



Kulka

The Life and Times
of Gordon Briscoe

The inspirational story of Dr. Gordon Briscoe's life - from his work with legendary eye doctor Fred Hollows, to his days as an activist travelling Australia and telling traditional land owners about their land rights, and everything in between.

STUDY GUIDE



KULKA premiered on National Indigenous Television in October 2010.

It is a biographical program that offers a moving and inspirational account of one Indigenous Australian's story. It is the story of Gordon Briscoe and his journey from an institutionalized boy who became an angry young man of the civil rights movement to esteemed academic and recipient of the prestigious Order of Australia. It is an intensely personal journey that takes Gordon back to his country as he reconnects with the people and places that helped to shape his identity.

The program goes beyond the biographical details of an extraordinary life to explore topical issues about health, identity and social justice for Indigenous Australians.

Curriculum links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at upper primary, senior secondary and tertiary levels.

Curriculum links include **Australian History, Civics and Citizenship, HSIE, Indigenous Studies, Contemporary Australian Society, English, Legal/Justice Studies** and **Politics**.

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should take care when viewing this film as it contains images of people who have passed away.



What is the program about?

KULKA celebrates the life and times of Dr Gordon Briscoe (AO) - a campaigner for basic human rights for Indigenous Australians, an activist, motivator, thinker, researcher, author, teacher and mentor. It is the inspirational story of an institutionalised Aborigine, interned in an 'alien' camp during the second World War with very little education, who struggled against the odds to achieve dignity and respect for himself and his people. His work as co-founder of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern in the 1970's later led him to initiate the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program conducted by the late Professor Fred Hollows - a program which opened the eyes of the world to the poverty and disease underlying the health problems of Indigenous Australians. As a Land Rights activist and the first Indigenous Australian to stand for federal parliament, Gordon traveled throughout the Northern Territory talking to communities about their rights as traditional owners. The intensely personal story of Gordon Briscoe's journey as a boy once labeled a 'ward of the state' to a man who reclaimed his traditional family and sense of cultural identity, is a powerful one that resonates with the ongoing struggle for self-determination facing Indigenous Australians today.



How is the story told?

Narrated by Gordon's oldest son Aaron, the story of Gordon's life is constructed through the anecdotes of family, friends and colleagues. Together they piece together a mosaic that is Gordon's life story. At the same time, Gordon is writing his own biography, so he goes in search of his past, revisiting family, friends and places that serve to jog his memory and help him fill the pages of his memoir. The program ends with Gordon's memoir being published. He dedicates his work to the boys he grew up with in the institutions, and to the extraordinary brotherhood of young men who inspired each other and kept each other strong.

What does Kulka mean?

KULKA is a Pitjantjatjara word used to describe the desert oak tree that is native to the central desert area that is Gordon's country. While its fragile looking foliage is easily buffeted by the wind, its roots extend deep into the red earth where it draws moisture into its sturdy limbs to ensure its survival in extreme temperatures.

The Kulka tree is a key image in Gordon's story. It symbolises strength, endurance, brotherhood and survival. The tender Kulka saplings grow close together out in the harsh climes of the desert and in doing so form a natural windbreak that keeps each individual tree protected. Gordon meets up with members of his traditional family and shares a meal of kangaroo under the huge embrace of the Kulka tree.



THE STORY OF A LIFE

“I’m mbarntwe nitjika which means native flower.” Gordon Briscoe

- The story of Gordon’s life is told through interviews with members of his family, friends and colleagues. How do these multiple points-of-view build an impression of Gordon’s personality?
- Does your impression of Gordon change over the course of the program?
- Does this program leave you with any questions about Gordon?
- Gordon’s family, friends and colleagues tell anecdotes about Gordon. Choose one of these anecdotes and explain what it tells us about him.
- Imagine you could tell just one story from your childhood to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end, note what you think it reveals about you.

- The filmmakers use photos and archival footage to depict Gordon’s family and his life. Choose four family photos from different periods of your life and use them to construct a series of autobiographical snapshots. Who is in each photo? Who took the photo? Where were you? What was the occasion? What was the mood? Does the photo correspond with your memory of the time? What has happened to the other people (if any) pictured in the photo? How have you changed since then? Do you like the photo? Why/why not?
- Choose six adjectives to describe Gordon. List three qualities you like about Gordon.
- Find out all you can about Gordon’s people, the Pitjanjara people. Look at a map of central Australia. Locate the following places: the Finke River, Jay Creek, Titjikala. Imagine you are a child living in the central desert in the 1930’s. Write a story about a typical day in your life.

A LIFE IN INSTITUTIONS

“They wouldn’t let you talk language or anything like that and you wasn’t allowed to go to the camp and talk to them blackfellas after work, nothing.” Alex Kruger

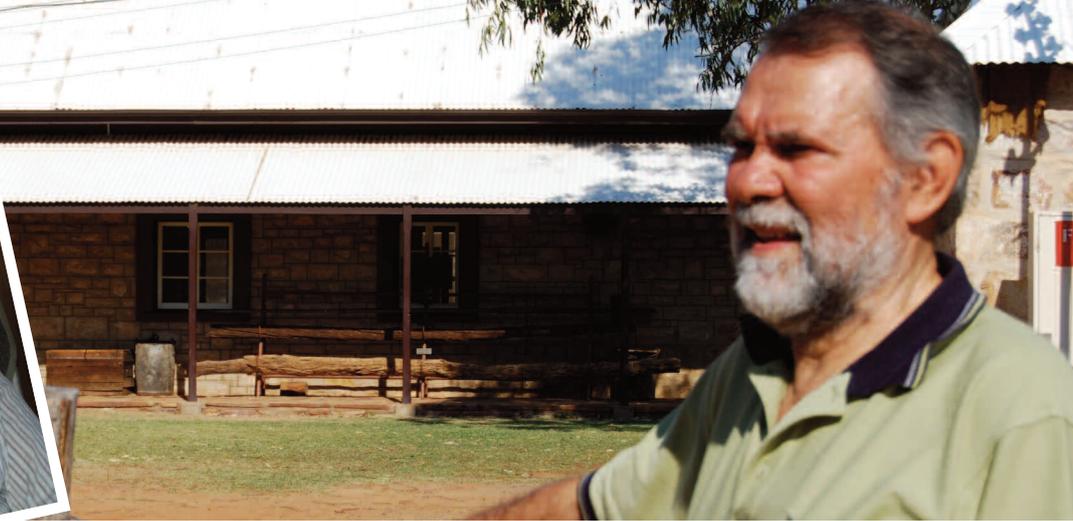
- Gordon’s very early years were spent in the police-patrolled compound in Alice Springs called “The Bungalow”. Alex Kruger, Millie Glen and Gordon Briscoe all describe life at this compound. How do their memories differ from each other? Are their relative ages and gender a factor in their recollections of life at this compound?
- Gordon was sent to a church-run Aboriginal Institution in New South Wales at St Thomas Anglican Church at Mulgoa. Here he was separated from his mother and lived in a dormitory with other Aboriginal children. Make a list of the differences between your childhood and what you imagine life at Mulgoa would have been like for a young boy such as Gordon.



- Gordon's mother, Millie Glen and Gordon's friend John Moriarty were forcibly taken from their families and put into institutions. What do you know about the Stolen Generations? What reasons were used to justify this cruel and inhumane treatment of Aboriginal families? Several films have been made about this topic, for instance, **Rabbit-Proof Fence**, **Lousy Little Sixpence**, **Stolen Generations** and **Land of the Little Kings**. Watch one of these films to provide the context for Gordon's resentment of the treatment his mother received at the hands of the State. List some of the long-term consequences of this policy.
- Gordon's mother sent him to St Francis House because she wanted him to have opportunities she'd never had. How might Gordon's life have been different if the family had returned to Alice Springs after the war? How difficult would it have been for the mothers of boys such as Gordon and Charles Perkins to make this decision? How influenced would they have been by the church that had also raised them? Do you think Gordon's mother made the right decision?
- Family is very important to Gordon. Millie Glen talks about herself as being "*Gordon's surrogate mother*". What does she mean by this? Explore how the concept of family for Aboriginal people can differ from that of non-Indigenous Australians. How important is it for relatives to be connected by blood? What long-term effect has the history of institutionalising Indigenous Australians had upon family life?
- How has dislocation and alienation from traditional family life impacted Indigenous Australians? How have Australian government policies in the past contributed to this? What are the current policies with regard to conserving and maintaining these important family connections?

- Gordon never knew his white father. The only father figure in his life was a priest – the Reverend Percy Smith. How do you think this may have affected him and his attitude to the world as he was growing up? How important is it for a young Aboriginal boy to have a bond with his biological father? Research the father and son relationship in Aboriginal culture. Pretend you are Gordon at the age of 15. Write a letter to the white father he has never met.
- Gordon's skill at sport opened up opportunities for him and sent his life in a new direction. Over the years, sport has provided many opportunities for talented Indigenous Australians to improve their personal circumstances. Aboriginal sporting heroes also perform an important social function, in terms of their impact on the perceptions of the wider community. When charismatic AFL player Michael Long pulled up his football jumper and pointed proudly at his black skin, he created an extremely potent image. Cathy Freeman's victory at the 2000 Olympics in the 400 metre run was referred to by then-Opposition Leader Kim Beazley as 400 metres of reconciliation. Write a profile of an Aboriginal athlete, detailing his or her background and the obstacles he or she had to confront. How was this sportsperson portrayed by the media? How prevalent is racism in sport?





- In the program Gordon talks about not being able to walk into a shop in Adelaide and get a cup of coffee or buy a suit because of his Aboriginality. This kind of racial prejudice was prevalent in other parts of the world at this time. How does the treatment of Aboriginal people at this time compare with the injustices suffered by black South Africans under apartheid? Imagine you are an Aboriginal person living in 1965 in Adelaide. Write a letter to your local member of parliament describing an incident in which you suffered racial prejudice. Describe how you felt and what you think should be done to change this situation.
- Millie Glen talks about how they were forced to speak “the Queen’s english” at the home on Mulgoa. How many Aboriginal languages would have been spoken in Australia in 1945 when Millie was at Mulgoa? How many Aboriginal languages are spoken in Australia today? How important is language to the concept of identity? What can be done today to keep Aboriginal languages alive?
(Reference: <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>)
- Gordon was married to Norma whom he met in England while he was playing soccer there. They returned to Australia soon after the birth of their son Aaron. What might life have been like for Gordon and Norma if they had stayed in England? Was racism and prejudice as widespread in England as it was in Australia in the 1960’s? Marriages between people of different racial backgrounds were known back then as ‘mixed marriages’ and were often frowned upon by the dominant white European cultures in both England and Australia. How difficult might it have been for Gordon and Norma as a young couple in this social environment? What obstacles and challenges might they have faced?

The Story of Indigenous Rights

“I left Adelaide as a ward of the state and I came back to Sydney with a young family and as an adult and I was a ward of the state in New South Wales.”

Gordon Briscoe

- What does “ward of the state’ mean? Research the Australian federal government policies that resulted in Gordon becoming a “ward of the state”.
- Gordon’s closest friend and greatest influence on his life was his older cousin Charles Perkins. Who was Charles Perkins? What was his contribution to Black Civil rights in Australia? Who are your role models? Who has had the biggest influence on your life so far?
- The program depicts Gordon as an Aboriginal activist who worked ‘behind-the- scenes’ to bring about social and political change. How did he do this? Do you know of any other Aboriginal activists who worked for the cause of Indigenous civil rights in Australia? Research and write a short biography about one of these activists.
(Reference: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html>)
- While he was working at the Foundation, Gordon met Charles (Chicka) Dixon who was also campaigning for the ‘YES’ vote in the 1967 Referendum. What was this landmark referendum? Who were the other major leaders of the campaign? Why was this campaign so important to the black civil rights movement in Australia?



- In the program, Gordon says: *"By the time I came along, my mother was working as a domestic on slave-labour arrangements."* What does he mean by this? Research the history of Aboriginal workers in rural Australia. The landmark Wave Hill Walkoff of 1966 was a protest against these arrangements. What was the nature of this landmark protest? How did this protest contribute to the land rights movement?
(Reference: <http://www.indigenoustrights.net.au>)

- In the program, there is an archival photo of former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam standing beside Vincent Lingiari? What is the story behind this famous image?
- Research one of the key land rights decisions by the High Court, for example, Mabo or Wik.
- What is the Aboriginal relationship to land? Research some related customary laws and explain their cultural significance.
- Write a newspaper style report on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Old Parliament House in Canberra.



A LIFE WORKING FOR CHANGE

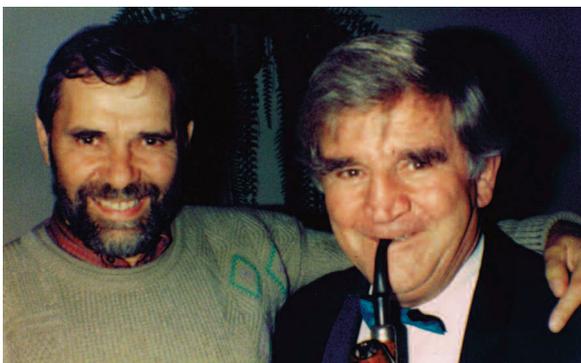
"The unique thing about Gordon is he didn't just talk about it he'd go out there and do it."

Lisa Briscoe

- Gordon's cousin Charles Perkins was the first Aboriginal person to graduate from university. His success inspired Gordon to return to his high school studies at the age of 30 and complete his education. Why did he feel it was so important to get an education? What might Gordon's life have been like if he had not gone back to school to do his high school certificate?
- Gordon worked for the NSW Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. At that time, the most challenging issues faced by Indigenous people were: lack of education, employment, housing and little or no access to health care. Choose one of these issues and compare the situation in the 1960s with conditions now. What has changed? How have problems been tackled? Have things improved?
- Gordon was instrumental in setting up the first Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. He worked closely with a woman called Shirley Smith, known to everyone as 'Mum Shirl' because she often vouched for young Aboriginal prisoners by claiming to be their mum. Research Mum Shirl's story and her important contribution to Aboriginal health and welfare.



- Gordon worked with researcher Dr Len Smith to bring to light the facts about the low life expectancy for Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians. How important is the work of statisticians like Len Smith in bringing about social and political change? Conduct a small survey in your family on health and life expectancy. Interview your parents and grandparents and find out what major illnesses are in your extended family's history and which particular ones have been the cause of death. Are there some illnesses that occur more than others, such as heart attack or stroke? Are there any incidences of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia? What conclusions, if any, can you draw from this data? How might this information influence your own health and lifestyle choices?



- Gordon also worked closely with Professor Fred Hollows. How has the important field-work of this ophthalmologist changed the lives of millions of people worldwide? (Reference: For All the World to See DVD Ronin Films 1992).

- The National Trachoma and Eye Health Survey of 1976 remains one of the most comprehensive health surveys ever carried out by the federal government. Jack Waterford attributes its success to the extensive consultation by the liaison officers with Indigenous elders and community members. Discuss this in relation to other Indigenous surveys and intervention programs.
- What are the key issues facing Aboriginal people today? Using a variety of resources, compile statistics relating to these issues, for example, incarceration rates, infant mortality rates, life expectancy, child abuse.
- Choose one particular problem confronting Aboriginal communities today, for example, low life expectancy, deaths in custody, petrol sniffing, alcoholism. Imagine you are a politician keen to address this situation. What policy initiatives could you implement that might improve conditions for Aboriginal people in this area? How would you go about developing such policies? Topic for a class debate: "The 2007 government intervention to enforce health checks in Indigenous communities was a paternalistic band-aid measure designed to win white votes."
- Brainstorm specific strategies and policies the Australian government might implement to 'close the gap' in the quality of life between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

BOOKS

Gordon Briscoe, **Racial Folly: A Twentieth Century Aboriginal Family**, ANU Epress, 2010

Bringing Them Home, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Canberra, 1997

Peter Read, **Aboriginal History Volume 4, Fathers and Sons: A Study of Five Men of 1900** (1980)

Alex Barton and Marji Hill (eds), **Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Australia's Aboriginal Peoples**, Macmillan, South Yarra, 2000

Rhonda Craven (ed), **Teaching Aboriginal Studies**, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999

Bruce Elder, **Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Mistreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788**, New Holland, Sydney, 1998

Kevin Gilbert (ed), **Inside Black Australia**, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988

David Horton (ed), **Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia**, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994

Charles Perkins, **A Bastard Like Me**, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1975

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Chip Rowley, **The Destruction of Aboriginal Society**, Penguin, Melbourne, 1972

Anna Rutherford (ed), **Aboriginal Culture Today**, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1988

Ann McGrath **'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country**, Allen & Unwin, 1987

John Moriarty with Evan McHugh, **Saltwater Fella**, Viking 2000

VIDEO/DVD

A Frontier Conversation, Claire Haywood (director) distributed by Ronin Films (2009)

Blood Brothers: Freedom Ride, Rachel Perkins (director), SBS Television, distributed by Film Australia, 1993, 55 minutes

Charles Perkins, Ken Hannan (director), Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2001, 41 minutes

For All The World To See, Pat Fiske (director) Bower Bird Films, 1992.

They Used to Call it Sandy Blight, Nomad Films International (documentary DVD) 1977.

WEBSITES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, www.atsic.gov.au

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, www.aiatsis.gov.au

Gary Foley, Black Power in Redfern 1968-1972 www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html

The Freedom Rides in Australia, <http://freedomride.net>

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice, www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/index.html

The Koori Website <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html>

National Trachoma and Eye Health Program, www.powerhousemuseum.com/australia_innovates/?behaviour=view_article&Section_id=1030&article_id=10100

Nappaljari Jones, Smith & Briscoe, They used to call it Sandy Blight, Australian Aboriginal Studies 2006/2.



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