Who is Frank Archibald? A celebration of local Aboriginal heritage during NAIDOC week 2008.

From left: Shane Levy, Lesley Vale, Nioka Chatfield, Nullamehi Chatfield, Anthony Green, Grace Gordon Jan Wyles and Methven

Frank Archibald was a forceful advocate for the rights of Aboriginal people. Raised in traditional ways, he only learned to read and write as an adult. Nonetheless he penned sharp replies to attacks made on his people. On one occasion he responded with the following words to a letter which had appeared in the press criticising the behaviour of a section of the Aboriginal community: "I am angry that you wrote this about our people. We can do steady work. Look at the house my sons and sons in- law built with Father Kelly. When there is no work we have to take charity. We use taxis when there is no other transport. Our kids do go to school. And mad-am, you would be dirty too if you only had one tap for the whole community."

This forthrightness, coupled with a passion to bring education to his people, has earned Archibald a place as a visionary Aboriginal leader in Armidale history. In recognition of his achievements UNE holds an annual Frank Archibald memorial lecture in his honour. This year's lecture will be followed on the next day by the performance of a play about Archibald's life and times. Written and directed by Barbara Albury, Who is Frank Archibald? explores issues of race, assimilation and reconciliation through the life of this eminent Gumbainggir elder who died in 1975 and was reputed to be over 100 years old. He has become a symbol of hope, vision and pride among members of his extended family (around 200 in Armidale) and in the general Aboriginal community.

Family members performing in the drama are: Lesley Vale (wife of Bill Vale who is a grandson of Archibald), Nioka Chatfield (great-granddaughter of Archibald) and Anthony Green (a distant nephew). Gracie Gordon, Archibald's last living child, is contributing memorabilia of her father, including a voice recording of the famous "train song". A painting by Debbie Walford depicting the origins of the Gumbainggir tribe will give an historic feel to the drama. Reference is also made to a number of local advocates from 1950s, such as Florence le Gay Brereton and Father Kelly, who helped Aboriginal people at a time when they were not allowed into cafes and were not welcome as residents of Armidale.