

LEW GRIFFITHS 1957-2013

Lew Griffiths: Filmmaker who fought for Cape York

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Recently, Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson said of Lew Griffiths, associate and media adviser at Pearson's Cape York Institute: "Our whole enterprise leaned hard on this man. It was he who picked us up and reminded us of hope in the uplands ... The Australia of which this man dreamed was one in which his sons could feel at peace with their Aboriginal brothers and sisters. He was a patriot who felt his nation fell short of its promise."

Although Griffiths was not indigenous, he dedicated the best of his too few years to working with the people of Cape York, firstly in their struggle to extinguish the archaic legal principle of "terra nullius" and, more recently, to advance their welfare.



Documented the lives and struggles of indigenous people: Lew Griffiths on holiday with his family at Aurukun. Photo: HARRIET VEITCH

Lewis William Griffiths was born in Wilcannia on November 23, 1957, into a peripatetic family that moved through the outback as his father, a builder, sought work. The outback fostered Griffiths' lifelong love of adventure and his friendships with Aboriginal people.

At 15, he landed a traineeship at Channel Nine in Sydney. There he mastered camera work, sound, lighting and editing in that pre-digital age. He went on to work for Channel Seven, SBS and freelanced for the ABC. He won an AFI award in 1997 for his documentary *Dhuway*, about the first land claim in Queensland.



Empathetic and down to earth: Lew Griffiths with Marcia Langton (left) and Noel Pearson (right) in 1997. Photo: Supplied

By the mid-1980s, Griffiths was being regularly seen in the Federal Parliament press gallery and was already known as a professional "all-rounder", acutely alert to the nuances of national politics, the media and public opinion.

In 1990, Griffiths first met Pearson and other members of the Cape York communities who had taken up the struggle of the late Eddie Mabo for the recognition of native land title.

National politics and media were brave new worlds for young Aboriginal men from Cape York but, in Griffiths, they found someone to guide them - a skilful and well-connected media operator who was naturally empathetic to Australia's indigenous people. It was the beginning of a working association and deep friendship that lasted more than two decades.

Griffiths was down to earth, firm but fair and likeable and his media eye was more fixed on the quality of the public outcome than the pursuit of personal recognition or profit.

Not only was he adept with a camera and the media, he was also a skilled carpenter, plumber, landscaper and builder - testament, no doubt, to early years on building sites with his father.

Unfulfilled will be Griffiths' ambition to bring the story of Aboriginal tight-wire artist Con Colleano to the big screen. Colleano thrilled and enchanted millions throughout the US and Europe with his act during the 1930s (including Adolf Hitler), while concealing his Aboriginality behind a pseudo-Spanish name. For Griffiths, Colleano's story epitomised the struggle for Aboriginal identity and respect.

Griffiths continued his close association with the people of Cape York - some 14,000 people spread across disparate communities - until the end. The last few years were devoted to the Cape York family welfare reform trial.

Griffiths leaves an extensive film archive of broadcast-quality audio and visual material that documents the lives and struggles of Australia's indigenous people, along with other human rights issues. The archive contains more than 2700 hours of video and over 10,000 still

images. The establishment of the Lew Griffiths Memorial Library is now under way, with a team seeking benefactors.

Griffiths was farewelled in the grounds of the Wangetti campus of the Djarragun College, an indigenous school near Ellis Beach, outside of Cairns. Many of Cape York's traditional owners came to pay their last respects to "the big white man with the camera" who was considered by many to be family - a brother, son, uncle.

Lew Griffiths is survived by wife Louise, their sons Wil, Tom and Sam, mother Mary and siblings Rhonda, Annette and Glen.

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