

Maureen's legacy lives on

By Shelby Gurney

The family of the late Maureen Williams, in a touching collaboration, are working with The Southern Cross Soloists and Queensland Ballet to weave her life story into a scenic tapestry of beauty, richness, and profound meaning.

The love her children have for her is unmatched and they hope this collaboration etches an ever-lasting memory of Maureen into those who see the ballet.

The performance tells the important life story and the struggles of the Rockhampton-born Wakka Wakka woman, who became a domestic servant from the age of 10, delving into her strong affinity for learning.

As she wanted to make sure her children had the opportunities for education that she never had as a young child.

Maureen and George are still highly of by the Indigenous community in and around the Rockhampton region.

Maureen and her husband George worked on cattle and sheep properties around Western Queensland while living in a tent with their three oldest children Peter, Patricia and Kevin. They then moved to Longreach, when George took a job on the Longreach Shire Council before becoming caretaker of the Longreach Showgrounds.

Maureen's grandson, Chris Williams along with composer Sean O'Boyle OAM and Wakka Wakka/Kombumerri choreographer Katina Olsen, have developed a work entitled "Gundirgan, Wise Woman" as part of the Queensland Ballet Bespoke season.

Katina Olsen is a Wakka Wakka and Kombumerri choreographer and dancer and through the information the family has provided she has been able to bring dance component of the story to life in conjunction with the composition by Sean and Chris.

The development of Gundirgan, Wise Woman aims to dive deeper into the generational legacy Maureen has left behind.

Each of her children and grandchildren have gone on to achieve great things in their chosen educational field, with some gaining several degrees.

Maureen's daughter Patricia Lieschke said her mother told her a few years ago that she was sorry she and her husband George never had anything to leave to all of their children.

Patricia said, "Don't worry Mum, you have left us all the best legacy any child could ever have and that is the grounding of a sound education so that we all had the drive to achieve at the highest level. All of us have had fantastic jobs and can support our families without the hardship you and Georgie had to endure."

The work builds on the original concert version of The Wise Woman which was composed by artist in residence with the Southern Cross Soloists, Maureen's grandson, Chris Williams, along with Australia's most prolific composer Sean O'Boyle.

Which had its world premiere in 2023 as part of The Southern Cross Soloists Didgeridoo Commissioning Project.



Maureen Williams.

"It's an ambitious project and we are very excited about its inception, development and upcoming performances," Chris said.

"For this collaboration we were exploring ideas but we wanted to write something that had a Wakka Wakka theme since we brought on Uncle Kevin as a cultural consultant with the Southern Cross Soloists.

"Grandma's story is easily the most powerful Wakka Wakka story we could tell and obviously is very dear to our hearts.

"We embarked on the journey of writing the Wise Woman, celebrating Grandma and her life, she was still alive and 94 years of age."

Maureen was described as an incredibly joyful person, who left a profound impact on every person she came across.

The impact affected not only her children

and grandchildren but everyone around.

Chris noted he always felt there was a royal-essence to her, as soon as she walked into a room everyone knew there was something special about her.

"She knew who she was and always carried such sweetness and joy with her," he said.

"When Grandma would look after my brother and I she would sing songs to us, she was singing Wakka Wakka songs."

Queensland Ballet has been active for around 60 years with this production being their first time telling a story in the Indigenous space.

Professor of Law Kevin Williams has been a cultural coordinator for many years and said it has been a monumental shift in acknowledging Indigenous culture.



George and Maureen.

"I feel honoured to be involved in the development because it's telling the story of my mother but also the partnership between mum and dad, they did everything they could to ensure we had a good education," Prof Williams said.

"Although I don't have the musical talent, I do have the story."

Classically trained ballerina Sue-Ann Williams said it's wonderful to see Queensland Ballet performing a contemporary piece choreographed by an Indigenous artist.

Sue-Ann began ballet classes at the age of 10 through a catholic priest who was very involved in the Indigenous community.

He organised for Indigenous kids to attend ballet class at the local hall.

She trained at the Valeria Hansen Academy School of Dance in Rockhampton and went on to dance with Bangarra Dance Theatre.

"When I was a little girl Mum and I used to watch the Queensland Ballet at the Pilbeam Theatre when it would come," she said.

"For Queensland Ballet to perform a piece about my Mum is surreal.

"I've been going into rehearsals and watching the way Katina works and how she works with the dancers."

Sue-Ann and the Queensland Ballet dancers travelled on Country to Ban Ban Springs to hear her incredibly moving story of Maureen's early years and learning about Wakka Wakka culture from Prof Kevin Williams.

From the breathtaking score performed live by the Southern Cross Soloists, the cultural storytelling to the emotive dance performed by the Queensland Ballet, those who attend will be swept away by the powerful story of Wise Woman.

Wise Woman will be performed at Thomas Dixon Centre (Queensland Ballet Headquarters) in Brisbane from 25 July to 3 August.

Pictures: SUPPLIED

We are recruiting

Rockhampton Regional Council are recruiting 3x qualified Heavy Vehicle Mechanics.

Join our team and keep our fleet running smoothly! You'll undertake repairs, servicing, and maintenance on our diverse range of earthmoving equipment, road trucks and light vehicles.

With competitive pay, a 9-day fortnight, and fantastic benefits this is an opportunity you don't want to miss. Applications are open now and will close on 15 July 2024.

Apply online at jobs.rrc.qld.gov.au/jobs

Careers at Council

rrc.qld.gov.au