

# Transcript: Courageous Conversations interview with Aunty Gail Mabo

**Voiceover:** A quick note for any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners, please be advised that this podcast contains references to and names of people who have passed away.

**Kathy Condos:** Hello there. Welcome to *Courageous Conversations*. I'm Kathy Condos, recording today on Gadigal land. This is actually a really special episode of *Courageous Conversations*, because today we're actually celebrating International Women's Day. My guest today is Auntie Gail Mabo.

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** What does that change look like? Well, it came in the shape of a girl, didn't it. And just happened to be me.

**Kathy Condos:** Aunty Gail Mabo, if you don't already know, is the daughter of educator and land rights campaigner Eddie Mabo. Aunty Gail is now a respected elder in the community and we are extremely fortunate to be working with her in Finance. Aunty Gail's raised a family. She's got number of *grown* children and grandchildren that I'm sure we'll talk about today. She's enjoyed an early career in dance and is now known for her work in the visual arts space. Her work's been exhibited across the nation. She's most recognisable as the spokesperson for her family, carrying on the legacy of her father. Welcome, Aunty Gail.

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Thank you, Kathy. And I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in which we gather, the Gadigal people.

**Kathy Condos:** Aunty Gail, can you tell me a little bit about your family? How many siblings do you have?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Well, Mum and Dad had seven of us. So, two boys, five girls, and then traditionally, as it plays out in the in the Torres Straits, if a family representative doesn't have a child at the age of 15, 15 to 16 for boys, they say "Maybe this person won't have children," so therefore the parent always says we might adopt a child for them. Except in my case, they adopted two for us. And so we grew up knowing that we had out there somewhere, was an older brother and older sister, but they lived in the Torres Straits. We hadn't met them yet. But then my sister turned 21 and we're all still teenagers at school. She has a baby, her first child. And she comes to Mum and Dad and says, "I can't look after this child. I want you to take this child." And Dad goes, "OK, we can do that." So along came the last one, who became number 10. And so we grew up knowing that there was 10 in the family, but originally Mum and Dad had seven, and now that's seven, I'm the one in the middle. And you know, it's that whole thing of, like, I was the one who stayed quiet and watched everything. And, you know, for me, it was a wonderful space to be. And it was wonderful to have it come from a big family.

**Kathy Condos:** I love that. So in terms of your own children, how many children do you have?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** I have seven. When I was all of, like, eight, I decided to myself that when I get older, I'm going to have seven kids just like my mum. And, ching ching, I got seven. I started off with four because I wasn't in a good relationship. And so I went, "Yep, go on the pill. Make sure I don't have more kids to this guy because he's not playing nice in this space." And so went on to meet another fella who then gave me baby number five. But then I found out number five turned into seven because there were triplets. So yeah, so to make my seven, I had to cheat — as my uncle says. You know, I took a shortcut to a big family by having triplets.

**Kathy Condos:** You are truly blessed, truly blessed. And I say that from a personal perspective because I endured many, many years of IVF to have my son. So I see children as an absolute blessing and a miracle. Let's have a bit of a chat about your dear father, Eddie Mabo. He's quite a household name and children do learn a little bit about him in the classroom today. But I'm wondering if you can share a bit about your dad from your perspective. How did you see him as a father and also as a leader in your community?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Well, my dad, to me he was the guy who drove the bus. Who rang the school bell — it was time to go into class. Who then showed us how to work our back garden, in at our school that we were at, and to plant plants that we could eat in our own school, because a lot of the school kids that came, they actually couldn't afford to buy too much to eat. Because big families, not enough money. So we started planting everything that could be eaten in our kitchen in our garden. Sometimes we all walk down to the garden and pick off a young capsicum and sit and eat it like an apple. It was delicious. The school was his part-time love and passion. But that didn't pay the bills. So he went off to James Cook University. He was the groundsman there. And so when we get back from the school, my job was to wash the bus out. So I'd wash the bus out really quickly. He'd park it on an angle so the water would run out and be fine for the next day. And so

then I'd run inside, change out of my school uniform, put clothes on, and go, "I'm coming with you!", when he's going out the door to do his gardening job. Because it was one way of me having so much fun, running around this big paddock. That I could be free. Yeah, I'm doing work for Dad, but I'm running around doing my own thing too, and for me it was just doing that and watching my dad and watching it over to make sure he's OK. And when I see people going towards him, I'd stop and watch, going, "Are these people angry with him or they going to ask him a question, or who are they?" Most of them were students. And they were just curious about his planting techniques, and why is he doing it that way? And so you'd see the student then take off their backpack and sit down next to Dad and learn how to plant these plants. And for me, that was the best thing. My dad had the gift of the gab that he could get anybody to do anything. It was quite funny that my son says, "Mum, you have that too." And so for me, I saw my dad as many things, but at the end the day he was still my hero. Because he was the one who taught us a whole lot of things and also to have utmost respect for old people. Because it was that thing of like, "They're the ones with the knowledge. You have to learn to sit and listen. When you learn to listen, you understand more things, and when you understand more things, you have a better way of looking at things." Just knowing that, and using that, In your everyday, you had that greater understanding and you could step into things better.

**Kathy Condos:** So that's quite a nice lead in to the theme for this year's International Women's Day, which is to embrace equity. And equity is different to equality. Equality is about providing the same support in the same way for everybody, and equity is about tailoring that support based on the understanding or the needs of the individual or the group. So for us today, we're really celebrating how far we've come, while also acknowledging that need to embrace equity and continuing to challenge gender stereotypes, discrimination and biases. Aunty Gail, can you tell me about the traditional roles of women in your family and culture?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** So women in the Torres Straits have a role that we are, and the grandmothers are, the matriarchs. So they're the ones that watch and look for, and will see, and will notice the potential leaders within the realm of all the children, not just their own children, but all children. And when they see that and see that their responsibility is to maintaining that the child understands where they come from. Who they are. And that one day they have to follow their own Tagai. Which is meaning, for me, Tagai is, when you follow your Tagai, you follow it to the place that is where you're meant to be.

**Kathy Condos:** Like your purpose.

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Your purpose.

**Kathy Condos:** So your father really broke the mould when he asked you as his daughter to carry on his legacy. What do you think made your father turn to you?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** For me, I think it was that whole factor was that he knew that I was the watcher. I watched everything. Everything in our house. I watched the way my siblings interacted. I watched the way my mum interacted with my dad.

And my dad interact with family members who came to visit him, community members who came to partake of his knowledge on our verandah, and then the university lecturers that came, who were his friends. They came, but they all sat on our verandah to have a cup of tea and just delve into his great mind on what were his thoughts on political aspects that were happening around the same time. I was a little girl who stood in the window, just watched and peered out, to make sure were their cups full of water? Did they need to have more? So I'd be backwards and forwards and just watch and help out that way. But for me it was that whole thing of like, just, doing that, I think he recognised within myself that I had an ability to adapt to wherever I was and have the ability to just listen properly. Because that's what it comes down to — is listening to what the question is, answering it correctly, answering it to the best ability you have. And also not being afraid to ask questions to anyone else either, and making sure that you're knowledgeable about something before you actually even open your mouth. I think being curious also. Because when you're curious, you ask a lot of questions. And you're not frightened of things. But you'll also have that ability to step up and go, "Yep, it's time for a change." And what's that change look like? Well, it came in the shape of a girl, didn't it? And just happened to be me.

**Kathy Condos:** As a woman. What unique challenges do you think have brought you to this important role?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Well, breaking the mould and being a man-only space to hold and carry on a legacy, which is, in our culture, is a man-dominated space. And for me to break that and step into it, it was time to give that culture a bit of a shake-up. And to make them aware that the voices of the women they do matter. It does matter in many levels. We can have arguments with you in the street, but we can't speak at a town meeting. Why not? So it was time to start shaking things up, and all of the people that I knew supported Dad in his case were women. The first one, the first plaintiff to stand by my dad's side was his maternal aunty. Who was my grandma. She was such a little lady, but she was a big voice and she knew all of the land boundaries and connections to space that needed to matter during his case. So she, without any obligation, she just says "I stand with you." So she is the first named plaintiff to stand next to Dad. Then came the men. But the men jumped ship a couple of times. Because they didn't see what he was doing was right. But for me, just having that role model of that grandmother standing next to him and knowing that when his mum passed away, just after giving birth to him, and he went to his fraternal uncle, that that old lady that was — Biniata is his name. So Mygga was her name [the spelling of these names may be improperly transcribed] — so when that came for them to step up and do this, that old lady told him his connection to his giz, which means his home, and how that came. So she was the holder of the of the stories. Granddad showed him the boundaries of the land. Engaged with him the neighbours who are on either side of the boundary, whether the boundary marker came to a point, to know the two neighbours on each side, so he understood those people. Whereas Grandma had taught him the way of connection on family and who we were related to. So yeah, the

strength of the of women were the ones that actually helped Dad. Put him in the right place to help fight his case.

**Kathy Condos:** What strength of women have you received?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** Well, that's a big question because there's many. Because I've got a lot of grandmothers, I've got a lot of aunties. And I've got a lot of friends who are people I look up to as role models, people who I look up to and I aspire to be like. My Aunty Rebecca, watching her raise her ten children, then go on to raise 20-plus grandchildren — take my hat off to her. She never complained. She just went about doing it all. Everything that she needed to do. With love for everybody who came into her house. Could make wicked fried scones. And one of the things is, when I had my first daughter, I reflected on who was the strongest black woman I know that I could name this girl after. That she would have a role model to aspire to. And I thought of my Aunty Bec. A woman who never complained, just got on with job and held everybody accountable when they needed to be pulled up. And that's my Rebecca, is the same as my aunty Rebecca. And my youngest daughter, I named her after someone who inspired me to dance. Who I first met at 15, when I saw her in a stage play and I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was like, "Who is this woman? I need to meet her." And she came up and I said, "Can I get your autograph?" And she said sure, she signed my pamphlet. Two weeks later. She's at our front door. I had a bit of a mind blow because my dad knows her. I went like, "Dad. Who else do you know?" But she came to our house. And she remembered Dad talking about me. Because she needed a babysitter for her daughter. So I became her afternoon carer. And we have a connection that goes a long way back, but I named my daughter from the triplets after her, because I thought "That's another powerful black woman that I need to name my daughter after." Because it is in strength of knowledge, of knowing who they're named after, to help them have that strength, to keep going to doing what they need to do.

**Kathy Condos:** Aunty Gail, what defines you and your leadership style?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** I think it's being a mum, and wanting the best for all and seeing the best in all. And not being that one to go, "Can't do that." So I look at it and go, "I'll give it a go, because if I can't do it, I'm sure there's someone here can help me." But it's having the ability to actually just navigate your space. But look at everything in the light of equal, not be better than anyone else, because we're all the same. You bleed. I bleed with the blood the same colour. We might just come in different jackets. But hey, we're all the same. And so for me, being a leader in what it is that I have to do, I remember where I come from. That's my strength. Is knowing where I come from and understanding that the past will dictate the future. And it's how you look at the past. You can look at the past in the manner of being angry. But you can also look at the past and going, that was a lesson learned. And what did we get from that lesson that we need to change for future? And how do we change for future generations, and what do I want for my grandchildren in the outcome of what I'm doing? So that's how I approach it, is, what I want for my children and my future generations. And the outcomes for other children, for their children. Because we have to have a mind map that takes us beyond tomorrow to know that that is where we

need to go. So therefore, the way I look at things and the way I direct things and how I navigate through things is, potentially what will this look like in the future for my children? Will I leave them the legacy that is profound, in the fact that I thought of them during this whole process? Because I look at my grandchildren. Will I be around when they have children? I don't know, but until then, I have to consider those who are not born yet. Because it is a path we leave, and may that path be, you know, we gather as much information as we can to move forward and make a positive change for the future.

**Kathy Condos:** Aunty Gail, we've been working with you I think almost a year now, and you've been helping us with our scholarship program for First Nations children and the work that we've been doing with Brisbane Boys College is part of that pilot. And I've heard, through the times that we've met, I've heard you use the phrase "planting seeds of potential", which I really love. If you think about your own daughters, granddaughters and women in in your community, what are some of the greatest hopes you have for them?

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** To be the best they can be. I'm not going to put pressure on them to become something. I don't want to set them up to fail. So therefore you plant the seed of hope that that one day they become their own person. They become their own captains of their own vessels. That they can stand and be proud of what they've done. And know that when they leave this space, that they will be remembered for something. It doesn't have to be the biggest mountain moved by the smallest ant, but it could be the smallest thing done that will ricochet and ripple through something that people go, "Wow. I remember when that happened." Could be just that moment. And for my children and especially my daughters, it is what I leave that they reflect upon. To help them manoeuvre through their next chapter of their life. The answers for the future generations will be left on the pages of the people from the past, so be careful what you leave on the piece of paper, because that paper can be right and it also can be wrong. So when we speak, we have to speak the truth. When we write, we write with that gusto of leaving truth for others to read. Because if we muddy up the water, their future is doomed. So for my children, and my daughters especially, and my seven granddaughters, let's make that something that is achievable. That expectations aren't as high. But with patience and just nurturing, they'll get to their best and they'll be their best at whatever they choose to be. Never put high expectations on something that is going to make that person feel like they're a disappointment. Because, no. No one's perfect, but we can all have a go, and it's through the correct direction and the way we choose to raise our children, is how they will see right.

**Kathy Condos:** Aunty Gail, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart today for spending this time talking to us, sharing your stories and just being. So open and kind with your experience and knowledge.

**Aunty Gail Mabo:** You're so welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Kathy Condos:** Our pleasure.