect Aboriginal experience and health outcomes. He has also contributed to curriculum development and teaching within Yunggoendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research. Uncle Lewis' demonstrations of Aboriginal pedagogical modes, using the mechanism of string 'games', are well-known and mesmerising. University-wide, he has provided input as a Kurna Language speaker and offered a Kurna Welcome to Country at Flinders University events. Many staff and students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, acknowledge his mentorship and counsel. Finally, as a particularly-respected Elder, he has provided cultural advice and expert knowledge around general matters concerning South Australian Aboriginal communities to Flinders University.

Overall, Uncle Lewis O'Brien's activities have been central to a re-inscribing of a Kurna presence into the Adelaide topographical and cultural landscape and an imbrication of vital Aboriginal knowledge, protocols and conceptualisations into the national purview.

11 August 2011