
Pioneer of Aboriginal rights remembered

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About 300 mourners gathered at the Aboriginal Advancement League headquarters in Thornbury yesterday to pay tribute to political activist and respected Aboriginal elder Bruce McGuinness, who died on Friday last week.

Most sat inside the large hall. Another 50 gathered in the marquee outside, where the service was relayed on a big screen.

With Bob Dylan playing through the speakers, images of Dr McGuinness - "Mac", or "Uncle Bruce", as he was affectionately known - were projected onto the screen.

While the photographs illustrated his journey - from a young, energetic man voicing the concerns of his people, to a wheelchair-bound grey-haired man - friends, family and colleagues remembered a man who devoted most of his 64 years to the fight for indigenous rights.

Delivering a eulogy, fellow Aboriginal activist Gary Foley said Dr McGuinness was a mentor and "probably the most impressive Aboriginal leader in the country".

One of the country's earliest pioneers of Aboriginal rights, Dr McGuinness became involved with the Aborigines' Advancement League. During the late 1960s he joined the Federal Council for the Advancement for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. He later formed a breakaway group, the National Tribal Council, with fellow activists Gary Foley, Dennis Walker and Naomi Mayers.

Dr McGuinness was instrumental in establishing the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy, which celebrated its 30th anniversary this year.

He was also one of the founders of the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation and the Koori Kollij Health Worker Educational Program.

He co-founded Redfern Radio, now known as Koori Radio, with Gary Foley, and is also believed to have been one of the first Aboriginal filmmakers, producing the short film, *Black Fire* in the early 1970s.

Dr McGuinness was awarded an honorary doctorate from Sydney's Tranby Aboriginal College earlier this year in recognition of his lifelong work. Yesterday's three-hour service, which concluded with Koori dancers performing traditional dance to a didgeridoo, was a tribute to a man who loved football, old Ford Fairlanes and his family, but most of all, a man who fought for the rights of the Aboriginal community.