



TRANSCRIPT OF RECORDING

ROBERT JOHNSON

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INTERVIEWER : You don't have to get too close. It's pretty good. But I'll just get you to start by introducing yourself and maybe your mob.

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ROBERT JOHNSON: Yep. My name is Robert Arthur Johnson. My mob, we're from Tasmania. Little river people down around Burnie. Any more than that about my culture, I don't know. My father shifted, or came from Tasmania over to the mainland when he was 16. He got into the Snowy Mountains Scheme as part of that for a few years until it was finished and then travelled around. He met my mother. I don't exactly know where. Shortly after that, I was born in Deniliquin, New South Wales. The family shifted around. I ended up having another brother and two sisters. We finally - like I said, we moved around Victoria and that for a while finally shifted here to Swan Hill, where we came up here in 69. I finished off my secondary schooling here in Swan Hill and, yeah, started work life. I did a bit of what young males usually do, mucking around and odd jobs and that sort of thing for until I settled down and did my nursing. Started that in 74, finished it, stayed here nursing. I went back to specialise in at the Royal Women's and Royal Melbourne hospitals as an anaesthetic and surgical nurse. The last 18 years of my 24 year of public nursing was in the operating theatre.

Left there, joined the Swan Hill Aboriginal Co-op as head of the health. Stayed there for probably another ten years. I became - went from being the health manager to being the CEO of the Aboriginal Co-op. And then I joined the Salvation Army and did four years of drug and alcohol counselling that I thoroughly enjoyed because most of my clients were my mob. And yeah, got a lot of pleasure out of that. That job became redundant. So I left there and my mate might cannot was in charge of the health service in Swan Hill, Aboriginal Health service. So he asked me to join him there again. Was nursing there. Probably did another 20 years in there when MDAS took over the health service in Swan Hill. I left just didn't like the ideas of what MDAS had going for our people. And at that time, I was ready to retire. Got a pension and Yeah, and now an active elder. Yeah. A lot of things that have gone along with in my days of nursing have - I haven't liked, a lot of times I've enjoyed it. But. Yeah, So far, so good.

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INTERVIEWER : Uncle, I'll just, I know, last time we had a bit of a yarn, you mentioned that you were really lucky to, to sit with the old people. You say you don't know much about your culture from Tassie, but I remember you saying you were lucky enough to sort of sit with some of the mob around here and learn some things.

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ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah. When I was when we first came up here, like I said, I was in secondary school, which would have meant that I was probably around between the ages of 13, 14. And my old man, he was he was black fella, although he lived out of a long necked bottle as far as I was concerned. But you know, the mob he used to get together and the wise family and the Moore family would come together. And my old man, naturally, was drawn to their own corroborees. And yeah, the more they drank, the more the elders talked. Because it loosened their tongue a

45

bit. And I was privileged to learn a lot about local culture and respect that I got out of that just by being there and just by sitting and listening. It was - drew me in to because some of the elder males there, they you know, they, they would talk of the dreamtime. And this dreamtime at that age drew me right in. I like I said, I never
 5 knew my culture, but to listen to another culture being talked about and being able to learn it, just was another thing to me. And it's gone on from there. My time being with the health services and all that and nursing with back, with my back, with the Aboriginal, Indigenous culture was that I got to know a lot of the elders, because of course, a lot of our elders are always got sicknesses and things that are wrong with
 10 them. So being a nurse and doing a lot of house calls and looking after them in their home. Again, elders had so much knowledge, and were willing to talk to you. So you only had to show a bit of interest, and that was enough to get their tongues going. And yeah, I was privileged enough to learn a lot and how to treat the elders. Even today, even though I'm now an elder, I sit and wonder and listen to the other elders in
 15 there - when they're not bitching about each other, it's great. But yeah.

INTERVIEWER : I'll also ask you about, I guess when you mentioned your nursing for a long time, what are the some of the things throughout your career that you've noticed in the way of yourself being in the position as an indigenous man? The
 20 things that maybe were reflected in the times of when you were working and the changes that you may have seen, you know, in your time?

ROBERT JOHNSON: The changes that I've seen are one that being a Johnson male and a very strong willed one, I didn't take - I still don't take any shit from anybody,
 25 but during my nursing days yeah. The hospital that I nursed at locally was - I mentioned its name, but their policy was if an Indigenous person turned up at the door, at the front doors, like a work emergency department, a fair bit. Automatically they called the police and they were removed. Now, I had great issues with that, because I could see that the uncle or the aunts or the kids needed help, but because
 30 there was so much trouble also caused by a handful of black fellas in this area, that they automatically were refused, unless of course, they come out like one had been axed or something like that and were really traumatised. And then all of a suddenly, the deaths in custody happened, and it came, trickled down from one of the board meetings that no longer were the Aboriginal community to be turned away from the
 35 doors. They would have been allowed in and treated as same as anybody else. Now, to me, that was a good thing. But at the same time, it took the - took the deaths in custody to change this, you know, this policy of white men to, to recognise the as a black fella, and that to me was a big leap forward. Sure, I had hassles because I always identified as black and especially Tasmanian black. And they created a few
 40 problems for me in the fact that my mates couldn't handle that. So that's when you find out whether you've got true mates or not.

And I really didn't give a shit because you know, they were either friendly, in need of
 45 mates and I still had enough, enough blokes around me, or enough people around me that accepted the fact that I was part Indigenous and yeah. But and then going out of mainstream or out of public nursing into Indigenous nursing, that was an eye opener because in working for an Indigenous mob. When I first started, the funding was a

big factor. And straight off, you knew that you were battling uphill to be able to supply, you know, the right nursing techniques to the - to the people. They'd never had really in-home nursing which is something that I introduced and carried out myself. At district nurses from the hospital, you know, a Black fella only had to go
 5 boo with them and they never come back, so. Or they had, you know, every family had dogs. Dogs barked at them. Nope, dangerous dogs, they'd never come back. So that meant that the person - and nine times out of ten, it was an elder who needed the treatment, never got treated. So yeah. And even today you know, it takes memorandums of understandings with hospitals and district nursing and all this sort
 10 of thing to, to get them to provide the services in home. But the best thing that ever happened was Indigenous organisations funded through the taxpayer's money became - they had to report back and sign off on things and funding went to white organisations and they had to have their funding signed off by local Indigenous co-ops or health units.

15 And, and that made virtually got rid of that memorandum of understanding, because as far as I was concerned, those memorandum of understandings weren't worth the paper they were written on. And it was the actual reporting back, and they had to get signed off by either health manager or whatever that was during those times of an
 20 Indigenous organisation, made them responsible, made them accountable, accountable - and therefore made their health teams accountable. They have to come and report, do it, be seen to be doing the job, walk the talk. And that that was great. That changed a lot of things for the health of our community. We've still got
 25 problems today. But, you know even in our local Indigenous health unit or health unit that's here, the employees that are employed there aren't doing their job. They turn up for work, you know, and they're not being accountable for what they're responsible for. And how do you how do you create that? There's not enough
 30 Indigenous workers in our organisations being taught or being able to carry out the jobs because they haven't been taught the right way. It's not their fault, They just they get disgruntled and leave the position. What should have been brought into these
 35 organisations is a system where if you employ a white person, qualified, white person, professional, that they take on an apprentice Indigenous person and teach them the right way. That's something that should happen right throughout all their organisations, not just, you know, in, in well - put it this way. Not in dreamtime or
 what - what should happen and what shouldn't happen.

INTERVIEWER : Almost like a partnership of them teaching the white people how to work culturally, and the white people teaching them how to work with the skill
 40 set.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah. That's right. Things like cross-cultural training. These days, I think it's a laugh, because they sit down in a in a room. Nine times out of ten, it's in a white organisation. And you get this bloke that comes in he gets paid to do
 45 the cross-cultural training I don't agree with. If you're going to teach our culture, it's got to come from the heart. And if you're getting paid for the job, you don't give a shit what you say. But if it's coming from the heart, then you know it's the love of the job and you're doing it to increase the outcomes of our community.

INTERVIEWER : I know that you mentioned you've done quite a bit of volunteering in the community around - in the justice system.

5 **ROBERT JOHNSON:** Oh, yeah. There's another organisation that seems to me to have fallen by the wayside, and That's a community justice panels. During the time I was with him, I was an active CJP here in Swan Hill. I later on became the chairperson for Swan Hill CJP. I was asked to go on the CJP board of Victoria. I was the secretary of that. And yeah, served there for about ten years as doing both jobs,
10 Swan Hill and on the - on the Victorian board. And the thing I found about that was the coppers loved the idea. They would ring up, all right, probably nine times out of ten, I'd, I wouldn't be on call, and I'd still get called. I know it annoyed my better half. But that also, you know, you've got to understand - understand that sorry. That phone, leave a message. Yeah, and I was also lucky enough I'd been jumping up and
15 down to some of these black fellas that were coming around, and to me, they were just talking shit about, how are we going to do this, and we're going to do that? And I said, well, why don't you start up, put a course together and start up the Aboriginal bail justice? You know, we want some black fellas that are Aboriginal bail justices, and bugger me dead, I got listened to. And I was in the first school of Aboriginal bail
20 justices that went through and that was a great - I think that was a great thing. I remember the - I come back to Swan Hill and got called into the police station for to sit on a black fella had been brought in and needed to be, you know, the coppers didn't want to lock him up, and one of them - didn't want the responsibility of locking him up. So they were passed them back to me.

25 I got in there and sat in, and I probably did lock him up being the first time. But, you know, I had a policy where I talked to him and make sure that they understood what they'd done wrong and how they don't - and why I was locking them up. But after that, I remember the sergeant in charge of the station at the time, at that time of the
30 day he said to me, Johnno, you're only going to do black fellas, or are you going to do cross-borders? Nah, I'll, I'll do across the board thanks, mate. I'll have great pleasure in locking up some of you white fellas. And, wow, that was a mistake. I reckon every time, because I had another bail justice and he was white. I found him all right, but he was a bit of a pain in the arse as far as coppers goes. And every,
35 every chance they got, they rang me up and said, oh, we've got this one. Cos I'd go in any time of the day or night, again I think it upset the better half. But yeah, it was something I enjoyed doing. It was something I was giving back to the community, because the community's been good to me. You know, it's provided me with a family, house over our heads, and a good life.

40 And so, yeah, it was that. I'm also still an active JP, Justice of the peace. And the community of Bedford get the benefit of that, because they're always coming in and want me to witness or sign something for them, and get a big shock when they say, oh, how much? No, it's all right. It's nothing, said JP do it for the love of it. And if a
45 lot more people had that attitude, this world would be a lot better off. But yeah. I don't think I've - I've been on a few advisory committees. I'm still on a few still serving on advisory committees. I was on an advisory committee. We're getting a

new emergency department in Swan Hill at the hospital. And that's - I was on that for a long time, from the beginning, actually, and I'd found myself getting a bit burnt out. And so I gave that away, and, and I might a couple of other committees. I'm on one for the accolades of the hospital. They have an - they have an advisory

5 committee that members of the committee are asked about. Well, I serve on that because the lady there that that's head of that she's a good mate. And so yeah, I serve on that and I, there's a couple of other ones that I'm on. Wherever I can help out with things that are good for the community, I do. And that's just not our community. That's a broader community. Because what benefits one benefits the other.

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INTERVIEWER : Yeah. That's right. And I know you said that, like, initially, part of why you wanted to do a submission was to talk about the elders and sort of how you what you would like to see. For, you know, your friends and your mob.

15 **ROBERT JOHNSON:** Yeah. Look, eldership, eldership, I suppose, as it was explained to me, soon as an Indigenous turns 50, they're automatically an elder. I disagree with that. Eldership is earned. It's a highly respected person who has helped out the community. I regard myself as an elder. And, and some of my other fellow

20 elders I hold in the same position. Eldership is not just, you know, you get up there with a big voice and go, I want this, I want that. And, you know, you can have reasons to be able to help the community and do the community. It's not for individuals to be able to help themselves. I'd like to see more funding bundled into our elders. I find that our elders group here in this area. I'll say this one area is very hard for our workers to get funding to do things with us. We're lucky, we've got a

25 partnership with the Salvation Army here in Swan Hill, and I'm not religious by a long shot. I'm actually an atheist, but the salvos are forever giving. And again whenever I can help them out, I do. Whether it's a barbecue or whether it's helping them. We've got a project going now which is involving some kids from FLO College here in Swan Hill that are building us some tubs of high rise flower beds,

30 and that for around the back of the out the back of the Salvation Army church.

Now, I had a whole heap of iron and steel that I donated to it. To get them going, and it's - I've heard out of that, some of the kids have said, no, no, no, we've got to build this for our church, for our Salvation Army church. Now, just to hear that it's been

35 worthwhile all along of doing what we're doing. It just, you know, word of mouth has spread and the kids are loving it. And it gives them something to do, because these are kids. Some of these are Indigenous, Indigenous youth that are had learning difficulties, yet they're learning skills now that they can use in later life. And yeah, it's great to see. So if we can give them some purpose and they can come along and,

40 and do that and then say, oh, we built that. You know, that makes them feel good and it keeps them off the street.

INTERVIEWER : Yeah, so in terms of like the funding is for elders, it's to keep them engaged in community as well as have a better standard of living?

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ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah, right now we're looking for a hub for the elders. Now, the elders need a hub because they need somewhere that they can go to like five days

of the week, Monday to Friday, to be open from the time that the health service is open, which is where our, our helpers or whatever you want to call them, workers come from and connected to - the actual setup down at the at MDAS Swan Hill is not good. You know, there's no space for elders and to share it with the children that, you
 5 know, they've thrown us out before - before we wanted to go and all this. So we Salvation Army officer - officers offered them us, their church, and that's where we hold it. And there's no strings attached. The elders get up there, they paint. They do all sorts of craft. Even if they have a day like, I'm the same, some days I'll have a day when I don't - i don't like to do anything. So we'll just sit around and we'll talk. We
 10 go out, we go fishing. We'll go a few trips lined up. We're going around having had a look at all the painted silos and all that sort of thing.

So we, you know, we've got a little bus and yeah, we do all the things. The bus picks all the elders up that want to be picked up, takes them to the to the church. When
 15 we're we finished runs them home, and yeah, do all this. And not only that, but it's introduced them to a facility through the Salvation Army where they can get help. And at present, our - we've got an indigenous worker that works for the Salvation Army. And that's an added bonus where we can get help there. The Salvation Army captain Rob Champion, he's worked with homeless people in Melbourne in a big
 20 way, and they brought him up here, and now he's working with us. And it's a partnership that's paying off. You know, like, Rob's great because he's dealt with Indigenous community of Melbourne. And now he's come to us and he's brought that experience with him. And he respects and understands you know, from not just Indigenous. But all other foreign bodies or other foreign people who've come in and
 25 landed in this wonderful area. So, yeah, it's a great thing you've got some good ideas. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER : So if you're an older person, Indigenous person living in Swan Hill, and you're - something in your house broke, you're gutter fell down, where
 30 would you go?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well, with - through the church, we I chased up a plumber to do the maintenance around the church. I chased up a electrician now, and I'm also trying to get a handyman that will take care of while the plumber will take care of
 35 that. But the Salvation Army, in its wisdom, has got funding that we can tap into. All I've got to go and go and do is talk to Rob, the Salvation Army captain, and that funding can be used for that. There are certain schemes, like if somebody's fridge blows up, there's a scheme called NILS where they can apply to NILS. They do a few bit of paperwork from the safe house here. It's part of their part of the
 40 neighbourhood watch house, and they can get a brand new fridge and paid off through the payment system. And there's no interest and no - NILS pays for the fridge, has it delivered to their house. You know, the people that deliver it usually take the old fridges away and get rid of them. And it's a system there. So that's one outlet for replacing white goods or you know, that sort of thing. Any maintenance on
 45 the house really should be done by the Indigenous housing group, but unfortunately they keep telling their people that there's no money yet. I don't know how many houses in Swan Hill they've got - there's got to be at least 20 or 30 Indigenous

houses, and then you've got haven houses. And yeah, they take in the rent, but somehow, yeah, maintenance just gets forgotten. So if I had somebody that was really in trouble, we'd find the funding through the Salvation Army or chase it and try to chase it up through something else. When CJP was going, we used to use some
 5 of that funding for that same purpose. I don't know where CJP stands in Swan Hill now, I know it's only one person that seems to be doing it, and to me that's wrong. But Yeah, no, we the Salvo's have got the funding and they they're not backward and helping.

10 **INTERVIEWER :** Yeah, that's great, Salvos will help anybody.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well, they should be black as far as I'm concerned. But yeah, I'm told Rob, you're the blackest white man I've ever come across. And that's true, you know, he's got a heart of gold and his wife, she's good. But yeah, no, there's
 15 ways and means of getting around it.

INTERVIEWER : So what are the - if you could say anything to our commissioners and refer to recommendations. Given your history of working in mainstream and Indigenous orgs and having been an active member in the community. You know,
 20 what is it that your community and many, probably many Ab communities?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I feel that out of out of this should be pathways should be made so that a young Indigenous people are approached from when they're in their last couple of years of schooling. And not only that, but maybe some mature adults
 25 too, to be able to get into these positions in our Aboriginal organisations, our Aboriginal organisations I think need a good boot up the arse to because they should be headhunting. You know, they're accountable now for their funding, and I don't think the accountability is strong enough to, for them to make recommendations. All these - all these Indigenous bodies have got boards of directors and that sort of thing.
 30 And I think they need to be also brought back into line in a set of - a set of recommendations made so that they start to look at replacing our youth, our workers with Aboriginal - professional Aboriginal positions and making it compulsory that all right, you hire a professional white person, they've got to take on an apprentice and try and teach him. And the headhunt the right people. You know, people that got
 35 the culture at heart and want to learn more and want to go places. My ambitions from when I left public nursing to when I joined the Aboriginal community nursing was to get as much of our younger ones into our organisations and get them into positions and make them where they'd stay.

40 I know the money's shit, that's something else that can be looked at. You know, make these positions so they they're in line with mainstream payments and all that sort of thing. Mainstream benefits. You know, that would that would bring in a lot more of our Indigenous people. If you get for argument's sake, I got chased a few years in after before I just left nursing by a government department to go and join them
 45 because they want all they wanted was to be able to stamp the paper and say, well, we've got an Indigenous registered nurse, you know, and, and when our nurses go through - and people go through and do their nursing or some professional, you find

that the government departments will try to snap them up just so they can, the paperwork gives them more funding. Why can't we do that? Funding is the biggest issue I find, and to make Indigenous organisations accountable for the funding that they're getting, you know, and that's, that's a strong thing. I don't think they're
5 accountable enough. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER : Is there anything else that you would like to cover or talk about, mention?

10 **ROBERT JOHNSON:** I think now we've just - in this area at the moment, there's been a tragedy where we've lost a young male or not a young male, he's in his 40s. And due to mental health. His brother's been accused of it. Now, that's a tragedy that's happened that there's not enough assistance there either from our own mental health workers or from mainstream mental health workers. We once had a CATT
15 team here in Swan Hill, and all of a sudden we had a mental health unit in Swan Hill, who attached to the hospital. It's all gone. You know, the region needs to have these organisations back in, in the in the regions. It's no good sitting in Mildura or Bendigo or, you know, the likes of Geelong or Warrnambool or you know, yeah, the big towns, great. But if people can't travel, you know, they haven't got number one, they
20 haven't got reliable cars, they haven't got the money to do it. And mental health to me is becoming a number one along with drugs - alcohol and drugs, is becoming a number one problem in the community in general. I think by having these units put back into the region the regions would, would prosper by their professionalism.

25 **INTERVIEWER :** Yeah.

ROBERT JOHNSON: A lot of money gets put into the, you know - sort of head space and government - local government mental health things and drug and alcohol, and to me it should be all bought together and made one big hub in the communities
30 where it's multi-purposed. And through that the community benefits, whether it's black, white or brindle, I don't care. I just want to see these, these sort of units reintroduced into the community and have some sort of accountability back to the communities. Because right now all I can see is, is these problems becoming greater and greater and greater and more lives are going to be taken, you know, and that's the
35 thing. The, the biggest factors that I find that I come across and I have for the last 68 years of my life is been - sorry.

INTERVIEWER : You can take a minute.

40 **ROBERT JOHNSON:** It has been that the lack of access to things like drug and alcohol medical facilities, mental health. Just something to sit there and listen to them, and it hasn't got any better, unfortunately. You know, we've had Royal Commissions into the Deaths in Custody. That was a big thing that changed a lot of lives. It brought respect back into the Victoria Police. And, you know, even - even
45 now, I find with the lack of respect and discipline that our young people show elders, people in the main, just ordinary people in the main street. And to the - and to the authorities, like I hear of, you know, ambos are is refusing to go to houses because

they know there's been domestic violence there. That's another thing there. You know, the amount of domestic violence that's in, in our communities. Doesn't matter if it's black, white or brindle, it's there. It needs to be addressed. So, you know, I it beats me how we're going to - how we're going to be able to address all these things.

5 But yeah, maybe instead of building all these great railroad lines that they're trying to build in Melbourne and, and all these new freeways. So, no, the infrastructure has got to be there, but the infrastructure to service communities needs to be looked at. And if that takes another Royal Commission, then so be it. But the outcomes are going to be there. The only Royal Commission I've seen that's done anything has been the

10 deaths in custody. Anything else - any other Royal Commission's, you know, they've just been, as far as I'm concerned, a waste of money. And big money at that.

INTERVIEWER : Hopefully this one will make some changes.

15 **ROBERT JOHNSON:** You know, the other, the other good thing is you know, Yoorrook seems to be doing a lot of good. So yeah, and maybe things have come out of that.

INTERVIEWER : Hopefully we have seen the government take up quite a few

20 recommendations, so let's hope we see them go and move into action.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah. Oh, well, it's going to have to, because we're going to see a lot more. And it doesn't matter what it is, whether it's the lack of drug - and drug and alcohol services, domestic violence. That's both a male and female, too.

25 And bad thing about that is it affects their children and, you know, in a big way because it teaches them that domestic violence is all right, and they grow up - and the generations that are there now that you see every day that domestic violence is there in in them it's not good. Yeah, so yeah. Oh dear. You'll have to excuse my dog he's not well mannered.

30 **INTERVIEWER :** He's got some footprints on the ground.

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