

YAMI LESTER OAM

Passed away July 21 2017

Aged 75 years

Reflections by Graham Thomas

VISIT TO WALATINA – Marla - August 2015

Judy and I visited Yami 2 years ago because he was quite ill and was formalizing his wishes for his funeral. He requested that during the eulogy that I reflect on his time in Adelaide and the antics we got up to as great mates – which culminated in Yami and me being the best man at each other's wedding and the enduring friendship over 55 years.



HIS CHILDHOOD

As a boy, Yami lived a bush life in on an outstation on Granite Downs in the far north of S.A. As they worked on the cattle and sheep stations, Yami's skills on a horse made him a natural for life as a stockman. He also learned about bush food and medicines, bush healers, and the spirit life in the area associated with their dreaming.

MARALINGA NUCLEAR TESTS

Yami's fulfilling life came to an end when The British Nuclear tests commenced at Maralinga. A major test, named Totem 1, was detonated at Emu Junction in the early morning of October 15 1953, sending a thick, oily, radioactive cloud some 160 kms to the north-east arriving at his home area in the sand hills on Walatina. It arrived as a black mist and caused many health problems, including eye damage, vomiting, diarrhoea, and skin rashes.

After several weeks, Yami finally opened his eyes. His left one could see a little but his right eye was blind. Therefore his independence was gone.

ARRIVING IN ADELAIDE

In 1957 at the age of 16 years, Yami was admitted to the Adelaide Hospital because of the illness in his left eye. Even though he still had about 20% sight in his left eye, the doctor determined that it could not be saved and removed this eye, making him totally blind. The medical staff had difficulty with the name Yami and recorded him as Jim and so Jim was how all of us in Adelaide knew him.

When he was released from hospital some 4 weeks later, he was able to be accommodated at Colebrook Home on Shepherds Hill Road in Eden Hills – he was regarded as a special case because they normally only had younger children. He could not speak English and relied on a young guy in the home to interpret for him. He was also introduced to Australian Rules football and has followed Norwood in SA and the Melbourne Demons in the AFL ever since.

He commenced work at the Blind Institute in North Adelaide making brushes and brooms – a claim that has made him a competent Broomologist. He learned English at the blind institute where he also learned to read and write braille over a 4 year period. He also learned old time dancing and

to play the guitar while at the institute. His first song was "I walk the Line" followed by other Johnny Cash songs.

During this time at Colebrook Home, he attended the Blackwood Church of Christ in Sunday School and morning church services. Here, he befriended Ed Ratcliff who would transport him to the church but also to work at the Blind Institute and back over a period of 4 years. Ed worked as a Panel Beater near the city at the time.

In 1961, Yami left Colebrook Home to live with Howard Hill and his family in Novar Gardens and later in Oalkands Park. As there were no young people at the Church of England where Howard worshipped, they stopped off at the Brighton Church of Christ on Sturt Road one day where he made a connection with the Thomas family. Yami, Eddy (Peter Edwards) and I became great mates and did everything together – youth group, camps, choir singing, and attending combined youth events and functions. Yami was baptised at the Brighton church by Jim Wright a short time later.

By this time, Yami had become very proficient as a singer and guitarist, and I would accompany him at many functions with me plunking away in the background providing a home-made base sound on a T/chest connected with string to a broom stick. By moving the broom stick, this affected the tension on the string enabling different base sounds. One of our favourite songs was "Telephone to Glory" sung by Jimmy Little.

One memorable event occurred on the June long weekend in 1964. Yami and I were attending a youth camp at Balaklava north of Adelaide. He brought along his reel to reel tape recorder that had a green flashing light to indicate the volume of the recording. We were bedded down in a dormitory with the rest of the guys, when Yami who was in a bunk near me called out and said that we should go up to the guy who was snoring loudly and record him. Reluctantly, I got out of bed and with his hand on my shoulder and the tape recorder in operation, we started to make our way to the other end of the dormitory between the bunks. One of the leaders who just happened to be Peter Johnson, heard us and ordered us back to our own beds. As we arrived back to our area, Yami started to get into the wrong bed and the guy who was fast asleep felt this body next to him and as he turned over saw this green flashing light – he let out a scream as though the aliens had landed and were upon him. As punishment, I think that Yami and I were on additional duties the next day.

Yami and I would often reminisce on other fun times that we had together and with the youth group and our wide circle of friends. He also had a deep regard for my parents Hedley and Alice who had him for meals at our place and always looked out for him.

In 1964, we were able to assist Yami to purchase his own home in Cecelia Street North Brighton, and Auntie Sophie Bishop who was 75 years old at the time and who had looked after him before moved in to help him in the cooking and house hold activities. She often commented "hurry up and get married Jim as I am getting too old to look after you"

During these years, Yami had a number of operations on his right eye with the hope of restoring his vision but to no avail. On one occasion when he was recuperating, he was visited by Lucy and so began a relationship. They were married in 1966 in the Grote Street Church of Christ and I had the privilege of being his best man.

In 1967, I was transferred to Melbourne with my work, and so our contact became irregular but our relationship remained strong. I met my future wife Judy in Melbourne and then had the privilege of having Yami as my best man at our wedding at Blackburn Church of Christ in June 1969.

MOVE TO ALICE SPRINGS

Meanwhile, Yami continued to work at the Blind Institute until 1970 when Reverend Jim Downing invited Yami and Lucy to move to Alice Springs. He began work for the United Mission as a Welfare Worker and Interpreter for the courts. He later became involved in the Institute of Aboriginal Development which was concerned with Aboriginal education and language. He took great interest in cross-cultural issues and programs.

The 1960's and 1970's were periods of immense change in Aboriginal affairs, but the land rights movement depended upon skilled interpreters to facilitate communication between indigenous land owners and the various government bodies that were involved. Yami, a bush boy who had never ridden in a car found himself travelling all over central Australia, grasping complex legal concepts and translating them for the aboriginal people. He learned strategy and negotiation skills, and was instrumental in forging landmark agreements that are a compelling part of Australia's black history.

He worked with the Pitjantjatjara Land Council on Aboriginal lands rights issues with the South Australian Government, and as an organiser and interpreter assisting in the handover of freehold title to the Anangu people in 1981, which came as a result of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act (SA). He also spent some time as Chair person for ATSIC representing South Australia at monthly meetings in Canberra.

He was regarded as a moderate in mediating in various negotiations between tribes and mining interests. Despite his blindness, he had great discernment in listening and recommending appropriate courses of action.

OUR MOVE BACK TO ADELAIDE

In 1979, Judy and I returned to Adelaide with our 4 children and set up home there. However, during our many 4 wheel drive trips heading north, we would visit Yami and also maintain contact with phone calls, as we continued to regard each other as special friends.

I also introduced Yami to Johnathan Moore (Associate Minister at Blackwood COC 2000-2007) and he became a special friend of Yami's. Johnathan also extended his friendship to many other aboriginal people in the APY lands. He then was able to take many groups over the years to visit Yami and other parts of the APY lands for the group to gain an appreciation of some of its culture.

STATE FUNERAL TO BE HELD AT WALATINA STATION – August 8 2017

Johnathan Moore is liaising with Yami's family, the Premier's Department and other people invited to participate in the State Funeral service. The logistics are quite complex and include the presence of the Premier, Governor and other key government ministers and dignitaries, as well as many hundreds of aboriginal people, and those he had connections with in the past.

The program will include a strong Christian influence led by Johnathan and a Lutheran minister. There are 3 parts to the eulogy – a person speaking about his childhood, me reflecting on his Adelaide connections, and someone talking about his journey post Adelaide.

Yami had also made a specific request for Judy, Lucy, Johnathan and me to sing “The Old Rugged Cross”. I understand that this song was special to him as he would play the tune on a gum leaf. At the funeral, I will see if someone else can play the tune on a gum leaf to accompany us.

Paul Kelly, a well known Australian song writer visited Yami some years ago and together they composed the song titled “Maralinga”. This song includes Christian lyrics and he will sing it during the service.

Obviously there will be input from many people and family members, as the service is expected to go for 2 ½ hours.

The government has organized for a huge marquee to be erected on an air strip on the Walatina property and will provide a lunch after the event. I have received a call from the Premier’s Department confirming our input as they are preparing a booklet for the occasion.

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO BRITISH NUCLEAR TESTS IN AUSTRALIA

In 1980, Yami was listening to the radio and heard an English Nuclear Scientist Sri Ernest Titterton claiming that all of the tests were done safely. Yami believed that to be a lie and decided to speak out. He became instrumental in raising awareness of the effects of the nuclear tests in Australia on indigenous people. In 1985, the Australian Government conducted the McClelland Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia, which found that indigenous communities near Walatina did experience radioactive fallout from Totem 1 in the form a black mist or cloud.

Unfortunately, the Commission was unable to conclude whether the black mist caused or contributed to Yami’s blindness – mainly because of historical uncertainties and the state of scientific knowledge at that time.

Graham Thomas

August 2017

(Graham is a long term member of the Blackwood Church of Christ and currently an elder on the church board).
