

INTERVIEW WITH WALA CONNECTIONS - 5/10/2020

Connection Matters Radio (CMR): As we look beyond, yet continue along the journey of Coronavirus lockdowns across Melbourne, connection to self, culture and country are for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders crucial to wellbeing. Today on Connection Matters Radio I'm joined by two Aboriginal women for whom connections to self, culture and country are all important. In fact, their prime focus in life is helping others experience those same connections. From Wala Connections, Thara Brown, welcome to the program.

Thara: Hi Charles, thanks for having us.

CMR: And Nartarsha Bamblett, welcome to you as well.

Nartarsha: Thank you. Pleasure.

CMR: Thara, starting with you. What is Wala Connections?

Thara: Wala Connections is an opportunity for us to connect to culture, be able to express ourselves as well as empower ourselves and other women and young people. We started it just because we love dancing. And we love our culture, and we started off just performing but given our backgrounds in education, naturally began doing workshops to get people moving and all people in schools as well as the Aboriginal community. And since then it's been evolving into mentoring programs and different dance workshops, which we're now doing online. That's basically, who we are and what we do.

CMR: And Thara, will definitely dive down into some of those programs,

especially the online ones now with coronavirus lockdowns in just a couple of minutes. Tarsh over to you, what does it actually mean, this connection to self, culture and country?

Nartarsha: I think I've connected really deep to those three elements, especially in this time, and really understanding the importance of that connection to ourself, culture and country, that wraps around the entirety of how we live our lives. And self can be our bodies like our physical being and body and connecting to that place.

Also, our minds and how we navigate our emotions and thoughts through just any time that comes up for us and also our soul and our spirit and connecting to that self - that place of truth in who we are and how we've been created and our purposes and our why, why we do things and our passion and love and things that bring us happiness. That represents all of self and also our culture. Our culture can be, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but also our culture of our environments of where we live and who we have around us and how we continue to live our daily lives.

CMR: Tarsh, thanks for that. Now, Thara back to you. What are some of the programs that have been either taken online or introduced since the start of the Coronavirus lockdowns across Victoria earlier this year?

Thara: In March, this year we were on tour with The Merindas, when everything started closing and the music and entertainment industry. We found ourselves at home, and just really missing dancing and connecting to other

people and finding that way to express at home was a really strange time so we just said, well, let's just take it online, invite people to do some movement workshops.

We explored a few different ways, we used our Zumba fitness instructing skills, initially to do some fitness. We did some dance challenges, some sort of freestyle movement, and we were just able to experiment and explore different ways to get people moving and connecting with each other at home. And we've been doing that for seven months now. So we're really proud of that.

CMR: Thara staying with you, how successful has it been during these lockdown periods?

Thara: Definitely at the beginning of lockdown when everyone was in shock mode and adapting and more globally as well, we had women from New Zealand, Canada, the States, islands join us, which was really beautiful. So it was definitely bigger at the beginning. And now, even though I guess the numbers are getting smaller as the rest of the country and the world is starting sort of easing restrictions, I think it's still being really important with the intimate group we have, especially in lockdown in Victoria and Melbourne.

CMR: Tarsh, Thara just mentioned that at the beginning of these online events, you were getting people from all over the world. And that begs the question, who is this for? I assume in this case it's not just for First Nations people of this country.

Nartarsha: No, it can be an extension of

First Nations people worldwide and also everyone else in between. Our culture is here to stay as the theme of this year, "Always Was Always Will Be", and it's time we get to share that and everybody else to embrace this country we're in - our culture - because it has so much to offer. So it's here for everybody.

CMR: And Tarsh, when you say everybody, what age groups we're looking at? Because surely, you're never too young to start embracing connection to self, culture and country, after all.

Nartarsha: No, never too young or never too old. Those excuses of age restrictions don't exist. We've danced with babies from zero to elders in 90s, and even if you're physically able or not, we've been with a diverse lot of people. So absolutely everybody.

CMR: And Thara. What programs specifically are being delivered right now?

Nartarsha: Yeah, so as well as Wala Dance we felt the need to do some mentoring in this time online obviously because we can't gather. So we opened up a Wala Sisters Expansion Programs to Aboriginal women, so this is a First Nations only group and program.

We opened it up to women from age 12 to 19 years old. We had 20 register and have been doing that for a month now with one-on-one calls fortnightly and then fortnightly group meetings over Zoom until we can gather again but just being able to bring in elders and other guests and facilitators to do different activities. The young women at home, as well as share their stories and cultural knowledge. All the feedback from the girls, why they registered was that they're missing that community connection and gathering and hearing from our old people.

CMR: Thanks for that Thara, and Tarsh to you now, I believe that there's something about an end of program camp that is at

this stage, hopefully slated for a roundabout January 2021, is that right?

Nartarsha: Yes, that's correct. And this is a part of the connection to country, which we believe is so important for the mentoring that we are providing through Wala. This is the integration and this is the total immersion where we have little sisters, big sisters, aunties, and elders, all the part of this process of sisterhood, of supporting, of growing and being able to give back to ourselves while on country. Really beautiful time.

CMR: Thara, how can people get in contact with Wala Connections?

Nartarsha: We have a website now, which was another little project in COVID, which we're proud of, but you can inquire through the bookings@walaconnections.com. Our numbers are on social media as well - we have Instagram and Facebook, especially with young people happy to be DM'd, emailed, called, whatever.

CMR: We'll provide all those contact details, including direct links to Wala Connections' website, Facebook and all the other social media sites along with the phone numbers to contact the ladies to find out about the programs. Thara, thanks so much for coming on to the program.

Thara: Thanks for having us.

CMR: And Nartarsha you as well. Both of you stay safe.

Nartarsha: Thank you.

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