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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Djetcha Zeta

Aunty Zeta Thomson

Yorta Yorta, Wurundjeri

Interviewed by Andrew Stephens

October 2020



Aunty Zeta Thomson (née Briggs) is a descendant of both the Moira Clan of the Yorta Yorta people through her father's mother and the YarraYarra Clan of the Wurundjeri people through her father's father. She is also a descendant of the Ulupna Clan of the YortaYorta people through her mother.

"This is where I come from," she says, "my tracks and my bloodline." As a highly respected Elder, last year Aunty Zeta was inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll, and has served on countless boards and committees mentoring and improving community outcomes for women's groups, healing groups, cultural matters and those of spirituality.

She has taught culture and language at Worawa Aboriginal College for many years, and has conducted many sacred Smoking Ceremonies and Welcomes to Country throughout Melbourne.

Aunty Zeta has been heavily involved in justice and corrections for over a decade. She has conducted cultural programs for the Malmsbury and Parkville Detention Centres, and serves on the Regional Aboriginal Justice Committee (RAJC). She has also served on the Victoria Police Koori Reference Group, and the Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee. Aunty Zeta also connects with inmates to offer support and to ensure their cultural and spiritual needs are being met.

Aunty Zeta is very proud to be the first person to exhibit at Melbourne Museum's Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, and has since had many exhibitions both in Australia and overseas. In more recent times, she has been content to leave the storytelling through art to the younger generations in her family, who are creative.

When speaking about her life and these deep connections grounded in spirituality and healing, Aunty Zeta first acknowledges her family and their importance to continuing Aboriginal knowledge and culture. She and her brothers and sisters grew up knowing their bloodlines and she passes that knowledge on to her three children and ten grandchildren.

"I belong to a strong and large family clan," she says. "There are many warriors in my family who have always been involved in trying to make a



change for our people and those around the country. If we are going to be talking about the past, we can't talk about ourselves as individuals because we are one voice. Our old people are still with us on our journey, they direct us to keep on track. It is important we have them present in conversation."

Aunty Zeta continues to gather with her family, some of whom live interstate, through Zoom, and they continue the important tradition of singing in the language as passed down through their mother and father. It is what they all grew up doing and what she passes down to her own family.

"While our people in those days weren't allowed to talk language in front of missionaries," Aunty Zeta says, "my mother and grandmother didn't take much notice and continued to speak in language secretly. My mother spoke several languages."

Aunty Zeta attended many schools in Melbourne and country Victoria. "They didn't have much trust in government, so we were always with them travelling," she recalls of her parents. "But that was all right, we were happy. Dad had to go wherever he could to secure seasonal work to feed us all."

During those years there were many gatherings at her father's cousin's church in Gore Street Fitzroy run by her uncle, Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls. "All our community would go there. It was 'the' gathering place and was always a really wonderful time for us."

"I am proud of all that history within our community, and most certainly from within my family. We all took part in trying to make a change when we didn't have anything. Anything we have now, we have from the struggle of our old people.

"With COVID-19, I haven't been out for weeks and weeks but that is okay. I just walk out the back where I sit by my fig tree and watch all the beautiful birds. Lovely birds ... crows, rosellas, pigeons and magpies. They all come at different times, it's really lovely and makes me feel like I'm in the bush.

"I often sit there at night when I also go out and just look up to all the stars. It connects me to my ancestors."

It is little surprise that Aunty Zeta's totems are birds – the Emu through her mother and the Bronze-Winged pigeon through her father. "All my children and grandchildren know this connection. My family is more precious to me than gold, and COVID-19 would be a lot harder without them."



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Aunty Zeta Thomson is a descendant of the Ulupna Clan of the Yorta Yorta Tribe through her mother, and the Wurundjeri Willum Clan, speakers of the Woi Wurrung language, through her father. She grew up in a large family in Shepparton and retains strong connections to both ancestral homelands. Her family maintains links with Cummeragunja through the continuing use of tribal burial grounds. Aunty Zeta has been involved in Aboriginal affairs, working at a community level, for most of her life. She has been a member of numerous committees, organisations, councils, boards and panels, imparting invaluable knowledge of her culture and history. Aunty Zeta is also an accomplished artist, and has exhibited her artwork throughout Australia and overseas. In recognition of her lifelong dedication to community work, advocacy, artistry and teaching, Aunty Zeta inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll in 2019.