

# 'We have more in common than we have differences'

Martin Flanagan

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The grandmother of Ken Lechleitner Pangarta was a Anmatjere woman who fled to the Tanami desert after the Coniston massacre of 1928. There she came across a half-Swedish, half-Austrian adventurer named Maurice Augustus Marie Lechleitner. To his Aboriginal family, he became known as "Tex" because there was a story he'd been a gun-runner in Texas.

Tex is Ken Lechleitner Pangarta's grandfather. His father was an Anmatjere man, from north-west of Alice Springs. Ken speaks four languages – Aranda, Anmatjere, Warlpiri and English – which is three more than most whitefellas expressing public opinions about blackfellas.

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Ken Lechleitner Pangarta. Photo: Martin Flanagan

He grew up in desert communities but, when he was 14, his mother asked a passing Lutheran pastor, "Can you do something for this young bloke?" The Lutheran pastor got him into Immanuel College, a Lutheran school in Adelaide. He remembers being deeply shocked when he looked out the window of the plane and saw Adelaide approaching beneath him, all those people and houses and cars. The people looked like ants to him. And what happened next? He loved

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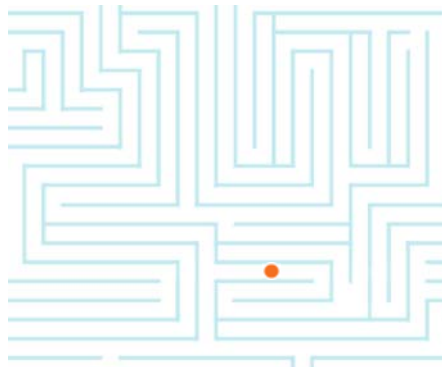


Immanuel College. He says half-jokingly that he'd go back there tomorrow.

"It was a happy experience. There was no stigma about being different. Everything was new but I felt part of it." He says the school taught him "the social interactions you need to advance in the Western world".

He says with some pride that Immanuel College is now a leading provider of Aboriginal education. His point is – when you cross over from one culture to another, there has to be an "induction process", and that's what Immanuel College gave him. It connected him into this other culture, whitefella culture. He met the families of farmers and lawyers and stockbrokers. They let him ask questions – in his words, they "shared their knowledge". He got an understanding of how this other world worked, this big immensely powerful one that simply had to be dealt with.

He says the biggest difference between blackfella and whitefella culture is individualism. The next biggest difference is our relationship to knowledge. Whitefella education teaches you how to access knowledge. Once you understand that, you can find out anything, even how to build a bomb. In Aboriginal culture, "When you are worthy of knowledge, you will be given that knowledge."



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Ken is in Melbourne for a symposium being conducted on Saturday by Creating A Safe Supportive Environment (CASSE) which has brought together thinkers from Central Australia and cultural and political leaders to seek recognition for Aboriginal people.

Ken is speaking about an Aboriginal "Men's Shed" – called Kurruna Mwarre-Ingkintja, meaning "Good Spirit Males Place" – that he's set up in Alice Springs with the support of CASSE and the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. The men at the Aboriginal men's shed call Ken "Ilpa", their word for ear. "You have to listen to gather intelligence," he says.


I met Ken at the MCG on Thursday night at 5pm, thinking he might like to see the Aboriginal scarred trees. I'd forgotten in making the arrangement that Richmond was playing Carlton in the season opener. Thousands of people were arriving for the game. We met at the statue of Dennis Lillee near a mobile kitchen selling gourmet sausages. He'd never been to the MCG before and was amused when someone asked him where Gate 6 was.

Ken once asked his grandmother about the Coniston massacre in which about 60 Aboriginal people died. She wasn't angry. She said of whitefellas: "We didn't know what they wanted." Ken says the

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WHITEHEADS. WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANTED. REN SEES THE problem being one of communication. "The capacity to communicate is there," he says. "Just not the willingness. We have more in common than we have differences."

Martin Flanagan is a columnist for *The Age*.

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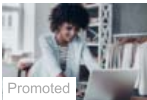
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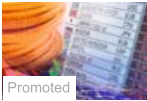
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