

## Quotable quotes

### William (Uncle Bill) O'Brien – Citizen of the Year

"I feel so emotional. I never expected this award at all in my life."

"I am extremely proud of the youth trying to make the Hastings a great place to live."

### Zara Youngblutt – Young Citizen of the Year

"I feel really honoured and proud to receive this award and I would like to thank my family and friends for putting up with me."

### Martin Hennessy – Sportsperson of the Year

"I was so nervous getting up there. Normally I don't have to make a speech when I win something in karate, so I am lost for words."

### Karina Nowlan – Sporting Talent Grant

"It really comes down to the local community and their tireless support."

"I didn't plan a speech for this. This is one of the most amazing feelings. I could not ask for anything else."

### Chairman David Mayne – Combined Rotary Clubs of Port Macquarie Carnival of the Pines Committee

"We wanted to bring the community together and the Carnival of the Pines did just that."

### Port Macquarie-Hastings Mayor Rob Drew

"This day is a great celebration for us as a country and for us as a region."



### Sandra Morgan-Beavis – Australia Day Ambassador for the Hastings

"I hope we could all be part of a better Australia."

# Uncle Bill's tears of joy at top honour

AN emotional Aboriginal elder accepted one of the Hastings' greatest honours – Citizen of the Year – on Saturday.

William O'Brien, better known in the community as Uncle Bill, earned the accolade at Port Macquarie-Hastings Council's Australia Day celebrations on the Town Green.

Hundreds of people gathered for the official ceremony which included the presentation of Australia Day awards from 4pm.

Although the winners learned of their awards the previous night, at a dinner hosted by the council at its Burrawan St headquarters, the magnitude of the honour caught Uncle Bill by surprise at Saturday's ceremony.

During his acceptance speech, the Birpai elder wiped away tears of joy.

"I never gave myself a chance to win this award," he said.

Uncle Bill was honoured for his advocacy of indigenous welfare issues. His Welcome to Country speeches often precede civic events, giving them the blessing of the land's traditional owners.

A member of the Birpai and Bunyah Aboriginal Land councils, Uncle Bill also is a member of the North Coast Area Health Service's Community Advisory Committee, Hastings-Macleay Community Transport, and Partnership in Aboriginal Care. He also has coached many sporting teams and volunteers for bush tucker talks at Sea Acres Nature Reserve.



□ **Hero:** Hastings Citizen of the year Uncle Bill with two of his biggest fans, wife Marilyn and daughter Kelly. Right: William O'Brien with his Australia Day award and medal.

Uncle Bill is a strong advocate for promoting the local Aboriginal community and the development of culturally specific services for his people. The 56-year-old, who has lived in Port Macquarie since 1969, is dedicated to the spirit of reconciliation and cultural understanding in the Hastings.

More on pages 18 and 19



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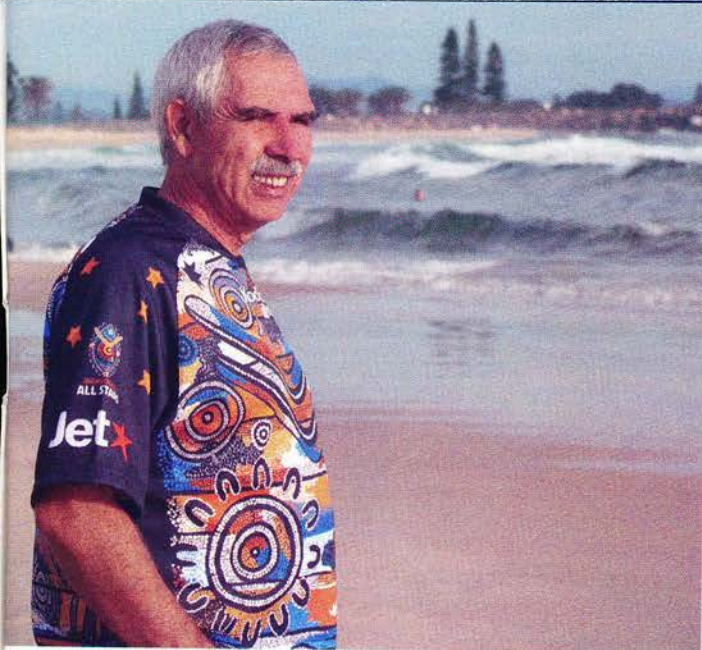
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For thousands of years generations have been verbally sharing their stories with one another and it is a concept central to Aboriginal culture.

"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  
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# ABC Rural

## BUSH TUCKER STORIES FROM THE BIRPAI JOCKEY



By Kim Honan

Monday, 25/02/2008

Birpai elder William 'Uncle Bill' O'Brien was this year named Hastings Citizen of the Year for his work promoting cultural awareness and advocacy of indigenous issues.

The former jockey conducts bush tucker tours at Sea Acres Nature Reserve in Port Macquarie, the traditional land of his people, on the NSW mid-north coast.

It was a piece of paradise for his Aboriginal people with everything from nuts, berries and honey to bush turkeys, possums even flying foxes.

He says native palms were used by early settlers for water diversion and the fronds of the palm by his Aboriginal people to wrap and cook the flying foxes in.

"When they unwrapped the frond along would come the hair and the skin and that would just leave the fleshy part of the flying fox and then they were able to eat it that way," he said.

The palms that had toppled over also provided a means for Aboriginal people to climb higher up into the canopy of the rainforest to gather other fruits and animals.

He says Aboriginal people were known more as a nomadic tribe because they followed the foods in season.

"They would go to different parts of their country at certain times of the year where food of some varieties were better in certain seasons," he said.

"The reason why they would also leave an area is because they didn't want to overpopulate and take out too much of what was available in that area so when they come back to that area that would be regenerated and replenished with plenty of fruits, nuts, berries and wildlife once again."

He says the coastal people, known as the Morning Star people, were very lucky because their diet consisted of seafood and they made fish traps with rocks and the tide as a method of catching fish.

The native ginger was used by the Birpai tribe for a variety of purposes.

"You can use the base of this particular plant, the root system, for flavouring and the fronds would be wrapped around the fish or meat and cooked in the fire, and the berries that they do develop are also edible," Mr O'Brien said.

At the top of a strangler fig tree in the nature reserve is a native bee nest.

"That was one of the favourite foods of the Aboriginal people because they would then mix that in their jams, they could also mix that in any of the teas or the medicinal drinks," he said.

Mr O'Brien says the cane from the whip vine was used by the early settlers to make the handles for stock whips.

"The Aboriginal people used to also use it for fishing rods," he said.

"It's a very beautiful cane and when you open it up the fibre inside is very strong."

The bolwarra tree dates back to dinosaur time and produces flavoursome nuts.

"The Aboriginal people would use that in their dampers to give it a flavour and it tastes like a hazelnut," he said.

Mr O'Brien was a leading jockey on the mid-north coast, eventually retiring in 1986.

He started horse racing before he was 15 at stables in Rosehill firstly with trainer Freddy Hood before moving back home.

"I teamed up with a trainer called Glen Hodge and we had a very very successful period over many many years," he said.

He won the Port Macquarie Cup in 1972, the Grafton Country Cup, the Gladstone Cup twice, the Christmas Cup in Lismore and even a big win in Brisbane against the city's leading jockeys at the time.



Birpai elder William 'Uncle Bill' O'Brien looks at the berries on a walking-stick palm. (Kim Honan )

## PHOTO GALLERY

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