

Yoorrook Justice Commission

Interview with Carolyn Lawson

INTERVIEWER: Start by introducing yourself.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Hello, my name is Carolyn Lawson. I'm from the Latji Latji Maraura Tribe, from Mildura. From Robinvale to Mildura to Merbein and back over to Lake Victoria, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. That's who my people are. I'd like to start off, first off with the - the way the police are in Mildura. In the last, what 20 years, I don't think nothing has changed. If anything, it's gotten worse with the Mildura police. I can remember an episode where [REDACTED] were handcuffed at the age [REDACTED] embedded into their wrist, and I had the Commissioner of Police come down from Melbourne. He sat on my front lawn, spoke to me, because I refused to take [REDACTED] into the police station. And there's another incident - nothing was ever done about that. I don't know even what happened, what report, nothing came back to me. Now I fast forward to another incident that happened with [REDACTED]. She was [REDACTED] at the time. She's [REDACTED] now, but she was [REDACTED] at the time when she got split open by [REDACTED] of the Mildura police station. I forget her name too, but I'll never forget her. They wouldn't let me see [REDACTED], even though she was [REDACTED] of age. They said I had no rights to go in there to [REDACTED]. There was only one police officer offered [REDACTED] a lot of help. And he was the sergeant - he was the sergeant. He took photos of [REDACTED] and everything. But the Indigenous worker did nothing for [REDACTED]

So nothing nothing come out of that. All I was told was [REDACTED] was unruly, no respect for the police or the Indigenous worker for the police station. And that still hasn't changed because this woman gets all the rewards. And at the same time, the Mildura police are still bashing our young children. Then there's another incident. Now we'll go on myself. The police were called on me, for me, for doing nothing wrong. They were going to arrest me over [REDACTED] stating that I was nothing but a dirty black woman. So, (indistinct 00:02:47).

INTERVIEWER: It's fine. You're fine.

CAROLYN LAWSON: I'll forget that name. So this person decided to take it more on to me, but I had to mention a name to him to stop him doing anything towards me. Now I went to lay charges and I couldn't because I had no witnesses, I had nothing. So when it comes to the police now, I'm like, I didn't even want to do this talk, because my kids are all older now with their own families, and still nothing gets done. [REDACTED] was locked up in gaol. So it's starting off with [REDACTED] now. I've had [REDACTED] locked up in the gaol system. Why? I don't know, one got went to gaol. [REDACTED] went to gaol, and no one else went to gaol in the

community. So I think the police of Mildura need to be told what their jobs are, get re-educated on Indigenous people in Australia, because it's wrong what they do to us, how they can still talk to us without even helping us. I need to stop.

INTERVIEWER: That's right. We can hold.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Might be family? No, I don't know that language. They come down here, good fishing.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. You don't need to like -

CAROLYN LAWSON: When I said the name, I didn't mean it -

INTERVIEWER: No, no, but that's the thing is, you don't need to worry. You just say whatever, because they'll take it out.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Oh, because, when I said [REDACTED]. That's the policeman. I just - I just think they need a lot of change, because kids are still getting hurt by them, and they can get away with it, you know?

INTERVIEWER: That's all right. We'll continue and just talk, like I said, we will take things out. It's fine, don't worry about it, you just tell your story. The way that you want to tell it.

CAROLYN LAWSON: If anything's going to change, you need to change something from over 200 years ago. And I hope you can do it, because nothing has really changed towards our young children. They're still getting bashed, still going to gaol, and there's no one there for them. You have an Indigenous worker at our Mildura police station, but still nothing gets done. You've got a group that goes around to pick up young Aboriginal children. But if you're not in the know, you don't get picked up. So a lot of my grandkids, I've got 33 of them, so I'd say [REDACTED] of them have already been in the hands of the police. So yeah, Mildura police station needs something done to it.

INTERVIEWER: And do you - like what is that change that you would like to see, do you know or its -

CAROLYN LAWSON: The change I would like to see is the - is that parents get rang straight away. Never happened with me. [REDACTED] got 15 stitches to her head, nothing happened. So a notified parent, do not lock them up, put handcuffs to them, or chuck them up against your work

car. There's footage on that on Facebook, a little 12 year old getting chucked up against the car, because the copper can't handle it. So there's a lot of that. Now, I'll take you on another thing, I was watching the news one night, and here was [REDACTED] getting dragged by the police, knocked out. That's another thing I want checked out. It's on channel seven news, see [REDACTED] getting dragged, punched. and he's - he's cold. He's knocked out clean cold, while the cop bashes him, because [REDACTED] kicked him in the face. [REDACTED] kicks the police white man in the face, and he bashes [REDACTED] while he's already knocked out. So I like to know what you can do with police doing that when it's actual evidence there on Channel Seven News. I'll never forget that day when I seen [REDACTED] like that. Just getting dragged along like he's nothing.

INTERVIEWER: How long ago was that?

CAROLYN LAWSON: [REDACTED] years ago. It was on the news.

INTERVIEWER: Not very long ago.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Not very long ago. He took the rap from [REDACTED] So he's in gaol now. Still in gaol. He's not the same boy anymore since he got dragged along, knocked cleaned out. So what happens there? You know, I'd like to know. This is [REDACTED] getting help? Because he's not the same boy, they made him ugly. They put scars on him. One thing I never did, I'd have got charged for it. So I like to know what happened to these police that do this and get away with it. Now, he was a detective. He had his knee on [REDACTED] chest. [REDACTED] was very badly burnt. He didn't care. He just kneeled down on [REDACTED] He didn't care what was wrong with his chest. What happened to him when he was [REDACTED] years old, that policeman didn't care. He just held him on the road like he was a piece of shit. That's all I got to say on that one.

INTERVIEWER: You're all right?

CAROLYN LAWSON: Yeah. It's my throat starting to get thin now, and I'm starting to get wild because I see say these officers -

INTERVIEWER: Water?

CAROLYN LAWSON: I don't drink water, remember? No, they just make me wild. The police. I know that's still going I think.

INTERVIEWER: That's all right.

CAROLYN LAWSON: But they need to have things done. Not just sit up there and say they're going to - to the Royal Commission. The Royal Commission needs to wake up, too. There's a lot of things I could say to the Royal Commission, on a lot of levels, even when someone died. But I won't go there because that's a different story.

INTERVIEWER: You were referring to the Royal Commission into the Treatment of First Nations People with Police?

CAROLYN LAWSON: Yes, but there was a time with the coroner.

INTERVIEWER: The Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody?

CAROLYN LAWSON: No, no. My grandson died. The coroner, not knowing cultural history, went with the father's side, and he had no rights to do that, the coroner. That's not his rights to say where my grandson go and get buried. He's not even buried on country where he was born.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: The coroner gave the ruling. They made sure they put Lawson on his headstone, because if they didn't, we were going to bring him back home. That was the only rights we had. So, you know, even the - even that coroner needs to be pulled up. You do not understand our culture. You should not done what you did. You made the biggest mistake ever when it comes to my culture. You done the biggest mistake. He was my grandson, all born on country. Now he's buried not even on country. In a foreign land. That's what the coroner needs to be pulled up over too. Not listening to people, our cultural ways. Now, we might have to learn white people's ways, but I know, I still practice my cultural way, and I didn't get to do it with my grandson.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: And he was a 21 year old man when he died. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: It's hurtful.

CAROLYN LAWSON: It is. Because I can't even go and visit him. He's out in the middle of nowhere. But yeah, that's life though.

INTERVIEWER: I think that you have had a lot of experiences that have shown how - what colonisation has done.

CAROLYN LAWSON: I can start from the beginning, when I was only little, living in Sunshine North, what they did to my brother and my mother. But then the police helped my mother when my sister drowned. But they were nasty in Melbourne. I remember that we were the fringe dwellers living at Sunshine North. I don't think there was even Caroline Springs back then. Deer Park was still our playground. And yeah, they were very nasty to my brother. My brother's in his 60s now. He don't talk about it, but you can tell it has affected him. So we go right back, back to that - to the 60s, if I'll put it that way. Robinvale used to be a terrible area too, but it's kind of calmed down.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: In the last 20 years, we - just, you had the Indigenous people fighting other people. So it's all calmed down now. It was war here in this town.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: But you know the police and everything's come back - we all come together now. The police get involved with NAIDOC and everything. I don't see that really much anywhere else, but here they're really nice. I don't really say that about police, but these ones in Robinvale, I couldn't ask for a nicer lot of police.

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel the difference is in Robinvale to Mildura?

CAROLYN LAWSON: They get to know the community. They don't just pick the community they want to know. They get to know all of us, the community. The sergeant knows me on a first name basis. I know her on a first name basis.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and do you think that's because it's a smaller community, too?

CAROLYN LAWSON: Yes, and there's a lot of police that come back that went to school here.

INTERVIEWER: Oh yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: So they come back to their own community. And yeah, one girl, she gets to know everyone. Like, I was looking at her one day and I thought I knew her. Yeah, I did know her, but she joined the police force.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: And she said she'd always come back to Robinvale. So there's about three young officers that's come back. But, you know, when it's not a country cop, you just know when they come in. Like when they punished the police officers, there was one officer sent from Melbourne to Victoria - to Robinvale because he was a nasty piece of work. We had him here. He bashed [REDACTED] in the car, and that was like, what, [REDACTED] years ago? So they moved the bad coppers out of Melbourne and put them in the country area, and they bring their same mentality with them.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CAROLYN LAWSON: And yeah, it doesn't happen much now here, that we've got good coppers at the moment.

INTERVIEWER: So I'm not sure whether police choose where they go, especially when they're starting out. They get put in places.

CAROLYN LAWSON: No this one was transferred.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so -

CAROLYN LAWSON: It's like the officer that pulled the gun on [REDACTED] in Fitzroy. The once-time premier of Victoria. I can't think of his name now, start with the H I think. [REDACTED] took it to him, the premier of Victoria, because he pulled a gun out on her because she was black, in Fitzroy. But they all knew [REDACTED] jumped the counter. Fitzroy police station for young kids.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Wow.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Yeah. So they know her in Fitzroy, [REDACTED] Yeah, she didn't mince words with them or anything. You know, you don't do that to kids, but yeah. So a lot of things I can go, but my brain just gets scattered around. And when this started, it made me shut up a bit. Did you notice that?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, well I mean -

CAROLYN LAWSON: But they're - yeah, I just wish the rest of the family would say something, you know? But they don't say nothing. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and if they don't, people don't - well, if mob doesn't speak up, then nothing changes -

CAROLYN LAWSON: We lived it - like the rest of my family say to me. Open your mouth up, what does it get me? Nothing. We're always behind the eight ball. Nothing's changed. When it was vote yes or no. There was a true picture there for you, so we got no hope. No hope. It's always going to be white man dictate. And as for people sitting in the government, supposed to be there for us - well, they're not my elders, so I don't listen to them. They're not my elders. They speak for their own people. You know what I mean? I can't speak for your people, it's not right. So when I tell you is my truth today, but I know what I've been through in my life. But the worst thing I ever did see was [REDACTED] when he got bashed. Then the next worst thing I ever seen was [REDACTED] bleeding from the face. So yeah, I've seen a lot, and I'm 60 now. I don't want to see no more, I'd rather see, I don't know - the police needs to be educated on Indigenous people. And if they got one bit of racist bone in them, they shouldn't join the police force. It's like in the education department, same thing. You cannot be racist in those jobs. You cannot.

INTERVIEWER: They probably, maybe needs to be a little bit more done in vetting people when they got into those roles, do you think?

CAROLYN LAWSON: Like some of them don't understand - I can remember a man getting told off and he got dragged in the car because he wasn't speaking English, and he didn't even know how to speak English. And we had to tell him he was speaking his language. But the copper got wild, and chucked him in, and just said to all of us, you don't even tell me what to do, you Black C's go home. And that fella got dragged there. So there's other truths in Mildura, too. But it's not my family, where the police take people out on the highway. Yeah, like New South Wales, that's different again. Now, I grew up in Coomealla. We had to be our - made sure we were in by 9:00, before the sun went down, because the police would take us out to the bush and have their way with us. And it was known fact, through the Aboriginal community where I grew up in. So it's -

INTERVIEWER: I don't think that was an uncommon practice.

CAROLYN LAWSON: Yeah. It's bad. Bad. I remember the first time I went and lived with my dad, you know. I had to be home at a certain time - a little, little town. And it was the ones that were supposed to protect you. They're the ones that were hurting you, yeah. But yeah, I can't think of nothing else to say. All I'm doing is getting stirred up. And I can't look over that way because they're watching me. But you guys - That's why I put my hand and moved. Yeah, because they just show theirself. I'm still getting used to that - that's why I want that off.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that they're happy that -

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