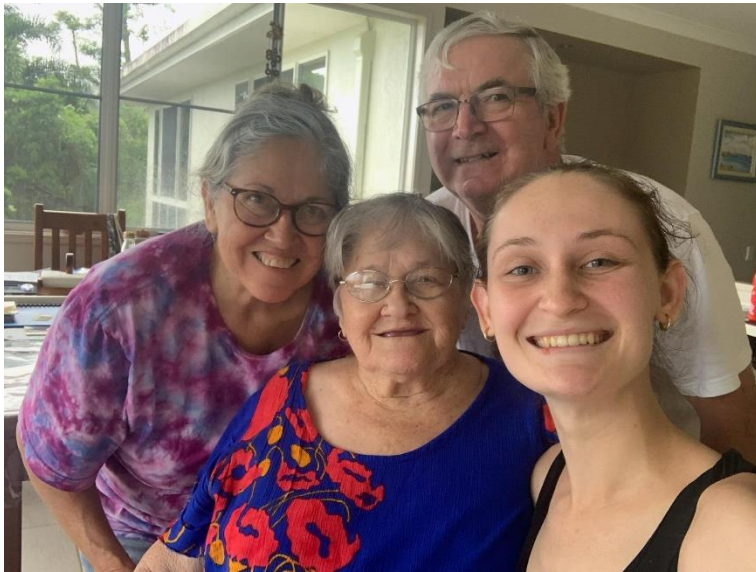


Merinda's story

(www.winanga-li.org.au/yaama-gamilaraay/nguu-books)

Former Gunnedah couple Judy and Dave Walters are immensely proud of their grand-daughter Merinda who has just released a Kamilaroi language book, *Dhawun Ngamingami-Ida-nha: Looking After Country*, which is being used to teach children at Winganga-Li Aboriginal Child and Family Centre and around Gamilaraay country.



Although she was born in Darwin, Merinda's roots are buried deep in Gunnedah - the Land of the Gamilaraay where her Nan Judy (Robinson/Mitchell) grew up.

The daughter of Matt and Marsha Walters, Merinda says she started off with small paintings and found enormous support. "It wasn't until my last few years in high school that I started painting. I am self-taught and actually dropped out of art in high school to do woodwork because I wanted a challenge, but some teachers approached me about different art competitions, a few of which I entered and won.



As she grew older Merinda began to battle with her identity. Being fair skinned, Merinda struggled to embrace her artwork and questioned whether her expression would be received positively.

“I used to doubt myself a lot, but my family emphasised ‘passing on the baton’ of our heritage and encouraged me to be proud. They told me I had a gift through art and that it was my responsibility as the next generation to carry on our culture and share it with the world,” Merinda said.

“Nan would say to me, ‘It doesn't matter how much milk you put in a cup of tea, it's still a cup of tea!’”.



Merinda has come a long way since then and strives to be loud and proud of her heritage.

“I grew up in the small community of Karumba in the Gulf of Carpentaria. I have always lived very close to my Dad's side of the family and feel very blessed to have grown up being proud of my Aboriginal heritage.”

Merinda went on to complete a Bachelor of Environmental Science and that is where the idea for the language book came from.

“Having grown up in Karumba, I was always outside running amok in the bush, on the beach, through the saltpans chasing lizards and frogs and just wanting to understand how the world worked - and I think that is what led me to fall in love with science,” Merinda said.

“During my last year at uni, I took a subject called Biological Invasions and for an assessment we had to write a science communication piece about invasive species. We were given complete freedom with it,” Merinda said. “So, I ended up writing and illustrating a children’s book, which was written partly in Indigenous language and also in English.”

“I considered myself pretty environmentally well-versed from a young age, but the idea of invasive species was something I knew little about even though it’s something so integral to the health of the environment. So I wrote the book for all the young ones like me, growing up in communities, out on Country, who want to understand what they are seeing so they can understand how to look after it.”

From there the idea became a combination of Merinda’s love of science, art and culture, and she used the knowledge of invasive species from her degree to illustrate the book and incorporate Gamilaraay language.

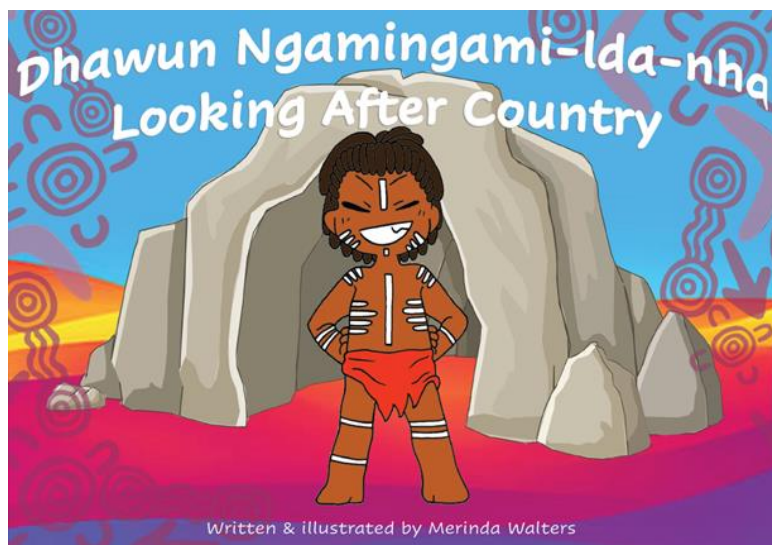
“I used this to both teach myself and to help spread awareness of Gamilaraay - that it is still here and being taught,” Merinda said.

Merinda and her publisher at Batchelor Press reached out to Dr Hilary Smith and the team at Winanga-Li Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, where the Yaama Gamilaraay! Language Reawakening Program is being taught. The support she received “was monumental

in ensuring my little book was accurate and the best resource it could be.”

“I did super well on the assessment piece and many people pushed me into getting it published,” Merinda said.

“A few years later I tracked down Batchelor's Press and the opportunity arose to partner with Hilary and her team to publish my book as both a language and science resource and now we're here.”



Merinda says she owes a lot of her career success to her Mum. “My Mum was a huge support - not only did she encourage me to attend university and guide me to my dream degree, but she also helped me to start my small business, *Mindy's Art Thawun Wandabaa* (find it on Facebook), which really helped me get my name out there and build my confidence.”

Hilary Smith said the team at Winanga-Li had been happy to help Merinda with this project as part of its Nguu Gamilaraay (Gamilaraay Books) project funded by the Aboriginal Languages Trust.

“Linguists from the Australian National University provided specialist advice,” Dr Smith said.

“We will be incorporating this book into our language materials theme on animals and country.”

After graduating from university, Merinda joined GHD, an Australian made, global consultancy where she works fulltime as an Environmental Scientist.

“Through GHD I was offered the opportunity to create another mural and made my first step into the corporate art space,” Merinda said. “I've continued to paint and create while also doing my best to give back and inspire the next generation,”



Through GHD and her ongoing support of the CareerTrackers Program, Merinda frequently visits schools in Far North Queensland to share her story and inspire First Nations students to undertake career pathways in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics).”
