

Brother Nicholas Genesisus Bilich, CFC

(6 July 1930 - 21 March 2000)

“Said the river to the seeker. ‘Does one really have to fret about life? No matter which way I turn, I’m homeward bound.’” (Anthony de Mello)



A trochus shell, polished by an Aboriginal man from the One Arm Point Community, a gift from Br. Nick Bilich some years back, is a treasured memento of the years we lived and worked throughout the Kimberley region of West Australia. It symbolises his deep connection with the land, the indigenous Aboriginal peoples, natural beauty and the built environment.

The Kimberley is a world away from the old Croatian fishing and ship-building village of Vranska near Split where Br Nick’s parents spent their childhood and Bilich is a common name. Vranska people have a reputation for being friendly and hospitable. Here on February 4th, 1917 Nicolai Bilich married Lucy Grubic and raised three children, Dinka, Tony and Valenka. There is a relief of Kairos, the God of the happy moment, in the nunnery adjacent to the church of St. Nikola at nearby Trogir. Our Brother Nick definitely inherited the friendliness and hospitality of his forbears and was always ready to celebrate the ‘happy moment’.

In 1923 Nicolai migrated to Australia to save money and setup house. His wife and children joined him in 1926 settling in Livingstone St, Beaconsfield, a suburb of Fremantle, a sea-side fishing and shipbuilding town like Vranska and the main port for Perth, the Capital of West Australia. Here, in 1928, Vincent was born and then, in 1930 when Nicolai was 40 and Lucy 33, on the 6th July their youngest son, Joseph Nicholas, the subject of this life, was born. The birth certificate lists the family surname as Bilich, the form Nick used all his adult life.

Joseph Nicholas, or Nicholas as he came to be known, grew up in Beaconsfield, in a house built by his father and still standing at 13 Young St. In later life, a niece, Cecilia Bilich Potter, took Nick on a tour of the places that were part of his childhood – the bottleo’s limestone shed down their back lane (who paid for and onsold empty beer and cordial bottles) then, the milko where milk was obtained in a milk pail, which Nick would carry home. They visited Joy Mahony, where Nick reminisced on those boyhood years. It was then he admitted to her:

“You know, when you were playing tennis, Joy, I stole your bicycle, that’s how I learned to ride. Every time you went to play tennis, I rode round and round Beaconsfield and got back before you finished.” And she said, “Nicky”, and he said “Yes”. She said “I knew”.

The Bilich children’s summer holidays were spent swimming at South Beach, buying broken biscuits from the Mills and Ware factory, listening for the steam engines hauling the wheat trains or gathering the wheat that had spilled at the siding.

“As a teenager he ended up being 6’8” or something. I know he had to duck to go through doorways, long lanky creature with big feet – problems with his toes. He used to wear sandals all the time. They were the only thing he found comfortable.” Cecilia Bilic Potter

Nick attended the Beaconsfield Convent School (1935-1937) and then Christian Brothers College, Fremantle (1938-1944). However, the pattern of the Bilich family life was dramatically altered in May 1941 when Lucy died. Nick was to lose the presence and care of his mother when he was eleven. Nick never spoke to me of his mother; however, I am sure this loss was life-changing for him.

Nick began to experience a call to join the Christian Brothers when he was thirteen. His father had already decided to work as a volunteer for the Croatian Jesuit Fathers in Calcutta, India. Around this time his eldest sister, Dinka, entered religious life as Sr. Mary Nicoline with the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. Nick’s form of application for the Christian Brothers lists his next of kin as Sr. Nicoline (Bilich) who was also his baptismal Godmother.

What a spiritual and generous family. Nick’s brother, Tony, had for a time tested a vocation as a Christian Brother, his eldest sister had joined a religious order and his father, with family approval, became a Jesuit volunteer in India.

Nick was one of eleven who made the long train journey across Australia arriving at St Enda’s Juniorate, Strathfield on January 28th 1945. Here he spent 3 years completing his secondary schooling, achieving Leaving passes in English, Maths I, Chemistry and History, later adding Maths II and Art.

Nick began his novitiate receiving the religious name Br Genesius on habit day, February 15 1948. That same year his father, Nicholai, entered the Jesuit Novitiate in Sitagarha, India as a lay brother. The following words, part of the life of his father, could equally have referred to Nick when he too was in his sixties working in the Kimberley:

“Here (Hazaribag, India) was a school to be built and equipped. Though now in his early sixties he set to work with zest. He went far and wide gathering building materials, often returning with harrowing tales (of) bad roads.... For (many) years he worked to supply all the needs of the mission with a quality of craftsmanship that was always masterly. With his keen sense of humour and great fund of stories ... he was always entertaining” Br. Nicholai Bilic SJ (1890-1968) by Maurice Dullard.

Br Norm Tuppin CFC tells that he was building a hayshed on the Novitiate farm when the Novice Master sent Nick down on some pretext, so Norm could assess whether Nick was sufficiently experienced to use Norm’s tools on another job. Obviously, the Novice Master had realised that Nick possessed practical skills of a high order.

In the Scholasticate Nick’s practical and artistic abilities were also in evidence according to Ivan Gogler, a life-long friend:

“Nick ran the printing section for Strathfield and did the scenery for Br Claver Daly’s plays. I had just finished an Irish cottage for a play, but I was stumped to make the thing look realistic. Brother Genesius came over from the Scholasticate and in three hours with a piece of charcoal gave the finishing touches to my papier mache cottage”.

Nick was posted for his first teaching mission (1950-1955) to Dunedin in New Zealand. During his six years in Dunedin he completed matriculation (English, History, Physics and Maths) and studied at the University of Otago (English 1 and History 1). He studied Building Construction I and II at the King Edward Technical College taught by a Mr Gillies, whose son Norm Gillies cfc fills in the detail:

“My father's name was Hugh Donald Gillies. I know Nick was very grateful to Dad for his assistance, but he (Nick) was pretty handy in the woodwork line, anyway. Dad always had a good word to say for Nick, and remembered him fondly. I was a student in Years 9 and 10 at the time, and remember vividly the beauty of his May altars.”

Br. Michael Flaherty adds further details of life in Dunedin:

“Houses beside the playground were purchased and Nick led the team in removing walls and making the needed repairs. In these houses Nick had to bend down to pass through the doorways.

Six young Brothers together we created our own fun. Occasionally, the Brothers played the students Rugby and Nick was on the wing. We reckoned he took the ball on the 25 and lent over to score a try! In winter, with snow outside, we played indoor soccer with a paper stuffed ball. Big Nick put his heart and soul into these games.

During holidays and on long weekends, it was too cold to swim so we tramped the mountains. Such trips bonded us together as we shared incredible scenery, long days, and heavy packs.”

Vic Larkin tells an oft-related story set in Wellington. Nick (6ft 7) and Vic Larkin (6ft 3) were walking together dressed in clerical black (in transit to their first mission in Dunedin) when a local came up to them saying. “I’m for the High Church too!”

Vic also adds the following:

“This gentle giant’s shyness was tested at Carisbrook Rugby grounds. We were there for an international match and the cheapest tickets were to stand in the outer with thousands of other spectators. The match was underway when a booming voice behind us bellowed “Get off your box, Father”. A spectator, excited by this comment, shouted back, “Father is not standing on a box. Come down and have a look!”

In community he contributed so much happiness particularly with his extraordinary skill as a cartoonist. His shyness was not aloofness but manifested itself by a reluctance to put forward a point of view. Yet this man was forever happy and had time for everybody. I was not surprised to learn that the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley region still miss Nick so much.”

That Nick was one of our few Croatian Brothers did not register with his confreres. He must have gone through much adjustment when moving from home to life in a Christian Brothers Community. I never heard him say a word in Croatian, a language he had spoken at home, or mention anything to do with Slav culture. His bi-cultural background would have helped him relate later so successfully to indigenous culture.

Nick made his life commitment to the Brothers on Christmas Day 1955, and then moved to CBC Fremantle, happy to be close to family. He was assigned the Grade V class with 78 students and continued his trade studies at the Fremantle Technical Institute.

“I’m sure Nick will be remembered by the Fremantle boys for many things, amongst them his designing and building of the May altars – modern in concept and very devotional and inspiring. His creativity and workmanship were always of the highest order.” Br. Tony Kelly cfc

In 1957 Nick moved to Boys Town Bindoon. He told me they were difficult years for both the boys and the Brothers. His challenge was to work for positive outcomes despite the lack of resources, the pressures from the property having to be self-supporting and the extensive building program still in progress. Added to this were the boys’ poor prior education opportunities and pre-Bindoon life experiences. Br. Doug Boulter, a former student of Bindoon, wrote of Br Sebastian Quilligan’s time as Principal (1954-1959):

“I believe that Sebastian had a fairly difficult period at Bindoon... The children were mainly migrants and delinquents from the Courts and they gave him a difficult time... Finance too was a problem as he did not have ready access to regular funds.”

Nick would have attended the funerals of three teenagers buried in the small cemetery south of the main buildings, all tragic events that affected Nick deeply as did the later suicides, deaths from violence, alcoholism and poor living conditions among his Kimberley students.

“It is possible to perceive, in the Bindoon period, the psychological scarring that was part of Nick’s life. Possibly the loss of his mother at an early age played a part. It is present in his paintings also – his emphasis in his last paintings of rusty iron symbolic of years of harsh living. Nick had great regard for those who bore the burdens of the day, yet in his own life he was very spartan – just getting on with it.” Peter Hardiman cfc.

Br Pat Mohen hints at these interior issues that Nick faced alone:

“He had seen hard times during his life which saddened him deeply. He usually closed off such memories as suddenly as he had started them but they lay within him and were not dealt with as far as I could tell.”

None of us are the well-rounded individual; our strengths are always in tension with areas where we do not excel. Nick’s gifts were those of the extrovert – good host, great conversationalist, a truly remarkable community man. The shadow was in his response to difficult situations – he internalised these feelings which took an increasing share of his energy and emotion.

Nick was to return to CBC Fremantle in 1960. The move was at very short notice by telegram as an emergency had arisen there. He took charge of the Primary Year 6 class (67 students). In addition, he renovated the kitchen and housekeeper’s quarters, finding time during 1961 to do a correspondence course in building construction with the British Institute of Engineering Technology. Nick showed great generosity, by spending his weekends travelling back to Bindoon to teach the year 10 Woodwork class, which had no woodwork teacher as a result of his sudden move to Fremantle.

“He is able to turn his hand to many things and do them well. His school work is sound. He can build, paint, decorate and draw plans but always his school duties are first. In spite of his six feet seven inches he is always busy and in community his good nature and happy spirit never fail”. Laserian Carroll cfc

During 1962 he began teaching Secondary classes in Technical Drawing, Art, Physiology & Hygiene, in his spare time transforming a classroom into a tiered Science lecture room. The Provincial Visitor in 1963 made a perceptive comment about Nick in the light of his later problems with pressures of work in Broome:

“He is very capable... and he works every day after school hours, and during every weekend. He needs to be watched lest he overtax his strength. He is very tall and not very robust”.

From January 1964, Nick was appointed Superior and Principal of our school in Collie where he served a full six year term. Falling demand closed most of the coal mines on which the town depended. The school and Brothers' community felt the pinch as did many families in the town. The Perth Brothers' communities helped with food and money.

“The Brothers' house was utterly dilapidated... Little was done to improve the house until 1966 when Br N G Bilich transported it two kilometres to the school site where he painstakingly began to renovate both the house and the school. His lone efforts gradually won the support of parents and students, who helped complete the renovations. His work was a gallant effort in a failing venture.” Beyond Dreams in Stone. Kevin Paull cfc p162.

“I lived with Nick for one year in Collie (1969). His good humour and gentleness helped make the isolation and poor living conditions bearable.” P.O'Loghlen cfc.

“How wonderful it was when his father came to Collie to stay a few days with us. Only when the old man was given something to do was he really happy. There was an obvious tenderness between father and son. It was another side of Nick who found it hard to unbend, caught between the image of what a superior should be and his real self – although in community we always seemed to be a very happy trio”. Reg Whitely cfc

“Remembering fondly the years together in Collie. Everyone looked up to you in more ways than one”. Ted Devereux (death notice in the West Australian Newspaper).

Collie is about 200km away from Perth so Nick was able to spend time now and again with his father, Nicolai, who had returned from India in 1966 to be closer to his family. On the 18th November, 1968, Brother Nicolai Bilic, SJ died in Perth. He was buried in the Jesuit plot at Karrakatta, Perth.

1970 saw Nick at St Patrick's College, Geraldton taking classes in Religious Education, Maths, Science and Technical Drawing. Br Godfrey Hall, in his Visitation Report, describes Nick as “an impressive man and a model of observance and charity” and recommended a move to a day school.

This was not to be, as Nick was appointed foundation member of a new missionary venture of Holy Spirit Province, a boarding school (later to be called Nulungu College) for remote Kimberley Aboriginal students, the first to offer them Secondary Education in the Kimberley. The Broome chapter in Nick's life reveals the enormous capacity of the man for work and challenge. The influence of his father's life in India must have been strong as Nick gradually moved from teacher to a missionary life of building, maintenance and skilling indigenous students.

“1971: Nick taught Social Studies in the mornings and spent the afternoons in Manual work turning out tables, desks and furnishings for the new Technical Building. The next project was the basketball court. Nick and the boys did the levelling and the formwork and had to work a cement mixer when commercial concrete was found to be too expensive.” Broome Annals

The first boarders arrived in 1972 and Nick was given charge of the First Year Secondary class. In August, he was hospitalized for several weeks with gastro-enteritis, a precursor of the digestive system problems which added to the challenge of the works he took on.

During 1973-4 Nick was involved with the building of a large work shed and store, a second basketball court as well as the building of the Laundry and Staff flats with materials from Talgarno – northern base for the Woomera rocket range. The next major building task was the new Manual Arts Building, to be designed and built by Nick and the Secondary boys, the Department of Aboriginal affairs providing \$60,000 for materials. The foundations were dug late in 1975 with materials arriving during 1976. The year was a busy one for Nick as he added dormitory master to his tasks for term one, took Year 10 students to Perth on excursion and completed the Manual Arts ready for use for early 1977.

The Nulungu Chapel is a lasting testament to Nick’s planning skills. Peter Hardiman cfc describes the project:

“It was probably in the design and building of the Nulungu Chapel that Nick reached the pinnacle of his prowess at thinking culturally and building to match. The overall structure, in steel and concrete, was meant to resemble the simple Aboriginal bark house with sticks poking through the roof supporting the sides. Around the base of it would be stone from all over the Kimberley so that the kids could say: 'a part of our country is here.' Likewise inside there were many touches in the furnishings to acknowledge the Indigenous and Japanese influences which were also a big part of Broome and its pearling culture”.

Br Doug Boulter cfc arrived in May to help Nick with the building program. Lack of accommodation for visitors saw Nick offering his own bedroom for their use. During term 2, Nick spent around 8 weeks sleeping in a classroom or the presbytery – such the generosity and asceticism of the man. (Summarised from Broome Annals)

Arnold McKenzie, a foundation student of Nulungu tells how he remembers Nick.

“I thank him for having had a hand in educating me. I consider him as more than a brother of Christian education; he is also an older brother to all of us who have had the opportunity to be at CBC Nulungu.”

The International Tertianship (1978) was an opportunity for Nick to broaden and deepen his life experience.

“On National Aboriginal Day we had our send-off for Nick Bilich who was on his way to Rome for his Tertianship and planned to return via the world. Almost 800 people turned up for the night and it was very gratifying to see and hear the respect that Br Bilich deserved”. Broome Annals, 1978

He regarded the Holy Land Pilgrimage a highlight of the Tertianship noting ‘its effects go deep’ and speaks of the ‘tremendous personality and spirituality’ of Mother

Teresa of Calcutta who addressed the group. I do not know if Nick made a pilgrimage to Vranyica, to visit relatives.

1979 was the year Nick, with help from Br Doug Boulter, transformed the former Tech building into a library for which Nick painted a full wall “Samurai Warrior” mural celebrating oriental culture.

“During visitation by Dennis Drake cfc, Nick expressed the wish that he would like a rest from the steady grind of looking after boarders. His unbroken stay since the College opened was coming to an end. It would be impossible to even attempt to write all that Nick meant to the College, suffice to say we shall miss him greatly, but at least we have something to keep reminding us of him – almost every building has had some Bilich influence”.
Broome Annals, 1979

Nick spent 1980 studying Units in Social Studies, Curriculum Development and Aboriginal Studies while living in the Fremantle community. Br. Kevin Johns was prophetic in his comment: “Nick views his present studies into Curriculum for the Aborigines as the beginning of a commitment which will interest him for the rest of his life”. Nick moved in 1981 to CBC Leederville, found the school environment difficult and was anxious to get back to Broome.

“He is now very anxious to get back to Broome to resume the work he left off. Nick is an excellent religious, quiet, cheerful, prayerful and efficient (if possibly a bit impractical in some matters). Broome’s gain will be Leederville’s loss.” Br. J. B. Darcy cfc

Nick returned to Nulungu College in 1982. On March 19th 1983 the Miriam Rose Ungunmerr stained glass window in the Nulungu chapel was blessed by Bishop Jobst who said the community owed a tremendous debt to Br Nick Bilich for his coordination and patience in completing the project (Broome Annals). The window is an Aboriginal design in ochre colours in keeping with the chapel design. Nick fitted out a kitchen in the Brothers’ house as well as building a unique tropical dining room for the Brothers which permitted total ventilation from two sides as well as protection from rain and insects.

Nick was also an accomplished educationalist. Br Laurie Negus, College Principal in 1978, chaired meetings formulating College goals. He said at the time that “Nick Bilich was a tower of strength during these meetings.”

Michael Lake, Manual Arts Teacher at Nulungu College, named Br Nick a true Renaissance man, excelling in the intellectual, spiritual and practical fields.

“Nick fulfils the term “renaissance man” in many facets of his life as a teacher, artist, curriculum writer, designer and builder. The way he adapted curriculum to equip students for life was unique. His artistry and creativity in making resource materials to back up his curriculum was legendary and his legacy lives on through the publication of these materials.” Michael and Bette Lake

So, it was no surprise that in 1985 Nick’s ministry changed from teaching to a more supporting role. He became curriculum consultant to Nulungu College, Broome and Luurnpa Catholic School, Balgo Hills. He would spend three weeks at a time at Balgo (around 1000km from Broome by road). He mapped the curriculum offerings at Luurnpa and assisted teachers using his many years’ experience of Aboriginal

Education at Nulungu. Later he reworked his teaching materials into technical education texts that have been published in the Kimberley by the Catholic Education Office. In November he did an offset printing course in Perth. Typically, he wanted his Aboriginal helpers to learn the same skills and as a result Gregory Gill and Brian Gordon accompanied him.

Ernie Azzopardi tells the story of his wife, Gerri, coming across a drunken Aboriginal man with a knife looking for Br Leo Scollen, Principal of Luurnpa. Gerri hurried a back way to the dining room to forewarn Leo. On being told of the emergency, Nick decided that he could handle the situation so went out to meet the man, saying 'Bede, I haven't seen you for a long time, how are things with you', skilfully diffusing a tense situation.

During 1985, Nick was considering his future and a number of letters passed between himself and Br Michael Flaherty of the Province Leadership Team.

"I think I would like a year at the Adult Centre. ... I am blaming myself for some of this as I realised years ago that my nerves were getting worse. Laurie (Negus) urged me more than once to switch to some other work... but in my 'wisdom' I kept putting it off. I let it go too long."

In 1986 Nick became a foundation member of the Kununurra Community. He lived about 600km away at Balgo Hills, an isolated Kimberley Aboriginal Community with a population of 400 in the Great Sandy Desert 300km from the nearest town.

"He lived frugally and in much hardship. The isolation – mail plane once a week, radio telephone – and unrest due to local politics among Aboriginal leaders made the task very trying." Kununurra Annals.

For three days a week Nick worked at the Balgo Adult Education Centre, responsible for the young men whom he taught literacy, numeracy, art and woodwork. Very often he and his class repaired house windows and doors for the Community families. After showing Brother Max McAppion some of the people's outstanding artwork he said, "What on earth can I teach them?" He designed the catalogue sheet to record the story of the painting, artist's name and other details for the first exhibition of Warlayirti Art, including 107 works of art by 35 artists. A Perth paper called it "The first major exhibition of West Australian Aboriginal Art and the first overall perspective of contemporary Aboriginal Art".

Nick was one of the first managers of the literature production centre at Luurnpa School, now the Walkala Centre. With his Aboriginal helpers he printed a very simple pictorial dictionary in the local Aboriginal language (Kukatja). This was later followed by other Kukatja language books, all before the computer age.

"I have been impressed by his generosity, his perseverance, his common-sense approach to things and his humour. I know that he has contributed an extraordinary amount to the Balgo community both through practical work he has done here and through his person. He is held in high esteem by those who knew him well." Mary Wicks, Remote Area Nurse Manager, Balgo.

Nick was ever positive in his conversations and interactions. He had a story for every occasion and could tell hundreds of jokes mostly involving a verbal twist. Two examples: The Buddhist monk at the dentist, refusing a painkilling injection for the reason that he wanted to transcend dental medication. And, Groucho Marx' comment "Either this man is dead or my watch has stopped". Nick was a fan of Hal Roach, had

several of his tapes and frequently quoted Hal's jokes as well as his mantra to the nun in his audience – 'write it down, Sister, write it down'.

During July 1987 Nick volunteered to join the foundation community in the Sudan if required. Realising his abilities and the needs of Australia's Indigenous peoples he added "I feel my first duty lies in the Aboriginal Apostolate."

In 1988 Nick began working on Bathurst Island in the Nguui Ngingawila Literature Production Centre, printing language resources, managing the offset printer.

"Many were the evenings when he would come home with stories about the malfunctioning press, the non-working assistants or both.

The press is now in East Timor in the Catholic Communications Office in Dili." John Hallett cfc

It was during this time that he helped design and set up the Bathurst Island Museum at Nguui and was an official guest at its opening.

Nick was on sabbatical during 1992 at the Pacific Mission Institute, Turramurra NSW. He could repeat in detail many of the sayings of one of the lecturers, Fr. Cyril Halley who impressed Nick during this course.

Nick read every issue to hand of the Tablet and National Catholic Reporter, keeping up to date with Church issues as well as honing his sense of the absurd by regaling us with any of a number of quotations from the Sic column such as the observation that if we are evolved from monkeys and apes – why are there monkeys and apes now?.

One of his Kimberley students remembers him as a religion teacher:

"It was not so much Nick's ability as a manual arts teacher that overwhelmed him as his religion classes. Justin still remembers vividly those wonderful religion lessons and the fact that they have meant so much to him." Laurie Negus cfc

"An integral lived part of Nick's spirituality was an Aboriginal Spirituality that requires absorbing the Aboriginal love for the land, where the presence of the Spirit is everywhere. How touching to hear at his funeral mass the Kimberley hymn:

Holy Spirit in this land

Reach out and touch 'im if you can" Br. Reg Whitely cfc

Nick was a constant reader particularly of biography and non-fiction. Some titles from his library show the range of his interests:

The Tangled Wing, Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit by Melvin Konner.

Conversations with God – an uncommon dialogue by Neale Donald Walsch.

Icing on the Damper – Life Story of a family in the Outback by Marie Mahood.

The National Gallery, London. Introduced by Michael Wilson.

Peter Faulkner cfc, a well-known Geologist and Environmentalist suggested:

"I would mention his love of landscape. He would frequently send me photos asking for geological information or he would have sample rock to discuss. He was a thinker; his desire was to puzzle things out. Terrain was important to him."

Nick enjoyed the challenge of design – for him it was a skill, an art, like painting. He enjoyed bringing a project from an idea to the planning stage and then to a final result. We often discussed plans together, some of which were well ahead of time like his plan to redesign Mirrilingki with new staff centre, kitchen and dining room as well as his innovative design for Aboriginal housing – in keeping with the way Aboriginal people live by providing replaceable modular units for kitchen, toilet and bathroom areas that need more frequent renovation. At Punmu, an Aboriginal Community near the Rudall River National Park, he built an innovative study room out of insulation panels used in freezer rooms. As well as offering good insulation they were easy to transport to this isolated place and simple to build with.

In 1993, after a well-earned period of rest and renewal at the Pacific Mission Institute in NSW, Nick returned to the Kimberley and the work of building and contact with remote places and people. This ministry involved living and working in a succession of isolated places -- something unique at the time for a Christian Brother. He was welcomed not only for the work he did but for the companionship and support he provided to people living in the remote outback. Nick talks about this work:

“They wanted someone to do maintenance in the remote Catholic schools so I just took it on. My aim was not so much to do maintenance but to go out and train the young blokes. There have been a few successes.” Broome Advertiser
July 29, 1998

Every year Nick would spend time at the Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre (850km from Broome) doing regular maintenance and completing two major projects – converting a machinery shed into a Conference Centre with mezzanine floor, toilets and kitchen facilities and adding a second roof over the transportable accommodation (to provide shade during the fierce summers). A past student of Nick’s, Dean Purdie, worked at times with him and has commemorated Nick’s work by producing an engraved wooden sign which reads “The Brother Nick Meeting Place”. The sign is displayed prominently on the Conference Centre.

Mirrilingki volunteers, Terry and Leonie Hughan contributed the following:

“We met Br Nick at Mirrilingki in June 1999. He found it difficult to get into our low caravan for welcome drinks and good cheer. He was the only person we knew that looked down on the rotary hoist when he hung out his clothes. His dry humour and stories always had Sr Wilga perplexed and his encouragement of Recco the cat to pinch goodies from the table caused much banter. Nick was once digging with a crowbar and we came across this ‘cable’. We both thought how lucky we were as we could have been history. As one Aborigine commented ‘Brother, if you hit that you be blacker than me’. The electrician duly arrived and promptly declared that our “cable” was in fact a bougainvillea root. Much embarrassment.”

Nick agreed to be temporary Administrator of the Balgo Adult Education Centre. Sr. Alice Dempsey SJG, pioneer Administrator of the Centre writes.

“In 1994, Nick generously returned as Acting Administrator for six months. His carpenter hands found more work as he and Ricky Waggagia completed a new administration office. I say generous, advisedly, as Nick had to delay a number of building projects.”

That he took on this position to help the Catholic Education Office through a difficult time speaks volumes for his abilities and dedication to aboriginal education. He was allocated an old transportable unit without verandah or any protection from the fierce

desert sun. Nick put up with this and other difficulties and challenges, relishing the opportunity to keep in touch with those he had taught at Nulungu.

Nick was determined to celebrate his Golden Jubilee (1995) in the Kimberley and not in Perth as was the normal custom. He made all the arrangements himself. The mass was celebrated by Bishop Jobst. During his homily the Bishop apologised for the stressful interactions of the past. A catered formal dinner followed. This was the first function to be held in the new Administration building at the College in Broome. Later in the year, Nick enjoyed several weeks in New Zealand visiting Dunedin and places where he holidayed and tramped all those years before.

Twice, Nick travelled across Australia to coordinate the work of Aboriginal young men restoring a heritage-listed convent in Wilcannia, in outback New South Wales, and to help the Sisters of Mercy in that remote town. Nick drew up a list of the places he had worked at during 1996 and 1997. The total was 27 places in the Kimberley plus 2 in NSW.

Never empty-handed, Nick always had something as a conversation starter among friends – a book or article, photos or a project plan, but mostly food. He enjoyed morning and afternoon tea and was great company. I found the following story on Nick's desk. It is typical of the Anthony de Mello type of story that Nick found thought-provoking:

“The author is in a security check line at Winnipeg airport. A man carrying a bible is waved through, but the next man, carrying a small revolver is whisked away although he protests... “I would never use a revolver on a plane. I don't even have a single bullet with me.” The author marvels at the havoc the man with the Bible could create if he taught Jesus' message and millions of people decided to live it. If a man carries a gun, we assume he will use it. If a man carries a Gospel book, we assume he won't.”

His Sister Valenka died 5th December 1996, his brother Tony passed away 11th January 1997 and his oldest sister, Dinka, Sr Nicoline died 7th May 1997. For Nick it was a difficult time losing his remaining siblings in less than a year.

Nick stayed in Broome during the 1997 wet season working on a large shed at Notre Dame University. The heat, humidity and hard work took a good deal out of him. I remember him coming home worn out and dripping with perspiration after several hours finishing a section of concrete flooring.

The 1999 Broome Annalist noticed changes in Nick's health and vitality:

“We noted that Nick did not have as much energy as in previous years. I think that it is important that Nick should think about cutting back on his work and relaxing more in the first and fourth school terms. During the year, Nick had several nasty bouts of the flu, losing weight he could ill afford to lose.”

Over the years, Nick had studied Art both at the Leederville College of TAFE (Illustration Techniques – Oil) and at Summer Schools in Albany where he concentrated on watercolour techniques. He was honoured by having the Art Centre at Nulungu College named after him. Br Max McAppion comments (1986):

“Mark Manado MC and John Jackey who welcomed the official guests, had been in the first class at Nulungu. Both were pleased to see that the formal

opening of this building gave them an opportunity to honour the men who had done so much for them at Nulungu”.

In 1977 and 1997 Nick won the Broome Shinju Matsuri Art prize for water colour. During his latter years, his gift as an artist blossomed. His paintings from early 1999 showed a freedom and boldness in sky and texture as he experimented with painting clouds and ageing rusty corrugated iron. However, he retained his earlier eye for architectural perspective as his subjects were, in the main the churches, pearling buildings and luggers of the Kimberley and Broome's history. His close friend Sr. Helena Brabender rmdm convinced Nick to paint for an exhibition. He produced 23 paintings for the exhibition, “Treasured Memories”, which was opened on November 10th 1999 in the spacious foyer of St Mary's College by Sister Clare Ahern.

The message of his paintings was respect and survival. The weathering and rusting buildings, the appealing or threatening cloud formations, were to Nick parables of the challenges and unpredictability of Kimberley life: The recently graded or flooded and impassable roads, plans supported or foiled by availability or quality of materials, the Aboriginal celebrations and enjoyment of improved facilities and abilities or the sorry times of death, poverty and frustration. When Nick heard of death, imprisonment or hard luck stories involving any of his past students, it was as though members of his own family were involved. He mourned for them; their problems were his own. He also rejoiced in their good fortune. Nick knew most of his former students by name, quickly recognising the features of the younger person he had taught.

Brother Nick lived simply with few belongings and few demands. However, his presence and influence were powerful for good. Though sensitive and pained by dissension, hardship or the tension and strains of setbacks, his authentic manhood and the background of a religious life lived completely, made him a peacemaker and someone who came close to all he worked and lived with.

Mid 1999, Nick visited the Ngallangunda Aboriginal Community at Gibb River Station for a week of retreat and reflection. It was a most suitable place for what was his last retreat among supportive Aboriginal people and in the beautiful woodlands and river country of the central Kimberley.

Nick spent December 1999 shifting house and going through his belongings. Much was discarded; precious books added to the community library. Photos, cards and letters were placed in groups for particular members of his family. After his death, there was not much in his room to be passed on. It was as though Nick knew that he would not return to Broome, that the drive south might be his last.

On his way to Perth, Nick called in at Bidyadanga, an Aboriginal Community around 200km south of Broome, to catch up with a friend, Bill Marchant. Quickly, word spread and Nulungu former students came by to renew acquaintance. It was only four or five hours later that Nick could continue his journey south.

In his last letter to Peter Faulkner cfc dated February 16, 2000 Nick said he “had a good year in 1999 except for two bouts of flu in 5 months – getting soft!”

The last family celebration that Nick attended was the wedding of Janelle Freeman (his niece) and Rowan Sepkus. The wedding was in Albany, West Australia, at Camp

Quaranup on Saturday, 26th February, 2000. Nick's wedding gift was a painting of their house and view – his last watercolour painting.

Early in 2000 Nick was diagnosed with a growth on one of his kidneys. The decision was made that he should have the kidney removed and he entered hospital on 6 March. In our last phone conversation on the eve of the operation, he said to me. "I am well, and I am going to hospital to become unwell". It was a brave quip, garnered years before from a newspaper report, now diverting us from the seriousness he must have felt. Nick's last words to another friend and co-worker, Br Norman Tuppin were that he would like to go out under the operation.

Nick's recovery from surgery was difficult and he was in and out of intensive care. Any time I rang for him I was told he was resting or in intensive care. He underwent constant medical intervention over this period involving 15 doctors, so it was obvious there were recovery problems. Br Pat Kelly sent out a fax at 10.00am Tuesday 21st March with the news, "We have received word Nick is very low. His heart seems to be failing." Another fax followed not much later announcing his death. His niece, Cecilia, visited Nick in hospital and had this to say:

"I don't know if many people knew that Uncle Nick read, searched, looked into everything, even religion. I honestly thought, this man couldn't possibly have any doubt about life itself. He looked into everything - he didn't judge anything. He analysed, he learnt, he took the humour of everything. He was a very good person from the day he was born to the day he died. The only time I saw a doubt or the only time he said anything in his life that was a little bit negative was when in the hospital, just before he died he said to me I don't want to end up in a retirement home because he felt that if he couldn't give his all it wasn't good enough just to sit around doing nothing. And he worked all over the North West; he worked wherever he was called. If they called him, he'd come".

His sudden and unexpected passing brought the Kimberley to a sudden halt as many realised the extent of their loss and how privileged they had been to have been touched by his life, enthusiasm and generosity.

The wish he expressed to me on several occasions to be buried in the Kimberley was granted. His body now rests in the Broome Cemetery in the plot of the Sisters of St. John of God. The circle has been completed, as it was the Sisters who welcomed and provided so much to Nick and the other Brothers on their arrival in Broome in 1971. The vigil rosary was recited in the Nulungu Chapel, which Nick had designed.

A memorial Mass in Perth was well attended by family and the Brothers. The celebrants of his funeral in the Broome Cathedral were Bishop Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome, Fr Paul Boyers Vicar General, Fr Wendelin Lorenz sac long-time friend of Nick, Fr Kevin McKelson sac early supporter of Nulungu College, Fr Brian McCoy sj for a time member of the Brothers' Broome Community and staff member at Nulungu. Rocks and soil were brought from the places where Nick had worked. The soil was added to his grave and the rocks later inset on his grave.

Some reflections on the life of Br Nick Bilich:

“That Nick was so faithful to his prayer is something we all witness. His theology and spirituality are best expressed in his dreaming of the Nulungu Chapel. The stones from the different communities and the Aboriginal and Asian symbols speak strongly of his belief that Jesus speaks to and through all cultures.” Peter Hardiman cfc, Broome Eulogy

“Nick did not toil in vain, did not exhaust himself for nothing, but that his cause was the Lord whom he served so well. At the same time, Nick was no plaster saint, and his weaknesses and idiosyncrasies were clear enough and were part of the person whom so many regarded with affection and warmth”. Tony Shanahan cfc Province Leader, Holy Spirit Province Newsletter, April 2000.

“He always loved animals and children. Everything was a pleasure. He loved everybody he met - he helped everybody he met. He was jack of all trades, he could do absolutely anything”. Cecilia Bilic Potter, niece

“Sure, he was a bit of heaven around the place all the time – always at home with himself... He was truly an inspiration and a ‘life-saver’ in the Kimberley...” Sr. Betty Keane rsj

“He was extraordinarily generous and deeply loyal to the development of Aboriginal people, even when not many in our Province followed his example. When I encouraged him to give up his travel and work, he said he could not let down those ‘most in need’.” Br Kevin Ryan cfc, Province Leader.

“That he was a man of extremely generous spirit is undeniable. He was also a quiet achiever of boundless energy, whose dedication was both firm and unobtrusive. He simply set about to do his best for others whenever he could. What struck anyone who met him was his faith and firm belief in God and in people” The Bishop of Broome, Christopher Saunders, Kimberley Community Profile April, 2000.

“For such a shy person he sure has managed to touch so many hearts and gained so many admirers amongst the Kimberley people”. John Jackey, pioneer Nulungu student and educator.

“From your little charmers, Hayley and Lexi”
“I will walk in your image with pride, Peta-Marie”.

“He treasured what was forsaken and surely it is his badge of honour now”
Peter Hardiman cfc

Brother Nick’s good humour, thoughtfulness, spirituality, companionship and hard work will now be a strong and worthy memory to a life so generously spent. May he rest in peace.

www.westcourt.wa.edu.au/home/nbilich

The site features some of Nick’s paintings and an extended copy of this life. If the site has been moved, searching for 'Nick Bilich' will find the new location.