

## 7. Politics and real education

The last two chapters looked at the emergence of formal educational courses on site at Tranby. Over the same time, as Karen Flick pointed out, Kevin was involved in the political campaigning for land rights across the state, culminating in the achievement of the New South Wales Land Rights Act in 1983.<sup>1</sup> These different tracks – education and politics – are often seen separately. But they worked together in the way Kevin and his comrades understood real learning could take place through Tranby, as they explain in this chapter.

In the first section of this chapter, Kevin and Brian Doolan talk over the way they saw education and politics interacting at Tranby. Then three of the key areas of this interaction are sketched out. The first is TUCAR, the Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights, a strategic body which Kevin set up before he went to Coady although it continued to play a key role in both the college and in political activity after his return. Then there are two examples of the approaches to engaging politics which really developed after Kevin's time in Canada. One is the incorporation of senior Aboriginal people into the teaching program at Tranby as a way to support their political roles. The other is the campaign to end black deaths in custody, which drew strongly for its eastern Australian campaign on the infrastructure and support it received from Tranby.

The chapter draws on the memories and voices of many people – sometimes those of people who worked at Tranby and taught in the programs, while others are from the community members who took part in the courses or who, just as importantly, used Tranby as a base for some of their powerful mobilisations in the 1980s against racism and prejudice in the law, education, land, employment and housing.

While there were different themes among the people and movements who came through the door at Tranby – the common ground was that Kevin made a space for all of them, with the only demand being that the activists in turn make time for Tranby students to come, to talk and to listen to the way things worked.

He also encouraged them to talk with each other – in TUCAR for example, Kevin was able to bring together trade unionists from widely different commitments in working class politics, like communists and the right wing of the Australian Labor Party – far more widely than he would have been able to do from inside one union. Among the Aboriginal people as well, he was able to foster strong friendships between key people who would otherwise have been separated by long distances and the pressures of local campaigns, such as the friendships

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<sup>1</sup> *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW).

between Jacko Campbell from Roseby Park on the South Coast with Isabel Flick, from inland Collarenebri. Or between Isabel and Joe McGinness, from far North Queensland. As they all shared desks, shared meals and had unhurried talks together over shared cups of tea in the Tranby sun, all these people built up lasting connections.



**Figure 7.1: Judy Chester, Cookie and Kevin Tory, each with a key role in TUCAR, were here carrying an Aboriginal flag at a land rights demonstration.**

Courtesy Judy Chester family collection.

The person who helped to make it all work – alongside Kevin – was Judy Chester. Kevin and Margaret had split up by the time Kevin began work at Tranby and for a few years he was a single dad when Susie and Mereki came to stay. Then he met Judy. She was a Wiradjuri woman from Wellington who came to Sydney as a young girl when her family had to move to the city for medical treatment. She married in the area and raised her three children, Jodi, Peter and Jannette, around Liverpool in the ‘new’ suburb of Green Valley. Judy first came in contact with Tranby when local, grass-roots Aboriginal women began calling for a program that met their desires to re-enter the education process. They contacted Tranby, which sent teachers like Terry Widders to work with the local women to set up a totally new program they called ‘NOW’. This was so successful, the idea was later taken up by TAFE and, under the NOW banner, offered to women in many different areas. A bit later on, when her marriage broke down, Judy moved with her children into the inner city.

Judy got back in touch with Tranby and after a while she and Cookie began what was to become a lifelong relationship. Judy kept on extending her education, which led to her work with Tranby in its Action Development Unit and then as an organiser for the Public Sector Union where she made strong new friends. Just as important for her was her role as the partner in Cookie's life. She formed close, generous friendships with all the people Cookie brought together through Tranby and their shared political work. Together, they kept what they laughed about as the 'Elastic House' – their home and their warm companionship was always able to be expanded to fit whoever needed them.

## Shared visions

*Brian Doolan:* I'd met some amazing people when I was at Wilcannia, who despite the tough conditions they faced, were still willing to stand up and try to set up the education centres and the medical services. Coming to Tranby, I had the real privilege of seeing these people and others like them from all over the place coming through, people like Jacko Campbell, Merv and Shirley Penrith, Barbara Flick and Tombo Winters, standing up saying: 'Now we want to get on with achieving our rights!' There was a very strong sense of rights which was an incredibly exciting thing. And it was interesting that it was around that desk where Kevin was sitting and around his telephone, that a lot of those people criss-crossed with one another. It was that whole enabling environment.

I think you could have walked into Tranby and said, 'I want to start the next shot for Mars', Cookie's response probably would have been, 'Yeah, okay, now how are we going to? What are you going to do?'

It wouldn't be, 'Yes, I'm going to back you' necessarily. It certainly wouldn't have been, 'Oh yeah, okay, this is how you do it', because it was never directional. It would have been something like, 'Gee, that's really interesting'. And if you could show a bit of nous about how you talked about it and how you were planning it, then Cookie would back it at that point. And that would sort of validate it.

And so if somebody else walked in and said, 'They're mad', his response would be, 'Well, you know, we're all mad'. It wouldn't be necessarily that they're not mad – you don't put people down for being mad!

So I come back to this whole enabling thing that Kevin has allowed. He has played a validating role because he holds a position that people respect. So if Cookie says, 'Yeah, it's alright' or 'Yeah, that person's okay', that carries enormous weight because there's such high respect for him throughout the community. And I don't just mean the Aboriginal community – I mean throughout the

broadest community! In the trade union movement, in parliament amongst politicians, amongst the community groups, amongst activists. He has been able to validate a whole lot of initiatives that may well have died had they not got that sort of validation and that support.

As an example, I think the Deaths in Custody movement was one where there was a really important issue but there were only a few people involved in trying to raise it. And the fact that Cookie was known to be a friend of those people, was showing support for those people, was allowing meetings to go on at Tranby and giving the resources of the organisation and was from time to time lending his own time to go along and help organise things, helped the growth enormously. And it doesn't mean that Cookie started it. He didn't. Other people started it. But he *enabled* it.

There was the same thing with Black Books, the idea of setting up an Aboriginal-controlled book shop which would supply texts to schools so that schools could run Aboriginal Studies courses. I'm bloody sure Kevin's never had the experience of setting up a book chain. But he *enabled* that to happen. He didn't straight away say, 'Oh, no, that's too much' or 'No, our strategy is we've got to focus on X, Y or Z'. It's, 'Yeah, if there are some people that want to seriously give that a go, well, use the front room over there and off you go!' He allowed it to happen.

The whole Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights was a similar thing. There were a lot of people in trade unions who, out of a sense of good will, a sense of justice, a sense of fairness, wanted to support Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal struggles in their different forms. But they found it really difficult to hook into the Koorie community. They found a bridge in TUCAR and Cookie, who was somebody who would say, 'Yeah, you're not the enemy. In fact you're an ally'. And, 'Yeah if you want to organise that demo or you want to organise that meeting or you want to organise that committee and the fundraiser or whatever, you can give it a go'.

So he enabled it and sort of gave it validation. So that they could say, 'Yes, it's not just us floating off on our own white fellow idea. We have a link to the Aboriginal movement'. And that link very importantly had credibility. Because there were other people also who were trying to provide links who didn't necessarily have the credibility that Kevin had.

They're just a couple of examples that have quickly come to mind. And of course also, most importantly, was the whole land rights movement in the period of the preparation of the Green Paper. The fact that Tranby was able to act as a base

for rural Aboriginal people from lots of parts of the state, from Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee, Collarenebri, Moree, from the South Coast and up north, all the different places. That people had a point they could come to.

They had a choice in that, of course. There was also the Redfern base around the legal service and other places. But many people chose to use Tranby as their point of reference, as the base from which they would work when they came to Sydney. It was the point from which they would go to Parliament House or go to the Select Committee hearing or organise the demonstration or whatever. Again that was just an example of Cookie resourcing, allowing, things to happen. He was not leading, you know. Although a lot of people would say, 'Kevin's our leader' or 'Kevin's in charge'. And I remember Cookie's response to that as always being, 'Oh, bullshit!' But certainly his role was in *allowing* it to happen and giving it some resources, giving it a resource base as it developed. And always encouraging the discussion. He encouraged the honest discussion, the hard discussions about *how* it was developing.

What do you think about all of that Cookie? How do you see all those things fitting together? Or didn't they?

*Kevin:* They did. They did fit together and they did quite well. Because there's a lot of people who come here who weren't exposed to different things. And I always said this, is that when the Tranby Board or when TUCAR were meeting at Tranby, the students would be involved because they'd see white people coming into the organisation, sitting down and they could sit in there with them. And they could see that the white people weren't leading the discussions. At the TUCAR meetings, the Aboriginal people would lead the discussions and the trade union movement would back them. That's what we asked them to do. We said, 'We need the backing of the trade union movement. This is the organisation we believe that can get our message across and hopefully that the unions can get behind and so to push our message'. And that's what I wanted students to see at Tranby, and lots of them did see it.

The churches were another supporter that we had, the Australian Council of Churches (ACC). We had some of the meetings of the Aboriginal Advisory body for that ACC at Tranby. You had people like Terry O'Shane, Johnny Ah Kit,<sup>2</sup> Gary Foley – people from all over Australia were on the Australia Council of Churches Aboriginal Committee. We didn't agree with what the churches were doing 100 per cent, and they didn't agree with us. But we got along fine as long as we didn't go behind their back to do anything. We'd say, 'This is what we're going to say!' And you know, it might be against the church policy. But the next day we'd be meeting in there, nothing said, you know. That was our

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2 John Ah Kit, whom Kevin more usually called 'Jack' or 'Ah Kit'.



prerogative. We could go against them and they could go against us. So I think that's the way it worked and it worked really well. And Tranby students got to see some of that as well. So that's how the politics fitted in with the education centre work.

*Brian:* Students used to watch that, even if they weren't directly involved in it. It was just part of the atmosphere.

*Kevin:* Yeah, and that's what I'm saying. For our students, where they came from in a lot of country areas, it was 'us' and 'them'. They didn't have a good relationship with any white person. But by the time they left Tranby, a couple of them had made very strong friends with white people and they took them back to their country and showed them around – and they're still really close knit. That was good because it showed that you could work together. And Aboriginal people like Isabel Flick had four or five people behind her from Tranby, black and white, and she got a hell of a lot of work done in country areas. She got on with some of the white people because she didn't take a backwards step! So she got people around her. I think that was what Tranby was all about in those days. We had some very influential people like Isabel working with us.

## TUCAR



**Figure 7.2: Dick Scott at an early Tranby meeting.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

Setting up the Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights (TUCAR) created a way that the Aboriginal political movements could interact with the broader community – in this case through the trade unions – as well as providing a space for sharing information. As Kevin was well aware in 1975, there had been many unions which had had a long involvement with Tranby, like the fund-raising and on-the-job training programs carried out for years by the Seamen's Union. But times had changed. Aboriginal activists were more assertive about their need and right to speak for their own community goals, and they often shook off white support, feeling it would be controlling and exploitative. So unions which had been sympathetic, began to worry about whether they were being paternalistic and they had become more confused about how to offer support.

Kevin saw the need to foster a new space for communication between Aboriginal people and the trade unions. He had good friends who were active unionists, like Rod Pickette in the ATEA (Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees Association) and Meredith Burgmann in the Union of Academic Staff Associations (later the National Tertiary Education Union – NTEU). Together they imagined a body based at Tranby which would offer that space. They talked over a number of names and decided on TUCAR – it was a pronounceable acronym and its role was clear. Kevin took Meredith to talk with Alf, still the General Secretary, in around 1977 and with his support, Meredith, Rod and Kevin set up TUCAR.

As Brian Doolan had observed, unions 'found a bridge in TUCAR and in Cookie' which allowed them to connect to broader Aboriginal and Islander communities. There was enough initial interest to form a committee and negotiate a space for it in the NSW Trades and Labour Council building in Sussex Street. Kevin could draw on his old comrades from the Builders Labourers' Federation and sympathetic unions like the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) while Rod could mobilise the arts and media unions and Meredith had access to the large body of sympathetic academics across the country. TUCAR was aimed at informing unions about Aboriginal goals and seeking union support for Aboriginal campaigns.

The key to TUCAR's effectiveness was, however, the seniority of the union delegates who included a stellar array of the most well known unionists in the state. The participants went far beyond the networks around left-wing unions which Kevin himself had developed in the BLF, linked to the Left of the ALP and the majority of the membership of the Communist Party of Australia who had split with Moscow after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. As well, however, TUCAR included the networks which Alf Clint had nurtured with the Communist-led unions which stayed with the Moscow line, like the Seamen's Union of Australia and the Miners' Union. And it brought in some powerful right-wing Labor Party unions, who were sympathetic to Aboriginal rights

regardless of their politics. A key example was Charlie Oliver, the General Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), a right-wing union which had always covered rural Aboriginal workers like shearers and rousabouts, but which had often failed to take public stands in support of Aboriginal issues. Oliver, however, became unshakable in his commitment to support Tranby however difficult the issue might be.



**Figure 7.3: Charlie Oliver with Desmond Tutu.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

With time, TUCAR needed a full time worker and with funds raised by the union affiliation fees, it employed a series of Aboriginal organisers including Lee Silva and later Kevin Tory, an Aboriginal man from North Coast NSW who brought with him not only a background in Aboriginal politics but a legacy of proud anti-colonial activism from his father's Indian parents. New faces joined the committee and support group, including Hannah Middleton, an industrial relations academic who had become the honorary secretary of TUCAR by 1981.

The support that unions could offer was considerable. A good example was the continuing problem of housing. Families being forced to pay rents for substandard housing on government reserves was a recurring problem, highlighted by a community-wide rent strike at Purfleet in Taree in 1960 but repeated many times since then. To this was added the frustration which many Aboriginal people felt when they had tried to purchase the houses they paid rent on for years, believing after confusing discussions with state government



officials, that they were paying off the purchase price of the land. TUCAR took up such issues, lending union weight to the public calls for a rapid hand over of government housing to such long term Aboriginal householders.<sup>3</sup> At many other times, TUCAR coordinated mailouts and fundraising, offering political, moral and financial support to similar local and regional campaigns.

Just as important as what unions put in was the information sharing process. TUCAR meetings as Meredith, Rod and Kevin have described, often involved Kevin and other Aboriginal speakers giving union representatives sketches of current issues in various communities and an analysis of the overall progress in gaining better state legislation. These thumbnail sketches found their way back into union newsletters and work site meetings, building up a stronger and better informed link between Aboriginal and union movements at grass roots level, not just between delegates. It was particularly important that this flow of information had operated in terms of land rights because there was such a lot of local information which had seldom circulated outside the Aboriginal community before, as the previous chapter has made clear. Because Kevin had been mobilising this circulation of information about the ongoing land campaign since 1977 – and particularly since 1980 when the Wran Government had set up a Select Committee to inquire into the needs for land among Aboriginal people in NSW – there was a strong awareness of this issue. Trade union support was called on at many times, but the critical one was in 1981, when the Select Committee had strongly recommended action to fulfil land rights demands but the Wran Government seemed disinclined to act. Kevin takes up this story in conversation with fellow TUCAR founder, Rod Pickette.

*Kevin:* Well it looked like the recommendations were just going to sit there and Wran wasn't going to do anything with them...

*Rod:* So on May 11, 1981, we got up this deputation from TUCAR unions to Neville Wran, to try to get him moving on implementing the recommendations of the Select Committee. Because it looked a lot like the Labor government was just going to ignore its own committee recommendations, or water down the land rights stuff by mainly focusing on education and housing. So we called on the unions who'd been interested and active in TUCAR and organised this meeting with Wran.

*Kevin:* We expected about five unions didn't we? The Premier's office said we could have six. And we got about 15! Among others, we had Stan Sharkey from the BWIU,<sup>4</sup> Col Cooper from Telecom, Hannah Middleton, from TUCAR, plus Pat Geraghty from the Seamen's Union and Dick Scott from the Metalworkers!

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<sup>3</sup> TUCAR minutes, 21 February 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Building Workers' Industrial Union.

And of course there was Charlie Oliver. He was on the Right in the ALP and – in ordinary union politics, you didn't hear anything coming from him, you know? – you wouldn't know which way he was thinking. But from our point of view at TUCAR or Tranby, anything that we asked for, we got! We asked him for support to go to Wran at that meeting. When he walked in, Wran was very surprised! 'Cause old Charlie used to pull a lot of weight with the Labor Party, not just at the state level but at the federal level too. Maybe more than Neville Wran, who was the Premier of the state!

*Rod:* I remember it sort of shook them out of a bit of lethargy, didn't it? Just the standing of all those people who came along. The government, particularly Wran's minders, were taken aback. They hadn't expected this sort of breadth of concern.

*Kevin:* Yeah. And we only told them the unions that were coming. We didn't tell them which *people* were coming! And then when we all rocked up – they were running! His minders were running!!

Looking back, Kevin talked with Terry O'Shane about the role of TUCAR in the overall mobilisation of unions to support Aboriginal campaigns, including the Bicentennial in 1988.

*Kevin:* TUCAR played a good role, linking up with the trade unions. Kevin Tory and I would go down to see Martin Ferguson, when he was on the ACTU,<sup>5</sup> and he'd say, 'Don't give us anything we can't do first up'. So we said 'Employment' and so he worked for an Aboriginal person to be employed on all the Labour Councils, in every state.

But if he couldn't do something he'd say so. He'd say: 'I can't help you there, that'd split the trade union movement, but you should go ahead and do it.' And he'd tell us which unions he thought would back whatever it was, and who to see there. So he was really helpful that way. Jennie George was another one. One of the things that came out of it was we were able to get people from the Federation of Land Councils to address the ACTU.

But when you think about it, you might say 'Oh well, we done that', or 'We got that done' – as if it was easy. But it was really hard work, you know – for TUCAR! We used to have meetings once a fortnight to build that trade union support up. Remember that? And then it started going real well. After the big demonstrations in '88, everybody wanted to be our friend, you know? They said, 'How did youse organise that?' We said, 'Oh, it's pretty easy'.

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5 Australian Council of Trade Unions.

## Leaders and elders

Kevin's family life, then his work in unions and in co-operatives meant that he built up strong relationships with senior community leaders – older people with both knowledge and passion who remained active in their communities but wanted to have a say in the bigger debates as well. Each of these people were frequent visitors to the college and all the students became familiar with them and had access to them, which ensured they were mentors on many informal levels. Each of them also had a role in fostering particular programs or campaigns which spilled over into the students' lives, contributing to their formal or their informal educational experience while at the college.

One person Kevin had known was Jacko Campbell, from Roseby Park where he had settled although he still had family in Kempsey. Jacko was part of a strong network of South Coast elders and activists. His wife Nan and their daughter Delia were activists in their own right, while others like Guboo Ted Thomas, from Wallaga Lake, had shared memories with Jacko of life at Sydney's Salt Pan Creek during the Depression. Others again, like the younger couple, Mervyn and Shirley Penrith, also from Wallaga, had become allies of Jacko as he battled for decent housing in the early 1970s. Often accompanied by Terry Fox, then a Catholic priest, and with assistance from Merv Nixon, from the South Coast Trades and Labour Council, these South Coast Aboriginal people were frequent visitors to Tranby, building on their South Coast kinship with Kevin to develop strong relationships with Tranby staff and students.

Joe McGinness was another old friend of Kevin's. Joe had been a stalwart as the President of FCAATSI (Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) in the 1960s, uniting Aboriginal activists from across the country. He himself had come from Darwin, where he worked as a wharfie, and travelled to North Queensland with the Army, leaving that port for overseas service during World War Two. He was demobilised in Cairns and remained there, continuing his maritime work and marrying into a local Aboriginal family.

He became one of the key activists in Queensland and federal activism, campaigning for civil rights and for land rights. Joe continued to be particularly interested in union and co-operative ventures, advising Tranby on its bakery and other co-operative ventures in North Queensland. He visited Tranby with another North Queensland activist and unionist, Terry O'Shane, where Kevin met them before he was sent by Alf to North Queensland to visit the Tranby co-operatives there. Kevin stayed with Joe when he was there, and in return Joe stayed in with Kevin whenever he came to Sydney.



**Figure 7.4: Nan Campbell (left) with her sister and other South Coast women.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



**Figure 7.5: Joe McGinness and Cookie at Tranby.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

Over the years after Kevin and Margaret had separated, Kevin's accommodation had often been rough, so when Joe first started coming down to Sydney regularly, he would stay in the student accommodation at the back of the Glebe classrooms or at the Tranby-managed hostel in the Rocks. Later on, as Kevin set up a much more comfortable household with Judy, Joe would stay with them. Either way, Joe was often at Tranby, and his warm, broad smile became a welcome sight for students and visitors to the College over many years. When an area of land at Clump Mountain near Mission Beach, south of Cairns, was bequeathed to Tranby, Joe took up a position on the Board and continued to advise Tranby on the running of the property which remains part of Tranby to this day.

The third key community elder whom Kevin drew in to be a frequent visitor and mentor at Tranby was Isabel Flick, the Gamilaraay woman from Collarenebri, whose observations on the effect Tranby had on students coming from the community were included in the previous chapter. Isabel became a commanding presence at Tranby during the later 1980s and 1990s, well known to students and drawing great strength and resources from the students and staff at the college. Isabel had worked in a city hospital for some years in the early 1970s, where she met Paul Torzillo when he was training in medicine and before he had joined the Board at Tranby. But Isabel had only vaguely heard of Tranby by the time she returned to the bush in the late 1970s. She explained how she then became closely involved with Tranby in the early 1980s during the campaigns for land and for an end to black deaths in custody.

## Black Deaths in Custody

The campaign to end black deaths in custody is a good example of the type of campaign which Tranby was able to support and which in turn was an important learning resource for students. The story is told here by Karen Flick, who is Isabel's niece, and by Isabel herself. Both were involved in the support of the Murray family after Eddie Murray was found dead in police custody in Wee Waa in 1981. When talking with Kevin, they explained how they saw Tranby getting involved in supporting the initial political activism around land which was occurring in Wee Waa when Eddie died, and then how the College became a resource base for the campaign to assist Eddie's family and to try to win justice for the many people who had died in similarly suspicious circumstances.

Karen had been living in Wee Waa in 1981, and remembers the planning which was going into organising an occupation to reclaim a centrally-placed camping ground for Aboriginal cotton seasonal workers in the chipping season, from which the local council had just barred them. The Aboriginal workers from all



over the state had annually camped at Tulladunna, just on the edge of town and next to the river, from which they could easily be hired each morning for the long day's work of chipping out the choking weeds which grow around young cotton plants. The council argued this was an 'unsightly' camp and wanted the workers to be moved to a newly created Aboriginal Reserve, eight kilometres out of town. The Aboriginal protesters saw this as part of the wider issue of land rights and hoped an occupation would bring publicity and stop the council before the summer chipping season began.

*Karen:* We had been talking about land matters I guess around Wee Was for a long time, and then the council started to close down some of the camping areas saying it was unhealthy or something like that, it was not fit for people and the water was buggered up. But *they* had buggered the water up themselves, through the run off of the chemicals they used on the cotton! So we campaigned around the land issue – it was about challenging the local council that Tulladunna had to be left open because for people who come there and work, seasonally on the cotton chipping, that was the place that they would stay. So, we had a responsibility to keep Tulladunna open.

*Kevin:* We'd heard about this occupation from the Flick family and we organised the Tranby bus to go up. We had a few students from Collarenebri at that time, like Chittles (Colin Thorne) and some other students that Isabel had been sending down. And we had some lawyers and Madeline McGrady, the Aboriginal filmmaker coming too, to document the occupation.

*Karen:* Yeah that's right, you were all coming up anyway from Sydney and the South Coast to support the June land rights occupation. Then Eddie Murray was killed in June and that involved our family and the Murray family big time obviously. I remember the day that Helen Murray, his sister, came around and said to Mum and Aunty Iz, 'You got to come! You got to come! Eddie's dead', so they just jumped in the car and went up there. And then all the other things that happened after that, it was very intense, it was very difficult to go through that, anytime anyway.

There were a whole lot of other questions that needed to be asked so we decided that we would go ahead with having the sit-in at Tulladunna. It was a bigger picture – it was about whether somebody could come there and be able to get some employment and be safe at the end of it all.

*Kevin:* We camped there, the nights we were there for that weekend occupation, I remember how cold it was, in the middle of winter.

*Karen:* Yeah, and it was getting pretty hostile wasn't it.



**Figure 7.6: Isabel Flick speaking at a Black Deaths in Custody rally.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

*Kevin:* That's right – that car come that night. Tried to run over the tents. One of the Koorie lads from Tranby was sleeping in it. He jumped up and chased the car, banged on it with his fists on the windows... I thought he'd be knocked ass over head, jeez he was close to getting knocked over.

*Karen:* Yeah, and it was all that small town stuff, you know, that was really raw and red for me. Because all we were doing was sitting on our country, standing up for our rights and challenging the authorities about the death and what had happened.

Karen's Aunty Isabel stayed with the Murray family after Eddie's death, and she was with the family through the first half of the inquest held in Wee Waa. It became clear during that hearing that the police had serious problems with their accounts of which officers had been on duty the day Eddie Murray died. One was shown to have been misleading the court in his evidence. The second part of the inquest was due to be heard in Sydney.

*Isabel:* When the Coroner's Court was going to be shifted down to Sydney, we realised then that the Murray family wasn't going to get the kind of support that we were hoping. They were so upset, you know, they needed to be taken to and from the court and looked after all the time, because they were in a sick state really. And we were the ones trying to do all of that. So we said: 'Oh, we'll have to contact Kevin and see what he can do'. At the time, the Murray family didn't know about Tranby.

And so it worked out that Kevin had a bus there to meet us at the train. 'Cause on the trip down, we were all sitting up on the train all through the night, and we were all pretty knocked out by the time we got here. And then I was thinking about how hard it was that we had to get down here to the court, and this is the mother and father of the boy that's been killed and their family. We weren't worried about ourselves, we were just thinking: 'How can we make it better for them?' And then Kevin sorted it all out for us, met us at the railway. And took us over to Tranby with this big breakfast ready and everybody was able to freshen up a bit and go on down to the Coroner's Court there. So, that sort of eliminated a lot of worry for us with that.

Really since that time we built up a good sort of communication thing, and if I run into some kind of problem out there I could always ring Kevin and he'd be running around like a scalded chook too, but he'd always find some way to handle my stuff as well, and then we'd analyse it a bit later. So I reckon we had a really good little unit to keep us going.

Because after the inquest, with that 'Open' verdict, we couldn't just let it go. We wanted to go on and try to push to find out what really happened. But to go on to try to set up the push for a Royal Commission into the Deaths in Custody was a pretty full-on sort of decision for us. It made it better because we knew we had that support here in Sydney at Tranby. And then when we were talking to the

lawyers, well, it just sort of automatically happened, Kevin did all the lawyer stuff, and getting them together and we just had to come down and talk at the meetings, and say: 'Can it happen?'

*Karen:* I came to Sydney not long after that, and was working at Tranby, and got involved with the Black Deaths in Custody Committee... there was some activity already, because there had been John Pat's death in September the year before, in WA, so it must have been 1980. And, I remember when we came down for the inquest, we were asked to talk at the next rally about John Pat's death, which was September. I remember Aunty Iz and I came down to speak at it. I remember going to the rally with Aunty Iz and Madeline mob was there with her camera.

And I talked to people about that. I talk to Mum and Dad and I talk to Aunty Iz and I talk to Leila and Yabbu [Eddie Murray's parents] about whether I should get involved, because I'd be talking about their issues, so I was conscious of making sure that it was all okay. And, they said fine yes, be involved, you know. And, once again the resources of Tranby and Cookie supporting all of that was what, and during all that time, once again I think I continually sought counsel from Cookie, because there were some hard issues that we were going through.

*Karen:* I mean we were talking about challenging the entire judicial system about what's going on in the jails and that, because that's what it was...

*Kevin:* Federally, not just in the state, you were talking about the whole federal system right across.

*Karen:* And then trying to play a support role, cause then we were also getting information about all the other deaths that had occurred, or things that were happening and that sort of stuff. So then playing a support role and an advocacy role for families.

*Judy Chester:* The committee itself was mainly all women, I think that's important to say that.

*Karen:* Yeah it was Rose Stack, who was the librarian at Tranby and Rose Wanganeen from South Australia, Helen Boyle from WA who'd just started as Director of Studies at Tranby and me. It was Helen and Rose Stack who had set up this little committee before I came on board. They were both from Western Australia, Rose Wanganeen was from South Australia and then me from NSW.

*Kevin:* The four of you were really the main force. So you stretched right across the country.

*Karen:* But it was important to remember that we had to work on so many levels. Some of the things the committee needed to do were about challenging the legal

system on this level, then there's informing people about the issue through the media on that other level, it's about supporting families on another level, it's about changing the way things are on a day to day level, so all that sort of stuff was happening. And then just trying to gather a small support group to be able to keep doing whatever you were doing and having the annual rally or go and having fund raising and all that sort of stuff.

*Kevin:* That was the biggest thing, the fund raising wasn't it.

*Karen:* 'Cause you needed to have resources. All that communication took time. And I remember that incredible emotional demand on you, that support of the families, of the people involved in all these tragedies and trying to work out how to cope with it.

*Kevin:* I remember being at the second part of Eddie Murray's inquest at Glebe. The family broke down and just sobbed and sobbed and you know it just broke your heart. It was the worse thing watching them, seeing how it affected them...

*Judy Chester:* They took it really hard, they had to keep reliving it, go there every day talking about it, and they didn't actually get to bury their family and get on with their lives. ... Day in and day out.

*Karen:* And this is going back to the land issues and everything else that we were involved in, there was a role for everyone. We said, 'Yes you can participate but in terms of the public face, it's *our* responsibility, it's our obligation to raise those issues and to be the spokesperson in the media'. It was important for a lot of different reasons, it was important for families to know that 'Yeah them black fellas down there, they're staying true to what they said and they're doing the talking'. And it was important for the wider public to know that this was a black issue that we were dealing with, it affected everybody but it was a black issue, these were black deaths in custody and that's what we were campaigning against.

And it was important for us, for me anyway, to make sure politicians heard black voices, cause they can easily be dismissive you know, and I remember talking to Gerry Hand, Clyde Holding, two of the federal ministers we went through during that period. They were fairly dismissive until we began to show there was not just one case – and we were building on it all the time, showing them – 'Here's another case, and here's *another* one'. ... So that built the case, at the Royal Commission.

So when we finally got the announcement it was in 1988. The government said, 'We'll have the Royal Commission' – but it was fairly broad, it was to be an investigation into other issues associated with it too. I didn't quite know what that meant. I was at your place Cookie, remember? And I rang up John Terry



and said, ‘Well, how should we respond to this?’ He knew what I was thinking about and he said, ‘Well you acknowledge it. You say, “This is a good thing but – we’re also going to be closely monitoring what you’re doing and how you’re doing it”’.

After I’d rung John Terry, then I rang the media and told them what I was going to say. It was a learning curve, wasn’t it? It had to build up a lot of people in a very short time!...

And Kevin, you used to know a lot of lawyers. Remember we had to get all them lawyers to advise us, they all worked for nothing too. It was all those connections that you had Cookie, and it was the media connections you know and the other support through the unions and things like that that allowed us to continue. So there was a lot of other sorts of support that we were able to get as a committee, apart from Cookie’s just overall endorsement of the whole thing. That was important but it was about being able to have a place to do those things, have those meetings, have those discussions, but also resourcing all those other bits and pieces. So that was important.

Isabel kept up the conversations at Tranby – giving back that support in the teaching she gave again and again to new generations of students:

*Isabel:* I really enjoyed going into the classes at Tranby to talk to the students these last few years [in the 1990s]. When they dealt with the Deaths in Custody reports in their Legal Studies course, I was able to tell them how that came about. That Tranby College was the place that we had that first meeting to say: Can we get a Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody?

And you know, they didn’t even know that. Because I said to them: ‘How do you think the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission came about?’ And the students said: ‘Oh well, the government was getting worried about all the deaths in custody and so they decided to do something about it.’ And I said: ‘Oh, hang on. No, that’s not the way it happened at all. It was people like us that had to do terrible things like march down the street, shout out about the police killing blacks.’

And so I could tell them how we camped on Tulladunna for a week. And we were really under threat there. But, as I was saying, we had the real contact with Tranby if something went wrong. We knew that that was the only organisation we could call on. And so I explained exactly how hard it was to camp that full week there, even though they had a sign saying: ‘Campers will be prosecuted’. We dared them to prosecute.



**Figure 7.7: Tranby students at rally at Sydney Town Hall.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

So just getting that Royal Commission going was hard enough. Because we used to come down and march and have our rallies down at the Rocks and that went on for a couple of years before we finally got it happening. But we were very lucky that we had the base of Tranby all the time. Without that we would never have got anything going in that Royal Commission.

And even the court itself, when the commission was in session, you know Tranby supported that all the way through. The students used to go in and listen and so they were learning as well. A lot of them didn't know a lot of the things that were happening. So it was another education to them really. And what I said to those young Tranby people was, 'It's up to you now to carry on the monitoring of those Royal Commission recommendations. And if those recommendations are not being implemented then you got to ask why not and how can we deal with it'. I would like to see them set up their own Watch Committees in their communities.

Over this time, Kevin and Judy were themselves involved in a wide range of political networks and activities, like the nuclear disarmament movement and the overall directions of the Australian Labor Party. But at the same time, they were building the relationship that would last them all their lives.



**Figure 7.8: Judy and Cookie.**

Courtesy Judy Chester family collection.