

About Bill

In the words of Aboriginal community elder William "Uncle Bill" O'Brien, he can't do it on his own.

Fifty-nine year old Bill, a high profile member of the Hastings indigenous community, has the self-appointed job of coaxing a "shy race" out of the shade of 200-plus years since European Settlement.

He's a former jockey, a 2008 Hastings Citizen of the Year and endearingly called "Uncle" by his people but finding fellow Aboriginals to take part in public discourse remains a tough job.

"A lot of the elders get really upset when they are talking about the past," Uncle Bill says.

"It is often difficult for them to get it out in the right way because they get emotional."

"I would like to get more Aboriginal people to share (their stories).

While working to create community-wide conversations, Uncle Bill also has a number of projects in the pipeline, but ones he can not carry on his own.

"It's hard for one person to do it all," the father-of-two says.

When Uncle Bill refers to "it all" he means starting a youth centre for Mid-North Coast Aboriginals and a coastal walking tour complete with historical Aboriginal references – both items on his lengthy to-do list.

He already does bush-tucker and Aboriginal culture talks at Sea Acres Rainforest Centre as well as "Welcome to Country" ceremonies and he is a member of the Birpai and Bunyah Local Aboriginal Land Councils and a life member of the NSW Bodyboarding Association.

The volume of his work could be the snowflake that starts a snowballing affect in the future.

Today he notices there are people "willing to help" who he has to "get on board" and there are kids approaching him to ask about indigenous culture.

"I think that the community is starting to pick-up more cultural awareness and this helps bring other issues to the forefront – such as health, employment and education," he says.

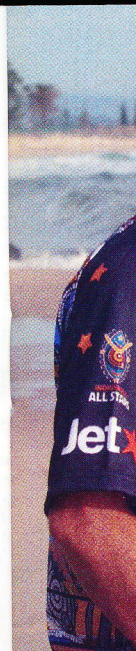
Uncle Bill sees sharing as an important part of his life – a lesson he picked up from almost 25 years of marriage to Marilyn and has applied in his community work.

"In marriage there's no this is mine and that is yours – it's ours," Uncle Bill says.

"One of the most important things is understanding the other person's feelings and to share things."

The idea of sharing is nothing new in Aboriginal culture and, when this is taken into account, his earlier comment about getting other Aboriginals to "share their stories" takes on a greater importance.

Photos by Kylie Biltris



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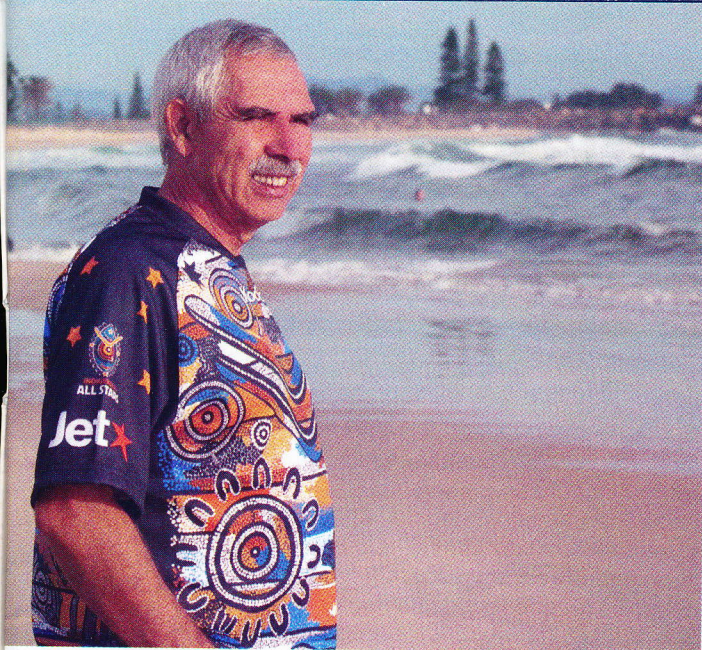
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For thousands of years generations have been verbally sharing their stories with one another and it is a concept central to Aboriginal culture.

"You go on life's journey, then it becomes a learning journey and for me it is now a teaching journey," Uncle Bill explained.

"This is Aboriginal culture – oral history works like that."

Bill had a door slammed in his face in 1986 when as a reliable country jockey he was forced to retire because of medical reasons.

He had been apprenticed at the age of 15 at the Rosehill Racecourse stables with trainer Freddy Hood before moving to the Mid-North Coast and teaming up with trainer Glen Hodge.

He won the Port Macquarie Cup in 1972 as well as a Grafton Country Cup, the Gladstone Cup (twice) and the Christmas Cup at Lismore.

Just as his career was gathering speed it was plucked away and as a recently married man in his late 20s with a young family to support he was put onto a pension.

He started to coach his children's sporting teams to avoid depression.

"It (being a coach) helped keep me sane," he said.

"Being involved with the children's sport gave me an opportunity to be more involved in their lives.

"There are no horses in the backyard now, but it took me a while to get over it (not being a jockey anymore)."

Uncle Bill, then as now, rarely left his best performance in the dressing room. He coached his daughter Kelly's softball and soon became a Hastings representative coach. He also was on the founding committee for the Junior Breakers and a level-two rugby league coach.

For a while he substituted horse riding with wave riding but bodyboarding, like his days as a hoop, he now leaves to the younger folk.

By Terri Thomson

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The repertoire for the evening will be a lively mixture of pieces from classics through to Jazz and beyond.

Location: The Riverview Lounge
Time: 5.30pm to 7.00pm
Tickets: \$13 per ticket (\$8 student concession)
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Buller Street, PO Box 230,
Port Macquarie NSW 2444
T: 02 6583 1499 F: 02 6583 6969
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