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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

## Strength in Survival

Aunty Di Kerr OAM

Wurundjeri

Interviewed by Tabitha Lean

September 2020



As 2020 delivered unto us a virus we could barely contain, we have seen borders close, cities slow and planes grounded, and while we are busy washing our hands, adjusting our masks and worrying about where we will get our next roll of toilet paper, it is perhaps the aggressive social distancing that we struggle with the most. For many reasons, it has been a tough year, and COVID-19 has presented many challenges, one of the most difficult being the isolation we feel from one another and the subsequent disconnection from our communities. I ask Aunty Di Kerr how she is coping with COVID, and she replies with some solemnity: “Not good dear, not good at all.”

I can hear the grief and strain in her voice. Aunty talks about the great loss our community has suffered within the past couple of weeks: “Eight funerals in seven days”, she tells me. Eight funerals... seven days... it’s just too many, COVID or no COVID. As we talk about the complexities of grieving during a pandemic and restrictions on gatherings, I am reminded of the centrality that grief and loss has on the social and emotional wellbeing of our people, and the effect of not being able to mourn as a family and community has on our ability to carry on each day. While Aunty Di tells me about the innovative ways that families have included community in Sorry Business – she talks of live-streamed funerals with uplifting music and Zoom conference calls – she laments not being able to “just be together with a cup of tea”. Aunty Di says that it’s the before and after bit that she misses... the just being in each other’s presence. It’s a mighty reminder of the power of silence in our communities, the care we extend to each other just by being present.

It is because of this disconnection and grief that Aunty Di set up her Facebook page: *We Can Do This*. Aunt tells me that the page was established to encourage yarning, to create connections, to share: a virtual coming together to help each other out during these difficult times. Aunty Di says, “Don’t think of this isolation as six weeks, that’s just too long. Think about it as just forty-two days, and then it will seem doable.” Her optimism and matter-of-fact-logic is uplifting and recalibrates the sense of frustration I have with the enforced isolation measures. Aunty Di says,



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“While we are isolated, we don’t have to be disconnected.” I also think how typical it is that this wisdom should come from one of our trusted Elders, a woman used to just getting on and ‘getting stuff done’. This is how we have survived, I think, because it is our Elders who hold up the whole community. Aunty Di laughs as she tells me she has been FaceTiming people just so she can see faces every day. She chuckles and says, “I don’t know how happy everyone else is with that though!”

As we talk about this whole new world that we are currently living in, Aunty Di reflects on how her grandmother and all our old people must have felt living on missions. “It’s like mission days but before my time,” she says. “We can’t go out after 8 pm, they couldn’t go out or they’d get punished. We can’t travel unless we have permission, neither could they. Only one of us is allowed to go out and get our rations. All of these things are so familiar to us.” Aunty Di then goes on to talk about the incredible resilience of her grandmother, and how the work Aunty Di now does is in her grandmother’s honour, because it is due to her survival that she exists. As we are talking of the strength of the generations that have come before her, Aunty Di talks of a new great grandchild that she is yet to meet. Having been born during a pandemic, in the middle of enforced isolation measures, Aunty Di is yet to hold her little great grandchild. She worries for parents who have to leave their newborn babies in hospital, only allowed to visit one hour per day. Aunty Di talks of the struggles for people bonding with their new babies, and becomes sad when reflecting on those missed opportunities for families to celebrate the wonder of new life.

As our yarn draws to a close, I ask Aunty Di how she looks after her own wellbeing while she is so busy caring for everyone else. Aunt says that her kids keep her in check, telling her when to take a break. Aunt also relies on traditional healing. Aunty Di says, “We have the right to do our ceremonies. We might have been stopped from doing them for a very long time, but no one can stop us now, not even COVID. You can do this, and you can do this yourself. Put your leaves in, smoke yourself, heal, feel better.” Aunty Di’s final advice to me is to honour our ancestors, believe in them, for they are watching out for us.

In them we trust.

We can do this.

Together, we can.



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*Aunty Diane Kerr is a respected Elder of the Wurundjeri Tribe. She has devoted much of her life to her local community, as a mentor and foster carer, and has worked in various fields including child care, education, native title, Stolen Generation support, and other community work. Her passion, however, lies in the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. Since 2014, Aunty Di has conducted women's ceremonies for Aboriginal girls approaching womanhood. They provide a connection to Country, knowledge of identity and a general sense of well-being. Aunty Di chaired the Royal Women's Hospital (Melbourne) Community Advisory Committee and was a member of its Consumer Committee. She helped found research at the University of Melbourne's Heart Research Centre around mental illness and chronic disease afflicting the Wurundjeri people. In 2017, Aunty Di was inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll, and in 2019, was awarded the Medal of Order of Australia.*