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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Delkaia Heart (Healthy Heart)

Aunty Nancy Harrison

Wotjobaluk

Interviewed by Monique Grbec

July 2020



The sunshine yellow of jonquils colour the winter green lushness in the front garden of Aunty Nancy Harrison's fibre cement home. Aunty Nancy is a Wotjobaluk Elder whose passion and commitment to Watchegatcheca (Wimmera) Country, community and culture was recognised by her 2015 induction into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll, and again in 2018 for the NAIDOC themed *Because of Her, We Can* celebration.

At 79 years of age, Aunty Nancy opens the front door smiling; her eyes are bright and her face is flushed with warmth. Snug in a dark green anorak with a pristine cream cable-knit twinset of beanie and turtleneck jumper, her energy is vibrant and youthful, like she's ready to climb a mountain. *Because of her we can*: this is a woman who understands that her own actions and interactions can make a better world.

A concerned voice calls from inside the house to confirm that Aunty is carrying a facemask. She reaches into her handbag and nods. For a community-driven person like Aunty Nancy, the COVID-19 crisis has changed her way of socialising. With cancellations of all group gatherings, Aunty is now more active on the phone and busies herself with visiting local family and friends.

While Watchegatcheca isn't on stage 3 lockdown, the ripple of Kulin Country restrictions has reached the town, with the streets quieter than usual. Aunty Nancy's preferred coffee shop is closed, so we take our bakery coffees and cake and sit on a bench in the old bus stop area where Aunty used to catch the bus to Wopetbungundilar (Horsham). The road currently consists of broken rubble and is cordoned off to keep us away from the final-stage works of a new library building. The new contemporary structure, with walls of windows inviting in the glorious cultural landscape of the Barringgi Gadyin (Wimmera river system), offers a Wotjobaluk understanding of the true value of this town: beauty, serenity, and sustainability.

Since returning to Watchegatcheca as her final resting place, Aunty Nancy has performed many Welcome to Country ceremonies, and as an avid reader her eyes twinkle at the possibility that when the COVID-19



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pandemic is over she might be invited to do the Welcome to Country ceremony for the official opening of the library.

Responding to the COVID-19 crisis is the Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-op, an Aboriginal community controlled health organisation delivering health and wellbeing services to Wotjobaluk Elders, and keeping Aunty Nancy stocked with mystery and romance books while the library is closed. Dee from the Community Home Support Program that Aunty calls HACC, enforces a contactless protocol and leaves books, and sometimes puzzles, and beads for craft, at Aunty's door. Although Aunty is still doing her own grocery shopping at the local supermarket, when the town's toilet paper supply was ransacked by out-of-towners Dee came to Aunty's rescue and delivered enough toilet paper to get her through.

In this time of COVID-19 instability, Dee and the co-op are a wonderful life-line for Aunty and the other local Elders of the Watchegatcheca community. Importantly, they supply the facemasks Aunty carries in her handbag and wears to her medical appointments. Replacing the Goolum Goolum drivers, taxis are now used as a safer way to travel.

Opposite our seat on the library grounds, we admire the new town mural painted on the brick wall of the fish and chip shop. In colonial heritage colours of cream, green and muted teal, history is explored: *Wotjobaluk* is ornately framed in first place, to reaffirm the importance of the town's first people and it's first culture; *Watchegatcheca* is centred as the heart of the mural in the same way Koories connect with Country as the heart, and rivers as bloodlines; *9 Creeks*, the 1800s colonisers' name for Watchegatcheca Country, caps off the mural; and, Dimboola, the current colonisers' name for the town, is visible through wheat and wattle branches, gum leaves and a cockatoo.

In recent times, Aunty Nancy learned that the white cockatoo is her totem. Like the curious and intelligent bird, Aunty guides me to the riverbank to study red gums and birthing trees. I look up to search for the yellow swish of white cockatoos in branches, busy with other birds in their pre-dusk flight. Across the road is the fenced-in parcel of land that was granted Native Title in 2005, when Aunty Nancy was chair of the Barengi Gadjin Land Council. The fiction of *terra nullius* was recognised, and as the story of our Aunty Nancy Harrison enters a new post COVID-19 chapter, we can be sure that her proud Wotjobaluk voice will continue to speak to protect Aboriginal culture and Watchegatheca Country.



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Aunty Nancy Carol Harrison is a respected Wotjobaluk Elder from the Wimmera-Mallee region of north-west Victoria, and often performs the Welcome to Country at ceremonies. She was Chair of the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation when it gained Native Title Determination in 2005, the first time the Federal Court recognised native title in Victoria. Aunty Nancy gives talks about Aboriginal art and culture to primary and secondary school students, and educates university students learning about the natural and cultural history of the Grampians/Gariwerd National Park and Mt Arapiles areas. She has been an active participant in the Department of Education's Koorie Education Workforce, and was involved with Monash University's revival of the Wotjobaluk Wergaia language. Aunty Nancy is also a talented artist whose artwork is used by local companies, and has been published in collaboration with other artists.