



Aunty Margie Tang

Wemba Wemba

Interview by Andrew Stephens

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There are no traffic lights in the country town where Aunty Margie Tang lives. It's not a big place, and not busy, so she is used to peace and quiet. Lockdown, however, has brought a new perspective to 'quiet'. It has provoked memories of life experienced by the Stolen Generations and their families when external forces strongly restricted their lives. "Honestly, since invasion Aboriginals have lived in lockdown," Aunty Margie says.

At a recent small family gathering for a birthday, someone grew anxious after doing a quick head-count. Was it too crowded, given Victoria's social distancing and gathering restrictions? "One lady said, 'We'd better go, there's too many of us'," Aunty Margie recalls. "I said: 'This is like when we had to hide from the welfare'. That's how it felt. We had to hide because the welfare would come and check how many were living in the house at my Aunty's place."

Aunty Margie has strong memories of those days in the late 1960s when she was in her middle-teens and living with her Aunty. All sorts of boundaries and restrictions were imposed on Indigenous people's lives back then, and the welfare officers could simply turn up and come into your home, she says. "I think a lot of the Elders will recall being restricted," Aunty Margie says, "but the young ones wouldn't have a clue what we are talking about." It's hard to understand that children could simply be collected and taken away without notice, she says, though some eventually made their way back home. Some of her relatives were removed from their families. Others were sent away on a "holiday" with white families they had never set eyes on before. "We had to do it, we had no choice," she says. "Parents weren't allowed to question it."

Her own story begins with "growing up barefoot in the bush" – idyllic in many ways, though her father didn't think school was important. "My Mum left my Dad so that we could go to school. So, we came down to civilisation, to Echuca." At the same time, she felt as if she were under the control of the authorities, with officers checking if their home was clean and the children fed.



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“We used to hide from the welfare. They’d check in your wardrobes and under your beds. They’d just walk in. They had rights over us. We were just flora and fauna then. But I also saw the funny side to it. We had a pet kangaroo my Mum had brought down from the bush. My Aunty had six kids and took me in because we were homeless. And she had others there too, and one day she said, ‘Quick, Little Red Rooster’s coming!’ We called him that because he looked like a rooster and had a red face. So, Mum dived under the kangaroo’s blanket behind the fridge to hide from him and he just walked past and looked through the gap and said, ‘Hello Rose’. She said, ‘I wanted to die, I wanted the floor to swallow me up.’”

Underneath that funny story, though, is the terrible control that was exerted over basic human rights, so it is little wonder that the lockdown echoes some of those concerns. Aunty Margie said she had a presentiment of all this: “At Christmas, I said it is going to be a strange year, I could feel it.”

Then the pandemic hit and Aunty Margie saw a lot of panic followed by a lot of good will. “People were being kind to each other, and that is heartening,” she says. “It felt so strange. I wasn’t panicking, I was just in disbelief. When things come up on you like that, at first I think there is denial, then you get the anger and then you have to accept it. We had no choice. It seems [to have lasted] forever. You have to really battle to keep your mind healthy and positive.”

Yet that is what she has done. Her resilient and perceptive attitude allows her to see some of the good that has come from this intense period. “Parents finally know what their children are up to. They have done things together they haven’t done before.” She misses her daughter and grandchildren in Melbourne, but has a son and grandchildren living locally, and has found much more time to do her own creative work, which includes basket-making and painting with Aboriginal themes. She laughs about the price of petrol being cheap when people haven’t been allowed to drive far from home (“except for round and round the roundabout”) and she sees the irony of the payments being given out by “Uncle Scott” [Morrison] “when we can’t spend it!”

But, again, she sees the serious links to the past, with all people now experiencing a taste of having their rights removed. “They are looking over their shoulders. They might be thinking what’s next?”

“But I must also mention: the air is cleaner, it’s raining properly, the waterways are flowing, and animals are coming out – they are looking for people; they are fretting for people. Mother Earth needs a breather – a



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simple thing Aboriginals said many, many years ago. The greed has to stop.”

Margie Tang is a Wemba Wemba Elder, artist, poet and story teller. Margie was one of the first performance artists, doing drag king characters to entertain her Tiddas and community in Echuca in the 1980's. Margie was crowned Miss Aboriginal Echuca winner in 1968. Margie has been a drovers' cook, a masseuse, a keen sportswoman, and one of the first Koorie bush food caterers-in 1990's Echuca where she also cooked on a river boat, and at the Warma Aboriginal Co-operative. Margie took on the town of Echuca for its racism in 1991, getting national media coverage after her mother was denied entry to the pub where she was cooking. She has always believed in education despite being denied finishing high school. She became a Koorie teachers aid, and now tells Koorie stories of childhood and lived experiences to local schools in Kyabram. She also volunteers at Kyabram hospital and op-shops and regularly makes art for the Koorie Markets.