

## INTERVIEW CHRIS GEE (PANDEMIC PORTRAITS) - 6/10/2020

**Connection Matters Radio (CMR):**

During the frustration of Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns, people have lost their jobs, and of course, a great deal of freedom, which we all take for granted. While there are many who sit and wait for a return to normal times, there are those who put their skills, their passions, and experience to good use, often for the good of community. One such man, Chris Gee, an independent filmmaker living in the Melbourne suburb of Northcote, lost his job due to restrictions back in March. Since then, he's been creating photo portraits that document the lives of local residents throughout the lockdown. He joins me now on Connection Matters Radio. Chris, thanks for coming onto the program.

**Chris:** Thanks, Charles.

**CMR:** Chris, give us a bit of a background as to the motivation to initiate this project.

**Chris:** So like you said, I lost my work in the first lockdown, end of March, and I'd always wanted to do a bit more photo portraiture. And I based the idea... There's a popular series called Humans of New York. And then I'd go out and take photos of people in the local community and document what they are experiencing during COVID. So it's a photo portrait series where I go out and take a photo of someone, and then they contribute what they've been experiencing during this time. So what's changed for them, what's been good, what's been challenging, and what's been unique about their COVID experience.

**CMR:** Do you think this sharing of

personal experiences from members of the community can actually aid the wellbeing of others?

**Chris:** Yeah, I think so. I seem to get a lot of feedback and engagement on the Facebook page, where most of the portraits go. And there's a lot of engagement from people. There's a lot of comments. I hear back from people saying they love the stories, and especially, the good news side of it as well. I think people are getting caught up. They get a lot of bad news nowadays. So it's nice to hear what other people are up to and to see a photo and to get a bit of insight into people who might be living next door to you or the next street over.

**CMR:** Having a look at the various portraits that you've put up on Facebook and Instagram, and we will be providing everyone with the links to these particular areas on social media, once the interview goes to air, it seems that you're really capturing the essence of being in an incredibly ethnic, diverse community, which is Darebin.

**Chris:** Yeah, I'm trying to do that. I'm offering to participants... It's voluntary to take part, but I am trying to get a spread of people who live within the community. So age, gender, cultural background as well. So really trying to capture the diversity that's in the area that I live in, which is Darebin.

**CMR:** And you're now looking to do some portraits on First Nations people throughout the area. Is that correct?

**Chris:** Yeah, that's right. That's one thing that has been missing from the series, some indigenous voices and

pictures of indigenous people as well. So I'm trying to reach out to get some of those voices in the series.

**CMR:** And we'll come back to that in just a minute or two, Chris. What are some of the more interesting profiles or portraits that you've developed and put up on the social media? One or two that might strike your fancy?

**Chris:** I'm a believer in that everyone has a story, but if I had to pick some, I took a portrait of a lady recently who has done a series of photos herself on local bird life. And that's been really popular, and she's made a calendar out of that and got a lot of interest. I've been back and visited people who I shot early in the project, so who I took portraits of in May. And then I've been back recently for about a dozen and taken a second portrait of them to see what has changed. And that in itself has been a really interesting experience. People have moved house, they've lost friends. So even within a short period of time, there's been a lot of change for them.

**CMR:** So some fairly dramatic portraits.

**Chris:** I guess so, yeah. They all have a good news twist to them, but definitely within some, there's some hard stuff that people are dealing with as well.

**CMR:** When did you actually start this? You lost your job back in March. So when did you take up the camera again and start getting out into community, taking these portraits?

**Chris:** The first time around, I started in May, and for the first batch, I did 100 portraits from May through to about July.

And then I stopped, when the first lockdown finished and things were kind of going back to normal and my work picked up again, but then we've been through a second lockdown and the second set of restrictions. So I've started shooting the portraits again, this time around and actively looking for more participants to take part.

**CMR:** Let's get this right. This is entirely self-funded, isn't it?

**Chris:** Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I was just doing it initially, when I went out, I had my kids home from school, so we were doing distance ed at home. And so it was a bit of a creative outlet for me. I would take them out on the bike in the afternoon, and we'd go and visit a few people and shoot a few portraits. So it was a great chance for us to get out of the house, for me to do something creative. And for me to do something to contribute back as well and document this really unique time that we're experiencing.

**CMR:** How have you been getting the word out there to the community? In other words, going through that selection process and getting the people on which to do the portraits?

**Chris:** Mainly through Facebook, I've been contacting people. When I started the project, I initially put a post on a local Facebook community group. And from there, I lined up 20 or 30 portraits. And then from those early portraits, I was able to start the Facebook page and then put it out there again. And people put me in touch with other people, and it kind of rolled on from there.

**CMR:** Are you looking for specific sorts of people? I'm not talking about ethnic backgrounds, but experiences or socioeconomic positions, anything at all?

**Chris:** Not in particular. Like I said before, I think everyone has a story to tell. It's just how much you're willing to share in the

public realm. I guess anyone who might look at the series and say that they have a unique voice or unique story to tell, something that hasn't been covered. There's certain stories that I haven't been able to gain access to. So some sort of frontline workers, I haven't been able to capture stories of, like police. I would love to get that angle. Yeah, but anyone who's had a unique experience in this time.

**CMR:** And how can people get in contact with you to discuss their suitability for the project?

**Chris:** So the main way to get in touch would be through the page, the Facebook page, which is facebook.com Pandemic Portraits. And if you go there, you can have a look at the portraits that have been done already. There's a contact there as well, where you can send a message.

**CMR:** Chris, we'll definitely be putting you in contact with some great First Nations people. And I have a number of names already coming to mind, including, and I hope he won't mind me making public with his name, Uncle Talgium Edwards, who would be a marvellous subject. But if anybody would like to get in touch with Chris, bearing in mind that he is subject to a five kilometre travel radius from Northcote, then use that Facebook link, and we'll have that on the Connection Matters Radio website. Chris, thank you so much for the project that you're undertaking for community and for speaking to us here on Connection Matters Radio.

**Chris:** Thanks, Charles.

- END -