

Destruction of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Seven Seasons Mosaic at Collingwood College - Statement of Sophie Rudolph to the Yoorook Commission

Background

1. I hold a Bachelor of Arts with a Major in Australian Indigenous Studies, a Master of Education in Indigenous Education Policy and a PhD which also focused on Indigenous education.
2. I was a classroom teacher at Collingwood College (the **College**) in Melbourne from 2008 until 2009. In 2010 I undertook my Masters degree and worked as a relief teacher. In 2011 I returned to the College part time as the art teacher for Prep to grade 4 and finished as a teacher at the end of 2012 to pursue my PhD.
3. I have had an ongoing relationship with the College, often visiting to support the education programs and provide professional learning. The last of those sessions was a series of workshops in 2022 with all staff on Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.
4. My role as an art teacher at the College included:
 - a. arts skills sessions with each class once a week; and
 - b. in-class sessions once a week where I worked in collaboration with the children and their classroom teachers on interdisciplinary projects.
5. In this role I led the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Seven Seasons Mosaic project in 2012.

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Seven Seasons Mosaic

6. In 2012, the grade 1 and 2 class community at the College created a mosaic of the Wurundjeri seven seasons. This was part of a unit of work looking at seasons and change in the environment and included conversations with the students about different seasonal knowledge and the knowledge that belongs to the place where the school is located – the knowledge of the Kulin Nations people.
7. I applied for a grant from the Yarra Council to pay Aunty Judy Nicholson from the Wurundjeri Council to work with the children to design the mosaic. They learnt about the stories and Country that is connected to the Wurundjeri knowledge of the seven seasons and how to understand the changing seasons.
8. The children, their teachers and the parent community then turned the design into a mosaic in the school grounds. One of the parents was a builder and so laid a large disc of concrete in the grounds to fix the mosaic to. The children, parents and teachers then smashed the appropriately coloured tiles and glued them into place according to the designs. These were then grouted. The mosaic was opened by Uncle Bill Nicholson in December 2012 with a smoking ceremony.

(the Mosaic)

9. The Mosaic is a place where Wurundjeri knowledge is connected to Country in the school grounds and can be used by all members of the College community to understand Wurundjeri knowledge, culture and connection to Country.
10. Since that time teachers have used the Mosaic to teach about the Wurundjeri seasons both informally and formally. The seasons have formed part of the curriculum and the Mosaic holding Wurundjeri knowledge was used as a meeting point for some classes at the start of

each term to look and think about which season it was and what was happening in the environment.

11. I attach the following appendices depicting the Mosaic:
 - Appendix 1A: Children constructing the Mosaic in 2012;
 - Appendix 1B: The completed Mosaic in 2012; and
 - Appendix 1C: NAIDOC smoking ceremony with Uncle Ian Hunter, 11th July 2023.
12. In September 2023, the Mosaic was destroyed to make way for a building that was part of a new kindergarten opening on the College site in 2024. It is clear that it was possible to move the Mosaic to make way for the kindergarten, but it was instead destroyed. This demonstrates a breach of the school's responsibilities as custodians of Indigenous knowledge, and a complete lack of care for the Mosaic's significance.

Events leading up to the destruction of the Mosaic

13. In late 2022-early 2023, teachers at the College, including myself, were told that there were plans to build a preschool on site at the College and that one of three options would interfere with the Mosaic.

June 2023

14. On 19 June, Sormeh Afkari, Acting Assistant Principal of the College, also one of the teachers involved in developing the Mosaic in 2012, texted me to invite me to a smoking ceremony for NAIDOC Week at the College on 11 July. The ceremony was to be held at the Mosaic. Ms Afkari also informed me in these messages that the Mosaic would be demolished.
15. In the week of 19 June 2023, the last week of Term 2, Ms Afkari attended the Indigenous Perspectives Working Group meeting and told staff that the Mosaic could not be saved. She told staff that she was really upset about it, having been involved in the project originally. She did not provide any further details. This was recounted to me by [redacted] and [redacted] ([redacted]).

Week of 26 June

16. [redacted], the [redacted] at the College, spoke to the President of the College Council, Geoff Rundell. Mr Rundell indicated that the plans for the new kindergarten had not been finalised. He seemed to recognise the significance and importance of the Mosaic, and suggested the Wurundjeri Council and the community should be consulted on the design of the kindergarten and surrounds to ensure it was culturally appropriate. [redacted] highlighted to Mr Rundell that the Mosaic was a site of Indigenous knowledge and cultural significance and needed to be preserved at all costs. Mr Rundell welcomed input from Wurundjeri Elders and artists, including those who designed and created the Mosaic. [redacted] relayed this conversation to [redacted].
17. Mr Rundell spoke to Principal of the College, Sam Luck. Mr Luck told Mr Rundell that:
 - a. The Mosaic could not be saved;
 - b. This decision was out of the jurisdiction and influence of the school; and
 - c. He and Ms Afkari had approached Wurundjeri artists to explore the possibility of a new project that could become a permanent feature of the school and a site of Indigenous knowledge.

Mr Rundell offered to photograph and document the Mosaic for historical records, if the Wurundjeri Council gave its consent. Mr Luck was to discuss this with staff at the beginning of the next term. Mr Rundell relayed this conversation to [redacted].

18. I contacted [redacted] at the Wurundjeri Council's Education team to let him know that the Mosaic was going to be destroyed, [redacted]. His colleague [redacted] at Wurundjeri Council replied, asking for documentation regarding the Mosaic so that she could let [redacted] and the Wurundjeri Council know what was happening.
19. [redacted] received an email from a parent on the College's Council who was not aware of the Mosaic issue being presented to the College Council. The parent was concerned about its possible destruction and believed that every effort should be made to move/preserve it. The parent sent this email after [redacted] sent parents an email raising concerns about destruction of the Mosaic.
20. [redacted] and [redacted] spoke to various parents in the school community to let them know what was happening and they offered to assist with raising it at the College Council and with the principal.
21. On 28 June, during the school holidays, I met up with [redacted] and [redacted] to discuss the Mosaic in order to try to save it. [redacted] and [redacted] decided to investigate further.

July

22. On 11 July, the College held a smoking ceremony at the Mosaic to mark NAIDOC week. The whole primary school attended. At this event I spoke to various staff members about the Mosaic and that it would be destroyed. Some people were not aware of these plans, while others were and seemed resigned to the fact that it was being demolished.
23. On 21 July, Principal of the College, Sam Luck gave a 10-minute online briefing to staff before the school day began in which he conveyed the plans to construct a kindergarten on the school grounds. In this briefing, Mr Luck said that because of 'soil contamination' and costs they couldn't go with the original plan of modifying the existing buildings. He didn't mention the destruction of the Mosaic but said that trees in the area would have to be removed and that an 'Indigenous garden' was being planned. This briefing was relayed to me by [redacted], who was in attendance.

August: Communications with Yarra Council and Wurundjeri Council

24. On 2 August, I wrote to Councillor Stone at the Yarra Council to inform her that the kindergarten proposed by the College and to be run by the Yarra Council would be built on the site that the Mosaic sits, and would require its demolition. Cr Stone was present at the opening of the Mosaic in 2012. The Yarra Council also awarded the grant that enabled College students to work with artist Aunty Judy Nicholson on the Mosaic's design. Cr Stone replied to me the same day, confirming that she would investigate and that she was sure there was a way to move the Mosaic to a suitable location.
25. Cr Stone submitted my concerns to the Yarra Council's feedback system. On 3 August, I received a notification that the Yarra Council would be in contact with me within 10 business days to discuss.
26. On 9 August, [redacted] emailed me to tell me the following:
 - a. Her colleague [redacted], a [redacted] at the Wurundjeri Council, had spoken with Heritage Unit Elders about the Mosaic;

- b. The Heritage Unit Elders suggested it might be possible to register the Mosaic as an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage place; and
- c. [redacted] was also in the process of contacting the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register to confirm if registering the Mosaic was possible.

In the same email, [redacted] suggested the Mosaic could be moved to another site connected to Wurundjeri education.

27. On 18 August, Graham Davis, Manager of Building and Asset Management at the Yarra Council responded to my concerns submitted by Cr Stone. Mr Davis outlined that:
- a. The original plans to extend the existing building were too expensive and so they had decided on lower cost modular buildings delivered by the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA); and
 - b. The VSBA project manager had advised that the Mosaic would be relocated in sections prior to installation of the modular building, although success of this was not guaranteed and would depend on the construction of the base on which the Mosaic was built.
28. I wrote back to Mr Davis on the same day, thanking him for the response and suggesting that he contact the Wurundjeri Elders Council and the College teachers who were part of the project/are in charge of Indigenous education at the College to ensure the best process is carried out for moving the Mosaic and that a suitable new location is found. I also asked what research into methods for moving the Mosaic had taken place or would take place.
29. On 29 August, I rang Mr Davis as I had not heard back from him or anyone else at the Yarra Council. Mr Davis sent me an email outlining that he had spoken to the College, who had told him that:
- a. The Mosaic could not be saved because a builder had informed them that there is no way to move it, and there is nowhere else to put it;
 - b. They spoke to students and parents involved in the development of the Mosaic in 2012 and though they were disappointed, they recognised that the Mosaic is 11 years old and that the school should look at a new project involving local Indigenous families and current students; and
 - c. Photos and information about the Mosaic would be placed in the kindergarten foyer and that once the kinder is operational it would commit to undertake a project with similar purpose of connection to land and Wurundjeri seasons.
30. I wrote back to Mr Davis 29 August to express my disappointment. I pointed out that destruction of Aboriginal cultural knowledge was very bad and consultation about the Mosaic had been very flawed.

September

31. During the week of 4-8 September, teachers from the school reported to me that the trees in the courtyard where the Mosaic sits were cut down and piled in the courtyard. The Mosaic was still visible and intact on Friday 8 September.
32. On 4 September, Sam Hewett, General Manager of Infrastructure and Environment at Yarra Council, replied to my email to Mr Davis from 29 August. He asked for my phone number to discuss my concerns. I provided Mr Hewett with my phone number on 4 September.
33. On 6 September, Mr Hewett called me, and reiterated Mr Davis' messages from the email on 29 August.

34. On 6 September, I rang [redacted] to see if the College had contacted the Wurundjeri Council. [redacted] had not heard if the Wurundjeri Council had heard from the College but could not be certain. [redacted] offered to ring the principal of the College to confirm that the Wurundjeri Council wanted the Mosaic.
35. On 7, 8 and 11 September, [redacted] attempted to contact the Acting Principal of the College, Angela Watters, leaving multiple messages requesting a return phone call. [redacted]'s call was not returned.

13 September

36. On 13 September, [redacted] emailed Ms Watters requesting that she urgently contact her about the Mosaic and that the Wurundjeri Elders and Cultural Heritage Department of the Wurundjeri Council wanted to be informed of next steps regarding the Mosaic.
37. Ms Afkari called [redacted] to confirm that the Mosaic could not be saved. [redacted] asked for the written reports from the builders who had assessed the Mosaic as being unmovable. Ms Afkari confirmed that the builders' reports had been given verbally. [redacted] requested the names and numbers of the builders that gave these verbal reports. Ms Afkari told [redacted] that she had until Monday, 18 September to move the Mosaic if the Wurundjeri Council wanted it.
38. I contacted [redacted], head of the [redacted] at the Victorian Department of Education. [redacted] told me that he would contact the Head of Early Childhood Education at the Victorian Department of Education, Catherine Liddle, to get the works at the College stopped so the Mosaic could be moved.
39. I contacted art conservationists at the University of Melbourne for advice on how to carefully move the Mosaic without damaging it. They provided informal advice that indicated it would be difficult but not impossible to move the Mosaic. Their advice was that it may involve cutting the Mosaic into pieces and putting it back together again in another location.
40. On 14 September, [redacted] spoke to the VSBA Project Manager of the new kindergarten build. The project manager reiterated previous messages that:
- a. The Mosaic was too hard to move; and
 - b. The College had spoken to the Wurundjeri Council about doing a replacement work, and that the original teachers and children involved in its development understood the situation.

The Project Manager also told [redacted] that the Mosaic had already been destroyed. This was despite Ms Afkari telling [redacted] the day before that they had until 18 September to move the Mosaic.

41. On 15 September, [redacted] called to inform me that the Mosaic had already been demolished and we had been a couple of weeks too late.
42. Later, I learnt that during the week of 11-15 September, students at the College had described to their teacher seeing the Mosaic being lifted from the ground mostly intact in one piece. They expressed distress at seeing the Mosaic being broken into tiny pieces and put into a skip bin. From these accounts from students, it appears it was entirely possible to safely remove and relocate the Mosaic, as the art conservationists had also indicated.

43. Further, there appeared to have been little thought given to the emotional distress of children seeing the culturally significant Mosaic destroyed in front of them. The stories depicted by the Mosaic were important to many people at the school.
44. The Mosaic contained Indigenous knowledge that the College were custodians of. They failed in their obligation to protect that knowledge and ensure the Wurundjeri Council were central to making decisions about how to look after it.
45. This kind of disregard for Indigenous knowledge also sends a message to Aboriginal families who attend the school that it is not deeply committed to strong and safe Indigenous education. Teachers have reflected that they feel unsure how to continue the work of the Indigenous Perspectives Working group in the wake of this destruction of Indigenous knowledge.
46. I believe this was not just a failure of the College, but of the multiple education and community authorities who were contacted about the Mosaic to work with the College and the Wurundjeri Council to protect this significant artwork and Indigenous knowledge.

Thank you for considering my submission. I can be contacted for any questions you may have.

Appendix 1A: Children constructing the mosaic in 2012

[redacted]

Appendix 1B: The completed mosaic in 2012

[redacted]

Appendix 1C: NAIDOC smoking ceremony with Uncle Ian Hunter, 11th July 2023

[redacted]