

Yoorrook Justice Commission

Statement of Aunt Jennifer Beer

Dalk Muwil. Ngarringek Jenni Nyirr. Giyayurrwek Wergaia. Dyata Wutjubulak. Hello all. My name is Jenni Beer. I speak Wergaia. Wutjubulak country. Wupert Bungundilar Dyata is the name for Horsham in Wergaia

The reason why I want to put in this submission is we walk between two worlds. It wasn't our choice. We were forced from the moment that the British Empire set foot on our country, and we never conceded our country.

It's been a long battle because you have a hierarchy there that forced us into a way of life, took our way of life away, took our identity, took our laws. We today, we're so different, as Aboriginal people, because a lot of our people have taken on the assimilation policy they've absorbed into Western society. Their values have changed.

I've always walked between two worlds. I come from a family of nine. My mother was English. She ran away with my father, and they got married in Melbourne, at the time where it was illegal for Aboriginal people to marry whites or whites to marry Aboriginals. But they got married through Pastor Doug Nicholls.

So I was more around my father's, my aunts. I was looking for my identity, and I was in a grade three reader, and I was reading it to my grandfather. At that time, I didn't realise he was my grandfather. I just knew him as Ngek daddy. And he was always around. And he told me that my great grandfather found the three children lost in the bush at Natimuk here in our country. And so, for years, I used to think that I was Royal blood. He was named, he was announced as king, which confused me.

I had problems in primary school around, the J and the K's, I couldn't pronounce them properly. When I went to spell, I couldn't spell properly because of the K, and the J used to get confused with me. That was never picked up. So, you know, you hide. You hide a lot of things, growing up, and like I said, walking between two worlds.

When I was out in mainstream, I would always identify myself as Aboriginal. As soon as that person got up and walked away, I knew that they weren't. They weren't interested in me. They weren't, they didn't really want to know me. And that was my good indicator of getting rid of some, you know, unsavoury characters.

I got into education. I started in the 80s, and I started looking for my family tree. And that was very interesting because going through our native title, I gave Ray Madden, our anthropologist at the time, my family tree, and it was the only one that I was the only one that gave it over, and

so my grandfather's siblings connected all of us except the Robinsons that are in our claim. We crisscrossed, married in.

Even today, I'm still finding that connection with the mob. I can sit there, and I can tell them how they were actually related to me, and where different mobs come from and it was really interesting when I moved from Ballarat up here to Horsham and a lot of people didn't realise that I was Wotjobaluk and so they would come up and say, "well, I never knew". I said, "well, you never asked me. I knew you where you come from, you told me, but you never asked me". So, a lot of them thought that I was just connected in Ballarat and I wasn't. So that was an interesting thing.

And then coming back to my father's country, he used to bring us all the time up this way, up to Antwerp to visit. We would meet the relations on the way, so we had to call him, see him. Like there was a call in at Stawell, Ararat. We didn't really call into to Horsham or Dimmy for that matter. Oh, sometimes in Dimi, but mainly out at Antwerp. So, we knew who they were so that was great. I had that sense of belonging where I was. And then when I finished being the facilitator for Native Title in 2005, I wanted to know what was missing with their mob over here in 2014. I asked the question. I put it out there, what was wrong?

So, in 2005, I went over to New Zealand, and I discovered it was our language. New Zealand was about ten years in front of us with reclaiming language, and their culture. And so, I actually went into a primary school, where they were teaching Maori. So, everybody in that school spoke Maori. But as soon as I came out of that school into the streets, they would speak English. So, we were multicultural.

So that took me on the journey of revival and reclamation. We changed the curriculum here in Victoria, and what I mean by that, we did the VCE, LOTE, language other than English. We set the exam. The exam was it was a test case study through Yorta Yorta, but they never sat the exams. So, we talked about it and said, well, okay, if we sit the test, then we're changing it for all. Not just for us but for all. And so, we did that and we changed the curriculum of LOTE in schools, in primary and secondary schools, which is fantastic.

And so, we continue to do that. We took, in that process of doing LOTE, we didn't have a grammar or dictionary. Doctor Julie Read, she had researched our mob, our language. The day that we went in to register our claim in 1995, she actually went into the university, and her target was Wergaia.

So, ten years later, we meet up and she becomes our teacher and she also wrote our grammar for us. So, it's just taken me ten years, ten years of actually getting, the mob, the full group mob to endorse the grammar and dictionary to be published. So, once it gets published, we can add to it, it becomes ours, and the only intellectual property we were concerned with was the grammar. Because the dictionary, you can find that information anywhere.

It's out in the public domain, but not the grammar because that was developed by Doctor Julie Read. So, we negotiated with her to have that back, that given to us, and so we're still in the, in the process of setting up a language committee and teaching people. Because the language now is a written language. It's not an oral language, it's a written language so you have to get used to the words, how they're spelt. It's similar to English, but not, because we don't have, in the vowels, we don't have an 'O'. We use a 'U' for 'Oo'. And the structure of our sentences are different, too, because we, it's, verb, subject object. And then you've got your pronouns that you put on at the end. So, it's pretty daunting for me because I still have to hear the words said to me. So, we're still on that journey.

I've helped get back our lands. We've got that. We've got a lot more than what we ever thought. We never thought that we would get a consent determination. We did. We opened the doors again for Victoria, after the court doors were closed through Yorta, and then the change of, was it the TOSA (Traditional Owner Settlement Act) Agreements, abled other people to negotiate with the state? We knew that we had had it, because with native title, it's a big book. But there's only one thing that needed to be focused on is the connection to country, the connection from our ancestors to the arrival of the British. And we had that, and we had that documented, with the work from the Ebenezer where our people were put after the, Ebenezer was closed, it was still in the boundaries of the Ebenezer, so we they couldn't dispute that. But we agreed to do negotiations with the state around that which was fantastic.

You can't change society. You know, the way that culture, especially western society and how they structure it, anything else is foreign to them, might look outside of that. Eddie Mabo taught me a lot - you hit them with their own laws. And that's one thing I didn't say is that when we first met with the State and put our demands on the table, they ruled back for six months before they actually come and negotiated with us. And they had to employ the guy by the name of John Catlin to do it.

We also requested change - we wanted our cultural heritage back, because we had somebody up here that wasn't even, one of our mob doing a cultural heritage. And ripping us off, I might add. But, you know, that's the way it goes, because one thing I learnt about walking between two worlds is the greed, the mighty old dollar. The greed is so ripe there that people forget that it's not about money, it's about emotional support for your mob. And I always say what benefits the mob benefits me. What benefits me benefits mob. Always.

END OF STATEMENT