

HELD AT MITCHELTON LIBRARY

Truth-Telling



Debbie West

Wakka Wakka and Wulli Wulli woman, advocate for women in the courts and prisons

**Speaking at Truth-Telling at Mitchelton
Sunday 1 November 2026**

Mitchelton Library, 37 Heliopolis Parade,
Mitchelton

2.00 PM arrival for a 2.30 PM start

CULTURAL ADVICE AND CONTENT WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this biography names a woman who has died and describes violence, homelessness, and the removal of children. 13YARN, the national First Nations crisis support line, answers on 13 92 76, day and night.

Don't let anyone tell you colonisation lies in the distant past.

Debbie West has lived its cruelties first-hand. She survived them, rebuilt her life, and has spent her career since standing beside First Nations women in the courts, the prisons, and the child protection system.

A CHILDHOOD ON THE MISSION

Debbie, a proud Wakka Wakka and Wulli Wulli woman, grew up in [Cherbourg](#). When the mission sent her mother away to work, Debbie and her sister took responsibility for helping their grandmother and their younger siblings. At twelve, Debbie collected wood, tended an outdoor fire, and washed clothes and blankets

without running water, among many other duties the mission's deprivations forced on her.

That same year, 1975, a killer took the life of her aunt, **Queenie Hart**, a twenty-eight-year-old Wakka Wakka woman, beside the Fitzroy River at Rockhampton. Police charged a white man, but the judge dropped the murder charge soon after the trial began, and no court has ever convicted anyone of her death. Queenie lay in an unmarked grave in North Rockhampton for forty-seven years, until her family brought her home to Cherbourg in August 2022. She now rests beside her mother, Janey Hart.

Even though we can't get justice for her, it gave closure for the whole family.

DEBBIE WEST, ABC NEWS, 18 AUGUST 2022

[READ THE ABC REPORT ON QUEENIE HART'S RETURN HOME](#)

VIOLENCE, LOSS, AND THREE LOST YEARS

Debbie entered a relationship marred by domestic violence. In 1986, after six years, she escaped with her children to her aunt's home in Brisbane. Her partner tracked her down and took the three eldest children, and child protection authorities later removed them from his care.

Violence and loss on that scale left her empty, with no way forward. Three years of homelessness followed.

THE WAY BACK

The turning point came when she heard her grandmother's voice guiding her away from that life. A Catholic service linked to Holy Rosary School gave her accommodation, and she became involved in the school community, starting an after-school program that helped Aboriginal children with their homework.

An Aboriginal teacher at the school urged her to enrol at university. Debbie completed a four-year Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

at [Australian Catholic University](#), then a [Certificate IV in Community Services](#) at TAFE and a [Diploma in Justice Studies](#).

Through those same years, while raising her younger children, she fought Child Safety for six years and won back custody of her three eldest.

ADVOCATE FOR WOMEN IN THE COURTS AND PRISONS

Armed with her own experience of surviving domestic violence and the study that supported her recovery, Debbie began working in court support for women facing domestic violence. She helped them obtain the medical records that documented their abuse and complete the paperwork the court required for a protection order, which can bar a perpetrator from a victim's home, workplace, or school.

She moved next to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service](#), supporting First Nations people through criminal, domestic violence, juvenile, and family matters in the courts. As a Transitional Officer in remand and at Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre, she then helped men leave custody and return to the community, liaising with the Department of Housing and referring them to accommodation and support services.

At the [Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre](#), Debbie worked as a sexual assault counsellor and as an advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. There she also drew on her own long fight with Child Safety to help women whose children the department had removed. She taught them the department's language and processes, so they could fight to bring their children home.

Debbie had faced Child Safety with no voice and no support. She wanted every woman in that position to have both.

After a period with [Sisters Inside](#), Debbie now works for [Queensland Corrective Services](#) as a Cultural Liaison Officer, building its working ties with First Nations community organisations.

STRENGTH AGAINST THE ODDS

Her life shows the damage of colonisation at close range. It shows just as plainly the strength, courage, and determination of a woman who turned each loss into help for the women who come after her.



DEBBIE WEST'S STORY, AS TOLD TO

Linda Harnett

Co-coordinator, Truth-Telling at Mitchelton

Read more about Linda at truth-telling.online/coordinators

RSVP for Sunday 1 November 2026

Book your seat at truth-telling.online/speaking-next.php

A LEARNING COMPANION

Standing Beside First Nations Women

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Standing Beside First Nations Women

*Read, watch, and listen your way into
Debbie West's story*

Debbie West speaks at Mitchelton
Sunday 1 November 2026



Read, watch, and listen your way into Debbie West's story at your own pace, before or after her session. Each thread closes with a question to take away.

START HERE

The ABC report of Queenie Hart's return to Cherbourg, 18 August 2022, in which Debbie speaks for the family.

READ

Black Witness: The Power of Indigenous Media, Amy McQuire, UQP, 2024.

WATCH

How Many More?, ABC Four Corners, 2022. Free on YouTube.

LISTEN

Curtain The Podcast, "Aunty Queenie Hart, The Truth", with Debbie West.

EXPLORE

Over-represented and Overlooked, Human Rights Law Centre with Change the Record, 2017.

Open the learning companion at truth-telling.online/standing-beside-first-nations-women.php