

Curriculum Links: This film will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at Secondary and Tertiary levels. Curriculum links include: Indigenous studies; Australian History; SOSE; Legal Studies; Media Studies and English.

The following study notes were prepared for secondary schools.

For further information and sales: www.balladfilms.com.au

My Life as I Live it

SYNOPSIS

Director: Essie Coffey

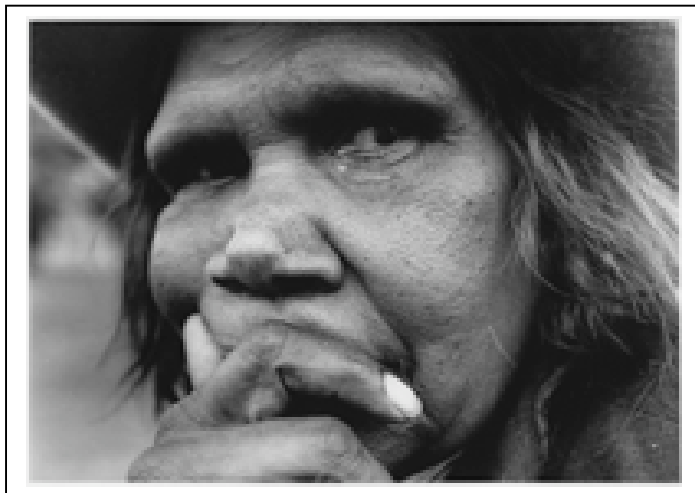
with Martha Ansara & Kit Guyatt

1993 Australia 56 mins Documentary

Essie Coffey's first film, *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978) is now a classic: (<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/my-survival-aboriginal/>). It introduced us to the life of her family and her community in far northwest New South Wales.

Essie's second film returns to her home in Dodge City fifteen years later. There Essie and the A-Team are nominating for the local Shire elections. Intercutting between 1993 and the same people and places of the past as documented in *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, Essie shows us that some things have changed, but some have stayed the same. The racism is still there, but the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) has brought a new pride for the future. In place of the arrests on pension day, there is now "police-community liaison" and the hope that tragedies like the death in custody of Essie's nephew Lloyd Boney will not happen again.

We hear testimony about Lloyd's death from CDEP Supervisor, Dallas Skuthorpe, a young participant in *My Survival as an Aboriginal*. We meet up again with other kids from the earlier film, too – some now have families of their own, and are involved in education, art and sports. Some are still drifting, trying to cope with alcohol and depression.



Throughout the film, we share the lively thoughts and presence of Essie herself, affectionately known as "Bush Queen" – as always "a fighter and a voice of her people".

This portrait of an Aboriginal community working towards self-determination was Essie's life as she lived it in 1993. Essie Coffey passed away in 1998, but this film is a testament to her spirit, her vision and her community pride.

ESSIE COFFEY

Essie was a Muruwari woman born near Goodooga, NSW. She was the co-founder of the Western Aboriginal Legal Service, and an inaugural member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Essie Coffey's passion for her culture and her entertaining and outspoken defense of her people are tangible in her films. As a charismatic, dedicated woman, she invites the audience into her community. She never flinches from showing the devastating impact of colonisation, yet her films propose solutions and bubble over with good-humoured cultural pride.

Please note: occasional coarse language

OPENING DISCUSSION

My Life as I Live It, produced and directed by Essie Coffey with cinematographer Martha Ansara and editor Kit Guyatt, is the sequel to her award-winning 1978 documentary *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (also available from www.balladfilms.com). As the differences in the titles suggest, Essie's second film shows people doing more than surviving under difficult social and economic conditions. In this film, she revisits people and situations of fifteen years previously to see what has changed.

My life as I Live It is Essie's report on her community's development, and what she sees as possible ways out of deprivation and depression. At the same time, she does not gloss over the realities of life on the fringes of a remote community.

EDUCATION

"Our people are not really getting the education they deserve. They not only want white history, white education; they want black history, black education. Who can give it? Only the Aboriginal people themselves who are experienced and talented in black history and you don't have to be a qualified teacher to do that.

" -- Essie Coffey

1978

The young school teacher in 1978 was well-meaning but could only give the "official" history of Australia as outlined in the education syllabus.

- Whose version of history was he giving? What does this version of history say?
- Are Aboriginal people included in this history? In what ways?
- Can there be more than one correct version of this history?

- What do you think Essie's statement on education means?

TODAY

Australian Studies is now taught in most schools, presenting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal texts with a different view of the colonisation of Australia and its impact on Indigenous people. *Dark Side of the Dream* by Bob Hodge and Jivay Mishra (Allen and Unwin, 1990) contends that Australian history has tried to "marginalise Aboriginal history and silence Aboriginal voices, acting in parallel to the repressive government policies that attempted to 'eliminate' the Aboriginal problem." Since 1978, a growing body of Aboriginal literature, art, music and film has presented similar points of view. In 2007, National Indigenous TV began broadcasting with support from the Australian government.

- What resources on Aboriginal issues and viewpoints do you have in your school?
- How have Aboriginal people have been written into the history of Australia in recent years? Do you, personally, think this is a good approach?
- Why does it matter what is taught in schools about the history of Australia? What impact can "white education" have on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students?
- In the film, Essie shows us that a number of the young people from 1978 have grown up to participate in education. Why would it be important to have Aboriginal Teachers and Teachers Aides in an Aboriginal community school? What can they do that non-Aboriginal teachers might not be able to.

HISTORY

"I seen what happened to my people. They been talked down to and put away. They been living in conditions they had to live in. They had to do this – they had to do that. Had to say this – had to say that. They had to learn this – they had to learn that. Now, it's starting to turn back on them. All we need is a pen and paper and a strong voice and a powerful voice to fight with."

Essie Coffey, 1993

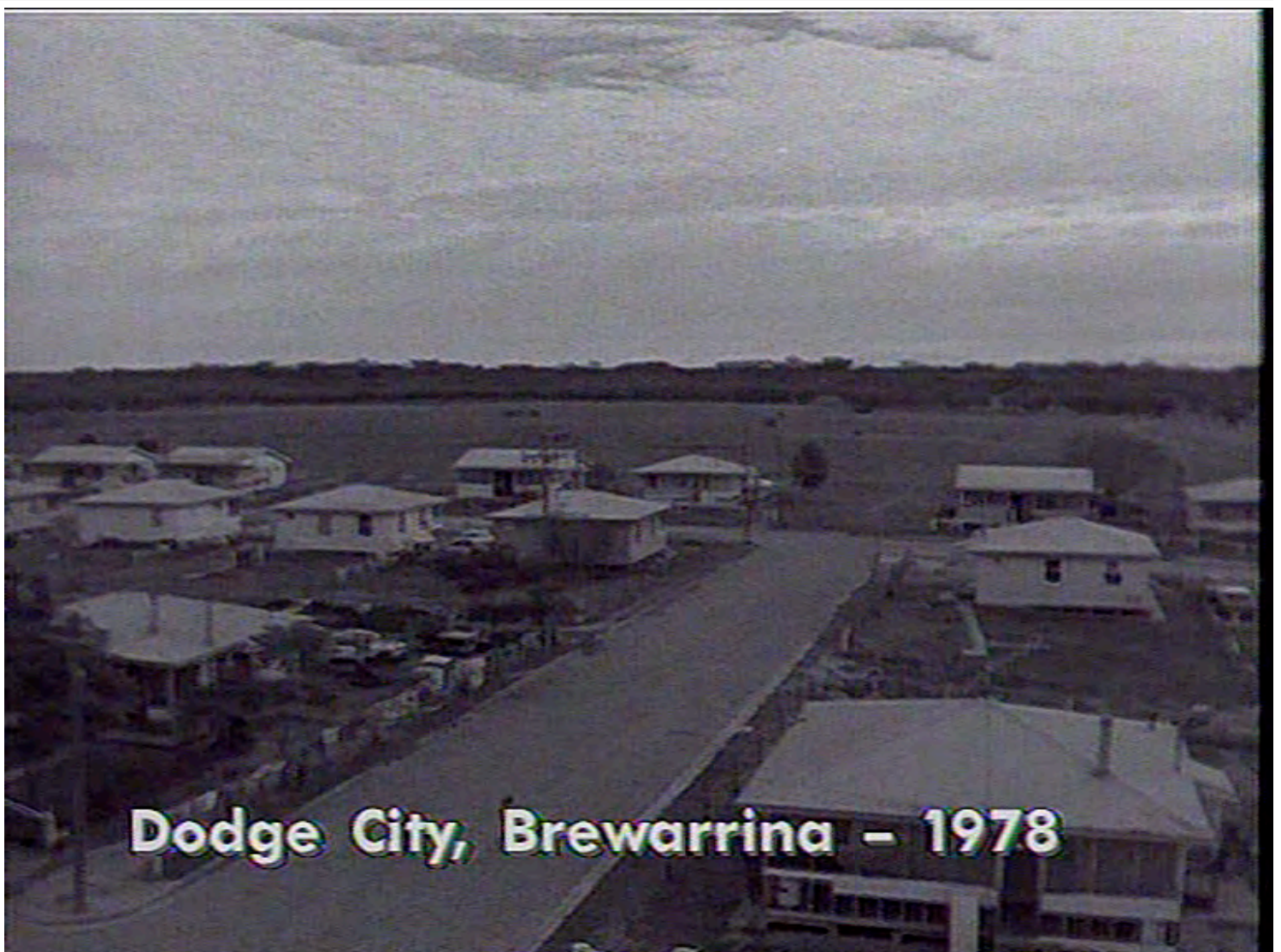
Here Essie is giving her view of what happened to Aboriginal people – this is her version of Australian history.

- How often do non-Aboriginal people hear this sort of view about the history of Aboriginal people? And the feelings that go with it? How often do you see this viewpoint on television, read it in the papers, or learn it at school?

- Have things changed very much since 1993 when Essie made this statement? Why do you think this is?

- What is the difference between the terms "white settlement" and "white invasion"? Which term would you feel comfortable using?

- What changes could be made to the media and to the teaching of Australian history to include Essie's point of view?



POLICE- COMMUNITY RELATIONS

1978

Police are seen only as a hostile arm of the law, arresting and throwing Aboriginal people into jail. There is no obvious communication, only the physical force required to get the drinkers into the paddy wagon. In 1978, the "powerful" control the "powerless" with little constraint.



1993

Police are seen as individuals, interacting with individuals in the Aboriginal community, listening to what they have to say, if a little uncomfortable, and working with them through the liaison officers. They are in Aboriginal houses, in their area, on their terms and at their invitation.

- In a multicultural country such as Australia, what skills do the Police need in order to do their jobs effectively?

- Find out how police are trained to work in different communities? Is sensitivity to Aboriginal people and culture included in their training?

- Who trains the trainers? Who would you consult if you were designing a training course?

- What skills would you consider essential?

- What role can a community play in its own policing?

- What do you think happens if the police are imposed on a community from the outside?

TRAINING OR BRAINWASHING?

Essie has mixed feelings about the two-week training course proposed for Aboriginal liaison officers.

"...it doesn't do you any good when you come back to your community at grassroots level... Experience is the best kind of schooling and that's training on the spot, experience the work under an experienced person.?"

ACTIVITY

Set up a debate on this issue. What are the arguments for and against training at a police academy? What is the role of on-the-job community training? What do you think would happen if the community had control over decisions such as the selection and training of Aboriginal liaison officers.

CONTROLLING THE COMMUNITY

One of the stories pursued through the video is that of running for the local council elections. Essie has to get a team together, the "A-Team", to contest seats on the Council. Once nominated, the A-Team has to organise the community register and to vote on election day. Once in the Council, the A-team can make their voices heard, try to change things and learn of future plans which may affect the Aboriginal community. Essie wants to see Aboriginal people "make decisions along with the white people of the town", particularly to improve housing, health, sewerage and water systems.

- In 1993, it was unusual for Aboriginal people to be involved in the mainstream community at Council level. Why? What were the barriers to participation? From the non-Aboriginal community? From within the Aboriginal community itself?
- Can you find out whether the political representation of Aboriginal people has changed since then? At the local level? State level? Federal level?
- What reason does Essie give in the film for becoming involved in the A-Team?
- What difference does it make whether or not Aboriginal people are involved in politics?

ACTIVITY

- Find out about your local council. How does it work?
- Can you attend a session of council as observers?

- What does your local council do for you?
- What would your life be like without council services?
- What are the effects on the health and well-being of a community of what the council does -- in the short term and in the long term.
- Are there activities appropriate for a local council which you would like to see your council take up?

Essie, who was a member of a number of representative bodies herself, gives the following view of Aboriginal politics:

You know, today, Aboriginals who play the politicians' game around the table, they not the powers; they're only the voice. The power is the grassroot people. Down there, the people, like simple people who live on the fringe of town, the fringe-dwellers. I'm only the voice..."

- What do you think Essie means by this statement?
- To what degree do you think your elected politicians represent you and your community?
- What measures exist to ensure that those "who play the politicians' game around the table" are the people's representatives?
- Are there any other measures which you think should be introduced to help our politicians represent the interests of "the grassroot people"?
- In Australia there are a large number of "NGOs", or non-government organizations, in many different sectors of the society. Which community-run and volunteer organisations do you know of? What is the value of their services, activities and political lobbying?



GRASSROOTS/ THE EARTH OUR MOTHER

Essie connects her concern for local grassroots training with her attitude towards the land:

"That's our soul, that's our heart – it is taken away from us. We still cry for it. Without the land, we are nothing. So we are still part of it. And we are and we wind slowly by slowly with the Aboriginal people who walked the earth over forty thousand years ago."

The Mabo court decision and the subsequent Native Title legislation continue to be debated in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. Find out what the decision and legislation actually said and set up a panel to discuss what their effects have been on Australia since then. Try to determine why these changes are considered so significant, why they have been so controversial, whether they have had an impact on attitudes and expectations about land ownership and use in Australia, and whether the fears and hopes in regard to native title have been realised. What is meant when Aboriginal people speak of Land Rights? To what degree do Aboriginal people have Land Rights today?

SELF-DETERMINATION

Essie was always a great believer in Aboriginal self-determination.

Self-determination is the Aboriginal people of today making their own decisions and managing their own affairs. We never ever been given the chance; because they been controlled by management here on mission stations.... They've been told what to do and when to do it. But now, people are making their own decisions... We are starting to be recognised here in Brewarrina though it's taken a long time. The attitude has changed. The progress of the Aboriginal people has changed.... They are independent people now and they believe in self-esteem, self-management...

- **Research what measures Aboriginal people have taken to gain control of their own communities and services.**
- **When and why did Aboriginal people form their own organizations to provide such things as legal and health services?**
- **Do you think the government should fund dedicated services especially for Aboriginal people?**
- **What is meant by "mainstreaming" of services? What are the reasons for it? What are the problems with the "mainstreaming" approach?**

BLACK DEATHS IN CUSTODY

Despite a 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the death rate of Indigenous people in police custody continues to be disproportionately high, as is their rate of imprisonment. Lloyd Boney, Essie Coffey's nephew was one of those who died. In the film, his friend voices the community's suspicions that this death was not one of the many indigenous suicides which occur in jail. Lloyd's aunt, Priscilla Boney, has trouble sleeping because she believes Lloyd's spirit is troubled and keeps coming back. In the film she says, *"We talk to him til he goes away. He never took his own life."*

- Find out about black deaths in custody. What are the statistics?
- What do different community groups and experts believe are the causes of black deaths in custody?
- Why are so many indigenous people in custody in prison today?
- Some people say that the high rates of imprisonment and deaths in custody result from the effects on

Aboriginal people of racism and prejudice – do you agree?

- What practical and useful steps can both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities take to overcome the problems of racism and prejudice in our society.

- Have you observed or experienced examples of prejudice in your own life?

- What can we do as individuals about prejudice in our daily lives?

- In 1992 the government's Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission established the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner to support social justice for Indigenous Australians. What does the Commission mean by "social justice"? Why does the Commission state that Indigenous Australians suffer from extreme social and economic disadvantages? What have successive governments tried to do about this disadvantage?

- Find out about the work of Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation of which Essie was a foundation member. Has it achieved its objectives?



ALCOHOLISM

Essie dedicated this film to the large number of people from her first film who had died by the time the second film was made. Many died from the effects of alcohol and they died young. Essie herself is a former alcoholic. Her daughter Brenda speaks of her own battle with alcohol on the film. About her own drinking problem, Essie says:

I'm not an angel with a halo round my head... I tried to go off it. I found that I was losing my husband, my children, my family – the love, the assistance of my family. And I don't want to lose them."

You can get help if you are an alcoholic or dependent on other drugs or if you are the child or close relation of a drug or alcohol-dependent person. Special support groups such as AA, Al-Anon, Alateen and others, along with individual counselling, exist to help people through this problem.

- Find out what these services are in your area.
- Invite a representative to come and talk to your class or group
- Find out how to start a self-help group of any kind.
- How can groups help us to overcome or work through our problems?
- Some people believe it is better to solve their problems individually, by themselves? Do you agree?

A Day at a Time

ADOPTION

In the film, Eddie is a young nephew of Essie's who was adopted out and brought up by a white family in Sydney. His white family have given him advantages that are not available to the young people of Dodge City. Nevertheless, Eddie has now returned to Brewarrina to live with his black family.

Eddie is not the only person in Brewarrina to have grown up outside of the Aboriginal community. The 1997 government report, *Bringing Them Home*, found that from 1910 to 1970 between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. These people came to be known as the Stolen Generations.

The film, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/lousy-little-sixpence/>) gives first-hand accounts of what happened to Aboriginal people under this policy of removal.

- Find out about the history of the Stolen Generations and the work of the Link-Up organization.
- What reasons did the government give for taking children from their families?
- What do people who were taken away say about the experience? What do the experts say about the consequences?
- How have Aboriginal people tried to prevent forced removals and bring families back together again?
- Imagine that you had been taken from your family and raised in a different culture. What do you think the effects would be on you?

CDEP: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EMPLOYMENT PROJECT.

CDEP is the greatest thing that ever hit out here. 'Cause when you look at CDEP you're looking at self-determination – self-management.... The people are working for themselves; they're working to better their own community – no more handouts, no more bludging on the dole."

– Essie Coffey

Essie was one of the people who suggested the idea of CDEP to the NSW government of Premier Neville Wran. This voluntary program began in remote indigenous communities as an alternative to the dole. It employs older people to teach younger people work and employment skills to the benefit of the community.

- Find out about CDEP and what it offers – to individuals and to the community. How is it different from other employment programs?
- What history and circumstances create the need for employment programs in indigenous communities?
- How have different governments viewed CDEP since its formation? Why did the Howard government abolish CDEP for remote communities in the Northern Territory in 2007?



OVERCOMING PROBLEMS

In 1985, Essie was awarded an order of Australia for her services to her people. She served the Aboriginal community over many years. She was a member of the NSW Lands Trust, helped to establish the Western Aboriginal Legal Service, was a Supervisor of the Community Development Employment Program in Brewarrina, a member of the Wakamurra ASTIC Regional Council for Northwest N.S.W., Co-founder of the Aboriginal Heritage & Culture Museum of Brewarrina, on the Board of Ngemba Housing Cooperative, an inaugural member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and Co-founder of Magunya Aboriginal Women's Issue organisation. Essie had a particular interest in women's affairs and helped to create the first women's knock-out football team in the Northwest region.

But Essie's life has not been easy. In trying to give up alcohol, she finished up in hospital in a coma for ten days and nearly died. A vision of her family pulled her back. She says she felt *"I got a second life and a second chance. So my faith in living's in my people and for my people. I overcame my problem. If I can do it so can you."*



ACTIVITIES

- How do you overcome problems?
- How can people like Essie Coffey inspire us to change and to do better?
- Do you have someone who is your personal inspiration?
- Who are some of the inspiring people of the past century? What are their qualities and achievements?
- Try to find such people in as many cultures and countries as you can.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

All Australians need to see videos like this about the realities of our own society. Essie's film is not always comfortable viewing, but it tells us things and shows us things about Australia that we need to know. It openly faces the problems of the Aboriginal community, not only its strengths. And Essie includes her own family in this very personal film.

What do you remember about it most? Devise a personal response. It could be a letter, a poem, a song or a play, a painting or photograph, or a film review – anything you feel can best express your response.

FILM TECHNIQUES

- The film switches between 1978 black and white film and the present. What effect does this have on you as a viewer? Is this an effective way of demonstrating changes?
- The music is written and performed by Aboriginal people themselves, including Essie. What is the effect of having only music from the community?
- All the interviews happen within the action of the film. What is the effect of interviews in which people speak as they are doing things compared with more formal interviews which have been set up ahead of time.
- This film differs from many television documentaries which rely on experts and outsiders to explain what we are seeing about other people and places. In this film Essie tells her own story. As the director, she controls what we see and what we know about her own life and her own community. Does this subjective approach make the film more or less believable for you? What is the difference from a film which stands back and delivers an opinion from the outside? What is the value of personal testimony?
- Filmmaking relies on different shot sizes to tell a story. When is the camera closer to people and when is it further away? What shots in the film make sure that we know where we are in a location or environment and what it looks like? Why are such shots important to the story Essie is telling.
- Documentaries like this one often consist of a lot of material which is shot on the spot, as things happen,

and only given a structure later in the editing process. What do you notice about the way this film is structured – how it begins and ends, and what threads hold it together in the middle.



ESSIE COFFEY • BIOGRAPHY

Essie Coffey, affectionately known as Bush Queen, was born Essieina Shillingsworth near Goodooga, N.S.W., the youngest of eight. Her mother was Ruby Bailey and her father, Donald Shillingsworth, known as Goodgabah, was a tribal elder of the Muruwarri people. Essie was brought up in the bush and as a teenager worked with her family on stations throughout Northwest New South Wales. Upon her marriage to Albert Coffey, she settled on the banks of the Barwon River at Brewarrina and began her family. In 1969, the Coffeys moved to the Reserve at West Brewarrina, known as Dodge City. There Essie raised eight children and ten step-children.

In the 1960's Essie, along with Steve Gordon and Tom Winters, founded the Aboriginal Movement in Brewarrina, establishing the Western Aboriginal Legal Service in the 1970's. Essie was also on the N.S.W. Lands Trust and the N.S.W. Advisory Council. She was well-known throughout the state as a Country & Western singer and song-writer.

In 1985, Essie was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to her people.

In the 1990s, Essie was a Supervisor of the Community Development Employment Program in Brewarrina, a member of the Wakamurra ASTIC Regional Council for Northwest N.S.W., Co-founder of the Aboriginal Heritage & Culture Museum of Brewarrina, on the Board of Ngemba Housing Cooperative, an inaugural member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and Co-founder of Magunya Aboriginal Women's Issue

organisation. She had a particular interest in women's affairs and helped to create the first women's knock-out football team in the Northwest region.

Essie Coffey's passion for her culture and her entertaining and outspoken defense of her people are tangible in her films. As a charismatic, dedicated woman, she invites the audience into her community. She never flinches from showing the devastating impact of colonisation, yet her films propose solutions and bubble over with good-humoured cultural pride.

In later years, Essie developed renal failure and became the subject of the film *Big Girls Don't Cry*, by Aboriginal filmmaker Darren Ballangarri.

(<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/big-girls-dont-cry/>) She passed away on January 3rd, 1998.

FILMOGRAPHY

1978: Director/Co-Producer: *My Survival as an Aboriginal*

Co-Producer: Robin Campbell, *Old Feller Now* (Dir. Alec Morgan)

1993: Director/Co-Producer (with Martha Ansara & Kit Guyatt) *My Life as I Live It*

As an actor:

1976: *Backroads* (Directed by Phil Noyce)

1980: *Women of the Sun, 2nd part*

Study guide adapted from that prepared by Patricia Kelly for the Australian Film Institute