

Remembering Steve Keed, a true man of compassion



Steve Keed, rear left, with mental health work colleagues. His recent passing has been keenly felt by all those whose lives he touched. PHOTO: SUPPLIED.

By RASA AND PETER KABAILA, IN COLLABORATION WITH STEVE'S ELDEST SON, KORI KEED.

The recent passing of former Indigenous leader Steve Keed has been keenly-felt by all those whose lives he touched. Most locals would remember Steve through his role as Director of Tubba-Gah (Maing) Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation in Dubbo, and his tireless work improving the lot of the Aboriginal community.

Former colleague Rasa Kabaila remembers a good man, a friend, and a supporter, of so many in his community.

It is with deep sorrow, that we announce the passing of Steve Keed, a dedicated social worker and mental health advocate, who left us recently and suddenly, after an unexpected stroke.

Steve was a respected and well-liked social worker at the City Community Mental Health Team in Canberra, where he worked for nine years until his passing in 2024. Known for his unwavering commitment to his clients, Steve always put others first. Whether it was bringing a coffee to a client, or taking the time to listen, he consistently demonstrated his deep care and compassion. His colleagues and clients respected him immensely for his dedication and the personal connection he made with everyone he met.

I'm a nurse practitioner, and I met Steve through us working together at the City Community Mental Health team. I interviewed Steve in 2018, in hope that a part of his life could be celebrated in my book that I published in 2024, *Put some Concrete in your Breakfast: Tales from Contempo-*

rary Nursing.

My book was centred around nursing stories. Steve was a social worker and, as I was already over the word-limit at the time of our interview, I unfortunately, couldn't include his story in my work. But I want Steve's story to be celebrated, which is why I'm paying tribute to him here.

As I look back on my emails with Steve about his story, I both tear up and smile, when I see his voice and character coming through each word. In my first email, I asked Steve if he happy to share a part of his story, while acknowledging that he was busy man.

He replied: "Hello Rasa, very busy but not too busy for you, my friend. Yes, I would be available to answer some questions, ring me any time. By the way, how are you going over there? Alright I hope."

In a later email, he admitted to me about some of the stress that he had at work (because the work that we do while rewarding, is also very consuming). He then added another line, like a resolution of strength: "It's okay, I'm just getting used to the pace of it all."

When I interviewed Steve and he talked about his family upbringing, he was honest about the difficulties that he and family faced, but also acknowledged the complexities of life.

He was a person who could see things from different perspectives: "My insightfulness to my upbringing and sense of humour, has always been protective for me. I know that people cope with things in different ways. I help my people when I can. I consid-

er myself to be very reliable and resilient.

"My skills in being able to help my family and myself, have been activated through my own upbringing, through my culture, as well as social work training and experience from being employed as a Social Worker.

"Other people in my tribe have not been given a chance to be taught the skills to be able to reflect on and process their trauma, which I think can be a big reason as to why a lot of Koori people, have had major adjustment issues."

Steve added, "I know that my life has been hard in many ways, but I also know that life is a gift, which I choose to make the most of.

I didn't complete Year 10. Yet, I managed later in life, to gain qualifications to become a Social Worker, all on my own accord, because I am passionate about helping others, and I am driven".

Steve also noted: "I am resilient and I can appreciate the kindness in nurses, social workers, and other health clinicians, who are doing their best to support to aid positive change in any culture.

"As a somewhat confident Koori male I try to aid my people (as many as I come in contact with). I try to slowly bring on change, to then help them understand there may be better way to heal, react and progress.

"Reconciliation works not with a tokenistic national 'Sorry Day', initiated by white politicians who have not been consulted with Indigenous Elders about their

needs and wants.

"On the flip-side, reconciliation will not come from a cycle of blame. Reconciliation happens from grassroots working up: through Indigenous people having conversations together with each other, and with white people about the pain they have all experienced and how they can heal together."

Steve's heritage was rooted in the strength and resilience of his Wiradjuri ancestors. His great-grandfather Harold Pierce Keed was part of a group of closely-related men who left the Cumeragunja Aboriginal Reserve in NSW in the early 20th century.

These men, including members of the Towney, Naden, and Powell families, traversed the NSW Riverina, seeking work in shearing sheds and ultimately settling in towns such as Dubbo, Peak Hill, and Gilgandra. In 1966, Harold Keed and Fred Powell, established a successful boomerang factory in Peak Hill. The following year, Harold Keed was elected to the town's Rotary Club, becoming one of the very few Aboriginal members of Rotary in Australia.

In 1998, my father, Peter Kabaila, had the privilege of interviewing Steve's uncle and aunt, Ray and Valda Keed, about their life on the Bulgandramine Aboriginal Reserve and the Aboriginal camps on the outskirts of Peak Hill. These historical archives were published in Peter Kabaila's book, *Survival Legacies*.

I wasn't aware of this information until 2019, when I was telling Dad about Steve, and I introduced them. Dad could see that

Steve was acutely aware of the historical and cultural burdens carried by his people. I also know from speaking with Steve, that he did feel the pressures and politics of his role.

A graduate of the Australian Catholic University, Steve lectured there and co-authored the influential article, 'Getting Used to the First Nations Person in the Room', which shed light on the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal social workers. His role as the Director of Tubba-Gah (Maing) Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation in Dubbo allowed him to help many individuals seeking recognition of their Aboriginal descent within their communities.

Peter, Steve, our work colleagues, and I, shared many meaningful discussions, one of which occurred around a campfire where Steve gifted Dad a boomerang made by his late cousin, Kevin Naden. This gesture opened a window into Steve's life and heritage, revealing a man who was not only intelligent and perceptive, but also deeply sensitive. These qualities made him an exceptional mental health worker, though they also meant he often neglected his own well-being in favour of others.

Steve will be profoundly missed by his family, including his two sons Kori and Jacob, his colleagues at the Community Health Centre, his clients, and his friends.

His legacy of empathy and service, will continue to inspire all who knew him.

Thank you, Steve, for your kindness and dedication. May you rest in peace.