

Reflection on NAIDOC Theme 2018 “Because of her, we can!” Cynthia Rowan

Whilst education gave me the tools to influence and fight for social justice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people my faith has been sustained through the inspiration of the Blessed Virgin Mary through prayer and reflection. This journey of faith did not include regular church attendance – it did however include prayer and having a firm certainty that it is what and how I lived my life in the application of social justice – *it is in the doing not just saying*.

As a role model in a male dominated culture Mary rose above the chatter and focused on her faith. She was a mother, supporter, advocate, listener, confidant, ministry – her actions over 2,000 years ago still inspire us today. She quietly and consistently practiced her faith in support of her son and her community. She can be seen as our spiritual mother as she nurtures the spiritual lives of grace in us.

What does this mean in this modern Australian society in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people survive.

“As pillars of our society, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have played – and continue to play - active and significant roles at the community, local, state and national levels.

As leaders, trailblazers, politicians, activists and social change advocates, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women fought and continue to fight, for justice, equal rights, our rights to country, for law and justice, access to education, employment and to maintain and celebrate our culture, language, music and art.” (<https://www.naidoc.org.au/get-involved/2018-theme>)

Over my lifetime many women have influenced and supported me in my drive for social justice for Aboriginal and Islander people. The first and the most influential was my mother - a woman of American Negro and South Sea Islander descent who could not read or write. Mum was supported by our Dad a Birra Gubba man of the Nuru clan from the place now known as the Whitsunday Islands. She was very intelligent and a woman of strong principals. Our mother’s principals of honesty, respect, equality and strong work ethics were instilled in all her children from a young age. I vividly recall her saying, “...that we were equal to the Queen of England and to the man sitting in the gutter”. What a powerful message of humanity and equality to instil in a child at a young age. An attribute that I continue to apply every day. Her strongest foundation for us was in her desire for all her children to be educated. As a child we lived in a tin humpy with a dirt floor on a pension reserve in North Rockhampton. Mum paid off a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica so that we could learn about the WORLD not just what was taught to us in school. This inspired my love of learning and reading in particular. My passion for justice was sparked by the way my Mother was treated because of the colour of her skin – I witness this event as a child and felt the humiliation my mother was being subjected to and the powerful way in which my Mum held herself with dignity in spite of being subjected to a racist rant. Dignity, cool, calm and collected are words that come to mind. My childhood experiences of being subjected to and observing covert and overt racism as well as, being inspired to be the best person I can be had influenced my passion for social justice.

My mother gave me confidence in my identity and my spiritual beliefs/faith are sustained through the role Mary continues to have in my life through prayers and reflection. Two question I ask myself:

1. What actions could I take to contribute to social justice?
2. How can my actions influence change through respectful interaction?