

**ST FRANCIS HOUSE: EXCELLENCE
SOUGHT & ACHIEVED**

Finale Part Two



3 May 2019

More than fifty boys lived at St Francis' House from 1945 to 1959. Many of those children came from Alice Springs and St John's Hostel and other places in the Northern Territory. Some of their stories have been lost. Some of their stories are incomplete or records missing. We have tried to collect what we can and with help from people from Alice Springs and elsewhere we have been able to bring together this series, "Kids from the Alice."



1947 - St Francis House Boys - Back Charlie Kunoth, Bill Espie, Peter Tilmouth, John Palmer - Middle Laurie Bray, Charlie Perkins, Ernie Perkins, Malcolm Cooper, David Woodford - Front Brian Butler, Gordon Briscoe

Brian Butler has devoted much of his life working towards reconciliation and improving rights for Indigenous Australians. His grandmother and mother were forced from their family at Arltunga, east of Alice Springs. Brian has been a constant activist to help his

people and was the founding chair of the Stolen Generations Alliance and an inaugural member of the Aboriginal and Islander Healing Foundation. He spent twenty years as director of the South Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, was ATSI Commission for South Australia, and spent fourteen years as chair of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, which initiated the 1997 Bringing Them Home report. He was founding chair of the Aboriginal Housing Board of South Australia and of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Medical Service.



Front page of Truth newspaper 27 September 1947 - 27 September - "Abos find fairy god-father."

Desmond Price was born at Queen Victoria Hospital in Adelaide in 1942. He was among the hundreds evacuated from the Northern Territory over fear of the Japanese invasion of WW2. When he left

school he worked for the South Australian Railways and became a member of the Australian Federation of Locomotive Enginemmen.



Boys at St Francis' House in about 1950. Bill Espie, Jerry Hill, Laurie Bray, David Woodford, Peter Tilmouth, Charlie Perkins, Malcolm Cooper, Tim Campbell, Ken Hampton, Ernie Perkins, John Moriarty, Gordon Briscoe, Desmond Price, Vincent Copley, Richie Bray and Wilfred Huddleston.

Sonny Morey grew up at Yambah Station, "The Bungalow," St Mary's and then St Francis House in the 1950s. A talented footballer he was one of the original Central Districts players when the club entered the SA National Football League in 1964. The first "Bulldog" to play 200 games he wore the red, white and blue 213 times, represented South Australia four times, was runner-up in the 1972 Magarey Medal to later Brownlow Medallist Malcolm Blight, won club Best and Fairest in 1970 and was selected in Central's official 'Best Team 1964 to 2003'.

Vincent Copley is an Elder of the Ngadjuri people of South Australia. He was born in 1936 in Point Pearce, South Australia. Vince Copley has been an important advocate for the rights of Aboriginal people. He has spent all of his life working to improve the social, legal and economic position of Indigenous people, raise self-esteem and regain identity. He successfully campaigned to reform marriage laws, create the South Australian Lands Trust laws and have the racially discriminatory Welfare Board legislation repealed in South Australia. Vince's early career was an accomplished footballer and cricketer. Later, he extended this through various roles in sports administration.

In 2000 Vincent was appointed Co-chair to the National Indigenous Cricket Advisory Council. Most recently, he fulfilled this role in tandem with John Bannon, former Premier of South Australia. In this capacity Vince has organized various national and international programs for Indigenous cricketers including the 1988 tour of England, which commemorated the first Aboriginal Australian tour of 1868. Vince's actions provided hitherto unrecognised—and certainly uncelebrated—appreciation of the role of Aboriginal people in Australian cricket. The significance of Vince Copley's contribution to Australian cricket is acknowledged in the Vince Copley Medal, which recognizes the 'most outstanding cricketer' at the annual Lord Taverner's Statewide Indigenous Carnival. He was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2017.



1979 reunion at St Francis' House. Back row - Ken Hampton, Vincent Copley, David Woodford, Charlie Perkins, John Moriarty, Desmond Price, Lesley Nayda - Front row - Jerry Hill, Father Percy Smith, Wally McArthur.

Mrs Smith was a mother figure to many children. Along with other children profiled in this article series. They developed lifelong bonds and remained connected. Many maintained a connection with Father Smith and Mrs Smith to seek support and celebrate achievements. Lots were married by Father Smith and many of their children baptised by him.



1984 reunion at St Francis' House. L-R standing – John Moriarty, Richie Bray, Wally McArthur, Charlie Perkins, Fe Smith, Brian Butler, John P McD Smith, Vincent Copley, Desmond Price. Max Wilson is squatting and Mrs Isabel Smith is seated.

In Alice Springs and at St Francis' House she and her husband cared for dozens of Aboriginal children and as this series has demonstrated they took up positions of leadership politics, government, advancing Aboriginal rights, sport the arts and many other parts of the community. John P McD Smith says,

“The collective achievements of the boys are quite remarkable, particularly when you consider the challenges facing Aboriginal people at the time.”

“They became leaders of the Aboriginal rights movement that began in the 1960s.”

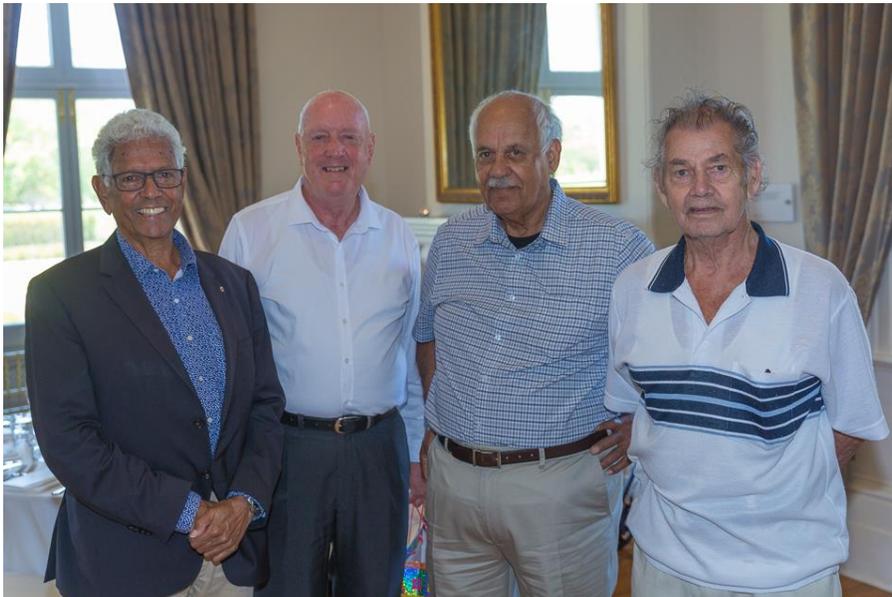
“They went on to become leaders in government and policy development at a state and federal level including the first Aboriginal person to serve as Secretary of a Commonwealth Government

Department and first dedicated Aboriginal policy adviser to a State Premier.”

“These opportunities were based on a solid education including the first Aboriginal university entrant in the 1940s, first male university graduate in the 1960s, first South Australian university graduate in the 1970s to the first PhD in the 1990s.”

“Sport is the great leveller. Many of the boys were top athletes, Australian rules footballers, leaders in international sport including soccer and rugby as national and state representatives.”

“Some of the boys were gifted artists and their designs adorn Qantas planes and the Aboriginal flag.”



2016 at St Francis' House. L-R - John Moriarty, John P McD Smith, Desmond Price, David Woodford.

Terry Cleary who lives in Darwin has been involved in the preparation of a new website about St Francis House launched in January 2019. He says,

“Probably no couple in the history of the Australian missions to Aboriginal people had as much influence on the lives of Aboriginal children as Father Percy Smith and his wife Isabel.”

“In January 1945, the Smith’s brought six boys from Alice Springs with the permission of their mothers, to Adelaide and soon after established St Francis’ House at the beach side suburb of Semaphore. Soon the original six boys were joined by other boys, some at the request of their mothers and others who had been removed from their families were placed there at the request of the government.”



2018 at St Francis’ House. L-R John P McD Smith, Brian Butler, Jim Foster, Vincent Copley, Gordon Briscoe, Mark J Smith.

“Without doubt, much pain and trauma is still experienced by the individuals who were removed and placed in institutions far away from their families and their culture. Many experienced abuse in these institutions. The ongoing intergenerational impact of the removal and abuse cannot ever be understated,” said Mr Cleary.

“Whilst St Francis’ House, for example, may have provided unique opportunities for the more than fifty boys who lived there - it was also

at times a harsh and lonely experience for many of the boys living so far from their families and growing up in a foreign culture,” said Mr Cleary.

Finally to Alice Springs News readers, thank you so much for your support and interest in this article series. Your feedback and comments have been much appreciated including some very touching personal outreaches. Sincere gratitude must be extended to Erwin Chlanda for the opportunity to share these stories.

Mark J Smith

Mark J Smith is the grandson of Father Percy Smith (1903-82) who was the first resident Anglican priest based in Alice Springs from 1933 and with his wife Isabel founded St Francis' House, a home for Aboriginal children. Mark holds an honours degree in history and politics from the University of Adelaide.

Comments

Bob Beadman - Posted May 4, 2019 at 8:49 am

The title of this article says it all. "Excellence" was achieved by the people who moved through St Francis House, and by three generations of Smiths as evidenced by this series. The historical record is much enhanced by this work.

David - Posted May 4, 2019 at 8:44 am

Hats off to all those great Aboriginal achievers and a great series of stories about them. Just to quote the story on the front page article of the Truth newspaper in this story Abos. Find Fairy Godfather.

That front page story in the Truth newspaper back then, goes on to state: "Half caste offenders grows week by week in the police courts of the Commonwealth, a silver haired Adelaide clergyman is quietly going ahead with an experiment that shines like a beacon in the story of Aboriginal welfare."

And the proof is, it was a great success. Today we are seeing similar sorts of problems with youth that in most cases, are incarcerated in youth detention, be it the infamous Don Dale, or one of the overcrowded centres in the NT.

Some are sent to Youth Diversion, the best the government can do.

Why not do a better job of the diversion, send those away who show promise like the boys who became great men in these series of stories, to get a good education, become productive citizens to help advance Aboriginal people's place in society and of everyone in general.

It is the governments of today that are failing youth and the whole of society, just turning out repeat offenders, not great men and women that they should become. The proof and evidence is there, we've read about it all.

Chippy - Posted May 3, 2019 at 3:03 pm

What a great series and history lesson for all that have followed it.

It was great to read up on bits and pieces of my brother Peter Tilmouth, and other great men from Central Australia and the NT.

Thanks to the Smith Family and also those involved at Alice Springs News for bringing these stories to us.

James - Posted May 3, 2019 at 11:19 am

What an inspirational series. I'm sad that it's come to an end. My unconditional admiration goes to Father Percy Smith, Mrs Isabel Smith, the St Francis' House boys and their mothers.

Ted Egan - Posted May 3, 2019 at 10:09 am

What a wonderful reminiscence this has been. What achievers!

Congratulations to all parties concerned.

I have been honoured by involvement with many of the lads in various capacities and they are all a credit to our First Australians.

Brian - Posted May 3, 2019 at 9:50 am

Thanks John, Mark and Erwin. A marvellous series of stories.

Much to learn from and emulate today to support people of Central Australia to thrive.