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# SOMEBODY NOW

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The Autobiography of Ellie Gaffney,  
a woman of Torres Strait

he was informed by the matron that I had the tidiest room in the nurses quarters. That's not bad I suppose, considering I was told that there were seven hundred of us training at various stages.

I returned home to work as a single certificate sister until I was able to start my midwifery training in six months time at the Brisbane Women's Hospital, now Royal Brisbane Women's Hospital. This was a twelve months course with practical experience. During the time I worked at home as a sister, I worked at the Waiben Chest Hospital. Waiben was the main hospital of the two on Thursday Island to combat the high percentage of tuberculosis patients from the Torres Strait and Aboriginal communities. The other was a rehabilitation centre called the Aplin Hospital.

The Waiben Hospital was staffed by nursing sisters on rotation from the Thursday Island Hospital, but it had its own chest physician, Dr Hales from England, who only recently died in 1985, leaving his wife Jenny and two sons who were born on Thursday Island. Tuberculosis claimed a few lives in the period from 1952 to the early 1960s but the effort put in by the health department and workers was such a tremendous success that it was almost eradicated, to the extent that the Waiben and Aplin Hospitals were no longer needed. They have been converted into flats for Torres Strait Islanders, and Dr Hales was able to return to England.

When the Waiben Hospital was functioning there were ten wards, and each ward would have ten to fourteen inpatients. Every ward was usually full all the time. Because of the treatment technique, the patients were usually long term, from six months to two years.

There were eight sisters on the roster, two on duty each day, evening and night, and two on days off. Each ward would have one nurse each during the day, and half the staff at evening shift, and one each for male and female on night duty. Including all the industrial staff, the staff establishment was quite large. When Waiben and Aplin closed, many local people became redundant and unemployed. The Aplin Hospital was the first to close. Aplin was a centre between Waiben and home for patients; from Waiben they would stay for some time at Aplin to prepare them to become part of society again. When the patients were

at home and felt they were having a relapse, Aplin would take them if the doctor felt they would be better off not to be re-admitted to Waiben. Aplin would assist with rest, diet, chemotherapy and other social aspects to help them get on with living.

Meantime, I returned to Brisbane to start my midwifery training at the Brisbane Women's Hospital. My twelve months there were good but not fun, because it was a full and intense course for that period. I felt I learnt more about midwifery after my training through practical experience and reading.

## *Nursing back home*

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I couldn't wait to return home again to nurse when I completed my midwifery training and to be with the family again. I was convinced that my family, especially my brother Frank's wife Selina shared my feelings. Selina and I had been mates ever since we were born, and for her to marry my brother and produce many beautiful children made me feel part of them, and I longed to be back with them and share their happiness.

Anyway, I returned, and even with all the excitement of being home again, I have to admit I was stopped in my tracks because of various policies concerning sisters and doctors which had been implemented by the so called authorities. In those days, that's in the 1950s, early 1960s, I believed the hospital's decisions were greatly influenced by the Thursday Island tennis club, to which the self appointed cream of Thursday Island society (all white) belonged. When the tennis club deteriorated as the 'social cream' saw it, because black people were learning to play tennis, another club was structured, and anybody who classed themselves above the black Torres Strait Islanders joined this bowling club. Today it's just an ordinary bowling club. All the power the people believed they projected has been diminishing since the Whitlam government came into power and gave status recognition to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Here I was, back home, and accommodated in the sisters quarters. What's unusual about that? Nothing, normally, but this was Thursday Island and there had never been a black sister from Thursday Island to be accommodated before. So notices for sisters in the sisters home and dining room appeared to me as racist. There were notices such as: 'Nursing sisters must not attend coloured Islander's parties or homes. They must not travel in unauthorised vessels.'

And that's just about every vessel except for the Torres Strait pilots or any white owned vessels. Well I suppose I made history, I was allowed to live in the sisters quarters and have meals in the staff dining room, which catered for the nursing sisters and doctors and any other white staff, whether they were academics or labourers.

There was another dining room, which catered for the Torres Strait Island nurses, domestics or any other local staff, who were usually industrial staff. Fifteen years later I was relieving the matron for part of her long service leave, and during this time I was to attend a statistics meeting in Brisbane and would be absent for four days. Before leaving for Brisbane, I employed the first Torres Strait Islander to become a trained and registered Enrolled Nurse's Aide (ENA). To me it was normal to put her in the trained nurses quarters, where the sisters were accommodated, as well as other white enrolled nurse's aides. On my departure, the next senior sister became the acting matron in my absence.

On my return before the weekend, I failed to see this young woman, the ENA, around the quarters; I thought she may have gone home for the weekend. On Monday morning, I saw her ironing her uniform in the laundry and greeted her, then went off to breakfast and waited to see her in the dining room, but she didn't turn up for breakfast. At lunch time, some sisters and I were making our way to the dining room and so was the nurse. When we arrived at the dining room, the nurse made for the other dining room. I called to her and enquired why she wasn't dining with us. She looked very embarrassed and said she would see me in the office after the lunch break to explain. During this meeting she informed me that the acting matron in my absence suggested to her that perhaps she would feel far more comfortable living in the coloured nurses quarters, and eating with them, and she felt that the acting matron was giving her a hint that she wasn't welcome in the white quarters, hence her shift.

I thought it was a very unusual approach for my reliever to take, especially when the nurse had lived with white staff for two years, at the hospital where she did twelve months training and during the next twelve months while she was working in a big Melbourne hospital. Here at this tiny tin pot hospital we had to put up with racial discrimination. When I approached my reliever, she didn't deny it or apologise, but she

made sure she told the matron on her return that I had questioned the decision. I was informed about this after I left. Life was made unbearable for the nurse involved, so that she too left, never to return.

At the time of writing this book, there are altogether five Torres Strait Islanders trained as sisters. There was also the young woman Ena, who did it without the tag 'Aborigine and Islander' to qualify her for an Abstudy grant. In fact, more Torres Strait Island women were trained before the introduction of these kinds of assistance schemes. There is nothing wrong with those tags, except to say that without the tag, the road is longer, harder and bumpier. We did it like any other Australian, we went through the same pain and pleasure as our colleagues. The incentive to return home to work is killed because of the parochial and discriminatory attitudes inflicted on us by these pseudo experts. I was banned by these experts from working at this tin pot hospital on Thursday Island for six years, for the sole reason that they disapproved of my private life, not because of any defect in my nursing, which I believe was some of the best nursing care, if not the best they have ever had at the Thursday Island Hospital, at that time.

I was a supporting mother of two very young girls, and to remain on the island to be near my elderly father whose health was failing, I had to get a job at the local pub as a kitchen maid. I was a double certificate sister, the only qualified Torres Strait Islander, as I still am. I had to work from 7.00 am to 2.00 pm then from 5.00 pm to 8.30 pm five days a week for \$25.00 a week. I was scrubbing and polishing floors, washing up, polishing silver and furniture, peeling vegetables plus other menial tasks that reduced me in the eyes of my people, thinking 'what's the point of seeking qualifications?'

I approached the matron and the local magistrate who was the chairman of the Hospital Board many times to question their parochial decision, and to seek reinstatement. They would look at me and say, 'it is the Board's decision'. I worked under these conditions for ten months until I met my husband of today who was working at the court house under the very same magistrate. The magistrate disapproved of our association and warned my husband to disassociate himself from my company, but these orders fell on my husband's deaf ears. He

continued to see the children and I, while working at the court house and doing his external studies as an article clerk of law.

When the magistrate couldn't have his way, he requested the police to take my husband into their care and see to it he was transferred off Thursday Island the next day. Poor Tony (my husband) was in a state of shock that this could really happen. Tony was transferred to Brisbane and had to confront the under secretary of that day, who advised him that if he continued to see me, and married me, it would affect his decisions if he was confronted with Aborigines and Islanders when he sat on the bench after he qualified. Tony decided to give up his studies and resign and to meet me in Cairns and get married. It wasn't an easy decision for Tony because he had to give up something he really loved and that was law.

When Tony and I were married, in a Roman Catholic church because it pleased Tony who is a Catholic, we received letters from anonymous people objecting. One even suggested that if Tony ever realised that getting married to me was a mistake, they had the power to seek annulment from the Pope. I wonder many times over if those pontifical poops ever regretted inflicting those hardships on my husband. They even blocked him from securing clerical work, so that Tony had to work in a fertilizing plant as a labourer, something he wasn't used to. Handling the fertilizer bags gave him blisters and his hands became raw. I had to bathe and treat them every night. I couldn't get work at any of the hospitals at first because of black balling by the Thursday Island Hospital. This persecution was not reserved just for me; many other outspoken sisters suffered the same intimidation until matrons of other hospitals woke up to themselves, and started employing these sisters on their own merit.

Well, with my not working and Tony only earning \$50.00 a week for fifty hours, he had to work overtime. So his working day would start at 7.00 am and finish at 10.00 pm, five days a week to bring in \$95.00 a week to meet expenses. During this time Tony and I decided to take out on hire purchase an electric fry pan costing \$39.00. Well, six months later, we were able to claim it as ours. That's how poor we were, but our standard of living never ever dropped, against the wishes of some people who were against our marriage.

Over the years Tony and I gradually worked ourselves into the situation we are in today. We lived and worked in Cairns, Brisbane and the Northern Territory. In 1977 I received a letter from a Thursday Islander who informed me that the matron of the Thursday Island Hospital would be retiring and some of the people on the island would like me to apply for the position. When we were holidaying on Thursday Island that year, I was approached by many people with the same request. At that time I was living in Darwin, employed by the Northern Territory Health Department and working at the Darwin General Hospital.

I discussed the requests with my husband and explained that if I was to be an applicant, I would want to do further training and studies to obtain a diploma in Applied Science in Nursing Administration, because I wanted to have the full qualifications as well as the experience when I applied. My husband's response was that he would support me in anything I did, but we didn't need it, which we didn't. We both had good jobs and were well paid. We owned our brick home, and the kids were happy with school and Darwin. However, I proceeded with applying to do the course at the Queensland Institute of Technology and was accepted in the 1979 class. So the family and I moved to Brisbane after securing an Abstudy grant. The decision to move cost us \$16,000, which was big money in those days. The \$16,000 included my loss of wage of \$12,000 and Tony's drop in wages was by \$1,500. The rest was in moving and setting up again.

This obsession of mine to be fully qualified was because I didn't want people to say I got the job because I was a Torres Strait Islander. I knew I had two certificates and twenty-six years of experience in active nursing but I wanted the real thing because no-one else had had it before in that position. So I did the course and obtained my diploma, and when the time came, I applied for the job. My application was never acknowledged until I made an enquiry and they acknowledged it after they had decided I wasn't for the job.

Prior to this time my husband decided we were coming home to Thursday Island. He honestly believed and so did I, that at this time when government was crying for self management, how could there be a decision not to employ one of their own who had the experience



and qualifications. The advertisement requested a nursing administrator, which would usually mean someone with general nursing, midwifery and administration qualifications and experience. I had them plus I was a local indigene.

So my husband and children moved to Thursday Island in April 1980. I still had to complete my contract with the Northern Territory Health Department. By this time we had moved the Darwin Hospital to the new Casuarina Hospital. Whilst my husband was on Thursday Island he was informed by a person who had no connection with the Hospital Board that the matron's position had been determined and it wasn't me.

I still moved to Thursday Island and the Thursday Island Hospital Board still hadn't advised me that I was unsuccessful, yet they were planning the send-off for the retiring matron, and planning to receive the new one, a white male, Warren Hann. Many of the people of Thursday Island were angry about the Board's decision, and formed an organisation called the Torres Strait Forum to be a platform for Islanders with grievances, particularly about discrimination in employment.

The Forum requested from the Board the reason for their decision against me. Their reason was that Warren had more qualifications than I. On research the Forum discovered that while Warren had a Diploma in Nursing Education, he didn't have his administration qualifications. The Forum felt the Board were being deceitful and parochial and they wrote to the State and Federal Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs and Health and called for the sacking of the Thursday Island Hospital Board because of their discriminatory attitude.

While the nursing superintendent and I are very good friends and I support his work amongst our people, I am honestly of the opinion that the Board was not ready for an Island woman at a decision making level. The Board is made up mainly of white men many of whom are Catholics and belong to the National Party, except for two black Torres Strait Island men who are Anglican. But the fact remains that there are no women, or black ones at that, on the Board, which is discriminatory. Whilst I am writing this part of the book six years later the nursing superintendent is in Brisbane at the Queensland Institute of Technology doing the course of Applied Science in Nursing

Administration, since his appointment to the Thursday Island Hospital as the nursing administrator.

Even though at that time nursing was my love, I became repulsed by the dirty politics played by men on the Hospital Board who knew nothing about health care, so I decided to end my nursing career. When Evelyn Scott, the regional manager for Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, offered me a job with their company, I accepted.

I worked for Hostels for three years, during the setting up of the Jumula Dubbins Hostel. During that three year period, the Torres Strait Forum, working with the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation, tried to set up a Islander Community Health Care Centre, but met with resistance from the hospital's medical and nursing staff.

Towards the end of my time at Hostels, I became involved in bringing media in the form of radio and newsletter to the Torres Strait. So when I left Hostels, the area officer for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, John Scott, had discussions with me about becoming a National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals (NESA) trainee under him. I was to work on setting up and incorporating the Torres Strait Islanders Media Association (TSIMA) and starting the training of local broadcasters for Radio Torres Strait. We also had to organise setting up the radio studio to broadcast from Thursday Island.

## *Education*

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Education in the Torres Strait has trailed behind that for other indigenous races. Many blamed the missionaries, others blamed the Department of Community Services, or even blamed the Torres Strait Islanders, but no-one blamed the providers of education. For so long they remained righteous.

Early teaching in the Torres Strait was always transmitted orally, associated with demonstrative learning and re-enactments. Since institutionalised learning intervened, most of the oral teaching has been replaced by written education, with the emphasis on the English language and customs. Many of the Torres Strait Islanders customs were denounced and ridiculed, and moves taken to make the Islanders white. Through TSIMA my move was to restore our culture and language. Because of the past socialisation period, our people were starting to believe that our way of life is subservient to that of white Australians.

When our people strove to advance with this mental picture, they aped the white person because of their distorted picture of advancement. In my view, education in the Torres Strait was still-born for generations. Educators came and went on to better things, but education remained as a uterine inertia. It just didn't get the stimulus to contract and expel and then develop. This was partly because special people were needed to deliver the education, and the need for involvement of Torres Strait Islanders in making decisions on education. I will come back to this later.

At this point I would like to mention that at a press conference in Canberra in May 1987 the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, told the media that it was twenty years since the 1967 Referendum took place which changed the lives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He gave recognition to the Aboriginal

leaders of that time for their tenacity in pursuing advancement for their people through politicians and churches.

Holding was most likely referring to the Aboriginal people who started their fight for betterment in 1932 when William Cooper from Cummeragunga formed the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne in protest at the conditions under which Aboriginal people were forced to live. This was the beginning of the Aboriginal struggle. They sent petitions to King George V and to government departments, they held meetings, rallies and marched for better living conditions. Many Aboriginal organisations formed throughout Australia, creating a network which eventually became FCAATSI.

FCAATSI stands for the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Initially it was FCAA for Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement, and in 1964 the Torres Strait Islanders were included so that it became known as FCAATSI. Torres Strait Islanders Etti Pau, Jacob Abednigo and Ted Loban had joined the organisation at the invitation of Joe McGinness. FCAATSI became the national body with over sixty affiliated organisations from all over Australia and played a major role in the equal wages case in the Northern Territory, land rights legislation and changing laws to provide equality with Europeans in education, housing, health and employment.

FCAATSI was also instrumental in launching a national campaign in favour of the 1967 Referendum to have the two clauses which discriminated against Aborigines removed from the constitution. Prior to the 1967 Referendum, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were under the one ministerial portfolio of flora, fauna, fisheries and Aborigines, and probably in that order.

The referendum succeeded; ninety-one per cent of the voters said 'yes' in May, 1967. At the FCAATSI annual meeting held in Canberra during Easter 1978, the conference changed its name to National Aboriginal Islander Liberation Movement (NAILM). The non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of FCAATSI who had made a worthwhile contribution in the struggle withdrew and branches closed down rapidly.

The first president of FCAATSI was Charles Duguid in 1958, followed by Doris Blackburn in 1959, and in 1960 Don Dunstan, who went on to be Premier of South Australia. From 1961 an Aborigine, Joe McGinness was the president, and held the position for many years, with Gordon Bryant MHR as the senior vice-president. So it was these people, and others such as Sir Douglas Nicholls, Charles Perkins, Rita and John Moriarty, the Jackomos and Briggs families and many, many more that the Aboriginal and Islander people today have to thank for better living conditions, services, employment and education.

The providers of education are only a recent addition. The people mentioned had to do it the hard way; they had no money for travel, and were never paid, but their aim was to achieve equal rights for their people. Therefore the 1967 Referendum opened the gates into greener pastures, and gave the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders two major schemes to assist our people to improve their access to education with financial and other assistance.

The two schemes are the Aboriginal Secondary Assistance Scheme (Absec) and the Aboriginal Study Assistance Scheme (Abstudy). The Abstudy scheme was established in 1968 soon after the 1967 Referendum. The scheme recognised that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are disadvantaged and aimed to help them achieve their educational, economic and social objectives by providing opportunities for further study and training after leaving school. The Absec scheme was established in 1970 to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to take full advantage of educational opportunities at secondary school. The Commonwealth Department of Education administers the scheme in close consultation with the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC).

The schemes are not legislated. The policy is approved by the Federal Minister for Education with approval from Cabinet, and may change as needs are recognised. Therefore as far as education in the Torres Strait goes, we have a lot to thank our Aboriginal brothers and sisters for always including us in what they achieved, whether it's health, housing, education or whatever. In this case it's education.

I was not familiar with the workings of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Consultative Committee (QATSICC) and