

Mr Charles Nelson Perkins AO

The degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon Charles Nelson Perkins AO by Chancellor Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer AC at an Arts ceremony held in the Great Hall on 11 May 2000.

Dr Perkins thanked the University for the degree which he accepted on "behalf of all of my indigenous brothers and sisters, particularly the stolen generation."



Chancellor Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer AC, Charles Perkins AO and Vice-Chancellor Professor Gavin Brown, *photo, Tracey Schramm, 'The University of Sydney News', 18 May 2000, University of Sydney Archives.*

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gavin Brown:Chancellor

I have the honour to present Dr Charles Nelson Perkins AO for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*).

Charles Perkins was born at the Alice Springs telegraph station in 1936. After starting school in Alice Springs, he was sent to Adelaide and did very well until high school, where, he says, he "failed miserably and was booted out". In 1952, he became an apprentice fitter and turner at British Tube Mills in Adelaide. As he has said, his workmates were "nice people, but it was agony for five years."

His biographer writes that when Perkins took up soccer at 14, it was "too late". His career shows, however, that although he did not enter first division European soccer until he was 21, he had the determination and outstanding talent to take him to the top, despite his late start. He played with great distinction for clubs in South Australia, England and Sydney before health problems forced him to retire, although he continued to play important roles in the management of the game.

While playing soccer at Oxford, Charles Perkins became conscious of the environment of the university, and he has said that it was there that he determined to continue his education. His earnings as a soccer player, as well as the support of his wife Eileen, paid the fees required to study for the University of Sydney matriculation examination, which he passed on his first attempt in 1961.

When he entered the University, he "couldn't wait for the first lecture and when I got there I was ready to do my degree in five minutes." Education for him was, he said, "like water on a dry sponge". He studied Government, Psychology, Anthropology, and Social Theory. He failed his first anthropology examination, but the next day, he recalls, "I was back there and I was working twice as hard." He still found time to become involved in activities such as Student Action for Aborigines and the Freedom Ride through western New South Wales. He writes of being in Sydney University's Great Hall on Graduation Day in 1965 as the first Aborigine in the whole of Australia to become a university graduate, where "they gave me a tremendous cheer in the hall and I did not

expect it. I was very pleased".

His graduation was a rite of passage to a remarkable career. It began with his position (from 1965-1969) as Manager of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney. At the same time, he was a member of several bodies, including the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. His appointment in 1969 as Senior Research Officer to the Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs was the beginning of his career as a senior public servant, involved in all aspects of aboriginal policy-making. He served as Secretary to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs between 1983 and 1988.

When he had gained his first job he was, he recalls, "very proud of myself", and decided, "I really gotta give it my best shot."

That determination to overcome obstacles, to shoulder the responsibilities of his office and to work for the benefit of all aboriginal people is the distinguishing mark of his career.

The same energy and dedication have marked his retirement. Charles Perkins has maintained an active public life, including membership of the Board of SBS, the Sydney Olympic Bid Committee, SOCOG's Indigenous Advisory Committee and as Chairman of the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association. Recently he has returned to the University of Sydney through his membership of the Committee to Review Aboriginal Education.

Charles Perkins was awarded the Order of Australia in 1987, and declared a National Treasure by the National Trust of Australia in 1999.

Chancellor, I have much pleasure in presenting Charles Nelson Perkins AO for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.