

## MARC NEWHOUSE — FATALITY

**HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan)** [ 6.20 pm ]:

I rise tonight to acknowledge the life and the passing of one of Western Australia's unsung heroes, Marc Newhouse. Many members will have known or met Marc, and I know that some members also worked with him over the decades. A passionate anti-racism and human rights campaigner, Marc was taken from us far too early and his remarkable life ended in February this year after a battle with cancer. I want to acknowledge the presence in the public gallery tonight of Marc's friends and family, and also members of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, who worked so closely with Marc for so long. Some in this Parliament knew Marc Newhouse in particular for his tireless work as chair of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, and the work he did in trying to bring justice for Mr Ward and Ms Dhu, two Aboriginal people who died in custody. But those were just the most recent of his works.

Marc Newhouse was born in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, in 1958 and his family moved to apartheid South Africa where, from a young age, he became aware of the injustices of racism and the importance of human rights, and a lifelong interest in ways of effectively organising for progressive social change was sparked.

Marc came to Australia at around age 19 and his first job was as a jackaroo in Clare, South Australia. It was there that he was kicked in the face by a horse, crushing his face and causing him to lose an eye. But as he so often did, he demonstrated his irrepressible good nature and humour, treating the three months in hospital as an opportunity to master the Australian accent, and he did that pretty well.

After his recovery, he was drawn back to South Africa and got a job as an apprentice farm manager, where he again witnessed intense racism in the form of gratuitous beatings and slave wages for African farm workers. In response — the significance of this for the time cannot be understated — Marc suggested they down tools to protest against the oppression. That was unheard of — a young white South African, with the trappings of privilege that apartheid South Africa brought him, leading a black workers' strike. For his efforts, he was subjected to a severe beating by the white farm owner in whose eyes he was a "verayer", meaning a traitor — a "Kaffir lover". Although he was severely beaten, he was unapologetic and he went to the police. He later said that he knew it was not wise, but he nevertheless went to the law. Unfortunately, the law was waiting for him. When he got to the police station, the farm owner was there, with the police. He was detained in police cells for days, accused of being a communist.

He came back to Australia and here he established the first youth drop-in centre in the Pilbara, in Port Hedland. There he dealt at the coalface with Aboriginal youth, and was exposed first-hand to the lives of those left on the margins. He also became very involved in anti-apartheid campaigns here in WA, including the African National Congress support group. Marc was acutely aware of so many of the similarities in the struggles of what he saw in South Africa and Aboriginal people here in Australia. Marc was also a regular at the old Swan Brewery protests and during these times he formed strong relationships with Aboriginal activists that lasted for the rest of his life.

Between 1992 and 1995, Marc returned several times to South Africa to participate in the democratisation process there, leading Australian work brigades working with grassroots South African community organisations. He was active in West Australian Solidarity with South Africa and, later on, West Australians for Racial Equality. Also during this time, back in Western Australia, Marc began employment with the WA Equal Opportunity Commission and became a key face of the commission for the many community organisations he worked with. Marc was a key energetic force for the EOC in many major endeavours, including the biggest inquiry ever taken into systemic discrimination in public housing, and the development of guidelines for schools relating to gender diversity and sexual identity.

But perhaps the most important part of his work since the late 1990s was his campaign for justice for Aboriginal people, particularly in the criminal justice system — an effort from which he never rested. The Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, now the First Nation's Deaths in Custody Watch Committee, was his great passion. Marc worked seven days a week, and was available 24/7. He did not

stop, not for holidays, not on weekends or at any other time. His family knew and accepted that he was effectively on call for the cause.

Marc's work on the issue of deaths in custody within WA has been transformative. It has shone a powerful light on some of the greatest injustices within our state and, importantly, Marc worked tirelessly to empower Aboriginal leadership in this important space.

Despite being a very political person who was not shy about his political beliefs, Marc remained fiercely independent in the pursuit of human rights for the organisations he represented, never joining an Australian political party. As a result, Marc was unfettered by direct political allegiance in the pursuit of goals for the organisations and families he assisted. Marc's independence in his dealings with politicians meant that no matter what political party someone was from, if they made a progressive move in favour of the cause, they were given credit for it, but regressive moves or actions, such as a death in custody, would result in immediate action on behalf of families, including long-term campaigns. This approach proved very effective in his campaigning.

But despite the absolute seriousness of the work Marc undertook, I have to mention what a genuinely warm and funny man Marc was. Irreverent, self-deprecating and intensely kind, Marc had a unique power to influence and persuade those in power, and he was just a lovely person to work with and to be around. Marc lived life to its fullest and he brought love and compassion to this world, and it was with love, compassion and humour that Marc practiced his activism and chose to live his life.

Marc's funeral included a packed — really packed! — and diverse audience, starting with an Aboriginal smoking ceremony, and welcome to country by long-time friend and collaborator, Yued elder Uncle Ben Taylor Cuiermara. He paid testament to Marc's reach across a wide range of organisations, issues and causes, with the common theme of human rights and justice, particularly for those who are most vulnerable in our communities, including Aboriginal people, particularly within the criminal justice system, but also with respect to housing and land rights; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queer communities; refugees; and others who are impoverished or marginalised in this state.

I want to acknowledge the enormity of the loss of Marc to those members of his family who are feeling his passing so keenly: Marc's much-loved wife, Liz; his adored eldest daughter, Jai; his youngest daughter, Yelena, of whom he was so proud; his gorgeous granddaughters, Natalyia, Mailelani and Avei; and, of course, his mother, Maureen.

Marc's passing has left a huge hole in people's lives, just as his life had a huge impact on so many people. Marc was one of my dearest friends and I know that those of us who were closest to him have also been left with broken hearts. Marc brought people together and we miss him terribly.

The world is a better place because Marc Newhouse was in it, and he lived as a shining example of what we all should be. We should all aspire to be such a person.