



TWO OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY Edwina Pickles

Labor MP Linda Burney (left), the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to the House of Representatives and Lynette Riley, a senior lecturer, both 59, have been best friends since their days at teachers college.

LYNETTE: In the early 1980s we were both asked to join the newly formed Aboriginal Education Unit. We were developing the NSW Aboriginal education policy, and really felt we were creating positive change. We lived, worked and socialised together, and would often be called by the other's name. I think most people were confused as to who was who. I'm Lynette June Riley and she's Linda Jean Burney.

I got a position as a research fellow at the University of New England in Armidale, then moved with my husband and kids to Dubbo. Linda was then president of the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, so we didn't see much of one another. Then in 1997 I got breast cancer and had to come to Sydney for eight weeks for treatment, and Linda was one of the people who looked after me. Last year when I found out I had cancer in my spine, I rang Linda and she came to the hospital immediately.

She also helped me get through my marriage breakup. Rick [Farley, Linda's partner], was sick then, so we were both losing our partners in totally different ways. My husband and I eventually divorced in 2008.

She had children with one of my second cousins. So I'm her children's aunty. I've taken on the role of getting Linda and her kids their totems and assisting with some of their Wiradjuri cultural connections. I always said I would make a kangaroo cloak for Linda. For me, it was important that it was an outward symbol of who she was, so I put on it her family connections and her totem, the white cockatoo. Her role is to be a speaker, or a messenger, for Wiradjuri people, and the cockatoo is a messenger.

For her first speech in Parliament in August [after winning the NSW seat of Barton at the 2016 federal election], Linda wore the cloak and I sang the acknowledgement, introducing myself and paying respect to my Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi elders, before inviting Linda to present who she is. Her desire to do something culturally significant had a major impact.

I admire Linda's ability to keep friends. She's got an amazing core of friends. Also, I admire her ability to overcome odds. She had a mum who didn't want her, was brought up by an old aunty and uncle, and then helped look after them when they got sick. Before and after

school she worked in the fields to earn money to support them, and was only in her early teens when they died. She's had lots of hard knocks in her life and has always come out smiling.

I go to the NAIDOC Ball and the Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout with her every year, and we have so much fun. I always joke and say, "If ever you end up with another man, you have to tell him that the NAIDOC Ball and Aboriginal Knockout are my dates with you."

Linda always shares what she has. I consider myself very lucky to be Linda's friend. She's a far better friend than I am. I've gone off and done my own thing many times, but she's always been there whenever I've needed her.

LINDA: When Lynette and I graduated from teachers college, we were two of only a dozen Aboriginal teachers in NSW. I'd only been teaching for two years when we went to the NSW Department of Education in Sydney to develop the first Aboriginal education policy and teaching guidelines in the country. My memory is of this gorgeous, happy, young Aboriginal woman. We developed an instant friendship, and we've been best friends since then.

I grew up not knowing my Aboriginal heritage or family, and Lynette grew up absolutely imbued with both. In the 1950s, my mother was a 22-year-old non-Aboriginal woman, pregnant with an Aboriginal baby in the small NSW Riverina town of Whitton. She must have been shunned. She left the town when I was born. Her aunt and uncle, who were brother and sister and in their 60s, raised me.

I didn't know I was Wiradjuri until I met my father when I was 28. My father was an Aboriginal man from nearby Narrandera. I had 10 brothers and sisters, and a place in the family was just made for me. It was lovely.

As two Wiradjuri women, Lynette and I have a cultural spiritual connection. She's much more senior than I am, because of her knowledge of country, culture and language, and she'll be a senior elder. She is my cultural sister, and we're like sisters because of our life journey together: the fact that we have lived, laughed, cried, lost and loved together.

She gave me the kangaroo cloak 18 months ago, and for my first speech in Parliament I really wanted the cloak, and the maker of it, to be an important part of telling my Aboriginal story. Wearing the cloak and Lynette singing us into the chamber was incredible.

I have helped raise her kids, and she has helped raise mine. In the darkest days of my life after Rick died [in 2006], Lynette was one of the constants in my life, there with food and friendship. I was the same for her, when her marriage broke down after 25 years, and in helping to raise seven children: her foster daughter, two stepchildren and four of her own.

She's been so determined to get her PhD and I couldn't be more thrilled for her that she's finally done it. For her to come from – the same as me, I suppose – such humble beginnings to being Dr Lynette Riley is extraordinary.

I don't think Lynette realises the joy she brings to others because of her genuineness. It struck home to me just how deeply I love her when I heard she had cancer in the spine. I don't think I would ever recover if I lost Lynette. ■

66
Lynette is my cultural sister, and we're like sisters because of our life journey together: the fact that we have lived, laughed, cried, lost and loved together.

99