

**Yoorrook Justice Commission****BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE COLIN WALKER****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Uncle Colin Walker. I was born on 28 January 1935. My birth certificate says 29 January 1935, as my birth was registered the next day. I only got my birth certificate when I was 63 years old.
- 2 I am a Yorta Yorta man.
- 3 I have worked with Counsel and the Solicitors Assisting team to prepare this *balert keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' truth-telling *wurrek tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission.
- 4 This *balert keetyarra* concerns my experiences as an Aboriginal person, including:
  - (a) my early life, including my experience growing up at the Cummeragunja Mission;
  - (b) the impact of my Elders on my life and the role of Elders today in continuing cultural knowledge and practices;
  - (c) my involvement in land rights and my connection to Country;
  - (d) my work in repatriating Aboriginal remains and cultural objects, including those taken from Yorta Yorta land;
  - (e) my experience as an Elder sitting on the Koori Court in Shepparton;
  - (f) my advocacy and community work; and
  - (g) changes to the environment and my Country.
- 5 During the course of preparing this *balert keetyarra*, some questions have arisen which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given the possibility that further documents will become available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:
  - (a) additional documentation relating to this *balert keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
  - (b) it is possible that I may be recalled at a later *wurrek tyerrang*.

## Early life

### My family

- 6 I was born at the Cummeragunja Mission at New South Wales. My mother was Hilda Walker (nee Day) and my father was Fred Walker. I have two brothers – Barney and Roy – and a sister, Walda.
- 7 I married my wife Faye in 1956 in Shepperton. We've been married for 66 years. When we were married, we had 7 pounds to our name. We had five children, but have lost two of our boys. Our family now cover five generations (I have great, great grandchildren).
- 8 My nickname in my family is Coco, my son Colin Jr is called Coke and one of my grandson's is called Pepsi.

### My early years

- 9 My grandmother, Florence (Florrie) Walker (nee Hamilton), who was a midwife, delivered me in a tin hut with a dirt floor at Cummeragunja. She didn't just deliver me – she delivered a few others with Aunty Nora Charles. The hands that brought me into this world are the same hands that taught me about our culture and made me the strong Yorta Yorta man I am today.
- 10 My mother's Country was Wemba Wemba. We would go there to visit for holidays. Everything was there in the forest. When I was a boy, we would go out and camp in the forest. When I grew up, I would go and camp there with my kids. After the kids grew up, we would still go and camp there – out of respect for my mother's Country. I also conducted surveys for Parks Victoria of burial grounds and middens after my kids had grown up. My uncles showed me those places when I was growing up. Now, the only time I go up there is for funerals. I try not to miss any funerals, out of respect.
- 11 I call my mother's Country the land of milk and honey because of all the food that was there. My uncles were great hunters, they learnt me how to hunt, including what to take and what not to take.
- 12 My mother died when I was seven. My two brothers and I watched them take her to hospital on a mattress at the back of a dirty old truck. She gave us a wave and that was the last time we saw her. My father died when I was in my fifties. He lived around the corner, where my son and daughter now live – it's what we call the Yorta Yorta farm (Ulunja).
- 13 My grandmother, Florence, and my grandfather, Herbert, brought us up after my mother died. After the Cummeragunja Walk Off, they let my grandparents come back to my mum and dad's house to rear me and my sister. Everything we needed was in the house my mum and dad had.
- 14 The Morgan brothers lived with us too, as their families had passed. They moved in as my brothers. This was a way of showing respect to their grandparents who had passed. It was good

growing up with Nan and Pop, they were very strong, kind people – strict, but kind. I will never forget the teaching of my grandparents. I still visit the family plot at the cemetery whenever I'm passing and talk to them. I talk to them about the going on of the family and how things have changed over the years.

- 15 We lost my grandfather when I was about 13 or 14, and then we lost my grandmother when I was 19 or 20.

### Education

- 16 I spent my childhood in a white man's school, Cummeragunja Primary School. I didn't like going to school. All I wanted to do is hang around Dhungalla (the Murray River) fishing.

- 17 I was expelled from school when I was 13.

- 18 My real education came from our Elders. They would talk to us about our Yorta Yorta law, they were very spiritual people. My grandfather took me fishing and taught me about the importance of Dhungalla. The stories were handed to us to teach us things. Like the Bunyip story. We were told if you go in deep water, the Bunyip will get you. This taught us as children not to go in too deep in the river.

- 19 In the early 1950s, I got to go with my uncles and grandfathers and camp in the forest. It was unreal. The food they would cook, and stories they would tell. I was blessed to be able to go with them. Women would get reeds from the river in the forest for weaving. I wouldn't swap any of my cultural knowledge for any university degree.

### Working life

- 20 After I was expelled from school, I worked in a shearing shed as a roustabout. I took up shearing with my brothers. I went with my uncle, while my cousin went with my father.

- 21 I would move around shearing, earning 4 pounds a week. But I would always come back to Nan and Pop in Cummera. While I was shearing, I played football. I started in 1952 up at Deniliquin, had a few runs in the Goulburn Valley and finished up at Moama.

- 22 Growing up there was racism. Even after the Referendum in 1967, it didn't help us that much. If we walked into a pub in Echuca, they'd say they couldn't serve us because "your mob" kicked off in here. Even though it wasn't us – we weren't from there. But they tarred us all with the same brush – even though there was a big difference in where we lived.

- 23 As discussed later in my balert keetyarra, when I turned 49, I went to Tranby College to study to be a Site Officer. After that, I worked for the Land Councils and was involved with the Koori court in Shepparton.

## **The Cummeragunja Walk Off**

- 24 I was 4 years old at the time of the Cummeragunja Walk Off. I was told it was about getting better living conditions. Living conditions probably got a little bit better after the Walk Off, but housing was too small for big families.
- 25 Although many people did not return to Country after the walk-off, they made their way back at the end of their lives. A lot of them are buried back here on their Country, their land. They never forgot where they came from.
- 26 They can't take that away from us – it is our land.

## **Life at the Cummeragunja Mission**

- 27 I was brought up in the mission under two laws – white fella law and black fella law. As I grew up, I realised that the laws were different and that the white laws discriminated against us. I had no time for white law because it was so discriminatory. There was no such thing as justice for us on the mission.
- 28 I have a few memories from life at the Cummeragunja Mission.
- 29 I remember pushing my billy cart up to the manager's quarters every fortnight for rations with my brothers. Doug Nicholls used to come and visit the mission. But I was very young.
- 30 The mission manager walked around in the night. If your grandmother sent you somewhere, to your aunties', for a bit of flour or sugar and tea, they would ask you what you were doing and tell you to go back or they would kick you up the backside.
- 31 At Cummeragunja Sunday School, if you started doing anything in the Aboriginal way, they would say the devil would get you. It broke my spirit. It broke the Elders' spirits too and they didn't pass anything on to us. All they passed on to us was how to gather food, what to eat and how to hunt.
- 32 They took kids from every mission, and what they used to do was wait until all the men went to work and then come and take them. The welfare people didn't know how Aboriginal people lived. They'd come to the mission looking in the cupboards and if they saw no tucker you were a bad parent. But we had one big supermarket outside – fish, turtle, kangaroo, emu. All we had to do was make damper.
- 33 At the Cummeragunja Mission, kids weren't allowed near any sites after dark – especially if they were burials. One of my uncles, Stan Day, my mother's brother, was a champion shearer and used to trap rabbits on a big burial site. He had a trail around his traps which he used to check at night. He told me that it didn't matter how well he followed that trail, he would end up somewhere else. That was because he wasn't supposed to catch rabbits on that site – it was a

burial site. I called him the trapper without a trail. He was the best trapper in Australia, but he could never trap that site in the night.

34 I also remember welfare coming by the house. My grandmother put the hose on them and chased them out of the yard. When we would run home from school, we would follow Dhungalla. If welfare or the police came to grab us, we would jump into Dhungalla and swim over the border to Victoria.

35 In the young days, it was good being a child. But when you grow up to be an adult, you're thinking of the things that happened. If you came to stay with your parents on the mission, you had to go to the manager's quarters and sign a paper to say you are staying with your mum and dad – how degrading that was. It was breaking up the families, the extended families. You couldn't be close to your families while you had the white managers on the mission, unless you lived there on Cummeragunja as a family. But if family came to visit, you knew there was a time limit on their stay. We have been through that, that is gone now. But it will never be gone from our minds for those who are still alive.

36 There were good things about growing up on Cummeragunja. All the families look after each other. If someone acted up, the uncles and aunties would sort them out. If a fella hurt their wife and the uncles and aunties found out, they would ignore them. If that fella passed them in the street and said hello, the uncles and aunties would look away and wouldn't say anything. But after a few days, the uncles and aunties would say – "Hey, boy, come over here". They'd call him "boy" to belittle him. And then they'd give him a strong talking to. It was shame and respect that would sort him out.

37 A lot of the old people would work up at the forest at farms and go up there to work in a horse and buggy. Our Elders would also use the horse and buggy when I was growing up to go into town, usually Echuca or Moama.

38 A lot of young people have said to me, "Uncle Col, you must be a bitter man after all that". But I am not, because I am telling them what we went through, and what our Elders went through. If anyone should be bitter, it should be Aboriginal people for the way we were treated. We were never violent people. Now I think people are getting violent, and you can't blame us on account for all the deaths in custody and things like that.

39 The mission closed when I was about 19 or 20 years old.

### **The impact of my Elders on my life and their role in the Mission days**

40 My Elders were my teachers and lawmen – they were our power-points. My Elders were my professors, they were my scientists. They kept me on the straight and narrow when I was expelled from school. The sayings they would come up with, teaching us.

- 41 Our Elders taught me about the importance of Dhungalla, and how it is our protector and provider. The river was never a boundary for us Yorta Yorta. It is like a human spine with the kidneys around it, which is our land, and the veins travelling through it, which are the creeks.
- 42 The river is also our supermarket – we get our food at Dhungalla. They used to tell us “what are you doing wasting water”. I wouldn’t swap the things I learned from the Elders for any university degree.
- 43 We had a lot of respect for our Elders growing up. They were educated and knowledgeable people.
- 44 The way the Elders spoke to us, they spoke to us straight up and that made us show respect. For example, if you had to go somewhere in the morning with some of the Elders to work and you weren’t there at half past seven, they wouldn’t knock on your door. They would drive away, and the next morning you would say “I was running late” and they would say “We know you were running late, that’s why we left you”. And that’s all they would say to you.
- 45 To give another example, years ago we had wooden boats on the river. I jumped in my grandfather’s boat. When I came in and took it up the bank, I got out to tie it up. I saw this big black shadow, as my grandfather came over. He said, “You’re not using that anymore, as you didn’t ask for it”. It was respect. They didn’t swear, they wouldn’t kick you up the backside. It was respect and discipline. Their words would be enough.

### **Cultural heritage**

- 46 My culture is important to me. Once when I was asked to swear on a bible in court, I refused and instead pulled out a stone-tipped tommy axe and told the Magistrate that I would make my oath on the axe.
- 47 I returned to study when I was 49. I studied at Tranby College for two years to become a Site Officer. It was hard for me to go back to school because I couldn’t read or write. Around that time was when they created the Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW. There were 23 of us men from different areas. They were terrific young men, and we all got to go into the bush. I liked that work – we weren’t office people, and we weren’t cooped up.
- 48 When I was at Tranby College, I was sitting together with another bloke and he thought I could read and write and I thought he could, but in the end we realised neither of us could. I was so embarrassed, and I said “My swag is packed, I’m heading back to Cummera”. But the other bloke said we should call the young ones in, who were also studying in different areas. They helped us do our reports and we learned them the bush knowledge that we knew. We showed them that if there is a little scar in a tree, it could mean it was a burial site.
- 49 After I finished my studies, I worked as a Site Officer. I was the Cultural and Heritage Officer for the North East (when we were assigned to the Victorian side), and I ended up working for four

Aboriginal land councils or organisations in the Murray River Region across NSW and Victoria – Albury, Cumberagunja, Moama and Wemba Wemba.

- 50 We had many birthing trees on Country when I was growing up but not many are left now. We were upset that a lot of land owners would ringbark the trees in Victoria. That's the way you kill a tree and let it bleed out. We were against that.
- 51 When I was working as a Site Officer in Victoria for Aboriginal Affairs, all of us Site Officers (I think there were about 38 of us) were sacked at once, sometime in the 1990s, even though we weren't even at the meeting where they sacked us. We were told we had to give our badges back but I just told them "oh I can't find mine, the kids were playing out the back in the mud with it" but I still have it with me.
- 52 I look forward to the day when I see more Aboriginal Rangers and Site Officers so that we can control our own cultural heritage.

### **Native Title and land rights**

#### Yorta Yorta native title case

- 53 I was involved in the Yorta Yorta Native Title case. It went on for ten years and we lost. The court said the tide of history washed away our traditional rights. But we still go fishing, still go hunting, and still eat our traditional food, so I'm confused. How did our history get washed away? We still have our family ties. We respect our stories and our waters where we fish. We were insulted by the decision. No culture in the world really stays the same – nowhere white people have been. So of course Yorta Yorta people have changed – but we are still Yorta Yorta people and we always will be.
- 54 When I had to give evidence, they knew I was a local bloke and that I had the knowledge from my Elders. But they just crucified me. What hurt me is that the judge said I was a deliberate liar. We had to go through a lot to prove who we are, and our connection to Country. We had to prove it was handed down to us.
- 55 I think we had a lot of pressure put on us. You'd feel terrible when you'd be giving evidence. Why did you have to give so much evidence? Why did you have to tell them this? Why did you have to sit there for hours being cross-examined – when your Elders had told you these things! The evidence we gave – it doesn't come from a book. You didn't have to read it. It comes from the Elders – they spoke in their language and their hands spoke languages.

#### Exercising my culture on my land

- 56 We have to get the government's approval to exercise our culture nowadays. For example, if I want to make a canoe, I have to get a permit to take the wood. Even though I would only take the bark. If you take the bark, you don't kill the tree. It is only if you get to the sap that you kill the tree.

- 57 When I was growing up, we would make nulla nullas, shields, canoes. Why should we have to ask permission for our cultural rights?
- 58 I once gave a whole bunch of shields, spears and other artefacts to a white friend of mine, who said he had a guy from England who was in Melbourne and wanted to buy them. I never saw my friend or the shields again, or got any money for them.
- 59 The same goes for fishing. Things are tightening up, and the government want us to get fishing licences. We don't need the government to be telling us which fish to throw back. If one is spawning, or has eggs, you let it go. If it's too little, you let it go. We know. Our Elders taught us. And we pass that on to the next generations.
- 60 When we would go onto land to protect our sacred sites, landowners would worry – but we just wanted to protect those sites. Sometimes we would know there was a midden or a burial ground on that land and they would almost pull the gun on us and say “get off my property you black so and so”. It was hard when we first started as Site Officers.

### Land Councils

- 61 I've been heavily involved in land rights since the start, in about 1983 or 1984, setting up the Land Councils in NSW. I think there were 127 Aboriginal Land Councils when it was set up. Although it's the Land Rights Act, I call it the Land Wrong Act. It's totally run by big families now. If you've got a big family, you've got full control. What about the rights of other people? The Land Councils have got into trouble when they don't listen to the grassroots – the people.
- 62 We have families here that are 80km away living in Victoria that have never ever come to a meeting with us that runs the land council from 80km away. We don't see the value of the crops; we don't know the funds where it goes or anything like that. We should set up a representation of two or three Elders from each Land Council. We used to have State-wide meetings years ago – we'd travel all over. It was good, everyone had a say. I think that should come back.
- 63 The Land Council really let us down, as well as Native Title. We as Traditional Owners have no say in our Land Councils. If you have a big family, don't care where you come from, if you were picked by a big family, you are the bosses.
- 64 These things need to be carefully looked at.

### **Repatriation of remains**

- 65 I did a lot of work on repatriations of remains and bringing ancestors back to Country when I worked with the Land Councils and with National Parks. I worked across NSW and in Swan Hill, on my mother's Country. We travel to get the remains back, and we deliver them to community so that a proper burial ceremony can be conducted. Sometimes we'd do it with archaeologists – if a burial site got exposed.

- 66 Museums across Australia and the world have our skeletons. We got some remains back from England. I was told there are some in Russia. If that is true – why are they there? Who is going to be responsible for bringing them back?
- 67 George Black was paid to dig up a lot along Dhungalla and take the remains. They called it the Murray Black Collection. Some of the Elders reckoned he was paid five bob a skull at the time. I was involved in getting the Murray Black remains back with the Elders from the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Land Council. It was the biggest repatriation in Australia.
- 68 Of the Murray Black Collection, our Elders agreed to bury a lot of it at our local cemetery because we had nowhere else to do the reburial and it would be safe there. We had two lots buried in Cummeragunja. People were happy we had done it. The women handled the babies – passed them on with beautiful care and tender hands. There was one mob where some of the remains were in 100s and 1000s of little pieces.
- 69 It was hard to identify where all the remains were taken from because George Black didn't give any pinpoints. We decided that since the remains had been together so long that we would bury them together.
- 70 We didn't want the remains in boxes in museums. They've studied us for long enough. So we freed them. We freed them back to their land, back to their Country. The Spirits are free then. It was important for us to do this while we still had Elders to talk to the young ones and explain why we did this and how emotional it gets. I take young people with me to do repatriations, to teach them.
- 71 All missions were the same. If we use my grandmother as an example, she was taken by force from Coranderrk to Cummeragunja because they had the power to do it. When she passed away, she was buried on different land and Country. The government now don't have the respect to take them back. It happened everywhere, every mission. They didn't take people back to their land. People were taken away and never brought back to Country.
- 72 I believe we should get more funds to be able to do repatriations properly. They used to give us our accommodation and pay us to do repatriation work. When I go to bed overnight with a big burial the next day, I don't twist and turn – I know what to do, and that's why I think I've been blessed by Elders. What haunts me every night is wondering – who is going to be responsible for bringing all the others back?

### **Koori Court**

- 73 I was asked to be an Elder sitting on the Koori Court in Shepparton in the early 2000s. I did it for 16 years. I was very suspicious when they asked me. I remember thinking to myself that I didn't want to be part of a white law court and sit with a crabby old white person. Then I decided that although I didn't have any faith that it would be any good, I would take part so I could at least see what it was all about.

- 74 The Magistrates asked me, "Uncle Col, would you like them to bow to you when they come into court?". I said no. No one has ever bowed to us Elders before me. That's how I am.
- 75 I sat on the Koori Court for 16 years. For me, the most interesting thing about sitting on the Koori Court was connecting up the young ones. I have been blessed living here for all these years. My mother was WembaWemba and my wife Faye is Wiradjuri, so I got to know everyone. The first thing I'd ask was "what's your name" and "what's your mother's maiden name". You'd see them getting a bit nervous, but it gave them a bit of spirit. When you would connect them up, it was unreal. So many young people knew their family but not how they were connected. Young women would be crying and hug you because they didn't know, it broke your heart. I'm blessed to know the family connections. I went right back to their grandparents and their great-grandparents, who they were. It was a way that I could connect with them. I would say "well, what gives you the right to carry on the way you do? You come from a respected, community-minded family that did a lot for the community. Why are you going on like this?"
- 76 I remember one young fella who played football. I asked him who he played for, what number he was, and if he was playing this Saturday. I said I was coming to watch that game. I didn't go – but he would act knowing I might be watching. And that's what my Elders did to us – they would say they saw you fishing – but it was another uncle who saw you.
- 77 We interviewed one young man and asked him what it felt like sitting in the Koori Court and he said: "it's terrifying, all the Elders glaring at you." It was terrifying for him because we all knew who he was and what he'd done. I remember once I was sitting next to Aunty Merle Bamblett and a Magistrate to hear a case about a man who threatened his partner's mother with a carving knife. I told the man: "You're talking to an Elder; I want you to look me in the eye. Women play a big role in the Aboriginal community. You must remember that without women our community would be down the drain, and so would our little children. Women are not to be knocked around; they are to be respected".
- 78 I remember seeing one young fella came up to me and said, "Uncle, I'm not going before the Koori Court because I didn't do it". I went up and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "good on you". People shouldn't be pleading guilty to get before the Koori Court if they didn't do it.
- 79 Seeing young people succeed was an honour. One young woman who came before us had gone down the wrong track. Then we got a letter from the Elders thanking us for putting her on the right track. That really gave us a feather in our cap; we felt like we didn't waste our time with that young woman.
- 80 I even remember a couple of young men who came before us. One bloke used to come in a lot for minor things. We got stuck into him and gave him no sympathy. He hasn't been back and he's going well. We as Elders sitting on the Koori Court are there as protectors. We weren't only involved in sentencing. We were also involved in rehabilitation. Workers tried to find accommodation for the people who came before the Koori Court – straight away, we were on

it. Then we followed that young person right through. We didn't just throw them out in the gutters, like in mainstream jails. We followed them right through and got reports on their rehabilitation.

81 I once had to go for a drive from Melbourne with a young man. We had to hire a car and I said he had to put his name down as a driver too. He was surprised and said "are you sure Uncle". I said "yes, I don't want to drive the whole time". When we got to my house we got out of the car and he started to follow me, but I told him to get back in the car and go have dinner with his family and then come pick me up, because I knew he had kids and needed to see them. He was shocked and said "you trust me with the car" and I said "yes, I know you'll do the right thing". He said he hadn't been trusted like that before. It's like that with young ones, you've got to show trust and build them up.

82 The young ones were just so disconnected, because their parents might have passed away or split up and their grandparents were gone. So they were getting around and not knowing. It's a terrible thing to be lost on your own Country, when you've never had that connection. Society changes that much. We talked to them the way our grandparents talked to us. The young people showed respect afterwards, sometimes they would come up and cry and hug you - young women and young men. That was great.

83 The Koori Court showed me that white law and black law can work together. I feel that finally there can be some justice for Aboriginal people.

### **Role of Elders today and importance of continuing cultural knowledge and practices**

84 Now that I am an Elder, I pass on Yorta Yorta law to the young ones, particularly when we go fishing.

85 I am sad that I am the only Elder in this area. There is no one to talk to. The Elders are all gone from different missions now – passed away. That's why we want the young ones to come back to Country. It peeps me up talking to the young ones. A lot of them are on rehab due to bad drugs and they were taken out to the forest to get them better, but there were no funds to continue the programs. When they come out of rehab, and you get them off the bad stuff, there was nothing for them. They hit a brick wall.

86 We have a language book, and now the young ones are learning language again. I couldn't anymore, because it was taken away from us. I remember some of our Elders speaking language on at Cummeragunja but they did that when they didn't want you to know what they were saying. Our knowledge was deteriorated by the white system. It was taken away from us in one way. That's why we have to go back before we go forward. No one will change my cultural ways of living.

87 A lot of people say to me, "Uncle Colin, you have got a lot of knowledge, but we never see you with a cloak on." That's because my Elders never gave me permission. They passed away before they gave me permission. They respected me growing up as a young man, but they

never lived long enough to say “You know a lot, we taught you everything, we want you to wear a cloak”. They were not around to tell me that, so I will never wear a possum-skin cloak.

- 88 We all say, as Elders, the young ones are our future. I listen to them. I don't say “Excuse me, I'm an Elder”, I listen to the young one talking first. That's what we have to do with our young ones – it is our cultural right.

### **Advocacy and community work**

#### Cultural burning

- 89 I am involved with the Firesticks Alliance and advocate for cultural burning. Our Elders always told us that fire is a good servant but a bad master; if he gets control, he's a monster. Aboriginal people aren't really recognised in things like this. We want to be part of it and be involved together. I think cultural burning should be allowed in every forest where we are Traditional Owners. I don't know why they don't do it, and there should be more of it.

#### Cultural competency

- 90 Together with Larry and Len Jackson and Robynne Nelson, I run Culcha Camps. We provide cultural competency learning. I teach people about life in the bush at the Barmah National Park. They spend time fishing, catching and cooking, gathering mussels, cooking damper, painting clapsticks, playing didgeridoos and yarning about their life and work experience. I show them the bush.
- 91 The Culcha Camps are great.
- 92 I also did the Batja Men's Group, run out of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation. The men's group stated not long after I started at the Koori Courts. A young Aboriginal woman designed the logo. She's passed now. We have very good artists here in Cummera and Echuca. But they stopped since Justice stopped funding it.
- 93 I have spoken at AAMI Stadium at men's program events organised by Alan Thorpe. He had a few of us Elders up on stage. I have a lot of respect for Alan. Sometimes Alan would bring me down to Melbourne or come up to Country for the programs. I would speak to the young fellas. I told them to go back to Country, to find Elders. Many are lost souls. I always tell them that if you go back, someone from your family will still be there and be able to connect you. No-one can deny you that.
- 94 I also go and do talks at schools.

#### Men's programs

- 95 I did a lot of rehab stuff too. I handled a lot of young fellas on ice. I can talk to these blokes that came to our camp outs. I took them onto Country. I'd say bring your fishing gear. The ones with

drinking and drugs. I would listen to them and say “I was like you”. And they could see that you don’t have to be drinking or smoking to be a man.

### **Deaths in custody**

- 96 I went and spoke as an Elder and provided an Acknowledgment of Country at the start of the coronial inquest into Aunty Tanya Day’s death in custody. Aunty Tanya was my niece, a Yorta Yorta woman. I poured sand from Dhungalla on to the bench. I explained that this was where Aunty Tanya Day commonly found rest – this was sand that she had walked through with her grandkids – and how she was denied such rest prior to her death.
- 97 My niece, Veronica Nelson Walker, was picked up for shoplifting and died in a cell. Rusty, Veronica’s father, Faye and me reared him from when he was a little fella. And then he was taken from us and we had to go to court at Dubbo or Cowra. We didn’t get him back for about 12 months. When we buried Rusty, Veronica spoke polite and was respectful.
- 98 Justice is not doing the right thing by us. Why are our young ones dying? To me, it’s through stupidity. Young women, mothers dying in cells. I think that’s really got to be looked at.
- 99 It happens more now. Back when I was young, they were locking our people up for having a few beers, the cops would come around and take them. They’d take lock them up for the night – trying to show they were the boss, the manager. But I can’t remember any of our young women dying in a cell at that time.

### **Benefits of following a traditional lifestyle**

- 100 I have lived at Cummeragunja for 87 years. Four months is the longest time I have been away from Cummeragunja when I worked as a fruit and veggie picker or shearer. I always come home to Cummeragunja – Cummeragunja means ‘our home’.
- 101 I have never left Cummeragunja because I am a traditional hunter and gatherer, I get my own food from the forest and Dhungalla. My grandparents fed us good food, unlike what you get today at fast food places. We were fed on rabbits; fish was part of the everyday diet for us. We would just go down to the river and get what we wanted.
- 102 Today I am still a traditional hunter gatherer. I have a shooting licence and my guns are registered. I go in the forest, hunting kangaroo, emu and rabbit.
- 103 I have a freezer full of kangaroo and emu. If any of the young mothers come down and say “Uncle Col, I haven’t got much to eat” I give them some kangaroo or emu. That’s how I treat all my young ones.
- 104 I am 87 years old. I don’t take any medications, and I believe that is because I have an active healthy traditional lifestyle. I eat a lot of kangaroo and emu.

## Changes to the environment and Dhungalla

- 105 Our Elders passed it all down to us. We look after the Country that our Elders handed down to us.
- 106 They were concerned about issues like food, fish and turtles. We don't get as many turtles that we used to. We want to know why. The broad shell long neck turtle is our totem, they are not about like they used to be. We wonder why – is it the quality of the water? We don't eat them – but we would eat the other turtles.
- 107 The old people would say Dhungalla is our supermarket. We would eat fish, crayfish and turtles – but would never take more than we needed. We respected the water and nature – if a tree falls in the river that is natural and helps the fish – so don't interfere. Dhungalla was also our protector. If welfare came to grab us, we would swim to the other side.
- 108 The water quality was beautiful years ago; you could drink it straight out of Dhungalla, or open your eyes underwater. You can't now – your eyes would get infected. Dhungalla is only used as a draining channel at times – pesticides, you don't know what goes into the river system.
- 109 There is a swamp on my Country that we call Rushy Swamp. We used to get swan eggs and emu eggs from there. But now we ask, why isn't there water in Rushy Swamp? Our Elders would say you "can't knock blood out of stone". With the Swamp dry, we can't get the eggs like we used to.
- 110 We have a beautiful country. I don't understand why people want to wreck it. Things are changing. The forest is deteriorating. Many of the animals are now confused. Emus used to lay eggs once a year. Now they lay eggs three to four times a year. Why is that? I think it is the change in climate, and they don't know what's going on.
- 111 Parks will shoot deer and leave them. We should be setting up a program for people, young people, to collect the deer. Australia is a very wasteful country. Back when I used to patrol the national park, if I came across someone who had shot a kangaroo – I'd ask what they were going to do with it. If they said they were going to eat it, I'd move on – no more questions.
- 112 I don't know why we are looked down upon as Aboriginal people. We have to have a voice. We have to have a voice in Parliament. To fight for our rights.

Dated 27 May 2022