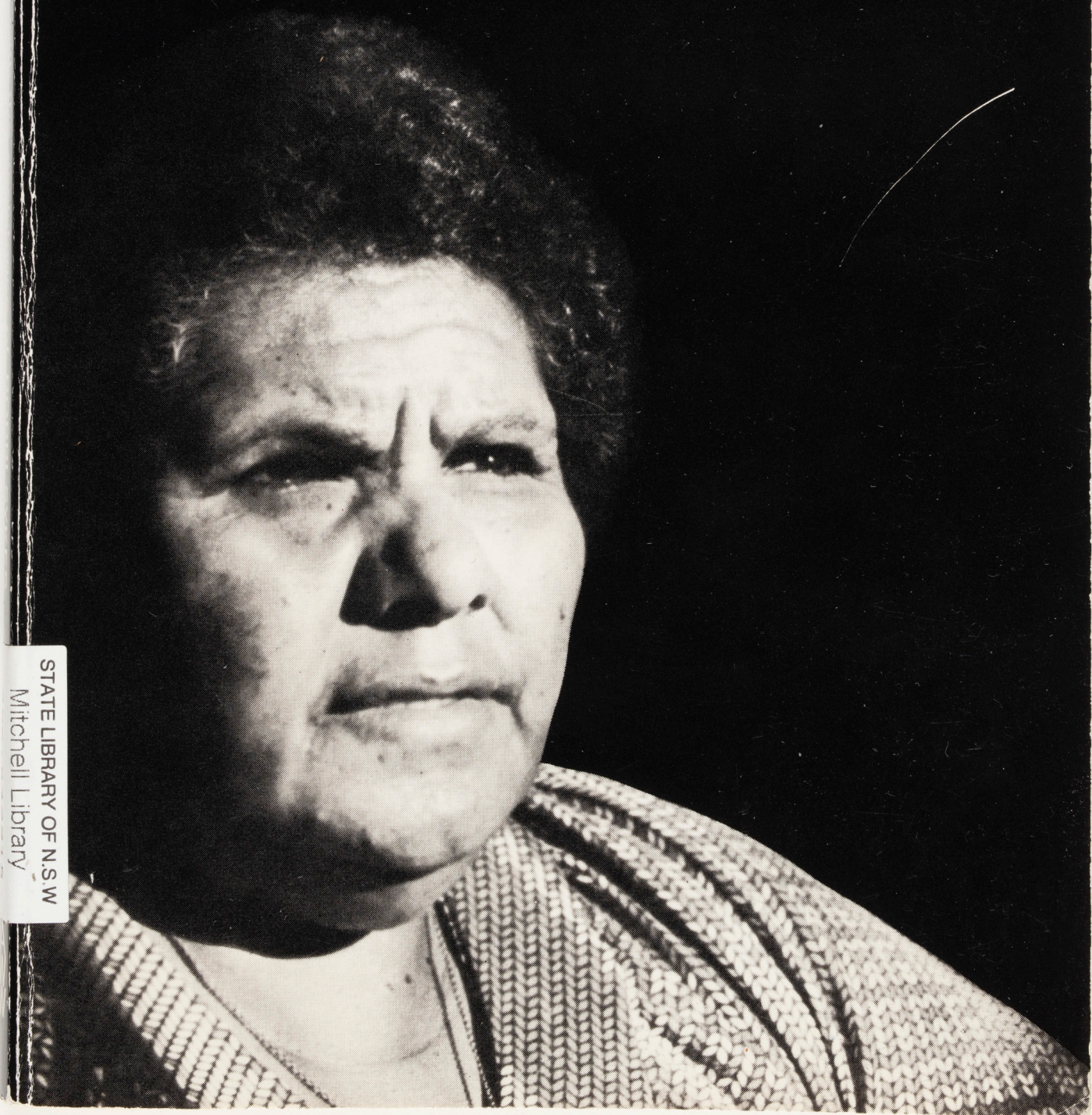


# Mum Shirl

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY —  
with the assistance of **BOBBI SYKES**



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I cried for months and still cry when I think of it. If only . . . if only I had not been so tired; if only there had been someone else to call who could just come in and stay with this girl, this beautiful girl who was grappling with such a big problem just then, and who needed a friend so badly, just then.

But you see everybody has their own families and they have to go home and cook and clean for them and be there with them, and they don't know about this girl. Very few Black people have telephones, so it is not as though I could ring around and find out who was free to come in. And this young girl, right then, needed another Black person to be with her, who would maybe just sit there, follow her around and put their hand in her hand.

When I think about this, I think of the Government and how they talk about all they think they are giving to Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people have had to fight to get money to run the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service, everything. They had to fight on the streets, get arrested, get their heads kicked in by the Police and get carted away in paddy-wagons — to draw attention to some of our needs, like the Aboriginal Housing Company where many people had to be ar-

rested before the Government understood the desperation of homeless Aboriginal people.

Still they give so little. We can't run a twenty-four hour service because we can't afford to. The people who work in the Services, they have their families, too, and they have to worry about where to get enough money to pay the rent and their electricity bills and buy warm coats for the children.

So many Aboriginal people already do, and always have done, so much for no pay, that money doesn't enter into it even though they all have big needs too. People will and do work for nothing, so I know we could run the sort of Service that could have helped this girl and the many others who get these big problems and who need somebody with them to help them sort it out. In that way, we have the people, but we do not have the money to pay for a building from which we could work, and while Aboriginal people will work for nothing, phones will not, and lights will not, and all the other things that we need to kick off such an operation do not come cheap, and we just don't have the money.

The Government puts out through the radio and the newspapers that they give Aboriginal people so many millions of dollars every year. But it is like a piece of elastic, all stretched out, and when they let it go, it springs back into just being a little piece. And the Aboriginal people end up with so little that people die all the time.

This isn't the only young girl; there have been others and young men, too. When they reach out, there isn't anybody there. I can't be everywhere at once and the other people who are doing the same sorts of things; they can't be everywhere at once. We need more Black people able to do these sorts of things, and they need to know that

their rents are taken care of, and they need strong and warm shoes and coats, so they can get out there and not have to worry about these things for themselves so they can help with the worries of other people.

So many Aboriginal people don't get jobs, can't get jobs, or the bosses won't give them jobs.



A very few, very lucky, young people are now getting on in education, and in years to come they might get jobs. But mainly our people are not given jobs. If the young boy who finishes school at about age fifteen doesn't get a job for four or five years, he gets used to having no job. He doesn't get used to it and like it, but he accepts that that is all he is going to get out of life.

But what does that do to him? He wants to be a man and look after first maybe his mother, or his parents and later he thinks about looking after a wife and children of his own. He plans these things and they don't happen. They look like they are never going to happen and he can't make them happen.

Even though white people say Blacks love to live on the social services, they don't. The little bit of money might keep body and soul together between jobs, but a person can't plan their lives on the soco (social welfare). They can't plan to ask a girl to marry them; they can't plan to save up and buy a bed or a fridge, or rent a place and set up a home. They can't want the normal things any man would want.

White people also say that if we have so many people on the soco, we ought to have a whole lot of people who are doing nothing and can therefore work in the organisations. This shows that they don't understand much about Blacks, or about people at all.

For instance, a Black who is on soco and can't get a job doesn't feel

good about himself. Apart from the little bit of money, which is never enough, they just don't feel good about getting it anyway. In order to live on that little bit of money, they have to spend so much time chasing after the cheapest everything. So they go to one supermarket and look at the price of a tin of baked beans, and then they go up the road a few blocks and look at the price there of the same tin and then they find they have to walk back to the first shop as their price was the cheapest to start with. Every little thing is that much trouble.

After a while, they get depressed about doing things that way and they get to the point where they don't care and then they buy the baked beans at the corner shop which is handy, doesn't wear out shoe leather and charges a lot more. When they run out of money, if they have spent enough in the corner shop the people who run it might let them book (obtain credit and pay later when they get their social welfare cheque). By then, they are living on their next fortnight's cheque, and have to start hoping for it to arrive on time.

A lot of their time is spent cruising around the streets, looking out for their friends and relations in the hope that some good thing might have happened to one of them; that they might have some money, or found a job, or won at the TAB. Then they might be able to borrow enough money, a few dollars, to get them through until their own cheque arrives in a few



days or maybe even more than a week's time.

**B**ecause they are always so short of money, they can't buy the right things to eat. Oh, yes, well, we have people at Aboriginal Medical Service and at the Health Commission and other places, whose job it is to tell Blacks what it is they are supposed to be eating. I even do the same thing myself at times, telling people to eat an orange, or a piece of steak and some vegetables. But what do you do when the Black person you are talking to has no money, or very little money? How do you say to that person, 'Look, your energy is right down and you need to eat something green like a lettuce or some cabbage and something like a carrot or a piece of pumpkin', and that person probably has enough money to buy one carrot for today, and nothing for the next two days?

**S**ome of them will say right out, 'I have enough money to buy one orange or take the bus back to where I live', and that's only the lucky few who are able to say it, because most feel so shamed about it that they find it hard to say anything at all. So it is not realistic to ask these people, with all their own problems, to work for free in the organisations and help other people by listening to their problems.

You've got to have a certain amount of your own security, like a place to live, food to eat and knowing your own family is looked

after, as well as not too many of your own problems, before you can help anybody else with their worries.

**S**o what happens to these young people who don't get jobs? They begin to waste away. If it is a person who is by themselves, either a boy or a girl, they can get very lonely and that kills them. If it is a young man who has a wife or a girl-friend and they can't get a job for a very long time, they just go down in themselves, often break off with their wife or girl-friend, because they can't stand the shame of seeing the other one hungry or needing things.

See these looks on people's faces long enough, or often enough, and you don't want to see them anymore. So you go down to the hotel and buy a drink, or hang around outside until somebody you know comes by and offers to get a drink for you, and there you are, inside, with lots of people, smiling, because they have had a few drinks. The juke-box is playing and everybody is talking, warm and friendly to each other, so you want to stay there because outside there are people who are hungry, who need money, who have no smiles and no music.

**H**ow many young lives are wasting away in these places? How many young Blacks go back to their rooms and feel that they can't face another day? How many feel that there are only two ways to go — the quick way, or the long way?



them. As these people also often chip in and help out with some of the immediate problems of some of the Black families, I do try to get out to talk with them and explain a few things. Some other Blacks also try to get around and talk to these groups, but there are too few of us and sometimes too many groups asking. Sometimes, too, the groups are just asking for someone to come and talk to them out of their own interest and not out of a desire to help. I'm not saying that's bad; it would be nice if we could go and talk to everybody who was interested, but the truth is that there are few of us who are able to go.

**I**n the early 1970s, for instance, when there was a lot of newspaper coverage about Aboriginal protests, there was also a lot of response from the white community, in that many groups wanted us to come out and talk to them.

Some of these groups just wanted to be told that we were not going to break out in riots, that we were not going to start carrying guns and other things like that which they seemed to fear so much. These groups would ring up and ask someone to come out from one of the organisations. Many of these meetings would be at night. The person who said they would go would often have to make family arrangements, get their children minded and make their own way out into white suburbs in the dark; suburbs where they had never been before.

The Black organisation would

not be in any position to pay the person's expenses, much less pay them for their time. When they arrived at the group, they would likely be offered a cup of tea or coffee, but very few would offer to give them back the money they had spent on fares, or to pay them for their time. Some of our community's good speakers at this time had small families, and would get in a babysitter who they would pay a few dollars, and when they came home they would be very much out of pocket. It turned out that it was costing us a lot to tell these white people that we were not about to start any riots and that all the events which were taking place were in self-defence. After a while, quite a lot of these speakers just wouldn't go any more, and they were criticised by white people who said we had become 'unfriendly'.

For many of us, however, it was not just a question of money; it was also a question of time. We could be here in our own community helping out, or out there in the white community not quite sure if our talking was helping anybody at all.

**M**y work, and the work of the other Blacks who are doing things in a similar sort of way as I do, is very hard to talk about, probably because it is not a job, it is a way of life. We don't start at any particular time in our lives, or at any particular time of the day. If the door knocks in the middle of the night, we open it. If the phone rings, we answer it. Saturdays and Sundays run into each other. We



can be up all night talking with some person who has that sort of problem, out at the prison at early morning, back at the Courts at 10 o'clock, at the Aboriginal Medical Service at mid-day, at the Children's Court in the afternoon, at a meeting to talk with some people about what we are doing in the evening, and likely as not, another meeting in the night.

Then when we get home at maybe midnight, there can be another phone message asking us to be somewhere urgently, or even someone sitting in the front room waiting all evening for the chance to talk. How can we say what we do?

When I first started visiting the prisons, I would ask for the person I wanted to speak with, and while most often I was allowed to speak with them, sometimes I was not. It was up to the superintendent at the prison to decide who could see who, but sometimes the warder or official behind the front desk would make the decision. When I later learnt the ropes, I learned that when the person on the desk made the decision, and when that decision meant I couldn't see the prisoner, I would ask to see the superintendent. Sometimes this got decisions changed to my favour, and sometimes it didn't.

However, I got to know most of the superintendents in the old days in just this way, and I had very little respect for any of them. Eventually they somehow began to think of me as some sort of welfare officer, and to say to each other, 'Let this wel-

fare officer in to see Prisoner X', but I wasn't a welfare officer, just an ordinary person, and not being paid by anyone.

When the State Penitentiaries, as they were then called (each being separately run by the superintendent in charge), were pulled together into the Corrective Services Department, the Department began issuing cards to people which were really passes to allow them to visit prisoners.

Through the mail, after the proper forms had been filled out, arrived this little piece of cardboard, which gave me the status of an Official Visitor. It wasn't the end of my problems of getting in and being allowed to see people, but it sure helped. I even became friendly, if you can consider only ever talking with people behind counters and desks as 'friendly', with some of the people who worked in the Department. These cards with which we were issued were stamped to expire on a certain date each year, and we had to go back at regular times every year to get another one.

After Mr. McGeechan was appointed in charge of prisons in 1968, I met him at the office and spoke to him on the phone many times. By that time, we had quite a large number of Aboriginal people in the goals and it was taking so much time to get around and try to see them all. I was getting some other people to help me — Father Allen Mithen and two Cath-



## *12: Waiting for Change*

For over twenty years, my life was filled up with all sorts of interesting things, but in a way, it could be said that I wasn't getting anywhere at all. I was going into prisons visiting and being called upon by quite a lot of different sorts of Government people and Departments to help, and all the time I was just receiving the Invalid Pension.

Because of the many people in need that I was dealing with and travelling in and out to see Government Departments all the time, I was always spending my own little bit of money on fares or on other people and getting into all sorts of trouble in my own life because I couldn't pay my own bills.

When I was younger, I used to have to jump goods trains to get around a lot and I thought myself lucky when I had the few bob for the fare and could sit in a seat in an ordinary passenger train. My electricity was cut off so many times I've lost count and my rent was always dragging behind and I don't like to talk about the trouble that caused me.

There was a policeman who had been in Cowra when I was young, and who had been called, up there, 'Uncle Abe'. It is very unusual for a policeman to be on familiar terms like that with the Aboriginal people in a town, but he was quite a decent bloke. He was transferred down to Sydney and after a while became Inspector Foster in charge of Newtown Police Station.

He had known me for quite a long time then, and knew the sorts of things that I was doing. He used to encourage other police officers to call on me when there was a problem regarding the Black community, such as someone who might have a warrant out for their arrest. This would give me the chance to get in touch with the person, and in a lot of cases, I would go with this person to the Police Station when they gave themselves up.

When the person went before the Court, the fact that they had given themselves up would be brought up in the Court, and I was often called upon then to explain the person's circumstances and



maybe even the circumstances of how they had surrendered themselves which goes down much better on their record. Often it wasn't that the person was trying to get away from the Law, but rather that they did not understand the Law and were frightened by it. Sometimes they were not even aware that there was a warrant out for them, or even what a warrant meant.

Apart from that arrangement with the Newtown Police Station, for which they paid me in courtesy, I suppose, I also did work for the Child Welfare Department. Barbara Burgess, who was the head of the regional office in Newtown and with whom I had a long association, would arrange for me to be notified if there was a problem regarding an Aboriginal child. Sometimes I would be asked to locate the parents of a child and again I often found that the parents were afraid of this Government institution, which was why they were staying away from it and not coming forward and claiming their child. The welfare department had a terrible name amongst the Aboriginal people for coming and taking children away. It was like a punishment that happened to people when they were already having a hard time because they had no money.

Sometimes, though, the Child Welfare people had come by a child because its parents were in prison, or dead, or sick, and they wanted help in placing the child with relatives who might be in a position to look after it. I would look into this

for them. I always lived in the Newtown/Stanmore/Erskineville area, so they could contact me quite easily and I was also handy to look for the families as most of the Aboriginal people lived around this area too.

At the time I had no idea of reward and no idea of politics. I often wished things would get better, but could see no way that this could happen. I suppose I felt that I couldn't make things better and I was waiting for white people to change things. However, the whole time I was waiting for changes to come through white people, nothing ever happened and things remained the same. The Aboriginal community was getting bigger and I was dealing with more and more people, but it was the same problems year after year, and often the same faces, with some new ones thrown in too.

Sometimes I thought of how lonely I was in a private sort of way, when I saw others getting married, or went to their weddings or christenings, and my sisters' and brother's families were growing, too. Oh, yes, I was surrounded by people and in stress I could talk to my sister Ethel, but she had her own large family to care for and there was no particular 'one' for me. Much earlier, years after my marriage broke up, I met a nice man. He was a Fijian and I was very much in love with him for a while. I even spoke to my brother about the possibility of marrying him. But even though I wasn't a practising Catholic, I was a Catholic and I