

Aboriginal leader Yami Lester dies



South Australian traditional owner Yami Lester, in a wheelchair, and fellow leader Mike Williams. Picture: Kelly Barnes

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Yami Lester, who was left blind by the Maralinga atomic tests and went on to become a tireless campaigner for Aboriginal rights, has died aged 75.

Mr Lester, who died in Alice Springs on Friday night, was left blind as a young adolescent from the nuclear bomb tests in the 1950s, which he called the “black mist”.

“Mr Lester was a key Aboriginal leader who embraced the challenge of bridging two worlds,” Northern Territory Chief Minister Michael Gunner said on Saturday.

“He never let his blindness hold him back, he was sharp as a tack in negotiating at the highest levels of business and government.”

He joined the Aboriginal Advancement League in Adelaide, fighting to gain recognition for the British atomic tests in South Australia, and an acknowledgment for the estimated 1800 Aboriginal people affected.

His work led to the McClelland Royal Commission in 1984-85 which resulted in group compensation for the Maralinga Tjarutja people and long-term clean-up operations to restore the land.

Mr Lester, who has an Order of Australia, was also central to the work of the Pitjantjatjara Council that led to the grant of freehold title to traditional owners in South Australia.

His family has been offered a state funeral, and the South Australian Government is consulting with his family to determine their wishes.

Mr Lester retired to his traditional land at Walatina Station near Marla in the far north of South Australia, which will be his final resting place, his family said.

Speaking to the ABC in 2011, Mr Lester recalled his nuclear experience. "I was a kid," he said. "I got up early in the morning, about 7am, playing with a homemade toy.

"We heard the big bomb went off that morning, a loud noise and the ground shook.

"I don't know how long after we seen this quiet black smoke — oily and shiny — coming across from the south. Next time we had sore eyes, skin rash, diarrhoea and vomiting everybody, old people too."

A family statement on Saturday said Mr Lester, as a stockman and skilled horseman, spent his early years working on pastoral properties across South Australia until losing his eyesight as a teenager and later becoming completely blind.

As a member of the Aboriginal Advancement League, he was drawn to social work assisting families in need with health and education during work with the United Mission and was instrumental, together with the late reverend Jim Downing, in the establishment of the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs and the Pitjantjatjara Land Council, the family said.

He "was a staunch land rights campaigner active in the handback of Anangu Pitjantjatjara (APY Lands) in far north South Australia to traditional owners as inalienable freehold title, as well as the monumental return of Uluru and Kata Tjuta to traditional owners in 1985".

"For several decades, supported by his children, he continued a relentless campaign against nuclear weapons as well as plans for a nuclear waste dump in South Australia."