

18. Reflections: Networks, hubs, pathways – and leadership

Heather Goodall

The photographs of Cookie's 70th birthday in 2009 tell a great deal about his life. They all show Judy Chester beside him. Cookie is sitting in a wheelchair, older of course and more frail, but around him as always are the family, mates and campaigners who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in the exciting process of making changes happen. In front of him was a big cake, iced in the Aboriginal colours of black, red and yellow and next to the cake, a huge plate of oysters!



Figure 18.1: Cake with oysters.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

His aunty Kit is sitting on one side and on the other side is Sylvia Scott, long time friend of both Judy and Cookie. Standing next to Cookie are Joe Owens, presenting Cookie with the last remaining Life Membership badge of the Builders Labourers' Federation and Pat Geraghty, towering leader of the Maritime Union and a friend from way back, talking with Cookie about memories of Alf Clint and then all the times with Cookie at helm of the Co-operative. The Tranby people were there, along with those others who have shared Cookie's vision of education for change: Brian Doolan, Linda Burney, Chrissy Kerr, Robyn Ridgeway and Derek Mortimer. The old friends from the early land rights days: Meredith Burgmann, Nadia Wheatley, Rod Pickette. And those stalwart unionists – Hal Alexander, Russ Herman and Tony O'Bierne. There are close friends: Paul Torzillo, Janny Ely (Judy's sister) and her husband Tommy, Norma Walford and Greta North. And there are many younger people – Judy's children and grandchildren, Rod Pickette's children along with Paul's and my daughters. Those young people were there as family, but beyond that, each of them was a friend of Kevin in their own right, drawn into the enthusiasm and enjoyment for life that he has continued to nurture in all of us.



Figure 18.2: Joe Owens presents Cookie with the last remaining BLF life membership badge. Brian Doolan and Sylvia Scott sitting on left.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 18.3: Pat Geraghty, long time secretary of the Seamen's Union, shaking Cookie's hand.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 18.4: Patty Anderson speaking.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

Patty Anderson, who had come down from Darwin, made the final speech, one that had everyone in tears one minute and laughing the next, about the times Cookie had brought people together despite distances and languages, and, even more amazingly, how he had somehow made sure that everyone got on. He'd given them all things to do, got them to go overseas when they hadn't wanted to, always been there to listen to midnight reverse charges phone calls from god knows where. Cookie is not well these days, but for all of us, he has continued to be generous with his time and warm companionship no matter how far away he is or how much it costs him in effort and energy. 'Mirrors' Cook – that's what Janny had called him long ago – is still using the phone to 'look into' many things for many people, fixing them when he can, helping to make new plans when he can't fix things, and never giving up.

By the time of that party in 2009, 20 years had passed since the Long March to mark the Bicentennial of January 1988. The defeats and the victories of the 1990s, in land, heritage and learning, discussed in the last chapter, had all played a role in shaping the ongoing momentum of the years to come. But the bigger questions were about how to nurture the storytelling which had been at the heart of Tranby.

In Kevin's later years at the College, with the expansion of Tranby's teaching program, it became clear that the old, dilapidated buildings would not be adequate for the students, let alone for the associated resources like Black Books. So he was involved in the planning for an ambitious building and renovation program. Not only were there the new programs, but there were as well some emerging opportunities which needed space, like the possibility of extending the library with a well-organised archive of Tranby's history, which the supporter and archivist Julia Mant had proposed. Kevin's lobbying skills became crucial to funding the plan, which he did with characteristic ingenuity by offering a personal invitation to federal ALP Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training, Ross Free to visit Tranby to see the state of the old buildings for himself. Perhaps even more important, because Kevin knew the building industry so well, he took a high role in negotiating the construction contract and then in liaising with the building unions to ensure there were Aboriginal workers on the job and that the Tranby students learnt about the building industry while the new College areas were being built.

But it wasn't just about the bricks and concrete. There was a central structural element of the old building which needed to be preserved for much more than its architectural value. This was the old sandstone fireplace in the dining room.

I remembered its importance in the early 1980s when I had worked there, and recently, in 2012, Chris Kerr described her memories of the way that fireplace was working in the early 1990s.

Christine Kerr: It was at the fireplace that everybody got to tell their stories in that building and they were stories that were shared. I still can point out that spot where it used to be. Somehow, metaphorically and symbolically, the whole of Tranby is the fireplace.

In the reconstruction of the new building there was a place left for the fireplace, but because of some council regulation, the fireplace couldn't be put back in there. I'd been worried that when it wasn't not a fireplace any longer then the stories would get lost. How were the young ones learning when those stories weren't getting retold around that fireplace?

I know better now.

Kevin too had been increasingly concerned about the stories of the place and the struggle. He had wanted to sustain the focus on cultural activities which had been generated during the Bicentennial. A developing program around the music industry expanded Building Bridges to become a major mentoring program for young Aboriginal artists, which linked high profile and politically active singer-song writers like Paul Kelly with Kev Carmody and others. Kevin had fostered the Aboriginal Writers Festival through Tranby, nurturing the storytelling in which he was increasingly interested. In the early 1990s, Kevin had encouraged his old friends to tell their stories. Joe McGinness was already underway with his story. On trips down from Cairns, Joe enjoyed Cookie and Judy's 'elastic house' in the evenings, with a lot of back up from Kathy Kennedy, Kevin's cousin, who was staying with them too while she studied at Tranby. During the day, Joe could be found in Cookie's office at Tranby, dictating his life story to Chrissy. It blossomed into his book: *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*.¹

Out of that process, Kevin looked for practical ways to encourage Aboriginal history makers and story-tellers, and this was the genesis of the Rona-Tranby Trust, the collaboration between the Jewish community and Tranby. With applicants chosen under Aboriginal control, the funds were able to foster the telling of stories in forms which otherwise could not have been published and circulated.

Cookie was able to be at work less often from 1997, as his emphysema got worse. He made it into Tranby on some days, sitting in the office like he had always

¹ Joe McGinness 1991, *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia.

done. But increasingly, he was working from home, with Judy managing his days and liaising with Chris Kerr who kept up the flow of work papers between Kevin's house and Tranby. Kevin kept in touch with Tranby staff and his far flung network of comrades by phone – the handset seemed to be attached to his ear.

At Tranby itself, the office still looked the same but Cookie's chair was often empty. The office was busy, however, not only with staff but because Isabel Flick, after a bout of illness, had decided to retire from the local land council in Collarenebri and was now often at Tranby, talking with students, undertaking outside talks and representing Tranby visions in many ways. And she had a new project. Cookie had encouraged her to take up the opportunity for funding support from the Rona-Tranby Trust and she had decided it was time now to get on with her story. She asked me to help with the research and writing but she wanted to use the money mainly to help her travel to talk with the people who had been close to her throughout the many struggles she had been in to gain justice for the people in north-western NSW. The Rona-Tranby funds made her story into a very strong community conversation – with the people she had worked with all featuring strongly alongside her as she tried to answer the questions she had about why her life had worked out the way it had.² Chris Kerr described to Kevin what the office had looked like in those days:

Chris Kerr: Auntie Is sat in that big pink chair. I can see her sitting there to your left side. You occupied the centre position at that desk whenever you could be there.

But it was probably after 1997 when you were spending a lot more time working from home. There was constant movement at Tranby, and lots going on, there was absolutely no doubt about that. But whenever I came into that office, I'd get the feeling as if you were there, Cookie, as a figure that was spiritually certainly very present even if you couldn't be there so much physically.

The only other person I knew to sit there solidly in your chair for any length of time then was Auntie Isabel. No-one else could fill it!

Kevin and Judy's home space now became even more important to Kevin as he became ill. Judy was tireless not only in making him comfortable and organising the medical visits and treatments. She was a committed activist and unionist in her own right, and her companionship and support for Kevin in his political work was just as important for him as her homemaking and carer role.

² Published after Isabel's death as the co-authored: Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall 2004, *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest. It was launched at Tranby.

Judy built a whole environment that celebrated Kevin's political as well as his family life. Kathy, Kevin's cousin, had begun to trace their family's stories through her Tranby coursework, which allowed her to build a collection of old photos and letters which were exciting and moving for everyone. Judy had them framed and organised around the house, and composed in collages on the bedroom mirrors. She ensured throughout this time that Kevin was able to re-engage with Susie and Mereki, his children, through contacting Margaret and the kids to gather photographs of their lives so Kevin could keep in touch despite no longer being able to travel. The photographs of Susie's four children, three boys and a girl, were up there among the rich display of family pictures for Cookie to enjoy.

Judy's own children had become very close to Kevin in the early years of their relationship, when the kids all came to live with Cookie in the inner city. All of them have continued to be often around. Talea and Karana, the daughters of Judy's son Peter, lived with Kevin and Judy for a time in their 'elastic house' in Burwood and recent photos show Cookie delighted to be meeting Talea's new baby daughter, Rose. Janette, the youngest of Judy's three children, lived with Kevin and Judy for many years, sharing in the supportive family life as well as generously supporting Judy in looking after Kevin when he needed it. Judy's middle child, Jodi, got married and moved up to Wellington, but has been constantly in touch. Jodi's three children, Tjanara, Ngahla and Yamirra, were often in the house or on the phone to talk not only to Nanna Judy but to their Poppy. Kevin and Judy followed all their growing up – Tjanara's traditional dancing, talented artwork and her determination to graduate from high school, Ngahla's exciting independence and his football games and Yamirra's exuberant childhood visits to stay with her grandparents. A steady presence in Cookie's life have always been his sister Joy, and Judy's sister Janny, with her husband Tommy, who enjoys following the trots and racing as much as Kevin. Along with them, there has been Kevin's brother, Ronnie, still in Perth but often over visiting Sydney to keep in touch, while Kevin's cousin Kathy would bring her mother, Kevin's Aunty Kit, up for visits as long as she was well enough to come.



Figure 18.5: Mereki and his wife, Miriam, on the South Coast where Cookie himself grew up.

Courtesy Margaret Munday family collection.



Figure 18.6: Linda Burney and Judy.

Courtesy Judy Chester family collection.

As Kevin was spending more time at home, the idea that he himself might get a book together began to take shape. At the same time as friends were wanting to drop in and yarn over old times in this comfortable setting, Cookie began to think he could use these opportunities to record the histories of the movements they had all worked for in a crucial political period. He talked it over with the Rona-Tranby Trust – and kept insisting he wanted to gather a history of the movements, not of his own life – and once they agreed to offer some funding, he asked me to help with the writing. So from then on, we used the grant to fund people’s travel from all over the country, to bring those old comrades down to yarn about the ways they had tried to make change happen. The long lunches and dinners started to happen, with good friends enjoying the time together as they recorded their memories. Judy and I were usually there, and often Paul Torzillo would be there too. I would work the recorder and Judy would produce magic food and endless cups of tea – and each of us asked some questions as a back up to Cookie. All the chapters of this book arose from those recordings of discussions, reminiscences and debates, although often the funniest stories have had to be left out. There was a lot of good cooking with Judy’s many roasts and seafoods and salads although sometimes the guests cooked too. Jack Ah Kit’s great curries are memorable!



Figure 18.7: Cookie with Terry O’Shane and Paul Torzillo.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.8: Cookie with David Ross (Central Land Council, Northern Territory) and Kevin's nephew, Gregory Streets, Joy's son.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.9: Bruce McGuinness, Gary Foley, Tim Anderson and Cookie, 2002.

Courtesy Tim Anderson.



Figure 18.10: Cookie with activist and union mates Eileen Haley, Russ Herman and Hal Alexander.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.11: Cookie with Kevin Tory and Heather Goodall.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.12: Cookie with Karen Flick.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.13: Cookie with Jack Ah Kit and his wife Gail.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.14: Cookie with Peter Thompson.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Figure 18.15: Janny, Tjanara (Judy's granddaughter) and Judy at Salt Pan Creek on the Georges River, Sydney, February 2010, where Janny and Judy spent some of their childhood. This was a great day and almost the last outing Judy had before she suddenly became ill and passed away in April 2010.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 18.16: Judy and Cookie in the early 1980s.

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.

Judy passed away very suddenly in May 2010 and left a deep sadness among all of her many friends and her family. The sessions which led to this book were all shaped by her presence and her warm enthusiasm for the project, so in very many ways, this book reflects her from all its pages.

Each of these sessions with old friends was unique but there were themes which kept recurring and these have shaped the ways the edited segments of transcript are arranged in this book. Those key themes can be drawn together here to close Cookie's book. These are themes which shaped the movements but also they are characteristic of Kevin's contribution to them.

Firstly, *learner-directed learning* at Tranby was sustained and encouraged through Kevin's time there. It has not only shaped the educational experiences of countless students but has made all of us who worked there into better teachers. This idea – which was an important outcome of the collaboration between Brian Doolan, Terry Widders and Chris Milne in the early 1980s – picked up the cutting edge thinking of Adult Education researchers and activists at the time. But it was so right for Tranby because it met Cookie's conviction that Aboriginal-controlled education at Tranby should recognise, respect and build on the knowledge of the Aboriginal people who came there as both learners and activists. Before he came to Tranby, this idea had flourished in the rank-and-file movement of the Builders Labourers' Federation and before that, it has arisen in Cookie's learning as he grew up in the working environment of Wollongong and within the Aboriginal community of the South Coast. Kevin's commitment to

this idea was sustained through changing staff at Tranby and different cohorts of students. So while Kevin always worked in collaboration with teaching staff at Tranby, he was also shaping the ways they developed the learning environment of the college, so that it met the goal of valuing and building on the knowledge of the learners and the whole Aboriginal community. This was the approach Kevin took in all his political involvement.

Secondly, in all of the movements in which Kevin has been involved, his contribution in *building alliances* was central. It was the alliances across left and right unions and between black and white supporters which strengthened Tranby as an adult education provider with whom the labour movement felt it could work. Then it was the alliances between regions in NSW which Kevin helped to build which enabled the successful campaigns which forced through not only the flawed Land Rights Act of 1983 but the broader gains of the Heritage movement. Then, crucially, it was the alliances between states and the very different Aboriginal movements in each which enabled the national push for land rights in the 1980s. As Patrick Dodson had said, Cookie was able to welcome people and enable them to come into the spaces they had not previously felt comfortable entering.

Then it was the alliances between the labour movements not just in Australia but overseas in the ILO with indigenous movements which enabled the interventions of Aboriginal Australian unionists like Kevin and Terry O'Shane into the international Indigenous Rights movement which led from the ILO to the UN and the more widely recognised steps which led to the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples in 2006.

Thirdly, all these alliances involved *crossing borders* – not just those between states or nations but across accepted divisions of factions and racial divisions. It took great courage to be able to make those leaps, but without the links across right and left in the ALP at various times, the political decisions which offered some support to Aboriginal people would not have been made. Similarly it was the links between atheist socialist unionists and the religious bodies of the World Council of Churches which not only drew funds for Tranby but generated support for campaigning organisations like the Kimberley Land Council or the North Queensland Land Council. These were the borders which often it was only Kevin who could cross, because he had won the trust of all sides.

Crossing borders for a specific question was fruitful, but all of the movements depended on far longer lasting connections. One of the outstanding needs was for *networks* which would be formed by strong personal friendships and confidence as well as political affiliations. When the movements discussed in this book were working at their strongest, it was usually because such networks were alive and functioning to pass information around and enable communication and decision

making across the obstacles like distance or factions or even languages. As so many of the people, whose words are recorded in these pages, say – Kevin was often the glue which kept those relationships active and functioning.

There have been many different metaphors to describe the way Kevin works. But when Chrissy Kerr speaks here about education, she is echoing the endorsement of Patrick Dodson, Brian Doolan, William Bates, Isabel Flick, Pat Anderson, Terry O’Shane and many others who all speak about Kevin’s role about different movements, from the NSW land rights movement to the national one or the trade union movement.

Chris Kerr: That small player Tranby had become a very large player that provided that hub of the wheel that keeps things turning. And it was Kevin who maintained that and kept the hub well greased and oiled and smooth so that this other wheel could keep turning – which had much broader implications for Aboriginal education nationwide.

That process was the networking of comrades and friends with whom Kevin was constantly in touch. Patrick Dodson put the same thing in another way, with another vivid metaphor (Chapter 11) when he talked about opening a pathway.

Patrick Dodson: It is the human encounter, not the issues. We probably knew what these issues were, but it was these *people*. These people who represented people in some other place, who were there... who created a sense of... well, when you thought of Perth you thought of Riley, and when you thought of Sydney you thought of Cookie, you didn’t think about anything else. You just said, well, ‘They’re the people that you got to see, when you go there’.

These are different images but they add up to the same idea. The basis for this capacity for Kevin to be a ‘hub’ or the person who was able to ‘open’ a place for visitors was his universally acknowledged *integrity* in all senses: his personal integrity, his financial integrity and his integrity of principle. These are rare qualities separately and are even more rare together, but all the people interviewed for this book have commented that these – all of them – were characteristic of Kevin’s involvement with them and whatever campaign they shared with him. These were qualities which Kevin has put together uniquely with warmth, generosity and humour – endlessly patient and always able to steer a diplomatic pathway through uncomfortable situations. This confidence in Kevin – to act as a hub or to open pathways – has been solidly based on a belief in his unshakable and unquestioned integrity.

The final theme which recurs in all the conversations is *leadership* – as an important but elusive quality of which all the activists were appreciative but about which they also had reservations. Many of the contributors to these conversations stressed how frustrating it was to see individuals cut themselves

off from the grass roots or the rank and file movements (depending on whether the speakers were Aboriginal activists or unionists). Both meant the same thing – they saw leadership as important for building movements but also as causing problems when people got carried away by power or separated from the source of their movement, the people who were making the day-to-day changes. Yet all of the people who came together to share their many and monumental contributions to different movements all deferred to Kevin – many spoke of him as always offering that valuable sense of direction but never seeking to put himself into the limelight or take any of the glory. In fact it has often been difficult to give Cookie his rightful share of the credit for the many things he has been involved in.

‘Leadership’ is such a sought after quality that learning programs have been established around it, such as the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre in Canberra. The series of interviews in this book have often reflected on the qualities which inspire and support communities and organisations – and Kevin’s approach has invariably been described as achieving just that – of embodying leadership. Kevin has not ever presented himself as leading nor has he seized the highest profile roles or the spokesperson’s mantle. Most often he has been encouraging other people to step into those roles and has supported them when they did so. Chris Kerr has pointed to the adage of Lao Tzu as embodying how Kevin has worked:

The greatest leader of all is one when, after the work is done, the people will say ‘we did it ourselves’.

In his own words, in all his work in movements and in education, Kevin has carried out what he regarded as the key principle of the Coady International Institute about leadership. Cookie remembered it as:

you have to bring people along with you – you can’t lead by being out in front.

It has been that approach to leadership which has allowed Kevin to continue to open the pathway to the many people in the many movements of his life.