‘A true pioneer within our community’

Nancy Giese (née Wilson) A0 (1997) OBE (1978) MBE (1970) 2001 Northern Territory Senior Australian of the Year, Doctor of Education honoris causa was a formidable person. She arrived in Darwin in 1954 with her husband, Harry, who had just been appointed Director of Welfare. In May 2004, she received an honorary doctorate at the University she had been instrumental in setting up, ‘in recognition of outstanding service to the Northern Territory community, particularly in education and the arts’, and her ‘unstinting efforts to make the Northern Territory a better place’.
Immediately on arriving in Darwin, Nan saw clearly that the development of educational facilities was essential if families were to be encouraged to settle in the Top End and make it their long-term home. Over the subsequent fifty years, she devoted much of her time to the achievement of that vision. ‘Through that half-century, there have been few, if any, major developments in Northern Territory education in which Mrs Giese has not had some decisive personal involvement…She has been a true pioneer within our community, recognizing needs and then taking the lead in the creation of amenities and institutions to meet those needs,’ continues the doctorate testimonial.

At the time that her grand-daughter Bryn graduated from the Northern Territory University in 2005, few in Darwin remembered that in the 1950s and early 60s, students had to travel to schools in the south even to matriculate.

BUILDING COMMUNITY
Nan Giese was part of a time in Territory history when citizens banded together, out of necessity, to build up the places where they lived. They needed to make for themselves a new kind of Australian community. Post-War Darwin was in ruins, and there were few services. It was even difficult to find somewhere to live. Not only was Nan a force in developing post-war educational and cultural services, but she also suffered the destruction of Cyclone Tracy in 1974, staying on in the devastated city as it rose again.

‘It was very friendly,’ she says of Darwin in the 50s and 60s. ‘There was an intimacy, and that kind of friendly environment. You’d go to town and you’d know simply everybody, and you’d go to these functions and you would know literally everybody—and that was nice in that you were part of a group.’

Some of the organizations in which she has played a leading role include the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University) and its predecessors Darwin Community College and the Darwin Institute of Technology; the Arts Council of the Northern Territory; the Australia Council; the North Australian Eisteddfod Council; the National Council of Women; the Darwin Performing Arts Centre; the Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory; and the Darwin Hospital Advisory Board.

FAMILY BACKGROUND
Educated at Brisbane Girls’ Grammar School and the University of Queensland, Nancy Wilson was born in 1922, the third daughter of senior bureaucrat Robert and Daisy Wilson. Her background was solidly middle class: an uncle, Brigadier-General Lachlan Wilson, was a war hero at Gallipoli and Damascus. His father, her grandfather Charles, ran a sugar mill on the Logan River.

Her husband Harry Giese came from a very different background. He was from a German migrant family who had settled in South Australia in the 1870s, moved to Victoria, then Greenbushes in Western Australia. His mother, Lilian, was of Scottish descent. A star sportsman and a young man marked for achievement by his mentors, after attending the Universities of Western Australia and Melbourne, Harry became
Nan’s boss, as Queensland’s first Director of Physical Education (1944-47). He selected her on graduation as part of his team to promote health and fitness in Queensland schools. Their marriage in 1946 created a dynamic partnership that was to endure through Harry’s years leading departments in the Northern Territory Administration and founding many community organizations, becoming the NT’s first Ombudsman and a key founder of the Menzies School of Health Research. He died in 2000.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION
Nan’s initial motivation for her involvement in Territory education was the wellbeing of her own children, Diana and Richard. ‘I lost count of the many families who simply left the Top End because their children had to go south to matriculate,’ she said. ‘This disruption to family life [meant] good citizens lost to a developing society that badly needed them. I was determined it wouldn’t happen to me.’

She became active in the parents’ committees of her children’s schools. With typical self-deprecation, she said: ‘I was one of those dreadfully involved parents, on all the school councils…a nuisance to the staff.’ In fact, she was a driving force, well beyond the time her children left home. ‘I joined many other concerned people to work for the development of education services, essential if the Northern Territory was ever to progress beyond outpost of Empire status.’ Although both the Giese children were able to matriculate from Darwin High School, both had to go interstate for university studies. Of her work for Territory schools, Nan says: ‘I learnt a lot in that exercise—to marshal community support, to cultivate the decision makers, to keep myself fully informed at all times, to work through a committee so that you didn’t seem too pushy if you came up with good ideas. If you are passionate and obsessive about what you are hoping to achieve, prepared to work hard, and never, never give up, despite all the setbacks, you will succeed in the end.’

The Northern Territory University, of which Nan was re-elected Chancellor every year from 1993 to 2004, evolved from a number of unrelated further education initiatives. ‘It was set up to provide opportunities and higher education facilities for Territory people,’ she says. It took a long time to evolve. In the 1960s, Top End education consisted of Darwin High School, two Roman Catholic schools, and an Adult Education centre headed by the redoubtable Harold Garner.

When the Graduates’ Association attempted in the early 1960s to initiate a Territory university, it was ‘laughed to scorn’, Nan said. In the late 60s, however, the Commonwealth government commissioned a report on post-school needs. Looking to the successful American model of community colleges, it recommended an independent tertiary institution which could offer both higher education and technical courses.

The Darwin Community College (DCC) was the prototype community college in Australia. Nan served on its founding committee and from 1976-85 as chair of its Council. The DCC had a wider scope than existing institutions, in the breadth of courses offered, in its degree of involvement with its community, and in the way it offered those with very different levels of earlier education a chance. She could see that the Territory
needed more Adult Education facilities, a wide range of trade, technology and university courses and teacher training. It also needed education in regional and remote areas.

Both Nan and Harold Garner were members of the Planning Committee which also chose the site, at Casuarina, where the University stands today. The committee emphasized that the DCC would need to be flexible, to meet the emerging needs of a highly mobile population. In 1972, a commemorative plaque was unveiled by then-Education Minister Malcolm Fraser. Buildings, including labs and trade workshops, art studios, classrooms, a library, a theatre and student accommodation, started to go up. In March 1974, the Darwin Community College was opened by Prince Philip, in place of the Queen, who had been called back suddenly to London, to deal with a constitutional crisis.

Eight months later, Cyclone Tracy destroyed everything. Casuarina, on the coast and in the direct path of the winds, was devastated. Sixty-two per cent of the buildings were unusable. Classes were forced to resume ‘wherever we could find space’, at primary schools, in warehouses, in rooms in the town centre. Some courses were transferred to Alice Springs and others to Perth. ‘The trauma of rebuilding’ took five years.

The Commonwealth government, with responsibility for Territory education as for all Australian universities, was not interested in giving the Territory its own university. Instead, it offered twenty places for students at southern universities. Paul Everingham, the first Chief Minister after self-government in 1978, was not impressed. Territorians decided to do it themselves.

The DCC, which became the Institute of Technology (1985-88) was funded by a special grant until the phasing out under the Dawkins’ reforms of the binary system of tertiary education. In January 1989, the Institute of Technology and the University College amalgamated to form the Northern Territory University (NTU). At last the Commonwealth accepted its responsibility to fund it. ‘If this is the way it has to be, let’s try to make it work,’ commented Nan. At the NTU opening, the Minister for Education, Tom Harris, said that ‘the long battle to provide Territorians with the right of access to a university education has been fought and won’. Students could start with a certificate course then proceed right through to post-doctoral studies.

By the time the NTU became Charles Darwin University, there were 15,000 students in faculties ranging from science to languages. The foundation NTU Vice-Chancellor, Mal Nairn, a veterinary scientist from Murdoch University, had seen that in the Territory, where a great percentage of the population were Aboriginal, encouraging Indigenous students to go on to higher education was crucial. Energy Resources of Australia gave $500,000 over five years towards the Ranger Chair of Aboriginal and Islander Studies, including bridging courses and scholarships for Indigenous people. Batchelor College was set up with a special grant.
Regionally, Alice Springs College offered students in the Centre courses comparable with those in the Top End. There was an NTU campus at Palmerston, Darwin’s satellite town, and facilities opened in Katherine.

Then there were NTU’s links out into the Asian region of which the Top End is part. NTU business degrees were offered at Kolej TAFE Seremban just outside Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. When top Chinese businessman Jose Yu’s daughter graduated from the NTU, he endowed a $750,000 scholarship program at the University. Chinese organizations in Darwin representing all groups, from the old families into the fifth generation to newcomers from Timor and Hong Kong, helped fund a traditional Chinese garden, with a pagoda, a pavilion, fountains and statues of exemplary educationalists. The Chinese Ambassador donated two marble lions to flank the entrance. In other community collaborations, the local Greek community donated $25,000 to set up a course in modern Greek.

Other links with the community were provided by the hosting of the Australian Universities Games in 1995; the annual shows of the School of Fashion; the innovative solar car program; and the open days and graduation ceremonies at which Nan for over a decade shook the hand of every graduate.

‘I’ve found it very challenging in this higher education area,’ she said. ‘There was nothing when we came, and now there’s a lot. And I’ve been involved in it, and it has been very satisfying. I built something up.’

In the 1994 Good Universities Guide, among a listing of Australia’s thirty-seven universities, NTU was ranked in the top ten Best Buys, for the quality of services and facilities provided for students. A survey carried out by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia showed that new first degree graduates from the NTU were significantly more likely than their counterparts elsewhere to be in full-time employment.
The Arts at NTU

Two elements of the University’s work, which have had long-term effects in the Top End community and beyond, are music and art. Print-maker Leon Stainer initially set up workshops in Aboriginal communities to demonstrate techniques to talented local artists, and work with them. Northern Editions introduced techniques such as etching, linocuts, lithography and silkscreen printing to already famous and emerging artists in communities throughout the Territory, Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia. The University has collected a copy of every print made under the program, building up an internationally-recognized treasure-house. During the 1990s, prints by participating artists were taken on tour to Territory and Western Australian communities. Indigenous artists from Utopia in Central Australia to Arnhem Land were involved.

NTU’s Arts Acquisition committee was appointed in 1981, with a budget of $5000 a year, boosted in 1983 by a $10,000 grant from the Australia Council. Works were acquired from local, visiting and other contemporary Australian artists, and displayed on campus to the public. In the late 1980s, display and storage space was provided in the new Administration block, and in 1989 the University gallery set up. The Department of Visual Arts and the School of Fine Art administered it, displaying 14 exhibitions a year. Two NTU graduates started the NT Crafts Council.
Music was part of the teaching program as early as the Community College days. ‘Musicians are passionate about what they do, and we were lucky to be able to make good appointments, particularly in the Institute of Technology times, with people like Martin Jarvis and Adrian Walter,’ said Nan. ‘With the visual arts people, they came because they were interested in this special environment.’ Jarvis, appointed in 1987, developed the Darwin Symphony Orchestra. Concerts have been successfully presented in Kakadu National Park and Katherine Gorge, Jabiru and Alyangula. There is now a thriving musical life in Darwin, including the singers of the Darwin Chorale, with musicians, dancers and players performing regularly at the large and beautiful Entertainment Centre on the Esplanade.

**ACHIEVEMENTS AT NORTHERN TERRITORY UNIVERSITY**

Unlike older-established universities, NTU had no bequests or endowments on which to draw for special research or teaching projects. In the early 1990s, the University Foundation was set up. It raised $13 million in nine years. The Southeast Asian Law Centre and the Chair in Clinical Nursing were among faculties that benefited from donations.

Not content to be a figurehead Chancellor, Nan chaired meetings of the University Council, and was active in appointing staff and planning and overseeing new buildings. Even after she retired, she continued to chair the Foundation.

Joyce Cheong Chin, another pioneer of tertiary education in the Northern Territory of the 1950s and 60s, who was to become Associate Dean at NTU, mentor to fashion industry stars such as Nelson Leong, says of Nan: ‘What I admired so much was that here was this woman who was way ahead of her time, on these boards and planning committees where nearly everybody else was a male…It didn’t faze her one bit. When I was also on some of these boards and committees, there were some women who felt that there was this glass ceiling to break. And they thought the only way to break it was to be like a man. So they would dress in more masculine clothing and they would use strong language. Nan never had to do anything like that. She retained her dignity— and she won a lot of respect.’

Joyce also remembers the large amount of background reading chairing such committees demanded, and the way ‘Nan would have everything correct and in order’. Above all, ‘she was able to persevere. She didn’t give up.’ ‘I never attended a meeting with her when she wasn’t completely across the issues,’ remembers Francis Good, who interviewed her for the Northern Territory Archives when he managed its Oral History section.

Nan sees the major achievements of her time working for Territory higher education as following the formation of the Northern Territory University. She felt that the staff attracted were dedicated and of high quality, something reflected in the achievements of students who have gone on to work all over the world. She is proud of the upgrading of opportunities for Indigenous people. Northern Editions’ unique and valuable print collection now includes work by some of the top names in Indigenous art, including
John Bulun Bulun, Banduk Marika, Queenie McKenzie and Rover Thomas. It has become one of the most significant publishers and collectors of Aboriginal prints in the world. Such work has empowered Indigenous people, offering them a means of communicating their culture, and leading to economic stability and social cohesion. The early musical activities of the Darwin Community College led to the setting up of the Darwin Symphony Orchestra which plays all round the Territory, often in spectacular natural settings. The International Guitar Festival brings top players from all over the world to Darwin.

BUILDING THE ARTS: PERFORMANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The Arts Council

In her early years in Darwin, what Nan missed most about her life in the South was entertainment other than the radio. So did many others. Of course, there were pioneering amateurs such as the Darwin Musical Comedy Society, who built their own theatre.

Like other community organizations in the Top End, the Arts Council of the Northern Territory, a government umbrella and funding body, was formed from a public meeting. It was called in 1968 and appointed the Chief Justice as President. When he returned South in 1972, Nan was elected President, a position she held until she retired in 1983. The Arts Council was affiliated with the federal Council, in operation since the 1930s. In 1968, their first presentation was Acker Bilk and his Premier Jazz Band, followed by the English chamber group, the Bach Festival Ensemble. They offered a program from Mozart to Stravinsky, on strings and Darwin’s only grand piano, Pfitzner’s Music House Bechstein Grand.

The Territory body gave opportunities to local artists, but it also aimed high. Why shouldn’t international artists include the Territory in their Australian visits? After all, it wasn’t every day a violinist could play in Alice Springs or a dancer perform in the Darwin Botanical Gardens on a frangipani-scented tropical night. Nan gained a commercial licence to drive the Nissan bus that met visiting performers at the airport. One-man shows toured the Territory in small planes, performing in schools and churches, in Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Nhulunbuy. Said Nan: ‘Everyone came. People were hungry for it. In isolated and remote areas, they had no access to this sort of thing.’

She remembers ‘all sorts of exotic people’ performing. There was the dance company of the Philippines, the Barangay Dancers and the Polish Chamber Orchestra. Right after Cyclone Tracy, the King’s Singers came in ‘to cheer people up’, from a makeshift stage at Nightcliff High School. In October 1971, during the ‘build-up’, the hot, sweaty time before the Monsoon, Dame Margot Fonteyn and the Australian Ballet arrived for ‘ONE FABULOUS NIGHT ONLY’. Onstage at the Gardens Amphitheatre, a dancer failed to grasp her partner’s sweaty hand and fell heavily to the concrete stage. Bleeding from her lip, she returned to the stage to acknowledge the applause of an audience of 3500. Then Nan rushed her to the hospital. Her partner refused to speak for three days.
Branches of the Arts Council were formed in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, then Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Groote Eylandt, all run by volunteer committees. The only paid employee of the NT Council was a part-time secretary. A range of performers visited the main centres, and also Warrabri, Bamyili, Milingimbi and Bathurst Island—all on a touring grant of $4000.

Schools were also included in the tours. For the first time, Territorians could enjoy international classical music ensembles, theatre and ballet companies, and puppeteers. As Nan wrote in a paper on the development of the arts during those years, it was Musica Viva which really ‘put the NT Arts Council on its feet, adopting it…as the artistically underprivileged part of Australia’ and generously subsidizing visiting artists. The federal Council supported an experienced director to help produce work with local groups.

‘People like to preserve an image of the Territory as the last outpost: Mick Dundee,’ said Nan. ‘I’ve had people come up here and want to do interviews, and as soon as you start to talk about anything cultural, they don’t want to hear about that because it’s not the image they have in their mind. They want to hear about the safari, the beer can and the barbie, the crocodiles and the safaris.’

Nan also served on the Music Board of the Australia Council, travelling to Sydney every fortnight for three years. The Board handed out grants to applicants like composer Peter Sculthorpe, and Nan took the opportunity to visit Musica Viva in search of performers for the Territory.

**The North Australian Eisteddfod**

Nan was on the first committee of the North Australian Eisteddfod, begun in 1957. It involved performers from across the community, in competitions in everything from lieder to mime. A unique component was the participation of hundreds of Aboriginal competitors in dance, campfire singing (‘didgeridoo and singing sticks optional’), choirs, vocal duets and verse speaking. The little halls reverberated to stamping feet and singing sticks as groups from Bathurst Island, Daly River or Beswick Creek danced. Walpamur Paints offered a prize for ‘two songs of own choice in native dialect’. The Aboriginal school choirs, some performing in local languages (in 1962, Yirrkala Methodist Mission choir sang *Jinaga Bala Tarbal*, a version of *Away in a Manger*) by 1961 outnumbered those of the Darwin schools. Some Eisteddfod performers went on to make careers. David Gulpilil was one of the early star dancers, and Marilynne Paspaley, daughter of the pearling dynasty, went on to act on television.

The Eisteddfod involved a wide range of Top Enders. Businesses and local dignitaries offered cash prizes, were sponsors (‘additional general donations from the ABC, The *NT News*, A.E. Jolly, Martin’s Newsagency, Jeanette Frock Salon, C.J. Cashman and Co. and His Worship the Mayor’) and took out display ads in the program. By 1962, Darwin High School Headmaster T.A. Kissel announced that ‘young people now make eighty per cent of the entries. This is good for it augurs well for the future and reflects the fact that this is a young and virile community.’
The King’s Singers inscribed this picture of themselves, ‘For Nan, with many thanks for making our 2 Darwin visits so enjoyable.’ They performed after Cyclone Tracy at Nightcliff High School, ‘to cheer people up’. (courtesy Nancy Giese)

The Performing Arts Centre

In 1965, the Darwin City Council created a sound shell, a roofed stage and some basic dressing rooms, in the Darwin Botanic Gardens. This was the Gardens Amphitheatre, still in use today. Up to 15,000 people can sit on the gently sloping lawns—provided it doesn’t rain. The Amphitheatre hosted performers including the Ron Burrows Quintet and Rolf Harris, who one night fell off the stage during an over-enthusiastic rendering of Jake the Peg. Other available venues included the space beneath Nightcliff High School, to which up to 800 chairs had to be carried for every performance, then cleared away afterwards. Dogs sometimes wandered across outdoor stages.

In November 1973, a public meeting was called to begin the work of setting up a permanent performing arts centre. Nan was elected Chair of the steering committee. The designers of the Adelaide Festival Centre were commissioned to undertake a feasibility study. They recommended that it should be built next to the Darwin High School. Then came Cyclone Tracy. It was well into the reconstruction phase before the idea surfaced again. In October 1975, Mayor Ella Stack proposed that $200,000 left over from the Tracy Relief Trust Fund be used to attract a 4 to 1 subsidy for a cultural complex. It took until Territory self-government in 1978, however, and a proposal from a developer, to get started on a building, a 5-star hotel incorporating a conference centre as well as a large and beautiful performing arts venue. It finally opened in 1986.
The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

In 1964, Ken Waters, the Member for Arnhem in the Legislative Council, introduced a Bill to set up a Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory. Again, there was a grand plan. Museums and art galleries were to be established, acquired or received for maintenance, control and management. Waters became the Board’s first Chair, and Nan served on the committee. A year later, its Annual Report confessed, with refreshing candour: ‘In its first year of existence, the Board can boast of no achievements whatsoever in respect of recordable events.’

It was offered many helpful suggestions about possible sites. Then the right person arrived to push the cause. One-man powerhouse Dr Colin Jack-Hinton, the first Director, helped refurbish the old Town Hall and a flurry of collecting began. Before the paint was dry, there were exhibitions of pottery made by Indigenous people at Bagot and Bathurst Island, a collection of Police Inspector Folsche’s nineteenth-century photographs and a display of French lithographs. By August 1973 the restored building stood in a lush tropical garden behind a white picket fence.

But this museum was only a shell. It needed far more display, storage and office space. Then even what was there was swept away. The morning after Cyclone Tracy, the staff salvaged what they could of the collections. For the next six years the Museum operated out of an insurance company building. It took until 1977 to settle on a new site at Bullocky Point, just down from Darwin High School.

Jack-Hinton saw the Museum as serving a Northern Territory ‘with its boundaries in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific’. He had a vision for collections covering the archaeology of the region, and his own specialist area of maritime history. Links were built with museums and art galleries in Asia and the Pacific, ‘our neighbours’. He aimed for continuing representation of Australian art, and a core collection of fine arts inspired by the Territory. He set up an annual artists’ camp and invited major Australian artists to the Top End. They donated some of what they produced to the Museum, pictures which Jack-Hinton credited with ‘creating Kakadu’ around Australia and overseas. Using George Chaloupka’s ground-breaking photographic documentation of the vast ancient body of Arnhem Land rock art, the Museum displayed the world’s longest-continuing art tradition.

It took time for a suitable place to display these treasures to be built. It wasn’t until after self-government, in 1981, that the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, a spacious waterside complex flooded with light, was opened by Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowan.
Nan Giese lived for 58 years in the National Trust house overlooking Mindil Beach that was her home throughout her time in the Top End. When asked what she loved most about living in Darwin, she said ‘My garden! I get a lot of joy out of my garden.’

Says Joyce Cheong Chin: ‘There seems to be this one link, this thread that went through right from the beginning, the one person who’s been a driving force through all those years when others have come and gone. Politicians have come and gone, either left Darwin or given up. Nan Giese was still there, right until fruition.’
The house at Burnett Place, Larrakeyah, that became the Darwin home of Nan and Harry Giese from 1954-2012, in the garden they planted and tended together. This is now the property of the National Trust.
(courtesy Nancy Giese)

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