

INTERVIEW WITH AUNTY EVAJO EDWARDS - 1/10/2020

Connection Matters Radio (CMR): One of the marvelous features of my work is speaking to amazing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and then being able to share those discussions and conversations with you. And today I'm particularly pleased to welcome to Connection Matters Radio an inspirational person, Mutti Mutti, Boon Wurrung and Yorta Yorta woman, Aunty Evajo Edwards.

Aunty, thanks so much for coming onto the program today.

Aunty Evajo Edwards: No, thanks for having us.

CMR: Aunty, how did the introduction of the more severe restrictions, the stage three and then the stage four, have on your personal and work life?

Aunty Evajo: Look, I think at the beginning it was just a process that, I guess we all just agreed with. Well, I know I did. And following on from stage three, it didn't really impact at the beginning.

I guess I did the right thing to start with and I wasn't doing much socialising or seeing people that you shouldn't have been seeing. I don't think it did so much at the beginning. I think as time now has gone on, it has really started to impact, I think, to the degree of not being able to be with family where you need to be.

CMR: You do have a big family and you're very connected with your family. How have you managed to maintain a decent level of your personal wellbeing during this time?

Aunty Evajo: In my personal life, I think my wellbeing comes with the availability of being able to see my grandbabies to help with any mental health issues that my children may have. So I would care for the children for a couple of hours just to give them a break.

So for me, that connection was pretty safe, but with the connection overall, with some of my sons who work in environment, where they've got contact with outside associations, if that's what you want to call it, because they're tradies. So that in itself, so you don't get to see their children as often. That's been pretty difficult, but...

CMR: How have you managed to improve it though, to remain in contact? Have you gone on to Zoom?

Aunty Evajo: We do FaceTime. Yeah. Yeah. FaceTime's mainly the things through our phones. Not so much as Zoom meetings or anything like that. It's just more FaceTiming through Messenger and phone calls and just continuously keeping contact, them checking in and ensuring that I'm okay. And that in itself is really great.

CMR: Aunt, your personal life aside, you've been a great advocate for Stolen Generations. And of course your work with VACCA on redressing child sexual abuse, it's ongoing work, it's heavy work, and yet you're maintaining it through COVID-19 lockdowns. How are you maintaining this?

Aunty Evajo: Firstly, I guess, I'm blessed to be still employed and be able to do our job and support all our clients across Victoria. It's the National Redress

Scheme, I guess, was something that came out of the Royal Commission in Institutional Child Sexual Abuse.

So I was still able to take people's stories, but not in the comfort of their home or a safe place that they chose to be because of the contact. But we still could support our clients the best way we could through either phone calls or Zoom meetings or even Messenger, to be able to keep that contact the best we can, or the best we could during this time.

It's been a bit difficult sometimes, talking about this stuff within your own home, where you find that when you have an office space to go to, that you can actually leave that at the door and having to deal with this sort of stuff within your safe sacred space, but you still allow that because it doesn't become about you. It becomes about those people that need your support.

And we have a wonderful team that works on this and works with, we've got probably nearly a hundred clients that during this time we've tried to keep it connected as we can. Sometimes it is difficult, but it's just being available. I think that's the important thing. We've set up Zoom meetings, weekly healing meetings with as many clients that want to come on and have a yarn.

CMR: Well global pandemic or not, obviously these clients of yours and others who may well be clients in the future, definitely need to reach out for your support and the support from those of your team. How can they get in contact with you even during the pandemic lockdowns?

Aunty Evajo: You can contact Ngarra Jarra Noun on either (03) 9459 7030 or through the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency VACCA and they will forward your information and contact to us at their earliest convenience.

Aunty Evajo: Absolutely. I look forward to it too, Charles. Thanks for the opportunity and if you need any information, you know where to get us and contact us.

CMR: And we'll provide those phone numbers and contact details on the Connection Matters Radio website. Aunt, we haven't yet spoken about your involvement with the Victorian Government Stolen Generations Redress Scheme. We will speak about it more in the next couple of weeks, because there are some announcements that will be made very soon, but how is that work progressing, in a nutshell?

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Aunty Evajo: Oh, look, I think it's progressing a little bit slower than we anticipated, but we blame everything onto COVID-19. So as soon as we do get updated, there will be meetings that will be taking place.

There have been organisations and selected committee members, Stolen Gen committee members to be part of this extraordinary opportunity. So I think when we get down to it, I'm hoping that we get out there to the community and to all our Stolen Gen and it's a great opportunity to have a voice for those of our Stolen Gen that don't and won't have a voice. So keep your ears open and hopefully there will be more announcements soon for you to know what's happening with that process.

CMR: We'll be bringing those announcements as well as relevant interviews here on Connection Matters Radio in the next couple of weeks and months, of course.

Aunty Evajo, thank you so much indeed, for coming onto the program. It is always a delight, if not a hoot at times, to yarn with you and I do look forward again to sitting down with you and having a yarn face to face.