

## Walking with the Wongi, My Journey

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When I immigrated to Australia as a child, I left behind all of my extended family. It had a profound effect on my feelings of being connected, of knowing who I belonged to and who my ancestors were. I suffered greatly through this.

In 1993 I developed a close relationship with Kathleen Northover, an Indigenous woman who was my neighbour in Collie in the south west of Western Australia. We became great friends and she invited me to be part of her very large family. I greatly admired her and valued her family's kinship. I featured the Northovers and their interaction with the wider community in my 1995 exhibition *Noongahs and Wadjulas*.

I wanted to know more about Indigenous Australians and decided to travel to Kalgoorlie in 1994 to find out more about the life of the Wongatha people. This was when I met Pantjiti Mary McLean and Kuyayina Everard (Dinny) Smith who live at Ninga Mia Village north-east of Kalgoorlie-Boulder. They are respected elders of the Ngaatjatjarra language group. Dinny (a Panaka man born near Mt Jameson) still sings many of the traditional songs, he is Mary's uncle and they have a close family connection. More members of their family group live at Ninga Mia and many more visit, coming and going from their traditional lands. Over a period of 13 years I have come to know them and their extended family well. For example, three of the girls in the image *Teenage Girls* in this exhibition I previously photographed as children in the exhibition *Not for Pauline* in 1998.

Mary and Dinny continuously sing songs - sometimes traditional, many of Mary's are religious. When Dinny sings I close my eyes and feel like I'm being transported into an ancient time. At first I could hardly understand what they were saying but we still understood each other. When driving around in the car they would often sing and I found myself swaying to the sound, we laughed a lot, the kinship was always heart felt and that was what kept me going. Some days we drove around town, others into the bush. Being originally from England I have never felt comfortable driving in my car out back! Mary loved it, she knew I was nervous and would say 'don't worry I'm a bush woman' or Dinny would say 'I'm a Wongi you won't get lost'. Sometimes we looked for bush

medicine or timber for Dinny to make spears with. Even when there was no road, I trusted them.

Mary always notices animal and human prints in the dust and points them out. When she sees prints in paintings and the artist hasn't got the angle right she imitates how you would walk if you left foot prints like that (looking something like John Cleese). She has me rolling around with laughter!

Other times when we get together there will be overwhelming sadness at the loss of a family member. Their mob is huge and at their age they know them all. I always carry a box of tissues around in my car as I never know when this will happen and they'll be inconsolable. Other days we might look for a missing family member, this could take all day and they never give up, especially when it's a teenager. Dinny teaches me his language when we're together – 'the lingo' he calls it. He has endless patience while I repeat it many times until he is satisfied. Mary gave me a few lessons but she would get frustrated with me very quickly. They know how much I want to understand their culture and need some language skills.

Mary and Dinny are great mentors for me. I have learnt much from their way of life, their sense of forgiveness, their lack of materialism and their extraordinary sharing with their family and mob. They have a culture that is a richly coloured tapestry that I feel so fortunate to have been shown. The more I experience it the more I appreciate its intricacies.

I would like to thank Pantjiti Mary Mclean and Kuyayina Everard (Dinny) Smith and the people of Ninga Mia Village. This exhibition is dedicated to families everywhere!