

I'm a Wiradjuri woman, my family is from Cowra in central West NSW. But I was born and raised pretty much really in Sydney on Gadigal Land, Redfern Waterloo and then out at Mascot. I now live on Bidjigal Country at Hillsdale. I am a Mother of four, and a Grandmother of seven. I come from a big family, Dad was, one of eleven kids. On Mum's side there's only her and my Uncle, so only two on that side but there's a lot of kids, grandkids and great grandkids. I got a new one yesterday for my birthday, so I have a birthday twin. Everyone in the family's got a niece or nephew born on their birthday, but I didn't - so now I do. That's my nephew's son, so it's my great nephew. And my other baby, my sister's grandchild is only about 3 weeks old. So, they don't get to stay the baby for long in my family, we might have to have a break for a little while now.

What does Community, Mob, Culture mean to me? It's family. It's all of that. And family is not just our direct family unit, you know - all the cousins that came out of those 11 on this side and two on this side - that's our family. But then we also have people that are connected to our family that are not blood-related but they're still counted as Mob. And Culture is everything you know. And when I talk about community, there's of course the Aboriginal community and the organisations, sports communities, and networks as well. Past history, this what I talk about on my walking tours. I only knew the political side of being Aboriginal, but I didn't have the Culture side because of our past history that's been denied. But now I know a lot more, and there's still a lot I don't know about Culture in different communities. Culture is what keeps you strong, I guess. It's having that strength in knowing that you come from the oldest living Culture in the world, that's what I want my grandkids to know. They're allowed to know now from when their born. It happens, it's part of their life. At the end of the day, it's family to me. There's so many of them that It's hard to think about other things sometimes, with so many birthdays and different events.

We make a point in our family that we have a pre family Christmas because everyone's busy on Christmas Day and no-one's got a big enough house to accommodate us all, so we have a picnic at La Perouse. This last year we had the beach bar downstairs, but it was just a bit of a get together. We have a secret santa. We want the cousins to know each other - because of housing and all that, people live so far away. My nephew is about to move out to a new suburb like Spring Park or something, to be able to afford to buy a house. The other cousins are at Mascot. So, it's coming together that one day, but also making an effort when it's someone's birthday. My son and daughter-in-law will drive out to Spring Park and vice versa. Its really important for those kids to grow up with that connection, you know? I had dinner last night for my birthday and it wasn't a lot of people - one nephew, his two kids there and the other niece with three kids and five grannies. Two of them were missing because someone was sick, but I had a ball! And my granddaughter who's eight, well the cousin that's her age wasn't there, so she asks, 'Where's the cousin that's my age?' Everyone else has got someone there their age, and they're all different colours and shades and sizes; but it's really important when they come together, they're family. The big ones sort of try to go away and do their own stuff but it's all about keeping family connected. And we do that in the sense of paying homage to our grandparents and our parents and the families they've built and just keeping it all together.

Most of my family back in the 60s and 70s and 80s from Dad's side came to, Sydney. For work, like a lot of other Aboriginal people who stayed here. So, I do still have a lot of cousins in Cowra? But we don't grow up like we used to when we were kids, and a lot of them that could come to city have passed away now. There are a few cousins still up there, but I pretty much only go back if there's a funeral.

Busy life, it's hard to get away to go anywhere. I'm lucky to go to the Central Coast to see my cousins. Not long ago I went to Darwin for my girlfriend's 50th and then again for work. On that work trip we went to Alice Springs, and I've got a girlfriend there who, her mother had not long passed away. So instead of staying in a motel I stayed at her house. Because I'm not gonna get up there very often and this way I can take advantage of the fact that someone else (work) is paying. But I'm staying with her to support her and catch up.

I got to travel a bit when I was there, I went to some remote communities as part of my work. And being someone from the city, it's just mind blowing because you know, Australia's big; but you don't realise it until you get out there. I only saw a couple of communities and there's so many more that are way out. We'll travel on a corrugated road for two hours, in some parts there's no Internet and it's like, how do people live out here? That's all they know and that's what they're used to. It was just beautiful, getting to understand those smaller communities, how they live and how they support each other.

We didn't get to spend a lot of time there, we were doing interviews, I think it was for the childcare subsidy. We had gift cards for the parents because we only had so many, but about 5 people would come in. A lot of them have English as a second language, so there's often people there that come in as a translator. So, we would give the parents a gift card, but then the rest of them are sort of like, 'What about me?'

It's not just about the gift card to them, they're going in there to support that woman. The way I saw it, it's all about supporting that parent to feel comfortable coming and talk to bunch of strangers from Sydney who are coming in asking all these questions. It happened with the women, and it happened with the men. My colleagues were saying, these are just for the parents, and they'd say, 'Well I'm the Uncle.' So we're like, OK, you're just as important as the father. I think that's what been watered down a little bit in the metropolitan areas, because we don't have those people close by to take on that role as the Uncle or the Aunty. Whereas there, they're closer together and around all the time. If the Uncle growls at you, that's just as bad as the Father growling at you. We went there for couple hours and for some reason left, so we didn't even get to stay the night or spend a lot of time with people. But even when I was in Darwin, the motel was near the supermarket and the shops; you wouldn't just see one Blackfella, there'd be like 20 all hanging out together. If somebody wanted to shop, they're all going together or they're outside waiting to get the bus together. So, you don't often see just one person by himself, they all move together as a unit.

I think I've found it easy to get in and make connections, with this one I was up at Coffs Harbour for work and rang one person up and introduced myself. She said, are you related to Millie Ingram? I said yeah, that's my Aunty, and she starts telling me about how way back they used to go out together and telling me stories and all that. So, when I went to that community, I already had a foot in the door. She had let other people know that it was alright to talk to me but then she said there was one Aunty that you have to go and see, 'She's gonna grill ya, She's gonna test you out.' So, sure enough we go to the house and at the time, we had to sit outside because it was Covid rules. She didn't want to sit outside because she'd have to move the dog and she wasn't happy about it. My colleague who isn't Aboriginal said to her, 'Sorry Aunt, but if we don't sit outside, we can't come in.' So she's like, 'Oh alright then...'

I was talking to the one that I knew in the company there were two other women, and they said, 'I'm just going to type up some notes is that ok? I'll show you when I'm finished if you wanna read it?' I said, 'Thanks for meeting with us, my name's Donna Ingram and I'm Wiradjuri...' And she said, 'Well you shouldn't be here. This is not your country. You can't come in here telling us what to do.' I explained, 'Well I'm not coming here to tell you what to do, I'm here to ask you what you want to see in this project.' And so, she just sat there, the other women are talking and after a couple of questions and about 10 minutes, she asks me 'Do you want a cup of tea Bub?' It was because that person vouched for me, without that it would have taken longer to breakdown barriers or even to get through the door in the first place. I love that yarn because she just wasn't having it. It's communities that don't agree with what the governments doing, that's where things like that happen and yeah, she wasn't having it.

Growing up, my Mum always said, 'They'll pick on you, you say you're Black and proud of it.' And for a while I didn't know the Cultural side of things to sort of brush those things off, but as an older person, it's protected me. So even though she's growling at me, I know where she's coming from, so it's not gonna upset me. I know she's checking me out.

It happened again at a local Land Council; they just had that wrong end of the stick. We'd had this good sort of relationship going on every month the project had been going and suddenly they were like, 'Listen here! We're not doing this. We're not doing that.'

We were taken aback, and I knew that they just had the wrong end of the stick, so they were defending their position, which is fair enough. I kept sort of reinforcing my point about, 'Well no... we did this, and we did that' and 'That's not what we're here for, we're here to do this.' And they all went around the room and they all had a go, all the board members. My colleagues were all a bit shell-shocked because they weren't expecting that and just didn't know what to do. They're very smart people and they knew this project inside and out, and I was there as that Cultural connection. I explained, they're just flexing their muscles as the board because they were a new board.

But they were telling us things that weren't relevant to the meeting, so I told them we can't comment on community business. I wrote it out to them, I was on the defensive and I was about to say, well look, 'We didn't come here to be abused. We came here to give you information and ask for your input. We don't deserve to be treated like this and we're going to leave.' Though it didn't get to that, and we just kept reinforcing our position and kept answering all their questions. They were saying 'What about this? Is this a draft? It doesn't say draft!' But it did at the top.

In the end we got through it and started organising the next steps. And then the chairperson said, 'Thanks for coming ladies.' We started standing up and they were suddenly all smiles and asking us 'Oh, how are you going, who's your relation? When's your next trip, where are you staying at?'

It had totally changed, they were no longer board members, they were people - and I just started laughing to myself because that was so funny how they just switched. To me, that proved my point they were just flexing their muscles as a Land Council, stating their position, but they'd been given misinformation. To keep the relationship, I knew I wasn't going to sit there, and cop crap all night, so I was trying to reassure them, explaining 'That's not what we're here for. That's not in the document. This is what we're here for, you know?'

**That** kind of heavy lifting, sometimes it's paid like with my work and a lot of the other times it's unpaid. So that was a work situation, and even at the meeting I had this morning, we were trying to find a date to do this workshop launch in our calendar, my colleague said, 'Everyone wants a piece of Donna'. Because even though there is an Aboriginal worker at the Council, obviously his input is going to be valuable as well, but because we're consultants they rely on us for a lot of that as well. In my team there's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, so they do come to me with even little general questions about different things and for meetings they rely on me there for that input.

Now, this thing about somebody's gonna get more money than others because they're more important, that's not how we operate as Aboriginal people. I just believe that everyone's equal and everyone deserves a voice. That's part of my trajectory, having a voice and even what got me into public speaking. Like going to a work meeting, or Land Council meeting or any other community meeting and you wanna say something but feeling not game enough? I would get real frustrated with myself for not, because then someone else would say it we all go, 'Oh we've all we been waiting for someone to bring that up, I was thinking that 10 minutes ago.'

And then I think there's the age thing as well, once you start getting older you just say what you think. I was on the ATSIC council and I was the youngest person in that council, so I didn't say a lot. We used to get a bit of discretionary funding, so I remember one time an organisation put in for some money. In the line items, they had done cleaning. And then down the bottom they had listed miscellaneous. So, I asked what the miscellaneous line item was and they said, 'Oh, that's for cleaning and other things.' I pointed out that they had listed cleaning up the top, so they were trying to double claim on cleaning, and nobody picked up on it, but I did. I think that's part of my typist's background. If there's a typo anywhere, I'll find it – straight away. On TV they often have the news headlines in the bottom, and they often make spelling mistakes and I pick up on them. People will laugh at me at work because if they have a document on the screen, I have to say something. And they sort of giggle because my eyes went straight to it, and I picked up the typo.

I've gotta be able to say that because there was a time when I used to feel like they were smarter than me with their PHD's and university degrees, but they just have different knowledge and its whitefella knowledge. And at the end of the day whatever they're doing is based on western ways of learning. I'd say, 'I could learn what they did, what they learn - but they can't learn what I know around Culture and being Aboriginal and living as an Aboriginal person. So, it wouldn't bother me but it in meetings I'd be quiet and not say much. Now I talk up.

That's what I want for my grandkids, and I don't think I've got any problems with my eldest one. She's very vocal and she's very social justice-minded. She wants to do Welcome to Country with me, so when somebody organised a foreign youth programme, I said I'll bring my granddaughter and she can help me. She was so excited, but then they got back to me and said they were going to get one of the young people to do an acknowledgement instead.

So, they pretty much cancelled me. I told her mother they had cancelled on me, and she said not to tell her that and just to say they'd postponed, because she'll be all like, 'Well, that's not really fair. They shouldn't have done that to you Nanny.' So we just said it was postponed until she sort of forgot about it, because otherwise she'd be all up in arms saying they did the wrong thing.

I think the rest of them are going to be like that too. They have that voice. They're very vocal about

their Culture and who they are. I love seeing young Aboriginal people doing that.

There was a recent event where they had all these young people talking. There's no way at that age I would have the guts to get up on stage with a microphone and make a speech. And I think that's the benefit of always acknowledging Elders and the work that they do, that's what's coming through seeing young people that do know their Culture from an early age. They're confident in their identity and they just get out there and do it. I just love it, seeing that.

Even when I went with Jacob and Elisa to one of their sessions, I was there just as the Aunty in the room and every now and then they'd pause and ask if I have anything to add? And sometimes at the end I'd just make a comment or whatever, but again, I would never have been able to do that at that age. Especially the wealth of knowledge that they had in a presentation and how they presented it and talk about it. I'm always just really excited and blown away when that happens. My granddaughter will be on the stage with a microphone as soon as she can get there.

It's a good thing they do public speaking at school, even if it's just in a classroom, but they're already practising that and overcoming that shame factor that sadly, a lot of us had. They're getting past that now and they're getting up there, talking about what they want and what they want to see. We all mean it when we say, 'Acknowledge Elders past and present.' I really emphasise that when I do the walking tours. If they hadn't gone down in the trenches, getting bashed or spat on, and all the bad things that happened... well they got up and kept going so that we can live a better life.

Which I guess I'll mention that we used to have a NAIDOC group in Sydney. ICAMPA, Inner City Aboriginal Multi-Purpose Association. We were very deliberate about the name. It was based down at Alexandria to organise local NAIDOC events. We didn't want to call it NAIDOC when we got incorporated, because we didn't want to limit ourselves when we'd apply for funding for other things like women's or men's programs. The volunteers there were a community committee, so one week would be 10, the next week we'd have 20, because it wasn't structured to have a treasury and all this and all that, the committee was just whoever turned up each week. Someone might volunteer to order the sausages, someone else might to volunteer to do the bread, you know. And then on the day of the event you just had heaps of people coming in. But I always insisted on paying the people who clean the toilets.

Everyone is quite happy to cook, do the set-up, looking after the Elders, like making a cup of tea, getting someone to the food, whatever they may need help with crossing the road. Focus on the Elders you know. And we would get volunteers that were outside the community as well, so they might have been volunteering as well just doing anything. That happens a lot these days, community centres with a sort of corporate centre taking their staff on the day to just do whatever has to be done, really. Back then it was more community people, men, and women.

We used to go to Alexandria Park after the Land Rights marches back in the day, in the 70s. The adults would make a fire and hang out and they would get fish and chips for the kids. They would make it there every year after the marches. One year the Department of Health turned up and gave out apples and oranges. The next year someone else would turn up with a stall and it grew itself into our annual Aboriginal Day gathering. Then it became more coordinated, and it was just the sort of inner city Aboriginal community and it was all voluntary. We would work from 6am till like 10, 11 at night. When Sarah Hamilton was working at NCIE she started doing a lot of the work with the stalls and paperwork, and she was giving us all a rest. I was able to start stepping back and she sort of was

running the whole thing and everyone were still involved, but then she left to go to a new job. So NCIE started running it, but we had certain values and rules, so we said no commercial vendors, or anyone selling food because it's not about money making, it's about community coming together. We also cut out the sugar, we used to have fairy floss, snow cones, soft drinks, but that was no good to anyone's diabetes, so we just cut that out.

We used to have an Elder's lunch, held on a separate day of the week and they incorporated into their Family & Culture Day which is fine. But apparently it wasn't very good quality. An Aunty asked for salt & pepper and it was given to her in a sachet. She said, 'What is this, ration days?!' So, if you ever have a function with Aunty Millie everything's got to be proper and have proper cutlery and everything else. It just respectful to the Elders who probably can't manage plastic cutlery, you know. They might break them trying to cut something, they're not very strong, you know. So not just giving them disposable stuff and to give them proper cutlery and plates.

I went to The Settlement once for an event and it was really well done with all this food and drink. A volunteer came over with the tray and to serve one of the Elders and he offered to serve her. She says, 'No, I can get it myself.' I was wondering about that, what she had got upset with, because it was nice of him to offer with helping her. I quite like that as I don't have to get up and I can do nothing, but she got really offended. She also felt like she was being offered rations. But that's just all that past trauma and that's what people are carrying, so that was offensive to her. So, I just stay observant to things like that interaction, and I'll take note of it, That's what helps me in my job and it helps me in my community and my family, so I can see if these cheeky kids are gonna bash each other in a minute or if there's a conversation going the wrong way.

Observation... I think I should do it as part of leadership, that and psychology. We used to go out together at night to the pub and it was always so busy, and the dance floor was packed full. So, the men would stand at the bar and the women would sit around with their girlfriends. And I would just watch and notice as a guy would start moving closer, paying attention to whether it was more of a friend or just a stranger, but he's there checking her out. And I'll just keep tracking them all night. At the end of the night, we'll be leaving and I have to hang back just to see if they walk out together. My friends would be all swearing at me getting me to hurry up. But I'd wait back to make sure and sure enough, they'd be leaving together.

We had to do really intensive customer service training in retail as well when I worked in a shop. It's about body language, you know? We watched a lot of training videos, and I could see what was going to happen before it happened. In the video and in real life. There might be a couple who have come in and they start having an argument, but it's a distraction. Because you're going to help one of them, right? But then the other one is over there shoplifting. You might not ever have shoplifted, but you have to think about shoplifting.

My favourite thing about volunteering? Seeing a successful community event and people coming on the journey. The most challenging thing would be sort of managing people's expectations, I guess. They might say, 'Why did you put the toilets next to the Elders lounge?' And it's for a reason but I'd say, 'Well why didn't you come to the meeting and tell us that?' So you're never going to please everybody in community.'

Ensuring volunteers are engaged, that's important. I created subcommittees, so everyone would just end up doing one bit of everything, you know? You do the volunteers. You do the catering. I'd have

them tell me what they wanted to do. And the corporates, they need to have some sort of Cultural understanding before getting involved. Like going through a training program all these different community groups can offer. We didn't want to make it too overwhelming or too scary, so we had a lot of induction and orientation. We'd have some of that artists turn up and talk to them and we'd give them 20 questions and those volunteers would have to walk around and talk to people to find the answers. Like what are the words to the Redfern All Blacks song? We can't just send them out cold, we have to sort of give them some information. About how do you deal with that? And to let them know to offer a cup of tea.

It's not about going into our community cold and expecting them to educate you, going there for a free history lesson. But to go together with some understanding of Culture and to be respectful. And I think one thing that we also have to teach them is to listen. If you're a volunteer like, if something needs to be moved, or something specific needs to happen, to listen and just do it without hesitation. So, for volunteers, it's important to have that sort of Cultural understanding, a bit of anchoring and knowledge about our history. It's about respecting community and if they ask you to do something a certain way, you don't question why they do it like that.