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JANUARY 20-21 2018

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The Weekend West

feature

**'We don't realise how
lucky we are with
those sorts of models.'**

Going the distance

Tracy Westerman learnt early how to be a strong, proud Aboriginal. Now WA's Australian of the Year is teaching others to be the same.

WORDS JULIE HOSKING PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

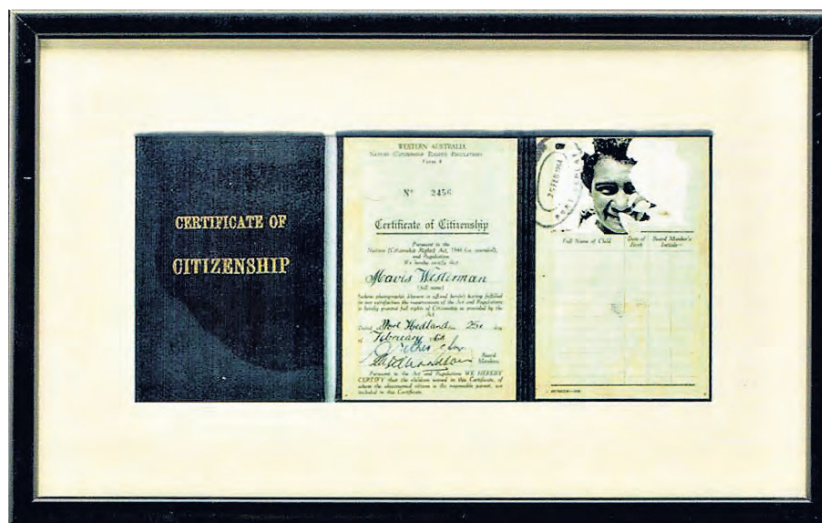
It looks like an old passport – those hard, fold-able ones you might have seen floating around in your parents' or grandparents' drawers. But the seemingly innocuous document is shocking on so many levels. It certifies that Mavis Westerman, a Njama woman born and raised in Western Australia like generations of her family before her, is a citizen of Australia. Not because she planned to travel overseas and needed proof of nationality. But because the law required Aboriginal people to apply for citizenship. In their own country.

"It's disgraceful," says daughter Tracy, a multi-award-winning psychologist whose groundbreaking work in indigenous mental health and suicide prevention has been recognised around the world. "Disgraceful."

We're sitting out the back of her beautifully renovated weatherboard, "the result of three renovations over 20 years". Designed for entertaining, the high ceilings and open-plan layout bring the outdoors inside, reflecting the laid-back Pilbara lifestyle she so loved. Not surprisingly, Tracy has no trouble finding dog sitters when she's off on one of her regular trips interstate or overseas.

Her overexcited cocker spaniel Jilya (meaning "my child" in Njama) – "she's a runt, I'm always drawn to the runt in the litter for some reason" – is doing her level best to engage me in a game of catch, shoving a tennis ball on my lap, while 14-year-old terrier Rusty, whose patches of rust have faded with the years, wanders back and forth to bark at the back fence. These pampered pooches have as much interest in their owner's latest accolade as they do in the appalling story of her mother having to attend a Port Hedland court in 1964. Under the so-called WA Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act of 1944, Aboriginal people "had to prove you had severed ties with Aboriginal community, were free of disease, could speak English and were 'civilised' in your behaviour" before they would be granted citizenship, Tracy explains.

"I do a lot of training and I only started showing that powerpoint (with the citizenship certificate) in the last couple of years actually, and people just gasp. They gasp because of how disgraceful it is, they gasp because they didn't know about it and they gasp because they see how recent it was," she says. "I've had people say to Mum 'That didn't happen'. People just can't reconcile it. So I think for me it just became really important for people to see a



living, breathing person who had a mother who had actually been through that."

It's also why the West Australian nominee for this year's Australian of the Year chose the certificate as one of the items for an exhibition at the National Museum of Australia. The other is a bottle of Pilbara dirt, one she carries with her on her travels as a reminder of her spiritual home.

Tracy Westerman has always been a proud Aboriginal woman. It was something instilled in the now 47-year-old and her four older siblings from the start. As was the importance of education – from parents who both had to leave school as children. Mavis and Mick met in Port Hedland, later working on stations where Mavis was a shearer's cook and Mick, a white man who refused to take wages because his Aboriginal workmates weren't being paid, was a ringer.

"We don't realise how lucky we are with those sorts of models in front of us. The big moment for me was when I came down to university and I realised for the first time that my dad was a feminist," Tracy says. "He was this tough, carved-out-of-granite-looking guy, and the biggest feminist you could ever imagine. All my friends that I was studying with were told by their dads 'Don't worry, you're just going to have kids, don't waste your time'. And I just couldn't believe it, couldn't fathom it, because there's my dad saying the complete opposite."

Tracy was born in Carnarvon when her parents were living in Useless Loop, a place she says helped embed those important early cultural connections. When the family moved to Tom Price in the mid 70s, it was a bit of an

eye-opener for them all. "It was really our first functional house; we had floors and electricity and running water," she recalls. "Mum really couldn't believe this was our house!" Being the first Aboriginal family in town, Mavis was also mindful of setting an example. "We were always impeccably dressed. Mum was almost like a drill sergeant – thank God for her because she taught us work ethic, she taught us pride, she taught us all those sorts of things."

Not long after Tracy was announced as WA's Australian of the Year nominee in November, Mavis was interviewed in Karratha, where she now lives. "I would never let them have a day off or wag school: that was off!" Mavis told the ABC. "In my generation we'd go to work as soon as we were old enough to get a job ... so I encouraged my kids – I said 'You've got to go' ... you've got to get on better in this world."

Tracy laughs at the memory. "It was just absolutely beautiful. But that was the reality of it, we literally were not allowed to have one day off! And if we got up later than 6am, too bad, breakfast, everything was cleaned ... it came from the history she dealt with, where your children could be taken away from you at any time."

Mick Westerman died of bowel cancer at 60 – "like so many people in remote areas by the time it was picked up it was just too late" – but it's clear he, too, is a hero to his youngest daughter. "I remember I'd get an A at school and I'd run home to tell him. He was this tough station man, with tattoos up his arms, but he was as soft and kind and as beautiful as you can imagine. And my mum watches politics for sport, she's a smart, smart woman ... They both came from nothing really. And yet just magically found each other, two people who together dragged us out of poverty in one generation."

Which isn't to say the Westerman children haven't encountered their share of obstacles, and blatant racism, over the years.

"My first recollection of it, my first real experience was being called a boong in the playground – boong and coon, horrible words. I didn't know what it was but everyone was pointing at me and laughing," she recalls. "But I remember the most sobering one, which was in social studies class, and there's literally a picture of an Aboriginal person's skull and of an early white person's skull and basically saying there's no difference, that we weren't evolved as people – »

feature

« they were comparing us to Neanderthal man. That would have been Year 5, Year 6 and I went 'I don't want to be one of them' »

As a psychologist, she now knows that reaction was about the desire to fit in at all costs. "When you're a kid you don't want to stand out for any reason," she says. "But I was just really lucky to have an environment that didn't generalise racism. They'd say 'That's just that nasty person', rather than, 'All white people are this way'. And I have never, ever been into divisiveness. We are all Australians together."

Besides, she says, the stakes are too high to make her work a black or white issue. "We have kids in our communities as young as 10 who are choosing the option of death instead of life. This is not an Aboriginal issue any more, this is a human issue," she says, her passion rising to the fore. "We are only as strong as our most vulnerable and Australians have always been concerned about our most vulnerable. I'm not a social media commentator, I'm not a politician, I'm very, very clear about what I want my platform to be."

Should she be named Australian of the Year on Thursday, Tracy plans to use that platform to do as she has long been doing – working to improve Aboriginal mental health and help prevent alarming rates of suicide.

As she celebrates the 20th year of Indigenous Psychological Services, a business she started because she could see her people weren't getting the kind of help they needed – and which she is proud to say has never had any government funding – even she finds it hard to believe she almost walked away from psychology.

"The first three years at uni I struggled, the culture shock was pretty significant. I mean I did distance education, I never caught an escalator, I never caught a bus, crossing Stirling Highway was terrifying to me," she says. "And then on top of that I had this concept of the sorts of things that worked for my people and I was being taught the absolute contrary of that. I thought I can't be a psychologist; if this is what psychology is, I've got it wrong."

Then the 22-year-old was offered a job working in Kalgoorlie and the Western Desert communities with child welfare. "My first job in Warburton was just after 60 Minutes had been in there to do the big expose on petrol and glue sniffing," she recalls. "I'd never been in an environment before where there was solvent abuse and there are 5000 household substances you can use to get a high."

"Imagine something the size of Subiaco Oval and shopping bags littered as far as the eye can see, discarded shopping bags that kids had used to sniff with. I had one sibling group one day, four years of age all the way through to 12 – five of them, high as kites. It's just heartbreaking."

But she loved the communities and immediately felt she could make a difference. Initially she was like a bull at a gate, wanting to smash all the obstacles at once, but was guided by some wiser heads. "One of my elders said to me 'It's like a drop in a bucket. One day you help someone and it's a little drop in the bucket, and the next day you help someone else and



it's another drop in the bucket and eventually the bucket gets full'," she says.

The experience also made her all the more determined to prove that mainstream psychology methods simply weren't effective in dealing with indigenous mental health and suicide prevention.

"I developed the first unique screening tool for Aboriginal youth (the Westerman Aboriginal Symptom Checklist – Youth, or WASC-Y), developed from the ground up and validated," she says. "I didn't realise that had never been done before, not just in Australia but globally. I started to think maybe we're getting this wrong, maybe the suicides are escalating because we're getting the risk factors wrong and no one bothered to check. So we checked and found that the risk factors were very different, and if you get the risk factors wrong everything going forward is wrong."

In 1998, as she was nearing the end of her groundbreaking PhD, she struck out on her own. "I was 27, I quit government, I bought a fax machine for \$300 and just started sending out faxes to people about my training workshops – \$600 for four days, fully catered. And that's how I started my business, in the front lounge of this house. People started registering straight away, I just couldn't believe it. But mostly the business was born out of pure frustration. I knew that you had to get into communities and skill up whole communities if you were going to make a difference."

Tracy has now trained more than 22,000 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers, accrediting them in her unique tools and approaches – enabling them to identify early stages of risk in Aboriginal people. She has also provided her suicide intervention programs to indigenous communities throughout Australia, as well as programs that improve the cultural competence of those working with Aboriginal people.

"You have to get people to identify unconscious bias and that's really challenging. It's quite common that they come up to me in tears," she says.

She conducts an activity whereby she asks the participants to picture a group of Aboriginal people in a park. "And I go 'OK, open your eyes'. And on the powerpoint there's a couple of very well dressed Aboriginal tradesmen at work in the park.

Proud family
All the Westerman children (pictured above) were taught the importance of education; Tracy with mum Mavis after getting her degree.



And I say 'Did you see this?' And then you have another picture of some Aboriginal people drunk and dishevelled and lying in the park 'Or did you see this?' I am not doing it for the shock value. I'm doing this because the science tells us that this shifts people."

Tracy and her older brother Michael faced far more overt racism when they shared a house in Kalgoorlie, where Michael was studying at the School of Mines. "We got to the point where we would get anxious about meeting new people," she says. "We ended up wearing Aboriginal badges on our shirts when we went out just so that people would know we were Aboriginal because every time you'd go out you'd be in an argument. It's a cost-benefit weigh-up when you hear racist things. You kind of go 'Do I let this slide or do I say something and the whole evening is kind of ruined'. It was exhausting."

Now with the benefit of decades of experience under her belt, Tracy believes the only way to ensure effective change is to teach, mentor and support, ensuring that local people are given the skills, too, "because they never leave".

She says with most non-indigenous people, depression is a build-up to an act of suicide but with Aboriginal people it's highly impulsive. "You have intimate relationship breakdown, and then they lack the capacity to self-soothe, which is very common in attachment disorder or people who have a lot of trauma from separation. Then there's alcohol and drug use as an enabler, because they have no other way of soothing, and then bang!"

Tracy uses attachment theory to teach people how to be tolerant of emotions they can't handle. Techniques might involve using a prepared rehearsed script, and constantly repeating it, so the new behaviour becomes ingrained. Or sitting down with children, rather than talking down to them, and making eye contact.

"Telling them 'You are important to me', reinforcing those types of positive messages," she says. "You need to change that environment. If you skill whole communities up, everyone's got the same understanding of what they need to do if risk occurs, and then you keep reinforcing it. And you see incredible change."

Intrigued by her work in the field, the Canadian government sent a team to Australia in 2005 to see it firsthand, returning home with a recommendation to adopt the same approach with indigenous communities in Canada. "The science tells you it





Global message Tracy (left with sister Lynette Upton) in the Canadian territory of Nunavut, where she was a keynote speaker; with mum Mavis at Tamala Station (below).



works,” she says. Tracy is big on “the science” and “evidence-based approaches” but she’s far from a geek. She’s funny and ridiculously fit, though a debilitating chest infection has curtailed her other passion: running. “I’m never sick, I haven’t even had a cold for about nine years,” she says, her frequent laughter interrupted by a lingering cough.

“I’m hoping to do the Perth marathon this year. I’m pretty well drilled now because I’ve done three. I’ve always been a sprinter, I was a State basketballer, I’ve always done fast things, so marathon running was the best thing for me because it made me slow down. It was this real mental battle initially because I’d go out like a bull at a gate and then after 10km I’d pass out. And then I realised actually you need to run within yourself. Running is my absolute salvation.”

She used to listen to music as she ran around the foreshore but the mad Freo fan – “being No.1 ticketholder for the Dockers would be the only thing better than Australian of the Year,” she jokes – now plays footy or psychology podcasts. “I’m one of those people who always needs to be on the move. If I’m struggling with something I’ll just go for a run, I’ll think it all through.”

But this trailblazer doesn’t need to think any more about the changes she’s been fighting for in Aboriginal mental health. She’s over consultations and inquiries, and just wants action.

In the video made after being named WA’s Australian of the Year nominee, Tracy has a simple message for Aboriginal kids: “Hi I’ve been nominated for Australian of the Year, which is pretty deadly, but do you know what’s even deadlier? I’m an Aboriginal person from the Pilbara and I became a psychologist and now I get to spend my time travelling around Australia helping our people. So Aboriginal kids, set your goals high, believe in yourself, and don’t let anyone tell you you can’t achieve your dreams, and you can be deadly, too.”

Just before I leave, Tracy ducks into the bedroom to bring out her mother’s certificate, the photo torn many years ago in a fit of anger. I am hit by two overwhelming feelings. Revulsion at the social climate that allowed such an injustice to be inflicted in the first place. And wonder that the proud woman’s daughter is now WA’s Australian of the Year.

Yep, that’s pretty deadly. [www](#)

‘Don’t let anyone tell you you can’t achieve your dreams.’

For more on Tracy’s work, see indigenous psychservices.com.au. The Australian of the Year awards will be announced on Thursday.

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