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Uncle Arthur Kirby

Baraparapa

Interviewed by Andrew Stephens

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Uncle Arthur Kirby has always used his hands. “If ever I saw a stick, I’d make something out of it,” he says. “It’s one of those bad habits I suppose.” Even during his life-long career doing engineering work, he has always reserved time for making traditional artefacts such as boomerangs, which he sells. Yet it is also very important to him that he passes on these skills to his children and grandchildren, for such craftsmanship was taught to him by his grandfather Charlie Kirby, “way back in the early days, when I was young”.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Uncle Arthur now finds himself even more deeply appreciating the importance of family and keeping traditional skills, knowledge and values alive: as social isolation continues, to various degrees, he continues to ensure the legacies of his family history are being passed from one generation to the next. While things have slowed down, he is stockpiling his handmade objects for later sales “when things open up”.

Living outside Mildura, Uncle Arthur says things have generally been “pretty good”, despite the pandemic. In his home are his daughter and granddaughter, and while they occasionally head into town for shopping, all three are otherwise on their own. “We don’t have contact with many people,” he says. “We just keep concentrating full-time on what we are doing.” That activity includes making his artefacts, developing 30 acres of land as a commercial bush tucker resource, and maintaining teaching of his grandchildren, who live mostly in the area.

“I am like old poppa bear,” he says. “I make sure my kids have respect for other people, and don’t rely too much on others ... they get out and do what they have to do themselves. I never went to school, and a lot of what I learnt was through just being there and having a go. It has been good for my family.”

Many of these children are interested in arts and crafts. Uncle Arthur’s late wife Penny was also a renowned artist. “The kids are all mindful of what I do and understand it,” he says. “They all do paintings and that sort of stuff. Passing it on, all the language ... it is very hard, it should have been done a long time ago.” At the centre of this teaching is the idea of respect. “The ways of our old people were that you learn respect and discipline first.



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That's the way my kids were taught." As well as teaching his family members, Uncle Arthur has continuing involvement with local schools, passing on traditional knowledge.

His bond with his grandfather, Charlie, remains strong in his memory. "He used to make boomerangs for tourists and he'd make two a day," he says. "It was one of the ways to feed the family. I inherited a lot of it from him. He taught me to make them. All we had was a tomahawk and a rasp and a bit of broken glass. For a lot of the 'comeback' stuff, we used hardwood. Mulga was one of the woods most people use to make 'comebacks'. We tried to keep it authentic." By using local resources around the places where he lived growing up, along the Murrumbidgee River right through to Mildura, Uncle Arthur became acquainted with their strength and beauty. And the activity "always came back to making Aboriginal artefacts".

Now "living down the barrel of the pandemic", Uncle Arthur is pleased to be in the bush and working on the bush tucker enterprise, in which plants for Indigenous foods and medicinal plants are sown to deliberately intermingle with the existing bush, as opposed to the European practice of clearing an area of its natural vegetation before planting out in rows, followed by a cycle of harvest, fallow and sowing. On Uncle Arthur's land, the seeds are first raised in a greenhouse and then planted in the bush in a naturalistic way, "so everything relates to each other". While the project is still in its early days, connections have been made with CSIRO specialists and with potential markets to ensure the best possible outcomes.

While the virus has slowed all this work down somewhat, Uncle Arthur says he loves walking around the property and getting back to nature, but he also keeps a strong focus on the more intangible, but deeply important, responsibilities of his world. "Keeping the dream alive is part of the mythical and spiritual part of our life," he says. "Everybody needs to understand that and we are trying to pass that on to the kids."

Uncle Arthur Kirby was born and raised at Balranald mission in south-west NSW. He is one of 13 children. Like many Aboriginal people, Uncle Arthur's family was forced off their land and into a corrugated tin iron shack built by his father, 5 kilometres from town. Later moving with his family along the Murray River to Kerang, near Swan Hill, Uncle Arthur currently lives and practices his craft outside Mildura.