



Uncle Rick Nelson

Dja Dja Wurrung

Interviewed by Andrew Stephens

October 2020

Uncle Rick Nelson probably never imagined himself as a rapper, yet there he is in a recently produced video in which he raps away like the best of them. With the aid of young musicians and artists through the Bendigo & District Aboriginal Cooperative, Uncle Rick got together with them and a video production crew, and they came up with the COVID-19 rap called *Uncle Rick's Health Message*.



Uncle Rick Nelson photographed by Liz Thompson

The video reaches out to the community, especially young people, to encourage them to do the right thing with hygiene and social distancing in order to protect themselves and others, which is why the lyrics are so attention-grabbing and catchy.

With his energetic and humorous rap, Uncle Rick asks people to “get the soap and get the bubbles: clean hands gonna keep us out of trouble”. He then raps on the importance of keeping our distance, even when together. As one of the musicians asks during the song: “How far, Uncle Rick, if we’re sitting with you?” To which he replies: “At least the same length as a didgeridoo.”

A respected Elder, Uncle Rick has spent most of his life on Jaara/Dja Dja Wurrung Country around Castlemaine. He says the lyrics for the video came together thanks to one Central Australian man, now living locally, who became involved. “He’s really into music, writing stories, poems and plays, so he came up with the words and we took it from there.”

In a second, more recent video, Uncle Rick and others sing the praises of staying connected, pushing the message that it is crucial to mental health and wellbeing to stay in touch with others, and to keep talking rather than isolating. The video is called *Stay Connected*.

Deeply involved in the community, especially through the Meeting Place program, he is no stranger to helping others staying connected: the core of his work is bringing people together, especially Aboriginal school students and young people, to deepen their understanding about Aboriginal life and culture. Even though the pandemic has led to the shutting down of schools



and restricted gatherings, making his positive contributions more difficult to sustain, he hasn't given up.

An optimistic and no-nonsense man who thrives on getting involved, Uncle Rick has not only been doing his utmost to keep people communicating in his community over the past six months, but has also kept himself busy preparing for a range of projects he will be involved with once restrictions start to ease a bit further.

"Because I am one of the traditional owners, a lot of stuff comes through me so I still get a lot of requests to do things here and there," he says. "We are having it a bit easier here in the country, compared to Melbourne. At least we can get out a bit more. I work with the men's group and school groups and that has all stopped because the schools were closed and we can't go on excursions into the bush to special places ... and for the men's group, the workers are working from home."

Despite Zoom meetings, participants have been dropping off. "For some people, they are struggling with it all. Others can cruise through it a bit more comfortably."

Uncle Rick's father, the well-known Elder Brien Nelson, grew up around Shepparton, moving to Castlemaine when he fell in love with a woman whose family had been in that area for generations. Uncle Rick says he picked up various pieces of knowledge from his dad as a kid, but as he got older and developed an interest in Aboriginal culture and history, he learnt more and began working alongside his father. "I've been walking in his footsteps and taking on his role," he says. "I've had to stand up and become an Elder. The community has bestowed that on me, so I run with it."

Before his death in 2019, preceded by a long illness, Uncle Brien worked on a book with and for children, which is being launched soon. The children were from the Meeting Place, which brings in Aboriginal children from various primary schools in the area and teaches them about Aboriginal life and culture. The Meeting Place has been a great success for local people and Uncle Rick is hoping to get funding to move the school to a permanent home in Chewton (it is currently at Yapeen).

"We've put in for that and now just waiting to hear how it goes."

One of the things he loves about visiting primary schools is sharing his knowledge and stories with the non-Aboriginal community and watching it spread. "It's great when kids come up and tell you things about how they've told their parents a certain story they've learnt," he says. "I get a smile on my face when kids come up and talk about Bunjil (the eagle) and



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Waa (the crow) and the mountain story about Mt Franklin and Mount Tarrengower. It's fantastic."

<https://www.facebook.com/BendigoDAC/videos/2538653719719488>

Uncle Rick is a Dja Dja Wurrung Elder and cultural advisor for the Dja Dja Wurrung community. He coordinates Men's Business where he takes men and boys out on Country in a variety of different ways.