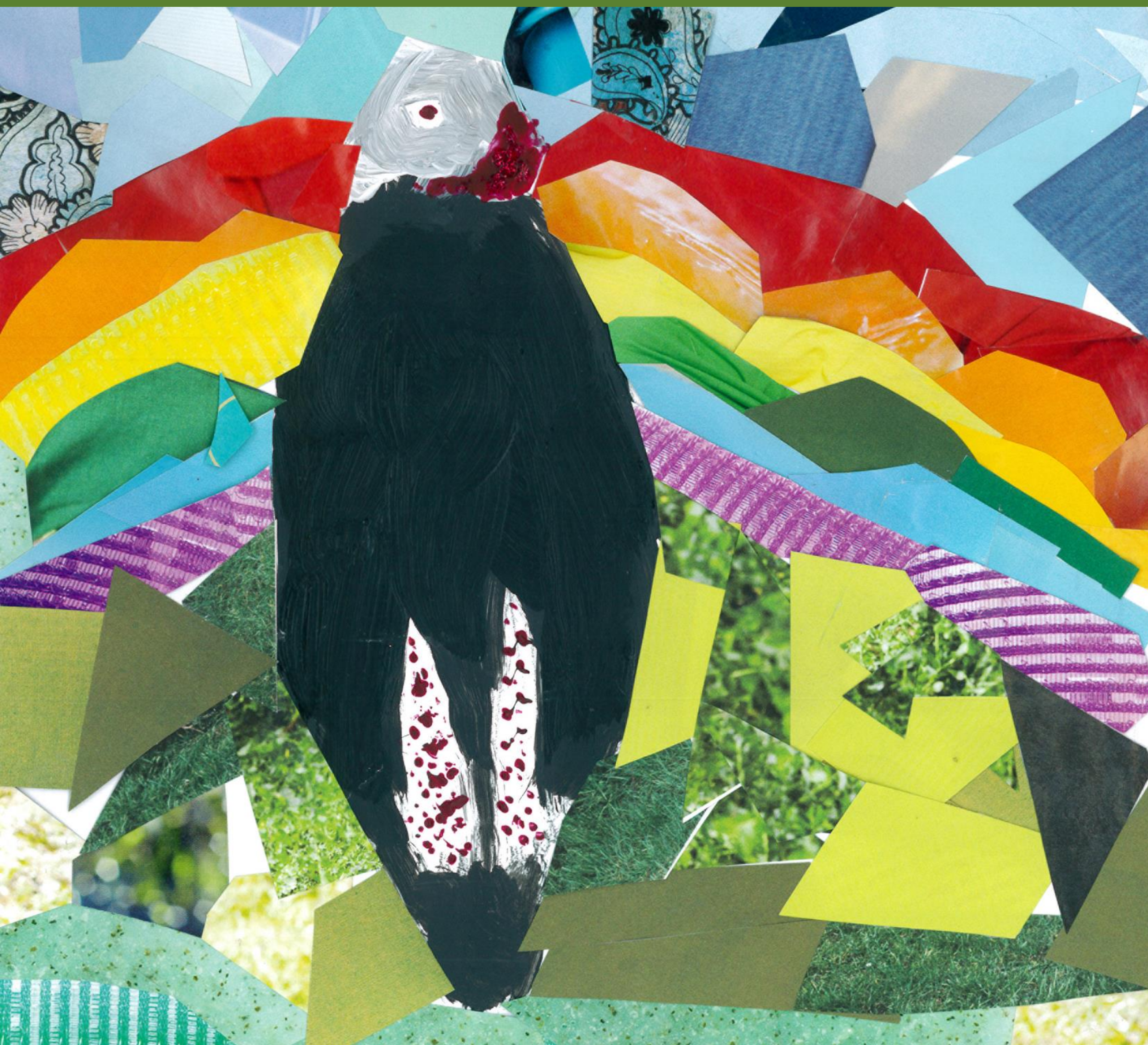
Dhumba-nganjin

Sharing stories to promote reconciliation



Department of Health & Human Services

State Government Victoria

Dhumba-nganjin

Sharing stories to promote reconciliation

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 03 9096 1026, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email: sharingstories@health.vic.gov.au

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

© Copyright, State of Victoria, Department of Health & Human Services, 2015

This publication is subject to Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial – NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public Licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) It is a condition of this licence that you credit the State of Victoria as author and do not extract images or text without the permission of the State of Victoria.

This publication contains images of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The images in this publication appear with the permission of the owners.

Available at www.health.vic.gov.au/aboriginalhealth

(1502029)

Foreword

Dhumba-nganjin means 'talk, all of us together' in the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung languages.

It is a very apt title for the Wirrigirri Sharing Stories activity which aimed to give staff in the department a way to talk together about reconciliation by sharing and listening to each other's stories.

Over the past few months, we have done this through having conversations in staff kitchens, meeting rooms and over partitions, taking part in a series of lunchtime yarns with invited Aboriginal guests and by sharing written stories. The written stories are contained in this book.

It has been a privilege to be entrusted with people's personal stories and humbling to be on the receiving end of emails from staff in the department who I have never met, who have wanted to contribute their story so they can add their voices to promoting reconciliation within the department.

Thank you to everyone who contributed a story. As you'll see when you read your story alongside the stories of others, no story is the same, we all have different experiences and understandings. But all stories have something in common, though they describe it in different ways – a vision for a genuinely reconciled Australia and inclusive workplace, a commitment to improved understanding and a belief that we can do better.

On behalf of everyone who contributed a story, anonymously or named, we hope reading our stories will be a way for others in the department to reflect on what reconciliation means to them. And in doing so, help each of us build a better understanding, appreciation and celebration of Aboriginal culture, history and our shared way forward together.

Lorraine Langley
Wirrigirri Messenger

Department of Health and Human Services

Acknowledgements

This publication was produced on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and the authors pay their respects to their Elders, past and present. Thank you to the Victorian Corporation of Aboriginal Languages for advice on an appropriate translation for ‘sharing stories’ and permission to use the title *Dhumba-nganjin* for this book.

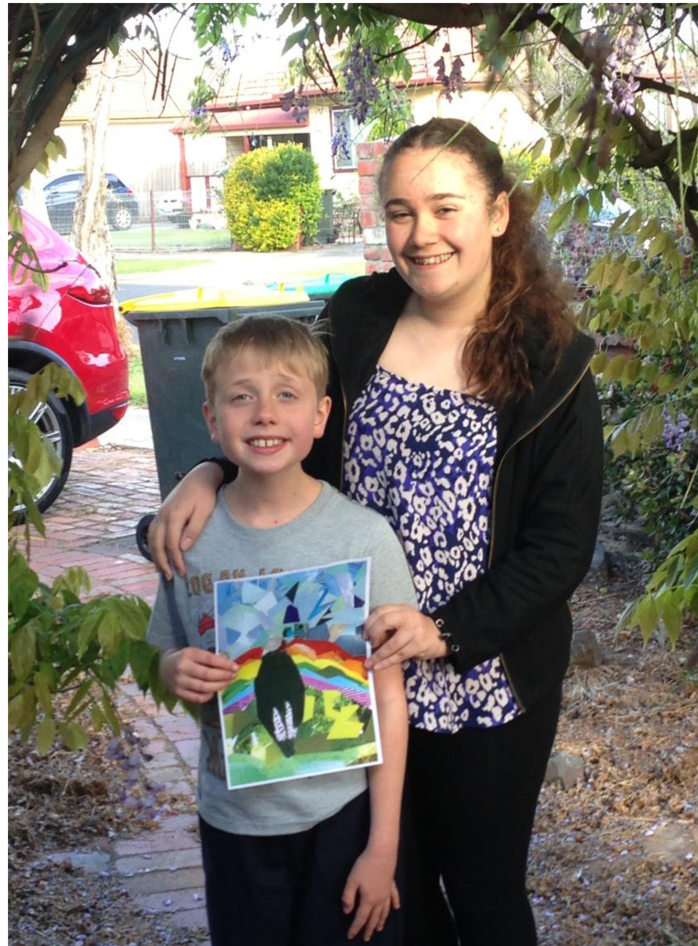
Thank you to everyone who provided advice and suggestions on *Dhumba-nganjin*. A special mention to Shane Nichols, Maria Cameron, Jonathan Ashley, Clare Carberry, Susie Tinker, Kylie Johnson, Gayle Stone, Anna McNaughton and Sally Mazak.

Thank you also to my directors over this period, Pam Williams and Eugenia Voukelatos, for supporting and encouraging my Wirrigirri role, and to Peter Fitzgerald for his support and for contributing the first story.

Photographs of the Wirrigirri artwork, The Healing Tree, were taken by Susie Tinker and reproduced with her kind permission.

Cover design

Thank you to the artists who produced the wonderful cover artwork ‘Bunjil’ for *Dhumba-nganjin*:- Oliver Marsich and Lilly Volpe, son and niece of MaryAnn Lindsay, Department of Health and Human Services.



TALK

The following stories appear in alphabetical order by the author's surname. Anonymous stories appear throughout.

Yarning

A few years ago, when I was working in a regional office, a local Aboriginal organisation applied for some funding to run a community yarning BBQ — or what we in the department would call a "community consultation". I remember there was some scepticism within the office about whether this would be money appropriately spent — 'It sounds more like a party than a consultation meeting' was the prevailing view of some of my colleagues. I was privileged to attend and be welcomed at the yarning and saw firsthand how useful and productive a meeting it was. My colleagues and I learnt an important lesson — if we are serious about respecting Aboriginal culture in our work, then it's up to us to "walk the talk" and make the effort to engage in a way that is respectful and meaningful.

Anon

Mark

For most of my 20s I was an ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) tutor in Sydney, where I was born. I learnt some things about universities and how they dealt with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but I'd guess that what I learnt would hold true for almost any institution.

Both universities I worked at went to great lengths to attract ATSI students, but didn't offer much to make them feel happy, inspired or included once they were locked into a degree. Lecturers seemed terrified of causing offence, but equally terrified of looking at the content and methods they were using and discovering how little these sometimes had to offer ATSI students.

Both universities had Indigenous learning centres. The students who walked through the doors were of all ages, from all over the country and all walks of life. Institutionalisation, illness and poverty often loomed in people's backgrounds, but just as often went hand in hand with optimism, humour and graciousness.

I was also given some lessons in generosity, usually by the students who had the least to give. I particularly remember walking to Central Station one day with Mark*. Mark was a Noongar scraping by in Sydney and was usually broke, but that didn't stop him from going and telling an old homeless man that 'this dude will buy you lunch' and then leading the three of us into the pub across the road for a counter lunch, paid for reluctantly by me. In hindsight, I can see that there is something very special about the kind of generosity that doesn't care who is footing the bill, as long as everyone is looked after.

I don't know if this little sketch says much about reconciliation, but it has been a welcome chance for me to remember those times.

*not his real name.

Tim Buckley

Reconciliation story

> *Deciding to write the following story for* Sharing Stories*, largely about my relationship with my one Koorie Uncle (by marriage), has set me on a journey I hadn't expected. Before submitting it, I wanted to check with him that he was ok with what I'd written. I shared it with him and my Auntie, and that has set off a series of emails, conversations and sharing of personal stories, opening up a new aspect of my relationship with both my Uncle and Auntie, bringing into the open things that I wasn't able to articulate to myself, let alone to them, previously. Since then, my Uncle has shared personal stories, his own poems about deeply personal topics and pretty much made himself available to help me understand better what it means to be Koorie. I have learnt that Uncle, Auntie and Elder are written with capitals as a sign of respect for Elders, that whether 'Koorie' is spelled with an 'e' or not is highly contentious and the topic of doctoral research, that a 'six dog night' is a descriptor of a night that is so cold that you'd need six dogs to snuggle up to in order to keep warm. I'm going to take my daughter to the Koorie Heritage Trust in the next couple of weeks (something I've planned to do for ages but not made the time for), and have an afternoon date booked in to visit my Aunt and Uncle to continue our conversation that has been prompted by the* Sharing Stories *activity. For what reconciliation means to me on a personal and broader level, it has been a game changer. My story is below…*

As an Australian, I have a strong sense of responsibility to understand and engage with the history of colonial invasion of this continent and its legacy for our present and future, both for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike. I regret that my school education didn't cover a lot of what I would consider basic Australian history and current Aboriginal-related issues, and while I did one anthropology subject on 'Aboriginal Australia' at university, my sense is that I don't understand as much as I should to be a proud member of my society.

This plays out within my own family, and there is a tension that I am yet to resolve.

I have grown up with an Aunty who has been very active professionally in the area of Koorie health and has strong personal relationships with many in the Koorie community, and a Koorie Uncle and cousin.

This has permeated my own upbringing at one level, not least because of my Uncle's prominent professional life addressing issues of Aboriginal cultural heritage and legal rights. I had many dreamtime storybooks as a child given as gifts from my Aunty and Uncle. I have many fond early childhood memories of time spent at the Koorie Heritage Trust and attending rallies regarding Aboriginal issues. Words like moodji are part of my vocabulary.

Yet on another level, the Koorie members of my family are just that – family. They are no different than any others in my wider family. I love them dearly for who they are, not what they represent.

As an adult, particularly working within the public service, I've felt the responsibility to understand, through my own endeavour, what it means to be Koorie. Many times, I've wanted to go and ask my one Koorie Uncle for his perspective on a particular event or issue. But I've been held back from doing so - because my relationship with him is as family, I would feel like I am somehow taking advantage of that relationship. I am acutely aware that in almost all other aspects of his life he is called upon for his experience and expertise as – for the last decade at least – a respected Gunditjmara Elder. As an adult, I've always asked my Uncle about how his current work is going with great interest when we see each other at family gatherings (despite retiring long ago, he is still very active in public life) – but beyond that, I want to keep my relationship with him on the basis it has always been – talking about chooks, gardening, woodwork, etc.

I feel like in order to have earned the right to ask my Uncle about anything related to him being Koorie, I first need to have done my homework to grasp as much of the issue as I can from what is publicly available. This would earn me the privilege to ask him for his perspective on an issue, by showing through my own action that I am serious about understanding the issue and have devoted time to doing so. It would be the respectful way to go about it.

Addressing this tension between my relationship to my Koorie family being just that – family – and my wish to engage as a non-Koorie with a Koorie is what reconciliation means to me at a personal level. But the concept applies more broadly – I believe it is incumbent on me as a member of this society to put in the time and energy to understand what it means to be Aboriginal in any or all of its multiple, complex and shifting dimensions and how this connects to what it means to me to be a non-Aboriginal Australian. I also believe that each person – Koorie or not – needs to be taken as a whole person just as they are, without being seen first as someone fitting into a particular category.

Maria Cameron

The NAIDOC Ball 2014

Thanks to Australia's Indigenous people and their continuous culture, it is fabulous that even today we can still have the opportunity to enjoy the oldest tradition in the world.

This year's NAIDOC Ball was one of the most unforgettable activities I have ever attended.

It was the first time I went to a ball. It was the first time I dressed with a bow tie.

There were people from our department, people from other departments, people from communities...

There was Indigenous art, Indigenous music, Indigenous dance ...

We were talking, we were dancing; we were enjoying the food, we were enjoying the presentations...

Most important of all, we were enjoying the happiness aroused from the integrated family of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The NAIDOC Ball promoted cultural awareness.

I am a migrant from China. I hope Chinese culture can be inherited forever even though I am now in Australia.

At the same level, I hope Australia's Indigenous culture can be inherited forever.

In fact, except Indigenous people, we are all migrants. I believe all of us are the same, we all hope our own culture will not be discontinued.

At the same level, all of us, I hope, will try our best to secure Indigenous culture.

It is the diversity and the multiculturalism that make Australia so beautiful, so interesting, so prosperous, and so appealing.

The NAIDOC Ball showed how Indigenous people have been contributing to shaping the biggest estate on earth so liveable.

The NAIDOC Ball showed how Indigenous people have been contributing to our contemporary society.

The NAIDOC Ball was an excellent opportunity for the integrated family to achieve mutual understanding.

As the traditional owners of this land, Indigenous people deserve all Australians' respect.

'Working together to achieve the best health and wellbeing for all Victorians', we should all commit to close the gap of length and quality of life for Indigenous Victorians.

Gordon Chen

A connection

I think I have always felt a sympathy and connection to Aboriginal people because they lost their land and were forcibly removed and had their families torn apart as did my family who came from Poland. My mum was 14 when she was taken by the German army from her family in Poland because of the war, and my dad and his parents were forced off their land by the Russian army and placed into Siberia. At the end of World War II my parents found themselves alone in foreign countries and moved to Australia, where they met each other. They made a new life here and never forgot Poland.

Many years later, through the Red Cross, they found their existing family members.

Anon

The Healing Garden

The link below tells the story of a non-Aboriginal woman who raised money to establish a Healing Garden at Monash Health following her personal experience of an Aboriginal healing space. As an Aboriginal person, I was touched by this story as it demonstrated not only her respect for Aboriginal culture but her recognition of its value.

I think there are many aspects of Aboriginal culture that have value more broadly to others in Australian society and it is important that we all make the effort to learn from each other. This is the essence of reconciliation. The story below is a very good example.

www.monashhealthfoundation.com.au/event/AboriginalHealingGarden

Darren Clinch

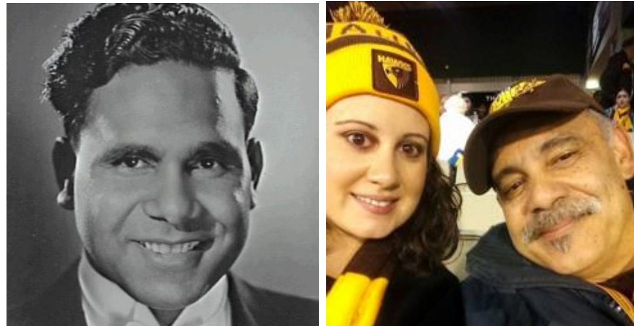
The reality of having an Aboriginal name and heritage in Australia

My grandfather Harold Blair was part of the Stolen Generation in Queensland, removed from his mother when he was two years old, and later on became the first Aboriginal Tenor.

My father, who is Aboriginal, and my mother, who is Australian, decided to give their children Aboriginal names, my name being Janannie (Ja-nar-nee), which means 'Ours' in a Central Australian dialect.

Growing up I have experienced a lot of awkward and difficult situations simply by having an Aboriginal name while not looking traditionally 'Aboriginal'. Many people have openly questioned my name and therefore my heritage because of my skin colour not being 'black' enough.

Although when I show people photos of my father and mother and sister and brother it becomes quite clear that my heritage is fairly obvious.



All of my life and to this day, I have had to justify my Aboriginality and family's history to other Australians, with some people responding well, and adjusting their attitude and beliefs, and others responding with blatant racism or ignorance.

However, I am very fortunate to have grown up with two strong and loving parents who have always encouraged me to stand up for myself, my family, and my heritage, and to never feel ashamed of my name. This is what has made me the strong woman I am today, and why I continue to live a fulfilled life.

It really is not easy living with an Aboriginal name and heritage in this day and age, in what to me, can sometimes feel like 'white Australia', with the negative attitudes that exist towards Aboriginal people, despite the many ethnicities that make up our wonderful country.

I hope that one day my own children can experience an Australia where Aboriginal people are fully embraced.

Janannie Clough

One night in Carlton

Travelling home from work on the tram one night, a woman with a quiet voice found my face in the crowd and asked if I knew the Fenwick Street stop. I wasn't really sure where it was, so I asked her where exactly she needed to go. She said Drummond Street and a number I can't remember now. I found the stop and helped her down with her suitcase. It was getting dark and she looked confused about my directions. I asked if I should walk with her to help her find the address.

As we walked she thanked me. She said people didn't often help ‘people like us’.

She told me that that morning her daughter had been taken by ambulance from their home in Sale to The Alfred hospital, suffering what they thought was a heart attack. She had followed her daughter to Melbourne by train and would be staying at the short-term accommodation on Drummond Street until her daughter was better. She had hoped to get to the hospital that night to be with her daughter, but the trams were so confusing to her, she couldn't face getting back on them. She would go in the morning.

Would it help, I asked, if I went home and got my car and drove her to the hospital. She looked surprised, but I said I would like to. We introduced ourselves — I'll call her Betty. We found Betty's accommodation and I said I would be back in an hour. I went home and told my partner what my plans for the evening now were! He said he would come along. We drove and picked up Betty. We dropped her at the hospital and, while my partner and I had a meal, Betty spent a couple of hours at her daughter's bedside. When we dropped Betty back to Drummond Street, she gave me a little slip of paper with her address and phone number. She said if I am ever in Sale, I am to drop in for a cuppa.

Anon

Taking the time to learn

Growing up in rural Victoria in the ’60s and ’70s there was barely any reference to Aboriginal culture or history in the local schools at that time — the focus was on the European pioneers.

As a child, one early influence was my father (a farmer) who showed me what he thought was an Aboriginal camp site beside a small river well protected by hills and trees. There were stones that were well worn, possibly for sharpening tools. The river used to have pools where platypus and black fish could be seen, the district was originally a giant rainforest. If this was a camp site I could imagine why it was chosen.

One year he returned from a Central Australian holiday with two water colour paintings by Walter Ebatarinja and Herbert Raberaba, some wooden musical instruments and a book about Aboriginal people living in the outback. Much later he also bought home a large ‘dot paint’ which tells a story (one I am yet to fully understand).

I admire the strength of Aboriginal people and their connection to country, community and culture and their holistic way of living.

Recently I went to a play about the talented artist Albert Namatjira and it saddened me how yet, not that long ago, such a successful man and his family battled racism and oppression.

We have so much to learn from Aboriginal people, if we take the time to listen, talk and read their stories. For me it’s about equity, justice and respect to make positive change where we can.

Sue Davey

Polly Farmer

I've decided the topic for my story is Polly Farmer, the greatest of Geelong ruckman, and also a captain and coach (and said to be the best footballer at Geelong before the Gary Abletts). His story is introduced at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham_Farmer

Polly Farmer was a hero to myself, my family and my friends when I was growing up in Geelong. As the child of a Geelong VFL footballer I knew most of the families of then current and former players. But Polly Farmer was never spoken about as Aboriginal. His early life with Sister Kate and the children of the Stolen Generation, remains a compelling (and largely unstudied) part of modern Australian history. The deeply disrespectful nature of this gap-in-the-narrative in Geelong four decades ago has given me food for thought as an adult. Will we ever learn if we don't have stories to listen to. So I thought it would be a good story to share.

Peter Fitzgerald

Annie

Annie* was a regular attendee at the casualty department of the small country hospital where I worked as a nurse in the early 1980s. She was always polite and patient and was fairly shy. She moved with grace despite her larger-than-average size. She trembled with persistent nervousness, especially when some of the doctors made it clear they thought she was wasting their time. Annie, in her early 30s, had myriad health problems but rarely presented for her own health concerns. The visits were always about her kids, who were a robust lot.

She told me that she took them to the doctor every week 'just to be sure, I don't want anyone to think I am neglecting them'. I assumed, with the wisdom of my 25 years, that this was just a local GP over-servicing and exploiting a vulnerable woman. It took me many years to realise that this behaviour was the product of what we now know as 'the Stolen Generation'.

I didn't appreciate then that Annie lived in fear of her children being taken away. I now recognise her bravery in overcoming her shyness to make those doctors examine her kids. The GP, who I thought was over-servicing, was more compassionate and understanding than I was.

I learned about Aboriginal culture from Aboriginal colleagues at the hospital. I discovered how often the Aboriginal women felt the need to discharge themselves early in order to attend to their myriad and complex family responsibilities. I began to understand the fear that many Aboriginal people felt when coming to hospital. I also learned that before 1967 the hospital did not keep records on Aboriginal patients as they were not citizens.

I think of Annie still. I hope that her health problems have not ended her life prematurely. I hope that she has her children and grandchildren nearby and that her family that she cared for so diligently are flourishing.

*not her real name

Cathy Fraser

A reflection

Like many of my colleagues I support efforts to improve reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but have limited direct involvement in my current work, or my previous jobs. It can feel difficult to know exactly how to contribute without appearing tokenistic or accidentally causing offence or running into problems of 'political correctness'. The *Sharing Stories* activity is a good way to engage with others on some of these issues. We all have different experiences and understandings and I think it is really important to make the effort to learn from each other and to overcome the reluctance, because of feeling uncertain about how to do it, to express our support for reconciliation.

Anon

Untold stories

The Aboriginal flag was raised for the first time at Swan Hill District Health on National Close the Gap Day on Thursday 20th March 2014.

As part of my job I am often invited to such events but this day was special.

It was a lovely sunny central Victorian day and the front entrance to the hospital was decorated with yellow flowering gum and red gum nuts.

There was a large group of hospital staff and members of the Aboriginal community and Aboriginal hospital liaison officer Aunty Deb Chaplin introduced young Aboriginal dancers and a didgeridoo player.

After official speeches and a blessing, the flag was raised by three generations of the Stewart family including Wamba Wamba Elder Charlie Stewart.

The event went well, but it was later over cups of tea that made it special when I was shown a photograph that the Stewart family had brought along with them.

It was taken in 1921 at a hospital fund-raising fete, and shows Jackson Stewart — Charlie Stewart's grandfather — on horseback leading the hospital parade through town.

The association between the Stewart family and the hospital goes back a long time.

The family explained to me that the flag raising was so important as it symbolised the common connection between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Swan Hill for ‘their hospital’.

Kate Glenie

Inclusion

Until recently, I worked in a regional office. About 21 people worked there. Two of my colleagues were Aboriginal. At the regional level, the Department of Health works closely with Aboriginal organisations. These organisations deliver an extensive and innovative range of health and community services to their local communities throughout Victoria. Since moving into central office, I feel quite disconnected from the work of Aboriginal communities. I rarely see an Aboriginal person in here. Our division alone employs about 150 people, yet I only know of one Aboriginal work colleague in central office. It would be good if we could change this.

Anon

It's OK to ask

Some years ago when we were rolling out a new data collection, I visited many health services to discuss the new collection with staff and learn what support might be useful for its implementation. I often spent time with receptionists and other data collection and data entry staff, trying to understand how they processed the information they got from their clients into our 'data items'. At one particular regional health service, I went through the list of data items with the very organised and helpful receptionist one by one, at her request, and we talked about the information they represented, and why we needed to collect it, and how it was collected.

When we got to 'Indigenous Status', she observed that it was a very difficult item to collect accurately, as the computer system had been set up to default to 'Not Indigenous', and obviously you couldn't ask people if they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander over the desk, because that would be rude. When I explained why it was important to collect the data, and that it wasn't rude to ask, she was unconvinced — not only were there non-Aboriginal people, she thought, who might be upset to be asked, but some Aboriginal people, she believed, would not thank her for asking them to identify themselves in public. I was quite taken aback; although I was aware that some Aboriginal people might have concerns about identifying as Aboriginal in a health service setting, it hadn't occurred to me that a well-meaning employee might not feel able to ask.

It made us realise the data collection manual needed more concrete guidance about how to ask about Indigenous status, and that this was a situation where we should specify that software should not auto-populate a default answer into records. Our team discussed this and similar feedback with service managers in a later meeting, and supported service managers to share their techniques for supporting staff to collect good quality data, including the need to respect client concerns about privacy and safety.

On a personal level, this encounter made me reflect on the way that racism embeds itself so deeply in our thinking and our culture. How easy it is as a white Australian to feel comfortable that you are doing the right thing by not being 'rude', when in fact you are contributing to continuing structural disadvantage and stigma. How easy it is to be socially embarrassed into acting in a way that doesn't offend racists, and doesn't help anyone else. How important it is to put the extra work in to ensure our data is accurate. I hope the experience has helped me check my assumptions and behaviour since.

Adina Hamilton

My story

When I thought about whether I had a story to contribute to *Sharing Stories* I couldn't come up with any. When I grew up I didn't know any Aboriginal people. What I learnt at school was minimal and mainly about Aboriginal people living in the desert, not Victoria. In fact, embarrassingly, it wasn't until I studied anthropology at the ANU that I first started to learn something about Aboriginal culture and history.

I haven't had many jobs where I've worked directly with Aboriginal people or organisations. And when I worked with Aboriginal colleagues we talked about 'work' not Aboriginal culture.

When I thought about it, I realised that my story is in fact just that — I don't have a story. I think this gap in many non-Aboriginal people's understanding and experience of Aboriginal culture and history is something we need to remedy to support real reconciliation. More 'education' about these things and also about Indigenous health issues would be great to share across the department. And more opportunities to meet and work with Aboriginal people both inside and outside the department and share our stories.

Robyn Harper

Venn diagram

When asked what reconciliation means to her, an Aboriginal friend of mine described reconciliation as like a Venn diagram, with Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in the outsides of the circles and those talking, meeting and moving forward together as the reconciliation bit in the middle. I think this is a really nice way of thinking about reconciliation. And over time, as more and more people move into the middle bit together, we are then making real progress on better understanding and a shared sense of reconciliation.

Kylie Johnson

Helping

Twenty-five years ago, I worked on an initiative to employ Aboriginal youth in the public service. My role was to assist with organising the recruitment side of the project and to answer queries from managers who had taken on a youth trainee. During this work, I met the Aboriginal community representative involved with the project and we did the interviews together.

At the end of the selection process, I summoned up the courage to tell him that I'd like to get involved in some way to help Aboriginal people and asked him if he could give me some advice.

He thought about it, looked at me and said, 'There's nothing you can do'.

I remember blushing and feeling a range of emotions – embarrassed, rejected, awkward. Had I said the wrong thing? Was my question a stupid one, or worse, an offensive one? I tried to make amends by saying 'I really did mean it, are you sure there isn't something I could do?' I don't know what I had in my mind really – other than having realised after hearing the stories of some of the young people, and having had to deal with the prejudices of some of the managers, that I wanted to do something 'to help'.

He thought about it a bit longer and then quietly said to me, 'The best thing you could do is when you're out with your friends or having dinner with your family, and they're running Aboriginal people down, you could stick up for us.'

I thought *'Is that it? That's nothing. Of course I can do that.'* But I interpreted his answer to be really saying that he didn't want someone like me to be involved so I just told him 'OK, yes, I can do that' and didn't say anything more.

Later on I realised that he had actually asked me to do a big thing, not a 'nothing' thing. I'm ashamed to say I didn't always do what he'd asked. I didn't argue with a relative at a wedding reception who said something disparaging about Aboriginal people. I didn't argue with one of my oldest and best friends when we were out with a group and she complained about Aboriginal people getting benefits 'for nothing'. I didn't argue with one of my bosses years ago when he made snide racist jokes. I didn't join in, but my silence was ambiguous. I did 'stick up for Aboriginal people' sometimes but usually with people I didn't know very well. In other words, I didn't risk an important relationship. I did it when it wouldn't cost me anything.

Years later, I realised that he hadn't dismissed me as I'd thought, in fact, he'd actually answered honestly about really giving me something to do 'to help'. And that I had probably put him on the spot by asking him that question and possibly made him feel uncomfortable to give me the answer I pushed him for. And that his suggestion about how to help was probably based on all the times he'd experienced being run down for being Aboriginal, or seen his family and friends run down, and maybe wished more non-Aboriginal people had been in their corner.

I hope I always remember what I said I'd do and will have the courage to do it and the imagination to do it in lots of different, respectful ways. I hope my kids see me doing that and they grow up to do the same.

Mostly I hope the time will come when what he asked me to do is no longer needed.

Lorraine Langley

Growing up in Gippsland

Growing up in Gippsland, in Gunai-Kurnai country, I had limited exposure to Aboriginal culture or people. Notably, the house sport teams of my primary school were all named after famous Gippsland explorers, two of which I came to learn much later, were associated with the Gippsland Aboriginal massacres of the 1840s.

Since Primary school, I have made my own personal journey to understand Aboriginal Australia — its rich and unbroken timeline, its contribution to the land and who we all are as Australians. I have been greatly privileged to have worked directly within the Aboriginal space a number of times within my working life and each time have valued the insight I have been afforded and the generosity with which my own contribution has been received. Now as a father, I seek to instil in my own children a deep understanding of Aboriginal culture and inclusion, of knowing this country's past, its shame and ultimately its own inevitable journey to reconciliation and the active role that my children, myself and all of us can make to enable this.

I wonder sometimes did my primary school go on the same reflective path as I have sought to, has it enshrined Aboriginal history and a commitment to culture in its curriculum and approach? Or sadly does it still honour the names and in turn the exploits of those famous Gippsland explorers that so significantly and negatively impacted on the Gunai-Kurnai people?

Anon

Bunjil

I first heard about Bunjil from my son Oliver. He came home from school one day in Grade Prep and said 'Bunjil is God, Mum.' I wasn't sure what he was talking about so I did some investigating. This led me to find that, to the people of the Kulin Nation, Bunjil the eagle is a creator spirit and protector, so I could see how he came to that conclusion.

Oliver showed me a giant nest that he and his school friends had made with sticks that they decorated for Bunjil to rest at his school. He has taken great delight in the Aboriginal stories that he has learnt at school.

Ollie and his cousin Lilly decided to do a piece of artwork about Bunjil and they included the rainbow, which is also of significance in that Bunjil has a son called Binbeal — a rainbow.

My sister and I were reflecting on how lovely these stories were and how we wished we had learnt them at school. It is through stories — the use of narrative — that we give context to a situation and give it a human touch. It seems to me that we can learn so much from Aboriginal history and culture and their use of narrative. It has applicability for the work we do at the department because the care of the sick unfolds in stories. Narrative addresses the need of patients and caregivers to voice their experience, to be heard and to be valued, and the use of narrative has the power to change the way care is given and received.

As well as resonating with the work we do here at the department, sharing stories between us is a way to build greater understanding and support reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

MaryAnn Lindsay

Untitled

So I went to this primary school. Mid 80s. Small school. Set in a nice middle-class neighbourhood in Brisbane.

Out of about 180 kids, about 30 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Apparently that was uncommon.

But I didn't know that at the time.

I didn't know that it was rare that our school bus driver – Ray – would start his rounds at 6 am picking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids up from the furthest reaches of the city and bring them to school.

All schools do that, right?

I didn't know that it was rare to once a month devote an entire school day to Aboriginal studies, pre-European history, dreamtime story-telling, learning about bush tucker or learning to play the didgeridoo on a freshly painted PVC pipe.*

All schools do that, right?

And who knew, that when I went off to my nice private girls school in the city that there would be not one – NOT ONE – Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the entire 1,800+ students?

Who knew that bumping into my Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander primary school friends would be such a surprise (I could say— shock) to my new (pretty much completely all white) high school friends?

Not me. We all have Murri friends, right?

And who at the age of 13 would understand the life-changing significance of my Murri friend's decision to drop out of a full scholarship at the best private girls school in the city (not my school) – due to isolation, racism and no support for the 'cost' of trying to be friends with the city's wealthiest school girls?

Not me. Not at the time. Gosh, I wish I did.

And who knew that nearly 30 years later, I would look back to my time at primary school with such wonder and such gratitude for something so rare – and something I fear may still be rare.

** I know that girls aren't supposed to play the didgeridoo, but hey, our teachers didn't tell us that.*

Anna McNaughton

At the footy

I remember being at the MCG one day watching a Collingwood-Essendon game. I was taking an English colleague, who was visiting Melbourne for the first time, to an Aussie Rules game. She supported Newcastle so I said 'Well they are the same colours as my team and we're both magpies so come along and barrack with me.' She was nervous to be sitting in the grandstand with supporters of both clubs all mixed up together. 'Aren't there fights?' she asked. 'Well sometimes I suppose,' I said 'but not usually.' She noticed lots of children there and I said 'It's a family outing to go to the footy on a Saturday afternoon.'

At one point in the game things were heating up and an umpire had made a decision in our favour. An Aboriginal man stood up in front of us to yell at the umpire's decision. Suddenly a booming voice behind us yelled at him – 'Sit down you black bastard.'

We all went quiet. Some of us turned around to look at the man who'd yelled the abuse. He was a big aggressive-looking bloke, all decked out in black and white, sitting with a mate. We all clocked that and also took in the situation nervously – was this going to get worse?

Then just as suddenly, the man from behind stood up and walked quickly down to the Aboriginal man in the row in front of us. One woman made her children slide down the bench away from them. We all worried about what was going to happen next.

The man said, 'I'm sorry mate, I shouldn't have said that. That was wrong of me. I just got carried away. I'm really sorry OK?" He didn't look big and aggressive anymore, he looked embarrassed and ashamed.

It was a terrible thing but a good thing too. I don't think anyone was expecting him to apologise, but I think we were all really glad that he did. The Aboriginal man accepted it graciously but obviously didn't want to go into it for too long. The man returned to his seat behind us. One person said to him as he went back, 'Good on you mate.'

We all went back to watching the game.

Anon

Boorun's Canoe

In 2012, I visited an exhibition titled 'Boorun's Canoe' at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in the Melbourne Museum.

The exhibition told the story of Senior Gunai/Kurnai Elder Uncle Albert Mullett, skilled in an age-old tradition of bark canoe construction practised by the Gunai/Kurnai people of Gippsland. A series of photos documented Uncle Albert's endeavours as he taught his grandson, Steaphan Paton, and other young men in his family, to build a bark canoe.

I clearly remember the beautifully composed black and white images stretching across the wall, chronologically capturing the canoe's creation and its floating by Steaphan, Uncle Albert and his family. I also remember the actual bark canoe siting proudly on display beside the photo presentation.

I really admired the family's efforts to honour their cultural history and practices, to maintain a family tradition and to pass it onto the next generation. I was also struck by the fragility of the situation. Without their efforts, how could such wonderful tradition be prevented from loss?

The word 'reconciliation' has a number of meanings. I like to think of reconciliation as a harmonisation or shared understanding.

Boorun's Canoe provided me with insight into Aboriginal culture and tradition for the Gunai/Kurnai people of Gippsland. It also reminded me of the importance of reconciliation - of sharing an understanding and respect for Aboriginal culture and history.

Ilona Nicola

Through the Gap : the road to Angatja

We have gills for dream life in our head; we must keep them wet.
– Les Murray[1]

Some years ago, in my early 20s while undertaking post-grad study, I travelled to a remote Pitjantjatjara homeland community called Angatja - located in the central western desert lands of far north-west South Australia. This community is a few hours south of Uluru in the beautiful Mann Ranges.

I was there (so I thought) to record the oral histories of several Pitjantjatjara Elders who had lived through the establishment of Christian missions and cattle stations and who had played an important role leading the 'hand back' — the land rights movement that eventually saw the return of Uluru to its Traditional Owners, the Anangu people.

What I learnt on that incredible journey to this place and this community was something entirely different, unexpected and much more enduring and personal.

Initially I was a fish out of water on every level when I arrived. As a young university student from the self-satisfied suburbs of leafy middle-class Melbourne, nothing could have prepared me for the heat, dust, flies, the space, silence, distances and cold night air. I will never forget the confronting, visible poverty, health issues and hardship in every community I visited.

My head was full of pre-conceived academic theories and the narratives of historic officialdom. I had come from a culture that had characterised the desert as an empty place 'out back'. I had been told to travel light (cultural baggage aside): a swag for sleeping in, solid shoes, a hat and enough drinking water to last several weeks - no need for make-up or a hairdryer where I was going!

What became obvious to me in the first days and weeks of living with Pitjantjatjara people was that, despite what I thought I knew, I had been oblivious all my life to the real story of Indigenous Australians across the country: what they had suffered, what they believed in, what mattered most to them and how they had survived after countless decades of being brutalised, poisoned, abused, stolen and dislocated by the dominant European aggression, racism and paternalism.

---

[1] Les Murray, 'First Essays on Interest', the People's Otherworld, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1983, p.8

The Pitjantjatjara people were immediately generous and patient and open with me. They took me in - shared stories with me, fed me, travelled with me on many trips in Toyotas through their country to show me important places. They taught me about the Tjurkurpa: the western desert word for the ancient Law which translates roughly as the dreaming and which holds the teachings, Law, codes and stories that have been in place for their culture since the beginning of time.

They also taught me songs, how to dance, how to dig for honey ants (tjala), and how to collect bush tucker and bush medicines. They also taught me how to live in the moment, reconnect with the environment and listen to my inner spiritual compass that had got lost in the noise of academic books, essays, lectures, debates and endless intellectualising.

Beyond the permit I had to obtain to travel into this country, the exhilaration of an adventure into the unknown, the striking beauty of spinifex and sand, and the sheer physical distance of travelling hundreds of kilometres into the desert over cattle grids and corrugated dirt roads, I learned that despite what that they have been through and continue to endure, Indigenous communities possess great courage, strength, pride, resilience, knowledge, kindness, humanity and hospitality. They also exercise forgiveness beyond words.

I moved to the Territory for several years in the mid ’90s and there were many more trips to central desert communities. But it was during that first visit to Angatja homelands, sleeping under stars, learning language and hearing stories in front of fires that I had an experience that shook me deeply and has stayed with me all my life. It was an out-of-body, out-of-place experience that profoundly challenged me to risk vulnerability and step out of my comfort zone as a non-Aboriginal person living in Australia.

Two decades later, I am indebted to the Anangu people for helping me access the meaning of reconciliation as it flows through friendships, stories and an openness to learn.

Gerardine O’Sullivan

Family history

My mother was born in the bush on a remote cattle station 200 km north-east of Alice Springs. My mother was the daughter of an Aboriginal woman and the station owner.

My mother's mother (my grandmother) was killed when my mother was four so her white father placed my mother in an orphanage in Adelaide. When my mother was 14 her father had my mother brought back to the cattle station in the Northern Territory to work as a maid for his white wife.

I have a copy of a letter signed by the Protector of Aborigines giving my mother permission to travel as she was of good character and had spent 10 years being educated in Adelaide.

A couple of years after my mother went back to the cattle station, my grandfather died. His white wife, who was originally from Melbourne, took my mother to Melbourne to be a maid and look after her five half-siblings. Her siblings did not know until they were adults that my mother was related to them. They thought she was 'just a girl who helped Mum in the house'.

My mother eventually went to work and met my father when they were both working at the GPO. Their story was a love story and they had a beautiful marriage. But my mother was extremely shy and did not go out in public unless there was no choice. My father was the public face of the family. It was only years later that I came to understand that my mother never went to the school etc. as she was afraid her children would be taken away. My mother never enjoyed good health and she died at a much younger age than I am now of end-stage renal disease, and was on dialysis for the last years of her life.

Although I understood we were Aboriginal, my mother never discussed her Aboriginality and it was only after she died in 1985 that my sisters and I went on a journey to connect with our rich heritage.

After many years working as a social worker in Melbourne, I moved to Alice Springs in 2000 and lived and worked there for eight years. During that time I connected with my cousin, who was a Traditional Owner, and with her extended family. My sisters and I made a pilgrimage to the station where my mother was born, met old people who knew my mother's story and who overwhelmingly welcomed us. And we even met one old lady who had helped care for my mother when my mother was four years old after my grandmother's death. People in remote communities knew the horrible story of my grandmother's death, knew where she was buried and knew that my family's history was part of the violence and massacres in the Northern Territory.

Towards the end of my stay in Alice Springs I had a significant birthday and had a huge party, inviting friends and relations from interstate. My mother's half-sister and her family came to Alice for the party and met my cousin and her family and travelled back to the remote station where my mother was born. Wonderful connections were made between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relatives.

It was just after the party that I felt that my work in the Northern Territory was at an end and I moved back to Victoria. After a two year stint working in a hospital in regional Victoria I decided that I really wanted to be working in Aboriginal health and fortunately, just as I was ready to move back to Melbourne, the position in the Aboriginal Health Branch became available.

I see my journey and exploration of my family's past and the bringing together of people as part of reconciliation and proud of my role in that.

Lorraine Parsons

Looking back, looking forward

Growing up in Victoria with celebrations of Captain Cook on glittering coin, our great founder.

Stories of rugged, determined settlers building a nation, shearing sheep and finding gold.

Explorers brave and intrepid striding into the harsh interior and finding land for farms.

Australia lucky, young and innocent but having to grow up in the great European wars.

In primary school no talk of injustice or crimes and the need to reconcile with Aboriginal people.

In secondary school Aboriginal people a common focus of jokes along with Jews and the Irish.

Living near the Yarra with horse paddocks still not yet become cricket pitches an urban paradise.

There was a girl, Jenny*, who I can still picture - tall, strong and black with a horse of her own.

Jenny, we understood was Aboriginal and had been adopted by kind parents much like ours.

In our childhood assessments she was lucky to have a horse of her own and to live in town.

Looking back now I suspect that Jenny growing up adopted in the ’70s was likely to be stolen.

Given a forced fresh start but always knowing and being reminded about her difference.

Growing up in a world in which she was expected to forget her history and embrace the new.

Expected to conform and be the same, expected to feel gratitude for the opportunities provided.

Unable to celebrate her culture, history, language, family, country, unable to reconcile.

In the careless way of childhood friendships I lost touch with Jenny so my thoughts turn to Gary*.

A school friend of my partner, Aboriginal and gay, intelligent and proud, he died too young.

I loved his energy, his passion for rights and justice, his fearless approach to a hostile world.

Was he drinking wine to have fun or drinking to numb the pain, to sleep, to forget, to reconcile?

Too soon and before I ask he dies alone in his government flat and we all mourn his passing.

These memories shape my thinking on how we could grow up as a country and reconcile.

Why can't the true history of our country be something we all learn from and vow not to repeat.

Putting aside assumptions and stereotypes and providing opportunity free of ignorance.

Having a shared love of the land and of the stories and wisdom that has been here for so long.

To dream together of strong communities where we can all stand tall and live without fear.

*not their real names

Graham Rodda

Pay the rent

In the late 1980s, I worked for a small health-focused peak organisation that had a community bank manage its payroll. They offered a scheme called 'pay the rent'. I don't know how extensive this scheme was, whether it was Australia-wide, or a Victorian initiative. Pay-the-rent offered the opportunity for a worker to nominate an amount to be deducted from their fortnightly pay to support Aboriginal people in their work with their communities. The money was collected by the community bank through the payroll arrangements with an organisation. I don't know how the money was handled after that. Was it managed through Trades Hall? Not sure, but it could well have been, being the type of activity the union movement was involved in during those years.

I remember thinking, *'What a great scheme. We should 'pay the rent'*. I resigned my position from that organisation when my first child was born however, I remained keen to make a contribution to pay-the-rent but things didn't quite work out. Some little time following, after the birth of my second child, I finally acted on my long-held desire to pay-the-rent and made a phone call to arrange that it be deducted from my sole-parent pension.

I remember the chat with the Aboriginal woman at pay-the-rent. I remembered saying I had wanted to pay-the-rent for a while but hadn't organised myself to make it happen. We chatted a bit and when I started providing my details she said no, no way would her people accept taking money from someone supporting two babes on a pension. 'No, keep that money, look to those kids, come back and talk with us when things are different.' I remember being stunned by the warmth and earnestness of her response. Sometime later when back at work, I looked again to find whether I could pay-the-rent but the scheme had been discontinued. I still wish there was a pay-the-rent scheme.

Anon

Learning is a result of listening

Dhumba-nganjin provides a unique opportunity to share stories, to yarn and importantly to help promote reconciliation. Yarning in particular has long been the foundation of the oral tradition of communication within the Aboriginal community, and Government is finally catching up to the real opportunity that informal, culturally friendly conversation provides for engaging community and, importantly, hearing what matters and how we can work together.

While yarning is a cornerstone to sharing information, we also know of the importance of data as a way of informing the story and importantly showing milestones and providing stretch targets. Within the Aboriginal Health Branch we are constantly seeking new ways to tell and share the story.

In one of my first roles within Aboriginal affairs, I carried the Aboriginal homelessness portfolio for the Office of Housing. A central platform for this role was the Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Network — a regular two-day meeting with workers and managers from the Aboriginal homelessness sector. We used this network to share best practice, to identify issues and to jointly solve problems. I remember when the Commonwealth asked Victoria to adopt a modified homelessness data collection that would be specific for Indigenous clients. It was designed with remote Northern Australian communities and homelessness workers in mind, and used a mix of visual prompts and simple language in an effort to better collect data from those with limited literacy – true for some workers in these communities too.

While our network recognised and was sympathetic to the challenges within remote communities, it was also clear to remind the Commonwealth and our own government that Aboriginal people are not homogenous – the issues people face in the north of the country are not the same issues for Aboriginal people living and working in Victoria. Before the arrival of Europeans, there were approximately 600 nations in Australia, each with its own territory, language and customs. By seeing Aboriginal people as a homogenous group is to deny them individual identity, to consider Aboriginal people all the same – from similar experience, socio-economic background or location is to risk developing models and responses that cannot possibly adequately respond to the needs of the people it seeks to work with.

The network also actively pushed back on the requirement to adopt a simplified data set. Even though that data set would have been easier to use than the existing system, they could see that by collecting information that was not directly comparable with the broader homelessness data collection, that Aboriginal homelessness would be an outlier and that it would become impossible to make direct comparison of the homelessness experience for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Adoption of such a system would also make it difficult to measure the impact of the systems and interventions that were developed to respond to needs of Aboriginal homelessness.

This experience brought home to me that it is essential that we pursue ways of gaining meaningful insight into the Aboriginal community and their health needs – through data, through conversation with community and through active partnership. I reflect often on the leadership shown by the Indigenous Homelessness Network in actively pushing back on a well-intentioned policy that would have likely had unintended consequences and in turn I seek to reflect on that in the decisions that I make and the advice I provide.

Mark Stracey

School trip to Uluru

I remember back in the ’70s, my school took us on a camping trip up to ‘Ayers Rock’. We saw lots of bushland. Miles (back in those days) of road. And had a few stops to see the sights.

One such stop didn't resonate with me until much later, when I'd done a short course on Aboriginal culture as part of the Department of Health Wirrigirri training. How naive we all were...

We'd stopped at a cattle station. ‘Go see the bush, go see the people at the station store’. And we did. But the highlight of the visit was a young boy, about four or five years old. So cute! Blond hair and big smile. All us girls (we were older teenagers) just fell in love with him. What a little *man*! I didn't understand at the time why all the adults had this strange look on their faces. OK, we were white, and they were Aboriginal, but hadn't they seen white girls playing with a little fellow before?

As a mother now, I'm amazed how composed those Aboriginal adults were. How compassionate. They didn't intervene. They let their little one play with us. He was having a ball and we were clearly besotted by the little one.

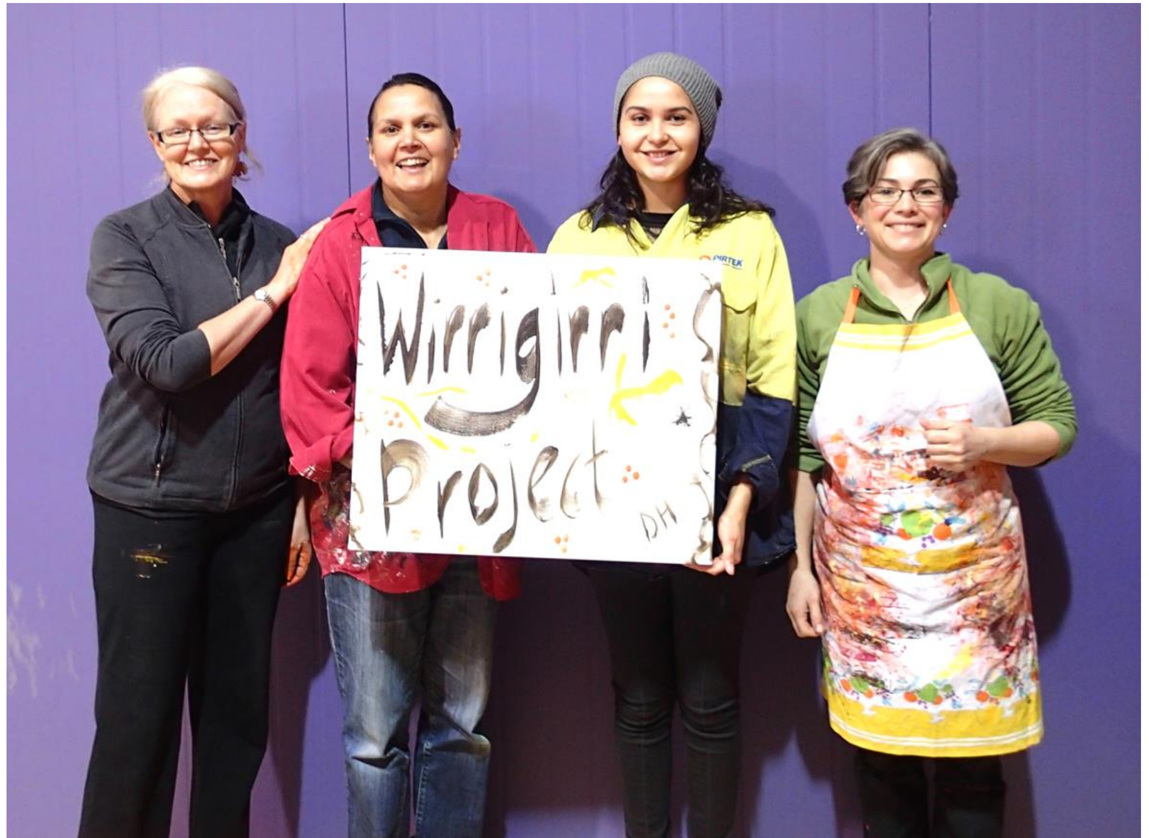
But each of them would probably have known someone in their isolated community who had been touched by the ‘Stolen Generation’.

White people coming on to their land and taking their dear children. Maybe playing with them (just as we were) to lure them away to a stranger's house. For rehabilitation. For assimilation into the white populace.

So many years later, I can only be amazed at their strength. And at their composure, their ability to just stand still and wait until the visitors left their home.

Gayle Stone

Reconciliation through art



As an artist, I wanted to do something creative for my Wirrigirri project. Two Aboriginal artists joined us to paint a picture that represented reconciliation to us. We showed them our style of painting and over four days discussed many different topics, shared experiences, laughed and cried.

We wanted to include words on the painting that represent and promote reconciliation to us. We chose words that appear simple on the surface, but I believe if we actually do these words, with another person, an Aboriginal person, this is a small step towards reconciliation.

Accept

Believe

Listen

Communicate

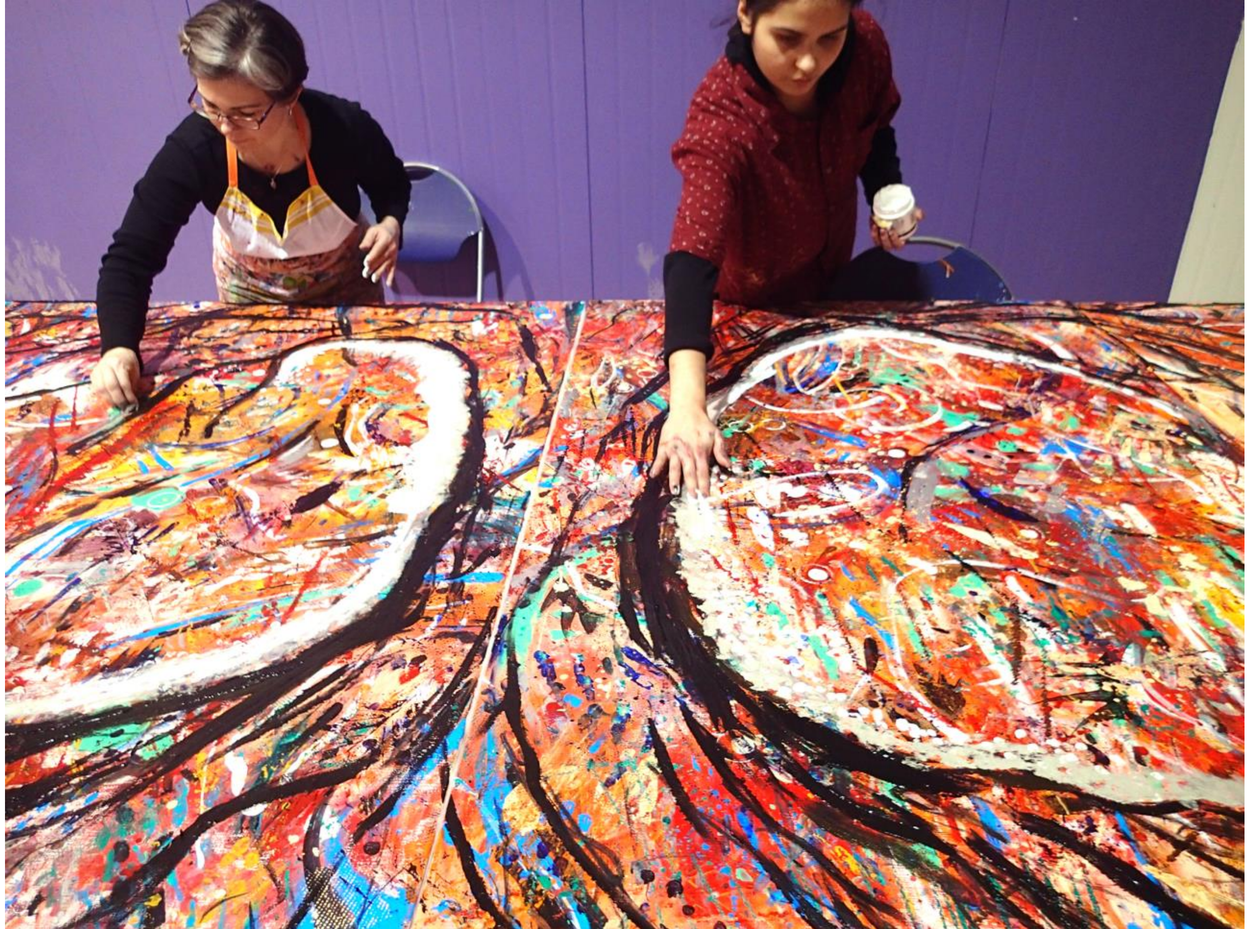
Love

Understand

Respect

I feel privileged that I've been able to create this painting with Judith and Lyn-Al, the Aboriginal artists, and Gayle, friend of Wirrigirri. I've joined the Monash Reconciliation Group and hope to continue taking steps towards reconciliation.

We called the painting The Healing Tree.



Reconciliation, being a Wirrigirri messenger, has been the start of a personal journey for me.

My initial idea of reconciliation was that it didn't matter that we were of different races or cultures or backgrounds: we were all humans, we all have the same feelings. However, working with, spending time with and talking to Judith and Lyn-Al has changed my opinion. Yes, we are all humans, regardless of race and we do experience the same emotions - love, joy, sadness.... However, for reconciliation to occur, I believe we do need to acknowledge the past and what tragedies have occurred to another race and culture, in order to move to a new place, a new understanding. You have to know where someone has come from in order to join them on the journey of where they're going.

Recognising someone's past, where they have come from, helps to understand where they are today, what has made them who they are. I believe then, we can begin to look at the similarities, rather than the differences we have, to both take steps forward to build the bridge of reconciliation.

Susie Tinker

Archie Roach

One day I was reading a newspaper article about an Indigenous singer called Archie Roach and realised that I knew him in primary school, as Archie Cox. (It was custom during that period for children to take the surname of their foster family.) I was 10 years old when I first met Archie at Strathmore North Primary School. Archie was one of the quiet achievers in the class. He was always coming first in the school's sporting events and won many classroom awards for painting and drawing. He seemed like a happy guy and I will never forget how I felt when I read about Archie's younger life and the troubled times of alcoholism, poverty, hurt and despair.

(The following is from Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archie_Roach#Biography)

Archie Roach and his sisters, along with the other Indigenous Australian children of the stolen generations, were forcibly removed from their family by Australian government agencies, and placed in an orphanage. After enduring two unpleasant placements in foster care Roach was eventually fostered by the Coxes, a family of Scottish immigrants in Melbourne. The Coxes' eldest daughter, Mary, played keyboards and guitar in a local Pentecostal church, and taught Roach the basics of both instruments. He was further inspired by his foster father's record collection, which included old Scottish ballads and songs by Billie Holiday, the Ink Spots, the Drifters and Nat King Cole.

Needless to say Archie's life story has had a great influence on my life. I only hope Archie found happiness when he went on to become a great musician and met his life and music partner Ruby Hunter, who died in February 2010.

Anon

The Rainbow Serpent

There was one student who identified as Aboriginal in my class for the entirety of my primary school years, a girl who excelled at, and was obsessed with, basketball. Whilst we studied in detail the colonisation of Australia and the hardships and challenges experienced by European convicts and settlers, we never studied her culture, nor its history, beliefs or practices. When I reflect on my childhood education, Australia's Aboriginal history, both pre-European settlement and after, stands out as a clear omission in my history and social science classes.

I grew up in 1980s Perth, Western Australia, and I can remember a key public debate being played out regarding the proposed redevelopment of a section of the Perth foreshore. The local Aboriginal community was opposed to the redevelopment on the basis that it was a sacred site, and regarded as the home of the Rainbow Serpent, an important Dreaming figure in many Aboriginal stories and rock art images. This created great controversy in a state that had had a fraught history with its Aboriginal populations, with generations of Aboriginal children stolen from their families, and an economy largely based on a mining industry that was built on land inhabited by generations of Aboriginal people for thousands of years.

I recall, as a Grade 5 student, accompanying my deputy principal to various debating and public speaking competitions and events. One day, the Rainbow Serpent site came up in conversation as we were waiting for a competition to begin. My deputy principal spoke scornfully of how Aborigines believed there was a giant snake living in the area, and how ridiculous this notion was. Being the good pupil that I was, I simply nodded and smiled, but inside I was confused. How could the beliefs and customs of a culture be dismissed so easily? In my mind, I tried to deconstruct the reasons why she held this view. Was the underlying implication of her comments that this group was opportunistically seeking money as a form of compensation, or just being obstructionist in the face of inevitable 'Western' progress, or just silly and infantile in their beliefs? Or…. was this senior educator simply racist and ignorant? This last possibility was an unsettling one, given I had been raised by my parents to perceive my teachers as the fountain of knowledge and wisdom.

A few years later, in 1992, the High Court handed down the Mabo judgement, recognising, for the first time, native title rights over land where a connection can be proven to still exist. This caused a huge public outcry in Western Australia, and I can recall teachers expressing concern about Aboriginal people obtaining native title rights to people's backyards and property. Along with the public and media debate, our educators did nothing to help young people like myself understand the true nature of the rights being recognised by the High Court.

It was only when I moved interstate and began to read books like *'Wild Cat Falling'* (a book largely set in Western Australia) as part of my senior school curriculum that I learnt of the Stolen Generations, and only later still that I learnt more about cultural heritage, the history of Aboriginal dispossession, and the concept of reconciliation. Indeed, it was only when I joined the public service many years later that I comprehended the unacceptable disparity in health, social and economic outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

To me, achieving reconciliation requires us to understand our country's past more fulsomely, so that we can build a better future. I hope that, unlike myself and my basketball-obsessed fellow pupil, my children receive a much more comprehensive education in the history of our country, including Aboriginal history and culture, so that they can be part of shaping a better future for all Australians.

Eugenia Voukelatos

The orphanagers

At my primary school there was a gate in the fence that led to the Melbourne Orphanage.

So I went to school with children we called 'the orphanagers'.

I think they went back to the orphanage at lunchtime – I don't remember playing with them or making friends with them.

They didn't have a school uniform like us.

I remember all those children as sad and being a bit frightened of their sadness.

They represented the worst that could happen to us.

Among them were Aboriginal children. I don't know how we knew they were Aboriginal but somehow we knew.

Years later I realised the Stolen Generation had been among us but never spoken about.

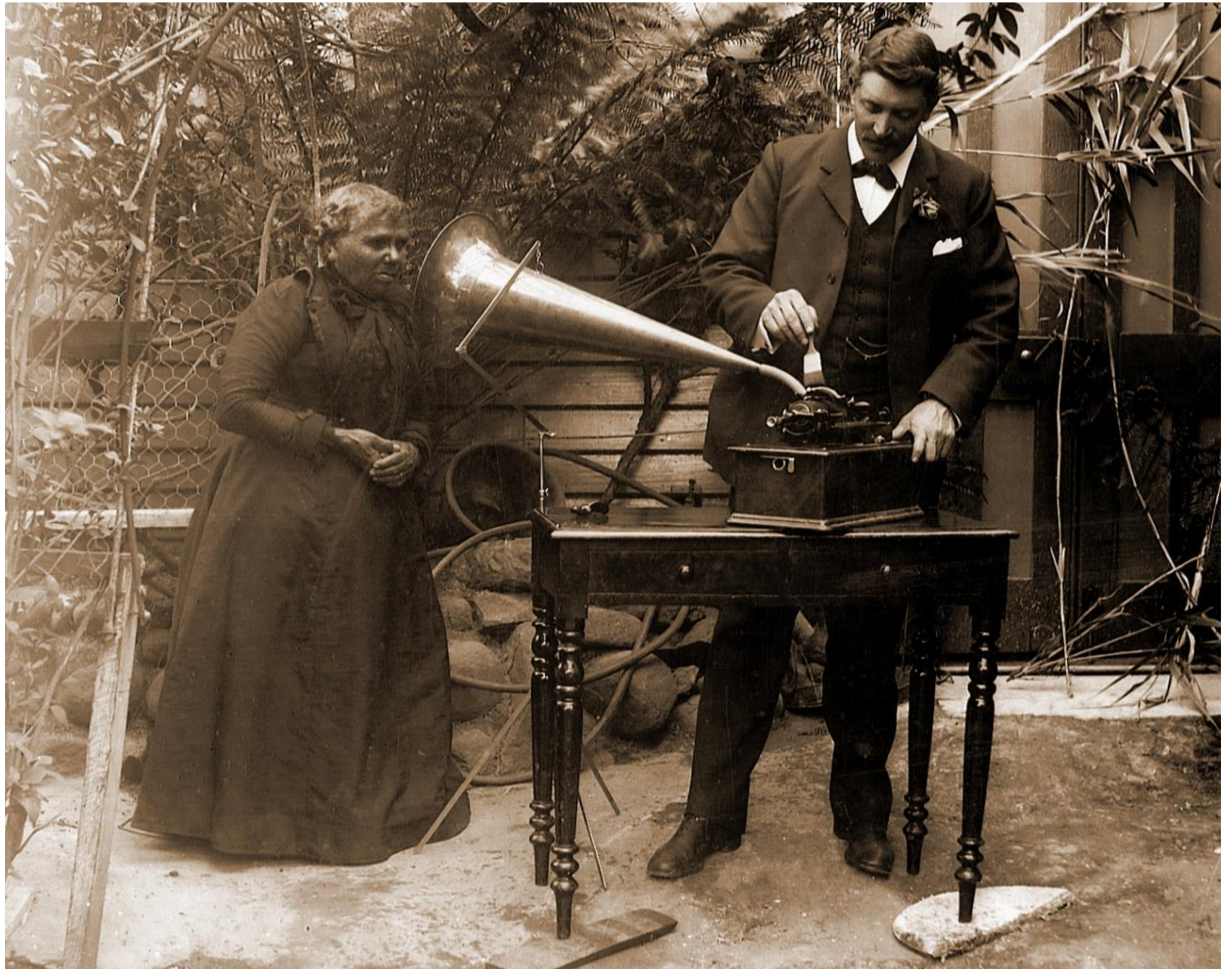
I hope they grew up to have a happier life than their childhood.

I hope they eventually reconnected with their families and communities.

I wish I had known then what I know today.

Anon

Reconciliation through song



As a child I was fascinated by a shoebox of old photos. One photo from 1903 showed Fanny Cochrane Smith singing into the horn of an Edison phonograph operated by Horace Watson.

As an adult I saw it in the Tasmanian Museum, and I realised how Australia's history reverberates through this picture: cultural contact, genocide, reconciliation.

Fanny Cochrane was born in Wybaleena, a bleak settlement for Aboriginal Tasmanians established in 1834 on Flinders Island. The settlement freed up Tasmania for European settlement. She learnt Tasmania's traditional songs, stories and culture, but life there was hard and she was treated very harshly.

Fanny married William Smith, an ex-convict. They raised 11 children, surviving through hard work and enterprise. She was an expert in bush tucker and medicine, and known for her generosity. She maintained her traditional spirituality alongside Christianity. She adorned her Edwardian dresses with shell necklaces, feathers and animal furs. Reconciliation personified.

When Truganini* died in 1876, Fanny claimed to be the last Tasmanian, setting off spurious pseudo-scientific attempts to establish her racial 'purity'. Regardless of the genetics, she was the last person on earth who knew the language, songs and stories of her people. Her response was to share these in public performances.

Horace Watson was a pharmacist of English stock. He married Louisa Keen, whose father had invented Keen's Curry. He built up the curry business and made a fortune. He had many interests, and was a member of the Tasmanian Royal Society.

Attending one of Fanny's performances, he was conscious of the historical moment. He decided to record her using wax cylinders - cutting-edge technology.

Those recordings have been invaluable in reconstructing Tasmanian language (palawa kani). The Hobart Museum's exhibit of Tasmanian culture includes this photo and a push-button activates the recording.

Despite the poignancy of the recordings, Watson reported: 'We had a real excellent time.'

As a songwriter, I wanted to capture this story about my great-grandfather, the weight of history represented in the photo, and how music can bridge the gulf between people and cultures. I called it *The Man and the Woman and the Edison Phonograph.*

Through this, I met Uncle Ronnie Summers, a musician from Cape Barren Island, who plays traditional music of Bass Strait. He is Fanny Cochrane Smith's great-great-great-grandson. We have become firm friends.

At the 2005 National Folk Festival we adapted the words of the song and performed it as a duet before 4,000 people. At the song's end I sang: 'And the man had a son, who in turn had a son, who in turn had a son, who was me.' Ronnie then sang: 'And the woman had a son, who in turn had a daughter, who in turn had a son, who in turn had a son, and the next one was me.'

As these words revealed our relationships to Fanny and Horace, the gasps from the audience were audible. Ronnie says in his book: 'It was the most overwhelming thing…When I looked up, we was playing to thousands of people and I reckon half of 'em was cryin'… there was a special feeling, like a bonding, among all those people.'

Music can move people, and make a difference. Someone said Ronnie and I are related by song. That captures the magic of us coming together around music, singing about our forebears doing the same thing a century before. The circle was completed when we recorded the song together, and when we got to sing it again on Flinders Island in 2013.

In Horace's words: we had a real excellent time.

Bruce Watson

*Truganini has often been identified as the last Aboriginal Tasmanian.

The song, incorporating the archival recording, is at:
www.brucewatsonmusic.com/TMATWATEP_BW&RS.mp3

Ronnie's book: Tasmanian Songman Ronnie, Ronnie Summers with Helen Gee, Magabala Books, Broome, 2009

The photograph on page 32 reprinted courtesy of Bruce Watson.

Welcome to Country

I've been pondering the Welcome to Country greetings. On the one hand, when it is a non-Aboriginal like me giving an Acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians of the land, it's something, but obviously a very, very small token.

What has really impressed me have been a couple of Welcome to Country speeches given that have impressed upon me just how connected Aboriginal culture is, how there is so much tradition and culture to be proud of and the strong link to the land. I am left with reinforcement of the respect due to Aboriginal culture and traditions on whose land I live and work. I know I don't know much, but even the little understanding I have, I wouldn't have got without those Welcome to Countries. I now see it as of important emotional symbolic value, rather than just a token.

In fact at one conference, Professor Fiona Stanley, well known for her work on improving Aboriginal health, spoke directly after the Welcome to Country. She must have been to many conferences indeed, but she noted just how good this Welcome to Country was and it clearly made an impression on another non-Aboriginal with far more experience than me.

Anon

The BBQ

Growing up in rural Victoria, my town had an Aboriginal name, but that was as close as we generally came to things Aboriginal. Despite appreciating the successes of Aboriginal celebrities – Lionel Rose, Evonne Goolagong, Pastor Doug Nicholls, etc. – my family held the prejudices of their generation.

One summer day we were enjoying a family BBQ in a park by the seaside with my uncles, aunts and cousins. A large, extended Aboriginal family appeared and joined the BBQ queue. A ripple of unease passed through some members of my family. The oldest Aboriginal man started to talk to us about his life and his work with primary school children, spreading knowledge and understanding.

Suddenly he leapt forward, eyes glaring and put his arms above our BBQ, shouting at us to step back; this food was his now. After a few shocked seconds he laughed, 'Now you know a little of how it was for us'. This short interaction taught us so much about the need for reconciliation and understanding.

Pam Williams

A reflection

For my family, reconciliation is about acknowledging and respecting the Traditional Owners of this land, learning about and celebrating our ancient Aboriginal history and culture, and sharing the vision for a reconciled, just and equitable Australia.

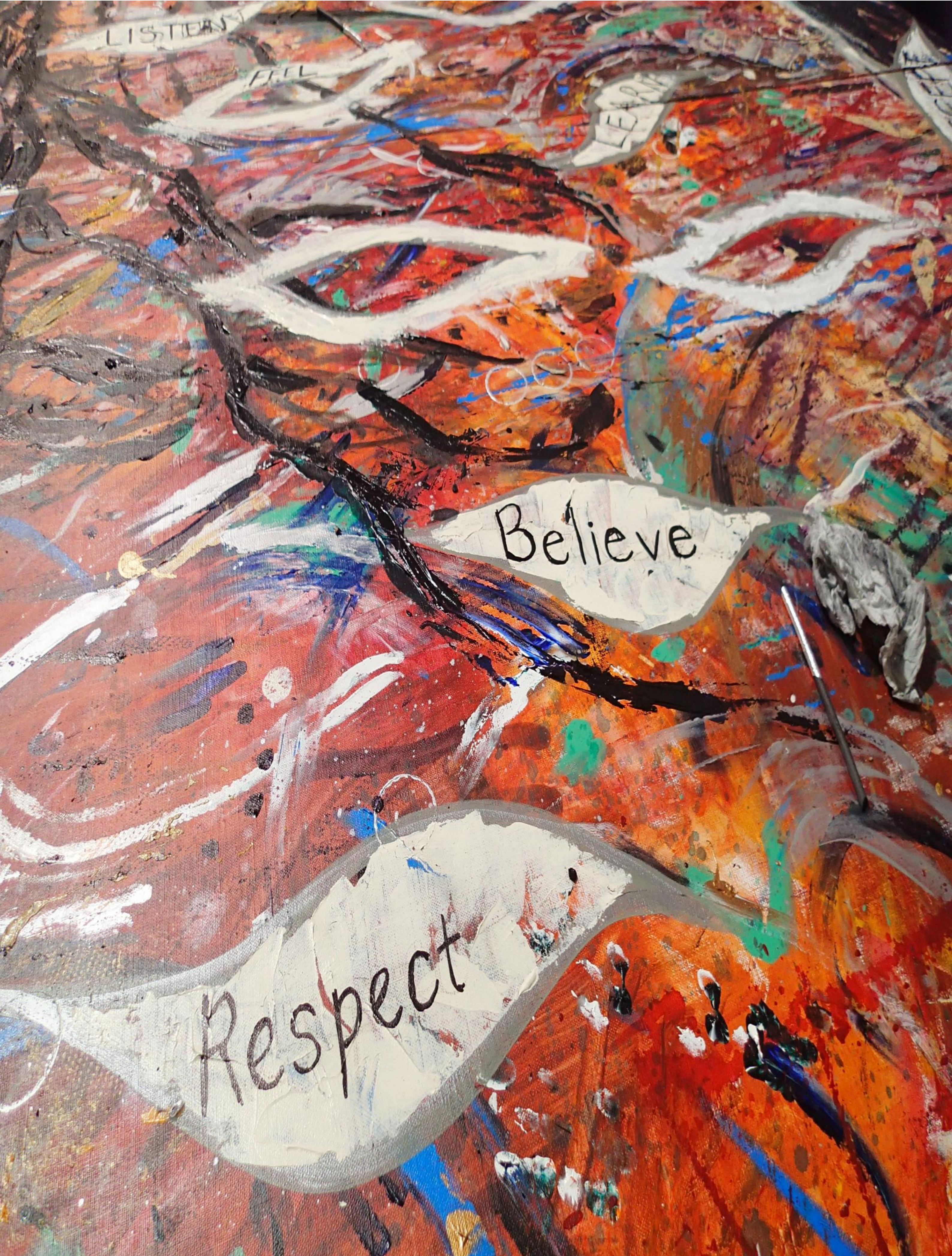
Gemma Wills

Overheard

I overheard an Aboriginal man and woman talking the other day. The man said, 'I can't believe people living in Victoria still don't know about Coranderrk'. The woman replied 'Yeah well I can't believe people living in Healesville don't know about Coranderrk!'.

I know something about Coranderrk, but I don't think many people in my family do. My parents didn't tell me. Did they know? We have a long way to go if we still don't know the basic facts about our history with Aboriginal people in our own state, let alone Australia. It is one thing to learn about the history at school or learning it through documentaries, but it would be better if we could talk about it with each other.

Anon


LISTEN
Believe
Respect