



Isabel Of The Inland

Mark Smith

Isabel Smith lived a life of faith, service, care and devotion as a surrogate mother to Aboriginal children from the time she married Percy Smith, Rector of Alice Springs, in 1943. Their grandson Mark Smith is making a film about their work with Aboriginal people in collaboration with accomplished actor and movie director Mark Webber.

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In her later life Isabel took great joy in seeing many of the boys from St Francis House achieve and take places of prominence in Australian society. They became leaders in government, business, academia, the arts and sport and were central to the 1960s civil rights movement and the successful 1967 referendum.

Ken Hampton, a member of the Alawa people from the Roper River area became a junior athletics champion and won the 1961 Bay Sheffield 130-yard race in 12.4 seconds. After his elite running days Ken became a community leader and Anglican deacon establishing ministries to support Aboriginal people, and was the first Aboriginal Justice of Peace in South Australia after being rejected by the Royal Australian Navy on racial grounds.

Almost sixty boys were at the home over its life from 1946 to 1960. Prominent former St Francis House residents include trailblazers such as John Moriarty the first Indigenous Soccerroo who is known for his Qantas Aboriginal Flying Art series,

“Ken became a community leader and Anglican deacon establishing ministries to support Aboriginal people.”

Above: St Francis House boys going to school in 1950.



historian and academic Gordon Briscoe who was the first Indigenous person to stand for Parliament and to achieve a PhD at the Australian National University in 1997, and the passionate civil rights activist and Commonwealth Department Secretary Charles Perkins. Sporting stars include cricket administrator and VFL footballer Vincent Copley, three time Port Adelaide Football Club Premiership player Richie Bray, 200 game Central Districts footballer Sonny Morey and Wally McArthur who played rugby in England after he missed out on Olympic selection, on racial grounds. Also, public servants Brian Butler and Les Nayda, the first Indigenous person to work directly for a State Premier. Seven of the boys have been recognised by the Queen with the Order of Australia.

Academic Peter Read, known for his biography of Charles Perkins and for coining the phrase “The Stolen Generation,” has said,

“Probably as much love was bestowed upon the boys by the Smiths as on any children in the long history of Aboriginal institutions. There was no paid staff. Percy and Isabel did all the work until Mrs Smith’s cousin came to help. Money was tight. On Saturdays Percy sometimes took the boys to football matches, or at night to the pictures. Out would come the pocket money tin kept replenished by parents back in Alice Springs. If anyone was short, the deficit would be made up by Smith himself.”

I came to know many of the St Francis’ House boys in their later years and it has been a privilege to learn from them. They have enriched my life and understanding of our shared Australian history.

To honour them I have developed a partnership with Los Angeles and Adelaide based movie director Mark Webber who has been deeply moved by this story, he said,

“The love and the care and the willingness to lift these boys up is really inspiring.”

“It’s just a beautiful story. First and foremost, it’s a universal love story, how Isabel and Percy found each other, and then a relationship that was built on a foundation of service to others.”

“I am excited to have this partnership and make this film about Mark Smith’ family and the incredible things they have done.”

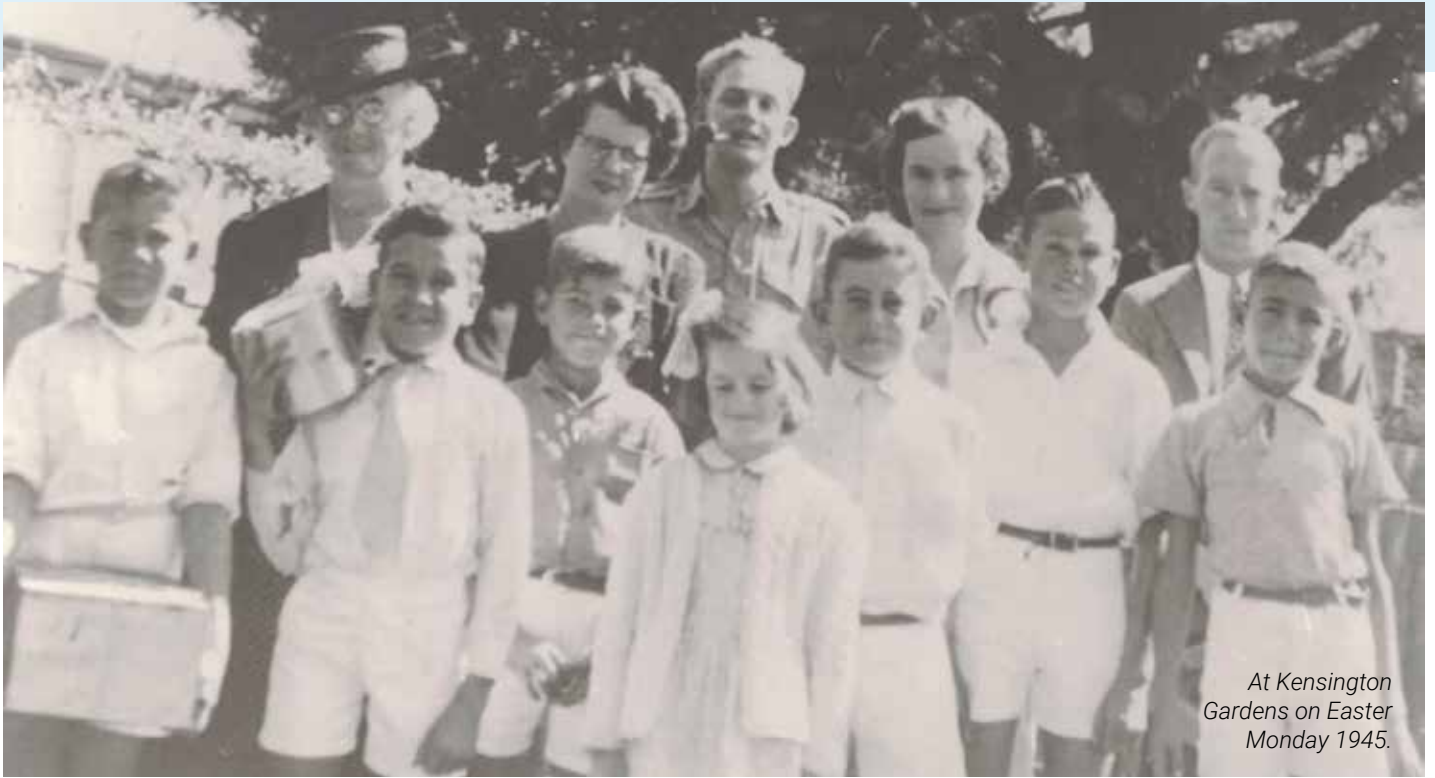
Mr Webber has an outstanding record of success with his movies at international film festivals, including Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Festival in Utah. He also has his own special connection to Australia, as he is married to actress Teresa Palmer, who is from Adelaide.

“I found only kindness from Father Smith and Mrs Smith, and they helped to shape my values and understanding of the world I was living in.”

John Moriarty is right behind the project. He was taken from his mother aged 4 and said,

“Percy and Isabel Smith cared for me at St Francis House in Adelaide after I’d been forcibly removed from my Yanyuwa mother from Borroloola. I found only kindness from Father Smith and Mrs Smith, and they helped to shape my values and understanding of the world I was living in. I’ve always appreciated the Smiths’ support in my life.”

*Above Left: Father Smith celebrates 50 years of ordination 1926-76.
Above Right: Bound for the big city.*



At Kensington Gardens on Easter Monday 1945.

The late David Woodford who was born at "The Bungalow," and was one of the first six boys said,

"I always kept in contact with my mother through letters and Christmas visits when funds were available. If mothers had difficulty finding the money Father Smith would think up some way to raise what was needed."

Bill Espie joined the NSW Police, was awarded the Queen's Medal for Bravery in 1965 and rose to the rank of Chief Inspector. He said of St Francis House,

"It was to become my fortress, my haven against an outside community who did not fully accept persons of Aboriginal descent."

"The accolades must of course go in the main to Father and Mrs Smith who brought about the concept of St Francis' House by an overwhelming desire to help young Aboriginal children take their place amongst the general community with pride and qualifications to reach attainable goals both in the present and future."

"Their private lives were non-existent due of course to their dedication. It was this dedication and commitment that made St Francis' House a success."

Explorer John McDouall Stuart dubbed desolate Central Australia the Dead Heart of Australia. Some 75 years later when Ken Leslie and Percy Smith were working in Alice Springs in the 1930s they produced a booklet called, "The Live Heart of Australia," which outlined their mission to help Aboriginal people. The film production company has been named to honour them and carry on the legacy of their work with Aboriginal people with the bold motto to, "Amplify Marginalised Voices."

This film will share Isabel's remarkable life and her humility and her goodness. It will share the love she gave to others. As far as she was concerned all the children she cared for were part of her family. She was their mother. She was a person who lived what Christ teaches.

Isabel was deeply sensitive, but resolute when it came to matters of principle and what was right. That is why at age 82 she gave evidence to the Keating Government's inquiry into the Stolen Generation: to put her husband's life of service accurately on the public record.

People ask me why I am doing this, and it is to honour my late father John P McD Smith who passed away suddenly in November 2022. This is something he always wanted to do: tell the story of his beloved parents in a mainstream medium. With Mark Webber's help, this dream is now a reality.

Mark Smith is the grandson of Isabel and Percy Smith and is collaborating with Hollywood Director Mark Webber and Live Heart Productions to make the film *Finding Miss Almond*. It is set in part in Central Australia, and recounts the history of Indigenous people in the care of Archdeacon of the Northern Territory, the Rev. Canon Percy McD Smith MBE and his wife Isabel E Smith OAM, many of whom achieved outstanding careers in government, business, academia, sport and the arts, and greatly advanced the cause of Indigenous affairs.

For more information and to support the cause please visit: www.liveheart.com.au