



STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY David Solm

Indigenous activists Rose Lester, 47 (right), and her sister Karina, 42, are the daughters of Yami Lester, who went blind after the “black mist” fallout from the British nuclear tests in 1953 came over his family’s camp.

**R**OSE: When Mum went to hospital to have Karina, my grandparents came to Alice Springs to look after my older brother, Leroy, and me. They were proper traditional, and built a little humpy in our backyard and camped there. I was chuffed I had a sister. She was a gorgeous, dark, chubby thing.

Karina was one when we moved to Mimili and Dad managed the cattle station for the community. I started riding and had a weekend job with Leroy in the cattle yards. Dad used to give us \$12.50 each. Decked out like a cowboy, I would line up with the stockmen to get my pay packet.

Karina was a tomboy. She had a shanghai [catapult] and was a good shot. I got cross that she tried to kill birds as I had these injured animals, an owl and a kangaroo.

Karina’s first language was Yankunytjatjara. When we moved back to Alice, and she went to kindergarten she couldn’t speak English. I decided my job was to teach her, so I used to sing *Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree* and make her repeat the words.

I admired that my little sis was proud of her Aboriginality and taught both her black and

white friends about her culture. I hid my language skills, because I was teased about being a “blackfella”. Also, Aboriginal kids were saying, “You think you’re white”, because our family were trying to live in two worlds. It wasn’t until I left school at 16 that I spoke my language, and worked for seven years as an interpreter.

Then Dad got the place back at Walatina in the early 1990s and I managed the cattle project there with his guidance until I was diagnosed with scleroderma, an autoimmune disease, and the doctor advised getting out of the dusty environment. I believe Walatina was still contaminated due to the nuclear fallout and that may have caused my illness. I wanted to be back on country and working on the land that belonged to us. I took a risk and it didn’t pay off.

I came to Adelaide in 2005. I couldn’t pursue my passion for horses any more, and was fighting for my life. Karina gave me the strength to not give up. “What are your skills, Sis? What can you do instead?” I returned to doing interpreting work so I could support my three youngest kids.

When I heard that [SA premier] Jay Weatherill had announced the Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal

Commission in March 2015, I knew I had to campaign against the nuclear waste dump. I asked Sis to support me because she helped Nanna – Dad’s aunt, Eileen Kampakuta Brown – with the successful Irati Wanti Campaign against a nuclear dump in Coober Pedy in 2004. So we’re fighting it together.

We see each other once a week, minimum, unless she’s up bush. I record my *Anangu Lands Paper Tracker* show at Radio Adelaide, next door to where she works. Karina is passionate about her language and when we’re together we switch between English and Yankunytjatjara.

Karina has very strong family values. She has four kids like me, and becoming grandparents six years ago, when my daughter Kiah had a baby, was an occasion for us to share. Karina is like the baby grandmother – Aboriginal way.

**K**ARINA: I admire Sis’s determination and focus. She’s always been quite independent, and has taught me to be who you are, to learn all the skills that you can, and to not rely on other people.

If anything was to happen to her, it’s part of my responsibility to look after her children. In our kinship structure, Rose’s children are my children. I love that. When Kiah was born in 1988, I became a mother the same time she did, because I’m her sibling. We love and respect one another and sometimes it’s not about us, it’s about our children and our roles, not only as mothers, but also now as grandmothers.

When I was little I was sitting with Mum and Dad underneath the commentary box at Kulgera races, and my seven-year-old sister came whizzing past the finish line. Rose had the nickname Mingkiri, which means “mouse”, and she looked like a little mouse on the huge horse.

She loves horses. I think her passion for riding came from Dad. He used to be a stockman and all his brothers were great horsemen. Dad’s been a huge influence on Rose’s life.

At heart she’s an old bushy. She grew up sitting round the campfire listening to our fathers’ stories. Rose has some stories too, like getting kicked in the chest by a horse when she was pregnant. She was lucky – if it was any lower our son Robbie wouldn’t be here.

In 2004, Mum rang me and said that Sis had been flown out by the Royal Flying Doctors and was coming to the Royal Adelaide Hospital. The doctor said she came in blue and gasping for air. She had pneumonia and got admitted into ICU. Later, through tests, we realised that she’d developed a severe form of scleroderma. She’s been dealing with that since then and has been quite unwell.

Sis’s illness has been the driving force for her anti-nuclear campaign work. I remember at one point she was saying “I don’t know if I’ve got the energy to fight this”, so we work as a team. We both received an environmental award in 2015 for our involvement in the Royal Commission and advocating for consultation with SA Aboriginal communities.

She’s ambitious, passionate, strong-headed and sometimes pig-headed. We have different views and ways of approaching things, like the management of Walla. Sometimes I find it challenging when we disagree, but we’re both strong-thinking Aboriginal Anangu women. ■

66

*In our kinship structure, her children are my children. I love that. When Kiah was born in 1988, I became a mother at the same time she did, because I’m her sibling.*

99