

Gone, but never forgotten

"We will remember so much about Murray and sadly we never say these things when we can.

His passion for justice, his sense of truth and right, his love of land and country, his humility, his confidence that each one of us could and should make a difference, his quick wit, sharp mind and steely determination, the wicked sparkle in his eye that hid such sadness about loss of land and culture, his great cooking; no one makes a Thai beef curry like Murray."

Helen Kenneally

IN CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF A YUWALIYAAY MAN

Murray Paul Chapman
1959-2007



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husband, father, son, leader, mate, and friend

Eulogy by Robert Tickner follows

PHOTO: GARY HARRIS/STUDIO 8

Eulogy for Murray Paul Chapman

Delivered by Robert Tickner

Friday, 2 March 2007

I am honoured and privileged to say some words today and to join with you in the commemoration of the life of Murray Chapman who was for those of us here, most importantly,

- a father;
- a husband;
- a son;
- a cousin [or perhaps a Kangaroo cousin as you were sometimes called by Murray];
- or may be you are a member of Murray's very extended family, including Shona's family;

And to the rest of us – and indeed all of us I have mentioned – he was a mate, a comrade, a leader – and a deeply respected Aboriginal man.

It is a reflection of the enormously high public standing of Murray Chapman that so many people from so many walks of life and so many parts of Australia have come together today.

It is truly a gathering of the clan – both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – and the rest of us who have come together to honour Murray's memory and life's work today.

I am sure that the very gathering itself will deepen our bonds of solidarity and our commitment to continue what Murray would call "the struggle" to fight for the rights of his people.

Murray was however – first and foremost – a wonderful loving father to Patrick and Kate and of course a devoted husband and partner to Shona who he clearly adored and who was a rock and anchor in his busy life.

Those were the responsibilities that Murray put at the very top of his priorities and there is not one of us here who would not have known of that determined focus of his life and heard him speak with pride and with deep love for his family.

There would, however, not have been a Murray Chapman but for his mother Ruth and his father Vic who were, with brother John, the other immediate shining lights in his life. He was so immensely proud of them and their influences clearly helped shape the Murray Chapman we know and loved.

Ruth and Vic are heroes of mine – and our hearts are also with them at this very sad time which comes so soon after the loss of John.

Before I remind you of some of the wonderful public life achievements of Murray Chapman, let me tell you something of the private "Muzza" and share with you some private family

moments because, at the end of the day, we are here not only to celebrate Murray's life but also to give our absolute support and solidarity to Shona, Patrick and Kate and the wider family – as well as to each other.

In sharing these stories I am going to take you into the Chapman household and, with the permission of Shona and the kids, am going to let you into some family secrets.

From many of the things I am going to say you will clearly see that I will be painting an accurate historical picture of a person steeped in integrity and be talking about Murray Chapman the champion of causes and fighter for justice. I am sure Patrick and Kate are so very proud of that part of their Dad's life.

But they will also remember all those "Dad" things. Those wonderful human memories of daily family life.

If Murray was going to do things it was never by halves and when Murray went shopping for furniture over the years there was no stopping him and Shona tells me he always bought the biggest and best – with an emphasis on big!

The family now has:

- a house;
- an office; and
- indeed an entire shed of massive refrigerators, huge coffee tables, huge televisions and paintings – some of which are the size of a piano!!

And don't think for a minute that Murray was some kind of saint. He so loved his kids that he even resorted to bribery – offering Kate \$500 for her savings account if she would undertake a learning extension program at school. As for Patrick, he was offered \$500 in an attempt to get him back on the rugby field so that Murray could continue to shout and scream on the sidelines and live out his football fantasies through Patrick!!

But it gets worse!

There are the speeding stories and the capacity to rationalise and justify this motor vehicle law breaking knew no bounds. Kate has told of the time when she and Dad were in the car driving to Sydney and she chipped him about his speeding. Kate (then on her L plates – Good one Dad!) received a nice long spirited and animated monologue of self justification in reply and it ended with her Dad telling her, "Look Kate, I would rather be a safe driver going over the limit than a bad slow driver following the road rules!!!" And so the drive continued.

Shona tells the story of Murray's cooking and his eagerness to please, but she had to be careful as she merely had to inadvertently mention a recipe or a fancied dish than it would be on the table when she got home from work and often in very great and bountiful quantities indeed.

But the lesson of these very private family stories is very simple. These are the currency of family memories that will endure through time and they give us some insight into the adoration that Murray felt for his kids and for Shona.

But the rest of us are grateful that they shared the private family Murray Chapman with us and the community because the work of this man truly helped make the world a better place.

Murray Chapman was born on 22 December 1959 on the South Coast of NSW, a Yuwaaliyaay Man with deep family connections with the Upper Darling River country of Southern Queensland and North Western NSW. Murray's Great Grandfather was born at Currawillinghi Station on the Queensland NSW border in 1850, his grandfather was born there in 1875 and Vic was also born there in 1932 and, of course, brother John is buried there as Murray himself will be.

This is Murray's country as it was so for generations of his people before him.

His Mother Ruth and Father Vic were strong influences on his life and he grew up deeply proud of his Aboriginal heritage. Vic Chapman as we all know became the first Aboriginal School Principal in Australia and was a strong role model for Murray. His Mother Ruth always told him that she did not mind what he did in life so long as he acted honestly, true to his conscience and to the best of his ability.

He certainly followed that advice.

Murray grew up on the South Coast of NSW and went to high school at Woonona. After leaving school, Murray went travelling for a short while and it was not surprising that his travels took him north to his family country and gave him opportunities to get closer to his extended family. He then studied law for a bit but did not finish the course as he was too keen to get cracking on life's work.

In December 1979, he took up a position as a Legal Clerk in the NSW Crown Solicitors Office. His first substantive employment position was involved in working on issues associated with Commissions of Inquiry into the Goulburn Gaol Riot, the Appin Mine Disaster and the Proposed Logging of Terania Creek. Thus he was in the thick of public policy issues from the time he got his first job.

You will notice a constant theme reappearing in Murray's employment record through his entire working life and that is that he only lent his labour to projects and causes he believed in and which could improve the lives of his fellow human beings and particularly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this land.

As Vic told me, and we all know, "Murray could not be bought" and from an early age he was intensely aware that all the money in the world could not buy a good reputation.

In 1981 Murray moved to the then NSW Anti-Discrimination Board where he was involved in the publication of research into the impact of Public Order Offences which so adversely impacted on Aboriginal people.

In the following year, Murray commenced work at the Public Interest Advocacy Centre where he researched legal and other remedies for the workers of the former asbestos mine at Baryulgil in northern NSW, formerly operated by that well known company James Hardie.

Throughout the period 1983 to 1990, Murray worked variously at the Public Solicitors Office, the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board and finally as an Aboriginal Policy Adviser at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

In early 1987, Murray and Shona were married and then, at the end of that year, the first of Murray's pride and joys, Patrick was born.

Now it was at this stage that Murray made a, what some people may have thought, was a seriously bad career move in that he sent a job application to a newly appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs who happened to be me. I remember personally reading the application soon after I was appointed and saw that he included among his referees Chris Sidoti the Human Rights Commissioner and also Bill Whiley, a salt of the earth veteran coal miner and a former Communist Party Alderman on Broken Hill Council, who I happened to know rather well.

I thought the application said a lot about the job applicant and after some careful referee checking Murray got the job.

He never let me down and (with due deference and due respect to the many wonderful people I have worked with) as Gough said of Margaret, he was my finest appointment.

For two years, from June 1990 he took up a position as Adviser in my office but, more importantly in that year, Murray's other life treasure Kate was born. In mid-1992, until after the 1993 election, Murray was my Senior Adviser, following on from Kath Taperell.

They were heady days and we were deeply committed to our work.

During those three years there were many achievements and Murray was deeply involved in all of them. We successfully worked with the newly established ATSIC with special people Lowitja O'Donoghue and Sol Bellear as the Chair and Deputy Chair respectively and we forged a productive and effective partnership free of major external political challenges of any kind. In our office we conceived and implemented legislation to launch the Process of Reconciliation with the unanimous support of the Parliament, directly coordinated the National Response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, proposed the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and moved to eliminate the backlog in finalising claims under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act. Murray saw it as one of his primary objectives to get as much land back into the hands of the traditional owners as could lawfully be achieved and always by following proper processes.

One of Murray's great skills was that he was a first rate manager and administrator which he also used to great effect in some of his later very senior public service appointments. Together we worked out that the NT Land Rights Act had, until that time, suffered from some major and very unnecessary blockages in process. When the Land Claims Commissioners recommended land for granting to traditional owners they would often note that there were potential issues of so called "detriment" which may include such "weighty" issues as unresolved questions of road width planning for some obscure road in the NT. Meanwhile, traditional owners continued to die while claims remained unresolved.

Together Murray and I changed the processes so that after reasonable attempts to negotiate solutions the issue was brought to the attention of the Minister for determination. This meant that land claims like the Waramungu around Tennant Creek were finalised after a decade of delay as were many others.

Twice Murray and I travelled to Geneva to address the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations and I have this priceless photo of Murray out the front of the UN gates. He had truly come a long way from his roots in country NSW and his earlier youthful ambition to follow his family heritage and become a boxer. Mind you, in his work he knew how to take up the fight but not, of course, in later days with his fists. However having said that, if I got into trouble on the street I would have been very pleased to have him on my side!

With Kevin Keeffe, Murray was involved in advising me on the use of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act in what became a major national issue to prevent the damming of the Todd River and the destruction of sacred sites in that area. At one point, Kevin and Murray worked together to arrange the urgent transmission and delivery of the ministerially signed Emergency Heritage Protection Declaration as the bulldozers prepared to do their handiwork at the behest of the then Northern Territory Government. The declaration remains the only occasion in the history of Australia where national powers were able to be utilised to permanently protect a site of Indigenous heritage and spirituality.

They were heady days indeed as I say, but justice was done – at least on that occasion.

I just want to reflect about how those of us who worked with him at that time in Parliament House remember Murray – and I know that each of you will have similar recollections of our mate.

- He was a deeply ethical person.
- He had a passion for justice and for the rights of his people.
- He had a deep love of country.
- He was a thorough and extremely diligent manager and administrator.
- Land handbacks brought out the "soft" Muz, which he didn't show very often outside his family, and I have to tell you that they were very moving events. I can never remember a land title handback where there were not tears shed.
- Murray also had a wicked sense of humour and was a great social commentator with considerable power over the English language. He could capture people's personality by a one or two word description of them which usually had everyone

laughing – and he was always so straight-faced about it!!!

- He was a great travelling companion –often giving a humorous running commentary of the events as they were happening.
- I found him very quick to understand where people were coming from and he had a great capacity to detect shonks and phoney people and to warn me about them. It is patently obvious that at times some of my successors could have benefited from Murray's frank and insightful advice.
- He was not always immediately forgiving of anyone who he thought had let down the cause.
- Conversely when Murray admired someone he would often tell you [and can't you just hear his words] that someone was, "a damned fine person".
- He was always good in a crisis and had the capacity to remain calm when often others around him were in danger of losing the plot.
- He will always be in our hearts and many of us to this day reflect in our work, "What would Murray think – or do – about this?"
- Despite his many life achievements he was a very humble person, not driven by ego and had a deep understanding of the privilege we had been given to serve the cause.

For those who worked with him, it was our absolute privilege and we were the lucky ones.

Murray left my Parliament House office in May 1993 as the Government moved to respond to the High Court decision in the Mabo case and debate began to rage. But three years in that place was probably enough for anyone and Murray just continued serving his people in another capacity after having been recruited by Dr Peter Shergold to be one of the senior public servants in ATSIIC. His new role was to be responsible for Land Management and Heritage issues and again providing advice to my office on these questions.

Behind the scenes Murray played a wonderful role with the provision of accurate and dispassionate advice on a whole range of issues over the succeeding three years. Just prior to the 1996 election, Murray moved to another senior managerial position becoming Deputy General Manager of the Indigenous Land Corporation working with our friend David Ross who he held in such high regard. Murray and I had worked closely together publicly and privately to push for this land fund to be established as one of the Government's responses to the Mabo decision, knowing that his countrymen and women in places like NSW would find it hard to overcome the challenge of dispossession to come within the ambit of a substantive native title claim. Murray took over the top job in the Corporation and worked there for another 18 months.

He was very proud of the fact that he had overseen the acquisition of approximately 1% of the Australian land mass over a four year period for the benefit of his people and had overseen development and implementation of a significant new direction in the management of Indigenous held land, addressing both commercial and non-commercial goals.

We can only but imagine the pride that Murray must have felt when the Board of the Indigenous Land Corporation decided to purchase an important part of Currawillinghi Station, officially

returning it to Aboriginal ownership. True to form Murray took the ethical approach and took no part in that decision making.

After that important work, Murray worked as a consultant for a period, and then in 2003, he was appointed by the NSW Government to be the NSW Aboriginal Land Council Administrator. As Geoff Scott, the Chief Executive Officer of the Land Council, said so frankly this week, Murray endured a degree of animosity upon his appointment from sections of the Aboriginal Land Council network who felt the sacking of the elected Councillors was unjust. But in Geoff's words, "Murray quickly put those concerns at ease. He made clear he would not be a party to any attempt by the state government to use the period of administration to diminish the hard won rights of Aboriginal people in NSW." As Geoff said, Murray was an

"inspired choice".

Murray summed up his own objective in this work, namely "to work with better governance policies and procedures, more efficient management systems and structures, and a financial foundation that better fits the organisation and the land council network as it serves our people into the twenty-first century."

In this role – as in all his work throughout his wonderful life – he achieved so very much and always – every step of the way – he was working for his people, and I know that Murray would want me to use this occasion to urge us all to redouble our efforts to fight for justice for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country and we must commit ourselves to do that.

Dear friends, no mere words can ever capture the essence of our mate and all that he stood for, but I hope these thoughts have rung true for you as they certainly do for me.

We have lost one of our very best, and the love and support of all of us go out to his family at this time.

Robert Tickner
March 2, 2007