

I'm Deone West. My mobs are Pajong from Fish River, Gunning, Wiradjuri from Hay, Narrandera and Yass and Gundungurra which I believe is around Gunning as well. I have also recently discovered that I have Mob on my mother's side from Beechworth but don't know anything about that side. It has taken me ten years to discover this far.

I'd like to speak about my paternal grandmother, Patricia Tankard, and her disconnection from her family. When Patricia married my grandfather, she was disconnected from her family. She had 2 sisters and her mum. I am told that she very rarely connected with them after her wedding. She went on to have 4 children, as well as many other pregnancies that ended in miscarriage.

When my father was 17 years old, my grandmother was 8 or so months pregnant. My father and his siblings were present when Patricia began to labour at home on the kitchen floor. She suffered a haemorrhage and neither her nor her child survived. I never really understood why she was having her child on the kitchen floor and not in hospital. I later learned that all of her children were born at home and, whilst never directly mentioned, the belief is that this was due to the fear of her children being taken from her. I also discovered that this is one of the main reasons that she was disconnected from her family. Patricia was trying to 'pass' as white. To keep her family safe.

In our family, being Aboriginal was an open secret. It was acknowledged but just as quickly dismissed. Because we didn't grow up on country, because we didn't suffer racism, because we didn't look Aboriginal, because we hadn't directly suffered it was accepted that we had no right to claim our heritage and that we should just forget about it, treat it like an interesting anecdote.

I cannot explain how or why, but I have always 'felt' Aboriginal. It wasn't until I was in my 40's and after my father had passed that I started to dig deeper and seek that connection.

Around 7 or 8 years ago, when working at a primary school in Frankston, I 'came out' as Aboriginal to our district KESSO. He became my mentor and we continue our friendship and my learning to this day.

He once told me "There is a place for you within your kinship group. It's there, no one can take it from you". That changed my life.

However.

It has and continues to be incredibly difficult to undo the lifelong conditioning that 'I am not Aboriginal enough to BE Aboriginal'. I feel so incredibly vulnerable and like any minute now a 'real' Aboriginal person will call me out. I am so scared of doing it wrong.

I yearn to travel to country, Narrandera NSW and meet my mob but the fear of being rejected by community stops me. I am working through that fear and have been lucky enough to be so wonderfully supported by the mob that I do have access to.

I did not choose to disconnect from my culture. That choice was never given to me. It was a decision made by my grandparents, but I still suffer the consequences.

It wasn't my choice.

So now, I am making up for lost time. I am continually learning as best I can and spending time with local mob.

I have also developed a 'Koori group' program for the Koori students attending the school I work at. We learn together and its beautiful.

I will, one day, go to country. I will meet my people and we will embrace and I'll finally know what it feels like to be home.

Thank you.