

VALE DIANNE B. GONDARRA

18.08.1968 – 24.03.2026

To Dianne, the system her people now live under has become like her dialysis machine: “It turns you into a product that just keeps you alive but doesn’t allow you to live as a productive, fulfilled human being anymore”.

Dianne B. Gondarra helped prepare this message in anticipation of her passing at the age of 57.

Dianne was the eldest daughter of prominent Arnhem Land leader and activist Rev. Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM, who was widely recognised across the country for his trailblazing social justice stand. Dianne B. Gondarra shared his sharp intellect and ability to understand, analyse, and articulate the difficulty of living between two conflicting cultural worlds. The struggle was real for Dianne, as it is for many Yolŋu, “*knowing every day that my world was dominated by another.*”

She was co-founder of the Hope for Health lifestyle healing programme, an educator with Why Warriors Pty Ltd and Aboriginal Resource and Development Services, a producer on Djambatjmarra, an advocate for remote dialysis services with Purple House, and a contributor to her father’s documentary Luku Ngärra: The Law of the Land. All of these important efforts were the backdrop to her most passionate work, supporting the groundbreaking Hope for Health (HFH) program.

Hope For Health

In 2014, Dianne found herself confined to a wheelchair, battling diabetes. But with the help of longtime friends, she improved her health through diet to the point where she could walk again. This experience not only changed her life but also gave birth to the Hope for Health movement, in which other Yolngu women joined her.

“Why Warriors, Tim and Kama stepped in and helped build me back through healthy eating and answering all the questions I had in our language, Yolngu Matha.”

It was during this time that Dianne realised it wasn’t only politics that was crippling her people; it was also a lack of understanding about preventable diseases and modern foods.

“Balanda keep telling us to leave our traditional ways, and you will be healthy. We did and lost our vitality and got sicker. Now our people are dying faster than they ever have. The Hope For Health program allowed me to see how things could be different. We would have a health coaching and information service that provides families with the knowledge they need to eat well, understand the causes of illness, and avoid diseases linked to modern foods and lifestyles.”

“I learnt about processed foods and the unhealthiness of modern life, and that it is not only a Yolŋu problem, but a global problem. However, Yolŋu are more confused; we are

still learning English and have so many misconceptions about modern food. Most Yolngu don't believe that modern Balanda food can make you sick."

"After we started the Hope for Health program. I spent a lot of time dreaming about how to return to the balanced life that Yolngu people once had, developing this vitality space in the community where once again we could see my people thrive again."

Unfortunately, Dianne's health recovery was too late to avoid the long-term impact of diabetes, and she suffered a major heart attack in 2016. Complications in the preparation for her heart surgery caused her kidneys to fail, thus forcing her to begin weekly dialysis.

Produced podcasts and videos

"Having been on renal [dialysis] for 10 years and now facing my own declining health, I still believed this could happen. So I dedicated whatever time I had to promoting health improvements in the community through education, working with the Trudgen Family (Why Warriors and HFH) and ARDS to develop videos, resources, and radio programs."

This was a tough battle for her, especially while she was also taking responsibility for herself and caring for other very ill family members.

Despite that, she played a key role in creating one of the best video series on chronic disease in the local language, explaining the condition in biomedical terms in Yolngu Matha. Many say this is one of the finest chronic disease education resources available for any First Nations community in Australia. Her work can be found on djambatjmarram.com

"I was very fortunate that Why Warriors and the Hope For Health program extended my life by over 10 years, so I dedicated my time to promoting health changes in the community through education, using our own gurraṇjay matha academic language in partnership with our Balanda team, who spoke our language and knew our law."

"We built the Hope for Health program because I was so inspired by how, despite having incurable kidney issues, I was able to improve my health through healthy eating."

"My vision was to see our people thrive, just as my father and other elders had experienced in the past. But the reality is, in those days Yolngu had some control over their lives through their democratic Maḍayin system of law and way of life."

Health in a Changing System of Domination

Dianne's battle, like many Yolngu peoples, is compounded by not only the devastating effects of introduced foods but also by the loss of control over their lives.

"I grew up reminded every day that my world was controlled by another. It has taken away my people's way of life. Now life has become a massive battle, and the health of our people of all ages is collapsing. Yet no one seems to be listening, doesn't matter what, even my father or I were saying."

The Balanda world is too fast and demanding, and not good for health. Well-being isn't just about your body; it involves body, mind, and spirit – what we call raypirri – practising a disciplined way of life that keeps all three in balance.

“That raypirri (discipline) was lost because leadership was officially stripped away from us through the Federal Government’s NT Intervention in 2007.”

“Everything was taken away from us: roles, responsibilities, and control.” “We have been named all sorts of things by the mainstream, that we are irresponsible, incompetent, paedophiles – all sorts of terrible lies. Annihilating people through these stereotypes.”

“Sometimes, as individuals, you try very hard. You try with all your might. But sometimes, things fall from your control and leave you with nothing. You feel nothing. You feel unworthy; your humanity is destroyed.”

“It’s the politics of convenience, where the mainstream system never takes the time to learn our language, understand our real needs, and recognise our Yolŋu Law as real law”.

“A big part of this controlling system is that it never gives us the knowledge and information our people need in our language. Instead, it gives us information in English that we do not understand.”

Through her work on the film that presented her father’s legacy “Luku Ngärra: The Law of the Land,” Ms Gondarra called upon non-Indigenous Australia to truly understand Yolngu law and their struggles in this imposed dominant world, rather than resorting to stereotypes.

“The lawlessness we are seeing in our communities, that is a product of the Intervention. My father warned that this would happen. Our own law has been demonised, and our own leaders have been stripped of their roles.”

As her father experienced with his calls for a Treaty, Dianne’s dream to have the Hope For Health program backed by the government has fallen on deaf ears. Despite a research program in 2022 showing the Hope for Health program was more effective than any other lifestyle improvement program ever run in remote Aboriginal communities, the federal government has turned a blind eye to it. (MJA research paper: <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.52593>)

“I tried so hard to create an effective living vitality space for others, so they did not have to go through the same experience I did. But no, it just didn’t work; no one wants to support the program that could stop so much suffering.”

For her, the system itself has become like her dialysis machine: *“It turns you into a product that just keeps you alive but doesn’t allow you to live as a productive, fulfilled human being anymore”.*

“The machine just keeps going; it never stops (the dialysis machine and the mainstream political machine), and it will never leave you alone because it doesn’t cure the problem, it just keeps you hanging on, barely alive.”

The Fight for Remote Dialysis Services

Dianne did, however, experience one fight that she won: getting dialysis in the country. After years of living over 500km away from home in Darwin to receive treatment, her

successful lobbying led to Purple House opening a 2-chair renal unit at her home in Galiwin'ku in 2021, now being expanded to 5 in 2026.

"I am extremely grateful to NT Purple House and their great staff for providing dialysis services at Galiwinku, it has been so important for us Yolŋu to be home when we have our treatment."

Katrina Baxter was Dianne's renal nurse on Elcho Island for over 7 years and describes her as proud and distinguished, and as *'the most charismatic, beautiful, fun and generous woman.'*

'She was always teaching, teaching me about her culture, teaching new renal patients on what to expect and teaching young ones how to prevent going on dialysis.'

Throughout this entire time of her ill health, she remained steadfast and worked tirelessly to give Yolŋu people access to trustworthy information they could understand in their own language.

Her Decision

Following her father's death in 2024, Dianne lost her youngest brother last year, leaving a huge responsibility on her shoulders to look after the family whilst also facing her own deteriorating health.

Through deep consideration and thought, Dianne decided to end her 'dependency on the machine' and stopped dialysis treatment 3 weeks ago. Applying the Yolŋu cultural way of preparing to cross over to the other world, she courageously called the family together and told them.

"I came to a peaceful realisation that even though there was a battle to fight, it was too long, hard, tiring and seemingly never-ending for a person like me who has to go into renal 3 times a week."

"And when you have absolutely no control over your life, how you want to live, or how your future is to be shaped, I believe I still possess the spiritual authority to decide how I die."

Despite what people may think about her decision, Dianne did not quit, and she did not take her own life. She simply chose to remove the machine that was keeping her alive in a reality that began to feel like a "dominating" machine-like prison.

Independent MP Yingiya Guyula shared, *'I made a promise to my yapa (sister) that I will carry on with the journey she and the old man (her father) have left us with, fighting for Yolŋu rights and recognition of Yolŋu law. It is an honour to work in their names and for all of the Yolŋu leaders that have fought with such integrity and strength.'*

Dianne's Plea

She calls the mainstream Australians to truly consider how to understand her people as they struggle in the English-controlled world. *"Please learn our language, recognise our democratic Maḏayin Law and treat the people as humans, not as you think they are, but as they really are."*

“Please listen to this voice that will not speak to you in real words anymore. Let it enter your nayanu souls and give you a new birrimbirr spirit of strength; a strength our people desperately need”.

Wamuttjan: Ms Dianne B Gondarra.

This media release and images have been approved by all of Ms Gondarra’s family for public release.

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