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## **In Them We Trust**

Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin AO

Wurundjeri

Interviewed by Tabitha Lean

September 2020



It had been a rainy evening the night before Aunty Joy and I spoke. The temperature had dropped, the heater was on and as a mad sports fan, Aunty had plans to watch the netball; two games in fact. We spoke briefly about her eldest brother's journey in the AFL as the first Aboriginal player for St Kilda back in the 1950s, and then our conversation quickly steered to COVID-19 and the Stage 4 restrictions. Aunty Joy lives in the hot zone, and has felt "all over the place" and "tipped upside down" for much of it, but it is "the little things", she says, that really get you down.

COVID-19 has brought its challenges. There is no doubt that lockdowns, physical distancing and curfews have us feeling socially isolated and disengaged from our communities. Aunty Joy shares the intimate reflections of Sorry Business during a pandemic, having lost two dear friends in the past week. Of course, due to restrictions, funerals were conducted by live stream, and while Aunt appreciated the efforts of family to share the service, she reflected on not being able to gather together to say the goodbyes and celebrate the life of much loved people. It seemed almost disrespectful to the family and the person passed," she says. It was in the moments of contemplative stillness, where you normally would be surrounded by mob, that Aunty Joy says it hit her hardest; the realisation that this was tough stuff, that this pandemic was really affecting us all on so many levels. Aunt reminds me, however, that we are absolutely stronger than what we think we are, because we are survivors; it's what we do.

This strength in survival draws me to Aunty Joy's story and she recounts a tale of her grandmother – Granny Jemima. Aunt tells me of Granny Jemima's time on the station, where everyone was required to return to their homes at 6pm to read the Bible. Ingeniously, Granny Jemima would call all of the women to her home to (supposedly) pray. She would instead, draw the hessian curtains across her tiny windows and all the women would gather collectively and talk in language, away from the watchful eyes of the 'protectors'. This was Granny Jemima's way to hold onto culture and heritage, and I imagine a flurry of language, stories, songs and happy faces. As a keeper of knowledge, Granny Jemima nurtured language by



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keeping it all at home and close to her heart. Aunty Joy tells me: “We are the gatherers, and language is an important part of culture still to be gathered.” This story reminds me that in our community, in order to survive, we have to just keep keeping on.

With preservation of culture on our mind, our yarn shifts to Country. I talk about the tyranny of distance and my longing for home. Aunty Joy tells me how lucky she feels to have been born on Country and to still live on Country: “No matter where I have travelled across the world, I am at home here, and I have that sense of belonging. The ancestor spirits are always with me.” Aunty Joy tells me that especially during COVID, she has felt that culture has really been helping keep her afloat: “When I spiral down, it is Country that will bring me back.” Aunt says this is also a time of reflection, and she tells me how the current COVID restrictions have her thinking about how her ancestors managed at the beginning of colonisation with all that they had to contend with. Aunty Joy talks about the oppressive nature of all of the current rules and restrictions which she describes as “stinking of authority”, and while she feels lucky to have no experience of those colonial times past and how badly her ancestors were treated, she believes the pandemic is a very good reminder. The yarn takes us back, and again we are reminded of the strength in survival of our people past.

Talking of survival and strength, Aunty Joy shares her concerns about the very real and oppressive impact of COVID-19 on youth in prisons. Aunt tells me that the kids inside have been locked up for 23 hours a day, and how her heart breaks for them, knowing her and others can’t go in and see them. Aunt tells me that COVID has closed the door on activities for the youth inside and the kids only have access to an iPad for 30 minutes a day: “They barely get on and they have to hand it over.” Aunty Joy laments that Justice are providing no additional means for kids to stay connected to families, and remains concerned for the worried parents. Aunt praises the kids for doing the right thing and “not acting up” during this time. We talk about the Council of Elders that has been established to support kids in the youth justice centres. Aunty Joy explains how these kids just “need someone to love, to look up to, to understand them.”

I think how beautiful it is, and how typical also, that it is our old people, our wisest ones, building these relationships and caring for our kids as they walk that long hard road to the outside world. As we finish our call so Aunty can catch her netball games, Aunty Joy offers to yarn sometime in the future to help connect me with some family, and this sums up this beautiful Elder: giving and kind, open and honest, a storyteller, a memory and knowledge keeper, and an amazingly strong woman who has so much



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wisdom and strength, that all I can do is smile and sigh because I realise that she herself, was a gift from my ancestors to remind me that we are strong and that we survive, and in them we must trust.

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*Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin is a Senior Wurundjeri Elder. A dedication to community is reflected in her extensive leadership roles: honorary Professor at Swinburne University; Chair of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the Victorian College of the Arts University of Melbourne; Board Member of Fraynetwork Multimedia (Sisters of Mercy); Co-patron for Keeping Koori Kids in Catholic Education; Patron for Parliament of World Religions; and, inaugural University Elder for La Trobe University. She is also an Ambassador for BreastScreen Victoria, Australia Day Victoria and an Animis Ambassador for Zoos Victoria. In 2001, Aunty Joy was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. In 2002, she was awarded the Victorian Aboriginal Women's Award, and in 2006 she was made an officer of the Order of Australia.*