



# Suggestion 32

Caitlin No

2 pages

I nominated the new area be called Hyllus after:  
Hyllus Maris

“Aunty Hyllus Maris was many things: activist, artist, cultural leader and philosopher. Above all, she was a visionary, who used her many talents to stand up for what she believed in. Her success in establishing an Aboriginal school challenged the education status quo and has been unlocking young people's potential ever since.

Born on Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve in 1934, Hyllus was the third of nine children. Her mother, Geraldine Briggs, née Clements, was a Yorta Yorta and Wiradjuri woman and her father, Selwyn Briggs, a Wurundjeri and Yorta Yorta man. Hyllus and her siblings inherited a profound sense of social justice from their parents, both of whom were prominent Aboriginal rights activists.

Hyllus lived at Cummeragunja until she was five years old. In 1939, her family were among 200 people to walk off the reserve in protest over its management. Afterwards they lived on the outskirts of Mooroopna, in a makeshift settlement known as the Flats. Its residents were excluded and stigmatised by mainstream society because of their Aboriginality. In later years, Hyllus often drew on her experience growing up as an outsider.

Much of Hyllus' knowledge about her cultural heritage, genealogy and history came through her mother, from her grandmother, Theresa Clements. Her grandmother instilled in Hyllus great pride in her Aboriginal heritage. Hyllus attended school in Mooroopna and then Shepparton. Many who grew up on the Flats remember Hyllus as their protector, a compassionate girl unafraid to confront the perpetrators of discrimination.

From a young age, Hyllus was an artistic soul and a talented musician. She played guitar and sang at local venues in and around Shepparton. Hyllus trained and worked as a hospital dietician. In 1956, she married a Malaysian geologist and adopted the surname Maris. She took a keen interest in Aboriginal affairs and supported her parents' fight against inequality, becoming a member of the Aborigines Advancement League and attending meetings of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI).

In 1970, Hyllus relocated to Melbourne, where she became a well-known activist and public speaker. She was a founding member and liaison officer for the National Council of Aboriginal and Islander Women, working alongside her sisters and mother, who was the council's driving force. Where services for the Aboriginal community had been neglected, the women worked to fill the void.

The various acts of community service Hyllus undertook included visits to incarcerated Aboriginal people, for whom she would organise bail and represent at court hearings. Subsequently, Hyllus helped set up the Aboriginal Legal Service in 1973, as well as the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and similar services in Queensland. Later, Hyllus chaired the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Culture, which organised some of the earliest Aboriginal art exhibitions in the state.

In 1977, Hyllus received a scholarship from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs to study social policy and community development in London with the prominent sociologist, Sir Richard Hauser. It was the first of a number of study trips abroad that included cultural exchanges with First Nation peoples of North America. During her travels, an idea began to develop in Hyllus' mind.

Hyllus returned to Australia convinced of the need for a holistic approach to Aboriginal education. She was determined to build a school that would focus on three key areas — wellbeing, education and culture — and established the not-for-profit Green Hills Foundation to raise funds. Intense lobbying by Hyllus and others secured a grant from the Victorian Schools Commission, to purchase land near Diamond Creek. A pilot project was then conducted. Shortly after, the first independent Aboriginal school in Victoria opened its doors.

Worawa Aboriginal College officially opened in 1983. 'Worawa' is an Aboriginal word for eagle. The name was agreed upon by the Aboriginal Elders who worked with Hyllus on the cultural content of the college's program, the eagle being of great significance in Aboriginal culture and a symbol of the tremendous potential Hyllus saw in Aboriginal children. Extensive consultation went into developing a curriculum that balanced Aboriginal culture with the very best of western education. Scholarships were offered to ensure the widest range of Aboriginal students could attend.

Today, Worawa is situated in beautiful grounds outside Healesville. It remains Australia's only boarding school for Aboriginal girls, catering for the middle years of schooling (years 7–10). Students come from across Australia and collectively speak more than 30 traditional languages. The school continues to develop high achievers and its ongoing success is a proud testament to Hyllus and her vision.

Artistically, Hyllus' legacy is equally significant. She was a playwright and a gifted poet – her poem, *Spiritual Song of the Aborigine*, is considered an anthem for her people. Hyllus also collaborated to write and produce a four-part television series *Women of the Sun*, broadcast on SBS television. It documented the Cummeragunja walk-off and the experiences of Aboriginal women across two hundred years of colonialism.

First broadcast in 1982, *Women of the Sun* won several awards including the United Nations Media Peace Prize; the main drama award at the Banff Television Festival in Canada; two Australian Writers' Guild awards and five Television Society of Australia awards. The script was published in 1983, followed by a novel in 1985. Hyllus was appointed as the inaugural chair of the Victorian Government's Aboriginal Advisory Committee.

Hyllus passed away in 1986 after a battle with cancer. The illness had done little to diminish her commitment to the Aboriginal community and she remained active until the end of her life.

In 1999, an annual memorial lecture was established at La Trobe University in honour of her contribution to Aboriginal education. Today, Maris House at Melbourne Girls' College sits as a tribute to its namesake. Hyllus was inducted to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2001.

Aunt Hyllus believed the future to be in the hands of the young. Thanks to her efforts, many Aboriginal children today are growing up with the opportunity to make a difference, just as she did.”

(or another Indigenous woman's name - we need more recognition of both women and Indigenous peoples in our society. )