



## Indij Readers and Wanja (Proof)

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**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE** (Parliamentary Secretary) [1.51 a.m.]: Last Thursday I was pleased to host a screening of the film, *Wanja*, in the parliamentary Theatre. The film *Wanja* was inspired by a book from the Indij Readers series, *Wanja: One Smart Dog*. Over the weekend, the book was added to the 2009 Premier's Reading Challenge. Indij Readers is a series of books that feature contemporary Aboriginal stories with illustrations by Aboriginal artists. The stories are written by Aboriginal children, teenagers and adults—some first-time writers—and some books are written by well-known indigenous Australians, such as Anthony Mundine.

The stories deal with issues that affect the lives of all children—culture, family, self-esteem, pride, setting goals and working towards them, good health, humour, tolerance and school attendance. The books aim to help kids, both indigenous and non-indigenous, to learn to read. But the books also help to encourage teachers to explore with their students contemporary indigenous perspectives and learn about indigenous culture and issues. In providing an indigenous perspective, they are also teaching teachers as well as other students about indigenous culture and contemporary indigenous lives in a way and at a level that is relevant to them. The idea for the books came from a fantastic woman named Margaret Cossey, who is a special needs teacher in Cootamundra. She related a story in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that I would like to share tonight. It was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* when the first series was launched in 2003:

Ms Cossey had realised that many children's stories did not interest the children to whom she read. She wrote some of her own before consulting Paul Williams, a literacy lecturer at Charles Sturt University, who said:

"There are enough books written by middle-aged, middle-class white women. Go out to the communities and ask them for their own stories."

That is exactly what Marg did, and that was the beginning of Indij Readers. Indij Readers works closely with Aboriginal communities. The books are developed in collaboration and consultation, with advice from elders and community organisations. Now in their third series, these books have helped numerous kids across the country to learn to read and to find pride in their own culture. One of the books has attracted a deal of attention and has become a film. That was the film shown last week in the Parliament.

*Wanja* screened earlier this year at the Sydney Film Festival and as part of the Message Sticks festival at the Opera House. *Wanja* is a documentary about the experiences of the community who live at the Block in Redfern, and it is told through the story of Aunty Barb and Wanja, her blue heeler dog. Aunty Barb is an elder of Redfern's community who lived on the Block for 20 years with her family and dog, Wanja. Aunty Barb and her granddaughter, Shannon, who is now six, came along last week to the screening, as did many other members of the Redfern community. I would especially like to thank Aunty Ali, who gave us a wonderful Welcome to Country.

Wanja was well known and loved by the locals of the Block. But she was also known to the police! She loved to chase police vans and bark at them. Apparently she could even spot police in plain clothes. But Wanja also had another special talent: residents of the Block say that she had the spirit and that she protected residents of the Block. But she also supported them. When residents were down, she would sit by their side and comfort them—whether they wanted her company or not. The film *Wanja* is told through the recollections of residents, including one story about when Wanja jumped into the front seat of a police wagon, barked at police, and prevented them from getting back into the van. But *Wanja* does not just tell the story of a well-loved resident of the Block. The film uses imagery of the surroundings to remind viewers about serious issues—substance abuse, neglect, violence, and conflict with the authorities.

Last Thursday at the screening, we were fortunate to have Dr Romaine Moreton introduce the film. Dr Moreton is a curator with australianscreen. She is an indigenous writer of immense talent, a poet who also writes prose, and she has produced her own films. She is a friend of filmmaker, Angie Abdilla. Angie could not be at the screening as she is in Holland, where *Wanja* has been selected to be shown as part of the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam. Dr Moreton's introduction to the film explained how the filmmaker had collaborated with the local community of Redfern to make the film. She told us how collaborative filmmaking is important to indigenous communities. It was collaboration that allowed the film to explore the serious issues impacting on the

community of Redfern, and to do so in a way that is culturally appropriate and sensitive to the issues faced by the community. Ultimately, the story of Wanja really is a story about the community of the Block. I encourage all members to see the film if they get the chance. I thank Tracey Hammond, Aunty Ali, Aunty Barb, Marg Cossey, and Cathy Brown for organising this event.