Stories: Sue Gordon

Dr Sue Gordon, OAM

Retired WA Magistrate

Dr Sue Gordon, OAM, was born in 1943 and is part of the Yamatji Wadjari – Ngoonooru Wadjari people. She has had a varied and storied career in public service, from service in the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC), to public administration roles in agencies such as the former Department for Community Services, Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, Aboriginal Development Commission, and National Indigenous Council.

Dr Gordon became the first Aboriginal magistrate of a WA court in 1988 (the Children's Court of WA) and sat on the bench for 20 years. She was the chair for the Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities in WA, known as the Gordon Inquiry.

Dr Gordon currently sits on the board of the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation and continues to be involved in community work with other various charities and community groups.

She was taken away from her mother at the age of four from Mt James station in Meekathara and placed in Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home in Perth. Her family were able to find her over 30 years later.

WARNING: The following article contains words or terms that readers may find offensive.

Western Teacher: Which public schools did you attend?

Sue Gordon: I attended Queens Park Primary School from 1949 to 1955 with dozens of other Aboriginal children who were in the Children's Cottage Home at that time (later known as Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home). We lived across the road from the school and I recall commencing Grade One with about seven other Sister Kate's children, so no first day blues!

I attended Armadale High School from 1956 to 1958 achieving my high school certificate with eight subjects. The children from Sister Kate's who went to Armadale High School in that period came from the home in Queens Park, and our farm where the bigger boys lived in Kenwick. We caught the train from Queens Park up to Armadale High School siding each day.

WT: How was your public school experience?

SG: The children from Sister Kate's made up nearly the bulk of the students covering all grades. This was the time of the immigration influx into Western Australia when migrants from mostly European countries settled in each state after World War II. We had a lot of Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Dutch, English and other nationalities at our school. This was the period when each child received a small bottle of milk at school for morning break. The children from Sister Kate's all went home each day for lunch, so did not have the usual mixing at lunch time. There was no uniform for the school at that time, only the physical education uniform. Nearly every child had second-hand clothes and very few, if any, wore shoes to school. Those migrant children who did soon took them off at school to be like everyone else. I personally experienced no real issues at school in lower grades.

WT: Did you encounter racial issues in your years of schooling?

SG: When I was at primary school there were a lot of racial issues. The other children who we called the "outside kids" called us nigger, boong, arkie arkie little darkies. We, the "home kids", also called the other kids names, such as slope head, dings, dagos, wops, wooden shoes and other derogatory names. So both lots gave as good as they got. The Sister Kate's kids had the numbers at school, so if any of us had an issue in the playground, we just called on one of our bigger kids to sort it out for us.

WT: How did your public school education help to shape the person you are today and help you to achieve your

goals or success?

SG: Primary school, in about Grade Four, had an impact on me as I found that if I worked hard at school, then Sister Kate's would look favourably on me to continue. The general policy at Sister Kate's was that if you were not very good at school, you would be sent out to be a domestic or a farm hand.

Sister Kate's children had the reputation as being the best trained domestics and were much in demand with the wealthy people of Perth, as well as farm and station people. I played a lot of sport and represented Queens Park Primary School in netball and athletics. I had a great love of reading and the wider community sent a lot of books, especially National Geographic, to Sister Kate's, which I absolutely loved.

WT: Did you have a teacher or staff member in your schooling that made an impact on you?

SG: At Armadale High School my Home Room teacher was Mr Neecy, who gave me a lot of support, and a typing teacher, Mrs Scurry in Year 9 and 10. Mrs Scurry saw I was interested in typing, so she encouraged me. In Year 10 she got me to sit for a scholarship to business school, which I won. So, in 1959 I went to Business College, which gave me the start to where I am today. My only problem with winning a scholarship was that Sister Kate's Home did not want me to go as it would cost money from a charitable institution for my train fares each week. They reluctantly agreed to pay and I graduated a year later. I have always been grateful for the teachers in Queens Park Primary School, and also at Armadale High School who saw something in me, and encouraged me to keep up with my studies.

WT: What advice would you have for teachers working with Indigenous students?

SG: Back in my early primary school years, there was no real emphasis on Aboriginal children, they just knew we had been taken from our parents and put in Sister Kate's Home. There were no real training programs for teachers, but I believe if they work more closely with the parents and grandparents to encourage attendance that is where we will make progress.

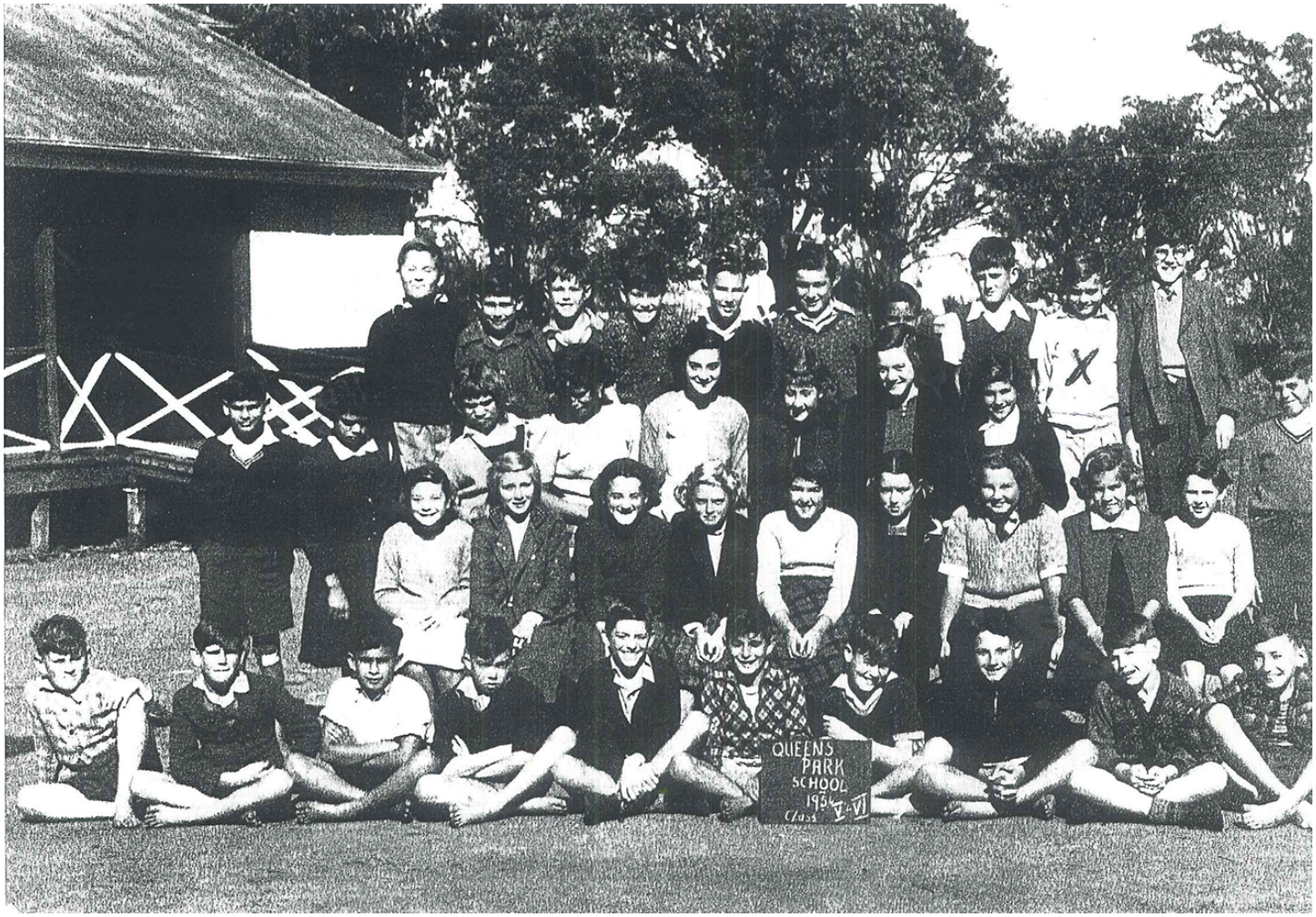
I am concerned that in this day and age, when everyone receives benefits of one type or another, that there is no real emphasis on actually getting Aboriginal children to school. I know there are some breakfast programs etc, and we have a lot of Aboriginal people graduating from university, but parents must understand that it is their responsibility to get their children to school on a daily basis, not when they feel like it. There is so much help for Aboriginal people these days, that I am still amazed that children are still missing not just days, but weeks of school each year.

WT: What would you like to see for Indigenous students and education?

SG: I would like to see more day care programs for Aboriginal children, then more emphasis on Kindergarten and Pre-primary school. Parents must be given assistance from when they leave hospital with their child, to understanding what an "invisible child" in the community looks like. Having worked in the Children's Court for 20 years, I saw so many "invisible children" who did not go to day care, Kindergarten or Pre-primary school, so were very much at risk, and also very much behind every other child when they started primary school.

WT: Is there a message you would like to give young Indigenous people today about their education?

SG: What I would say to young Aboriginal people today is "Education is the key to the future". We have literally thousands of Aboriginal people at TAFE and university. We have Aboriginal people who are the lecturers at TAFE and some of the universities. A lot of these people have come from very disadvantaged homes, but have pulled themselves up and got on with making a future life for themselves and their families. I would say personally to young Aboriginal people: "You can achieve anything you want to, just be prepared to work hard to achieve your goal".



Primary days: Sue Gordon at Queens Park Primary School, pictured second row seated, second from the right.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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