



KOORIE

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Uncle Ron Marks

Wergaia, Dja Dja Wurrung

Interviewed by Andrew

Stephens

September 2020



Uncle Ron Marks tells a story passed down to him concerning fishermen and hunters. The fisher folk are patient, he says, happy to wait for their catch, while the hunters are more extroverted and cannot sit still. Out they go to acquire what they want.

A Wergaia and Dja Dja Wurrung man, Uncle Ron chuckles at how pertinent the story is to the age of COVID-19. During the various stages of lockdown, he says, the introverted and extroverted sides of ourselves are challenged.

“If you are patient like the fisherman, COVID goes by,” Uncle Ron says. “You don’t think about negativity. COVID will pass, I will wait for the fish to come to me. The hunters, though, are too impetuous and impatient. People have got to stop going shopping for their dresses and beautiful suits and wait for life to occur again, and not bite off more than they can chew. Then we all win.

“That’s what I’ve been preaching – whether people listen or not I don’t know.”

Uncle Ron greatly enjoys relating an informative narrative. His entire adult life has been deeply rooted in education, and his greatest ambition has been cultural training and sharing knowledge and information about Aboriginal life with younger people, both black and white. This has covered everything from local language and culture to physical wellbeing and respect for the environment. Now, as an Elder in his communities – he turns 70 next year – Uncle Ron is taking the challenges of COVID-19 in his stride. He does what is necessary and then gets on with his goals.

“I go shopping for my veg and meat, and on the way there or back I buy coffee – and that’s my socialising,” he says. “The rest of the time I am working my butt off.”

Born and raised in Dimboola, Uncle Ron was a boarder at Ballarat Grammar and moved to Melbourne in 1970 as a young man, where he got his first job working for the public service as a “pen pusher” in the department that then dealt with statistics and the Census. Around that time, he also began to learn about Aboriginal affairs and cultural



KOORIE

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

development “from some of the best” – older Aboriginal people deeply involved in the field.

Returning to the Dimboola and Horsham area, by the mid-1970s he was married and fully involved with working in schools, imparting cultural awareness and teaching Aboriginal studies, and being a part of the local education consultative group. “There were only two of us on it, and then I got a job with Aboriginal Education as a teacher aide. There were about 70 of us around the state.” He then worked around the Swan Hill region as an Aboriginal Vocational Officer with the Department of Employment & Training and did his primary school teacher education at Bendigo Teachers’ College (later absorbed into Latrobe University) from 1977. During that period, he noticed how difficult it was for Aboriginal people to get jobs without “the piece of paper” that a formal qualification afforded.

“And so I then proceeded to teach kids and give them a better start in life, make their pathways easier,” he says. He again returned to the Horsham area in the late 1970s and chose not to work in one school with one class all the time, but to pass on his knowledge and cultural awareness through school camps, visiting the Grampians for rock art history and other pursuits. Eventually, two siblings and some cousins joined him, as demand increased, and the training became even more popular.

Part of this education involved his passionate compilation of a database of word lists in Wergaia (which encompasses various language groups/dialects). “Therefore, if you were at a school and you came to the Grampians, I would give the teachers a word list of all the animals and I would give the kids each an animal name to adopt,” he says. “The kids would be that animal the whole time on the camp. Each animal group would learn about the language, conservation and preservation of the bush.

“It made them think about us, caring and sharing. That all kept going from there and I have been teaching kids ever since.”

After 26 years spent in South Australia, Uncle Ron returned to Country five years ago, having formally studied linguistics in 2007, even though “I was a linguist long before I started studying it”. Uncle Ron says that, while growing up, he learnt a word here and there from the old people. These included his own grandfather (who died in 1970), whom he later heard an audio recording in which researchers interviewed Elders about the language. This pleases him immensely. “When you listen to the tapes it is just fantastic for those memories to be there forever. I will never not hear my grandfather speak again.”



KOORIE

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Recently, Uncle Ron established Wergaia Industries to cater for the demand for work in schools, and with Cultural Tourism. Otherwise, his work has not flagged since the pandemic hit with force in March: he has been a consultant to the City of Bendigo working on a project exploring the renaming or dual-naming of significant places to include local languages.

“Being an education consultant and mentor, I’ve built a reputation,” he says. “I might not make millions but there’ll be thousands of people knowing about our culture. International tourists are singing out for our culture. There are many things I am hoping young people will put spirit into, where they are proud of who they are and can answer any of the questions visitors want to ask.”

Recently, someone was asking Uncle Ron how he has been coping with COVID-19. “I don’t have time to sit down and mope because the world passes you by,” he says. “COVID came along and knocked things around a bit but I can’t sit down and not do anything to contribute to community. I am meeting people and looking at the young talent... and thinking I want to train them to be much better than they would consider.”

Uncle Ron Marks is Wergaia and Dja Dja Wurrung man. He has spent most of his life involved in community projects, and primary and secondary school education. This includes mentoring Aboriginal students, teaching Aboriginal Studies, facilitating school camps, and planning and implementing education projects and programs. In 2018, Uncle Ron founded Wergaia Industries, which forms partnerships with regional industry, businesses and the tertiary sector. He acts as a consultant, drawing on his immense knowledge and experience gained working in local communities and the education sector.