

RESETTLEMENT | Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanha

Transcript: Episode 5 | You Get Wary

My mother and my brother and my sister were were Stolen Generation, you know, and that, that had a really big impact on us. Mum didn't really tell us a lot about that because I think it was, you know, it really hurt her. She was a very tough woman and yeah, she made sure that we were on the straight and narrow all the time, because I think she was frightened of the fact of, you know, police coming, welfare coming and all that sort of stuff you know.

Luke Wighton VO: In 1993 Uncle Greg Packer was so angry at the vile racist public comments of Wagga Wagga City Councillor Jim Eldridge, he was ready to literally dump a truck load of sewage on Eldridge's driveway.

What upset Uncle Greg was Eldridge barging into Wagga City Council's Mayoral reception for the International Year of Indigenous People, yelling out comments about half-caste radicals.

A Tribunal found that Eldridge attended the launch with the deliberate intention to cause trouble. Whilst the whole event took only a few minutes, his pre-planned stunt clearly spoiled the whole event for those present.

A friend of Uncle Greg's talked him out of dumping the sewage - thus saving his job with the Council.

[00:01:40] Hi, I'm Luke Wighton. I'm a Wiradjuri man from Condobolin living in Wagga Wagga. I'm the host of this podcast series RESETTLEMENT—Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanh, which means Wiradjuri Welcome to Visitors. It's all about Wagga Wagga's First Nations community.

Before white settlement, we'd been living peacefully and sustainably in this beautiful part of the Country on the Marrambidya Bila - or Murrumbidgee River - for tens of thousands of years.

From the 1830's, colonisation of the Wagga Wagga area began, destroying our Mob through land theft, disease, murder and oppression. Our language and culture were denied, even made illegal. Our children were stolen from their families to be trained as slaves for the colonisers. We were banished to the fringes of society.

But in the early 1970's that changed. The children's homes were closed, the missions were shut down and the size of our population in Wagga Wagga began to grow again - under what was known as the Aboriginal Family Resettlement Scheme. The federal government scheme ran from 1974 until 1986. The aim was to move our mob from the missions and fringes of smaller remote towns to larger regional areas like Wagga Wagga, with the promise of better services and more opportunities.

This podcast series was a goal of the Wagga Wagga City Council's Reconciliation Action Plan. It has been developed by the Museum of the Riverina in collaboration with our First Nations community.

[00:03:16] So.... let's get to know another member of our proud First Nations mob.

Uncle Greg Packer was born in Leeton in 1956. He moved to Wagga Wagga in the late 1970's under the Aboriginal Family Resettlement Scheme.

His mother, one of his brothers and a sister were all part of the Stolen Generations. He was lucky to not have been taken himself.

Over his life, Uncle Greg has had many different jobs. From labouring on farms, to working in an abattoir... to later becoming a senior manager with New South Wales Health.

These days, he works on Country with Local Lands Services. In that role he is helping to train the next generation of our mob to do cultural assessments and traditional cool burning practices.

Uncle Greg is someone who loves a laugh, loves sport, and loves his culture. He's left his mark on many, many people in Wagga Wagga and the wider Riverina community.

For eight years Uncle Greg was chairman of Wagga Wagga's NAIDOC committee - so he has close connections with mob all across the city.

On top of that, Uncle Greg is a director of RMRA - Riverina Murray Regional Alliance. Its job is to represent the interests of our mob and Aboriginal organisations in 10 communities in the region. The Alliance is committed to local decision making.

Uncle Greg's mission is to make a difference... and ensure that all government and non-government services are accountable for their funding for Aboriginal people.

[00:04:46] Greg: There's six of us in the family, we're like siblings so I had a big mob and, yeah, although two have passed now, I've got two sisters that have passed but there's three boys and one girl left.

[00:05:08] Greg: My mother and, and my brother and my sister were, were Stolen Generation, you know, and that had a really big impact on us. And sort of mum, mum didn't really tell us a lot about that. Because I, I, my father sort of left home when I was three years of age, you know. I'm the youngest in the family so I didn't really have a male figure around me, only my older brothers. And yeah. And she didn't really go into it because I think it was, um, you know, it really hurt her because she was taken from her parents. She was taken very young and then she was told that her parents passed away and all that. And yeah. And it was, sadly because we found

one of her brothers and we saw him about three or four times and then mum passed away, you know, they just started to get to know each other and all that.

[00:05:55] Greg: Yeah, so, those are sad times. And then me brother, he's only just found out that he was a part of the Stolen Generation and he didn't know. Because his wife done some research on him and the person that she was talking to, I think it could have been Link-Up or something like that anyway. And he said, 'Oh, your husband's a part of the stolen generation because he's got a number next to his name'. And if you've got that number, that means you're a part of the Stolen Generation. You know?

The Australian government policy of stealing children continued until 1969 and has caused an understandable distrust of the authorities.

[00:06:46] Greg: You get very wary, wary of people that are around you, you know, especially if they work in government and all that sort of stuff, you know. You always think about what your mum went through and all that. Like - and she done it tough, me, me mother, like she was rearing six kids and.

[00:07:01] Greg: And like, you know, I can remember, I lived in Leeton, we'd come home from school and we'd walk up to the paddock and we'd help mum pick oranges just to feed us and all that sort of stuff. So, it was a hard time. Me mother died a very young woman and, uh, I think it was because of what she went through in the younger ages and working hard.

[00:07:20] Greg: She was a very tough woman and she made sure that we were on the straight and narrow all the time. So, you know, because I think she was frightened of the fact of, you know, police coming, welfare coming and all that sort of stuff, you know. Yeah. When you got on the wrong side of her you knew it though..

The history of what happened to our mob and our children... it's horrible... The children weren't stolen because they were neglected. It was to use them as slaves in white people's homes and farms.

[00:07:49] Greg: We don't hold any grudges. We just want people to understand that's what it's about, you know. And, uh, there's a lot of people that still don't understand. You talk to some people and they say, 'Oh, well, you know, you must have been getting fed or anything like that' and that, you know, but we were happy, you know, yeah.

Uncle Greg moved from Leeton to Wagga Wagga in 1978.

[00:08:17] Greg: I was on the housing commission list in Leeton and it was a seven year waiting list to get into a house in Leeton. And my older sister had actually moved over here about 12 to 18 months before I did through the resettlement scheme.

[00:08:30] Greg: And there was an old Aboriginal gentleman named Roy Carroll. And he come from Narrandera. And the housing commission actually employed him to go out and and talk to different families that were on housing commission lists all over New South Wales. Anyway - and I think my sister have had a little bit of part in it and told him to come and see me.

[00:08:52] Greg: So he came over and seen me and we were talking and he just said, 'look, if you want to move to Wagga', he said, 'I can get you in a house in three months'. And he explained it to me, he said 'what the Housing Commission set up was that they were going around and they were buying private homes around the suburbs of Wagga'. And he said, 'and that's what we can do', he said, 'if you want to do it'. And I said 'okay, I'll have a go at it'.

[00:09:20] Greg: And in three months time I moved over into, um, Bungown Place it was called and, uh, It was a little cul de sac and there was a lot of old people living there. We actually loved it. We had three children at the time. We had a three bedroom home. And the only reason why I left there is because me wife then, um, actually fell pregnant and we had another baby, so we went to a bigger house out, out near Ashmont.

[00:09:44] Greg: It was a bit busier for us, but I suppose I had the luxury of having my older sister and that here that had already sort of settled in a little bit after, after about 12 months and she didn't live that far from where we moved to, you know, so it was pretty good in that area.

[00:10:00] Greg: It was daunting. And one of my major problems was is, is Leeton is a really good place for work. Like, you know, farming work and there's a lot of seasonal work at the cannery and abattoirs and a lot of factories over there that you could work at. It was always a good place for an income.

[00:10:17] Greg: But when I come to Wagga, I found it really difficult to find jobs, you know. And, and, um probably for the first 12 months, I, uh, actually struggled with it, you know, trying to get a job, but, uh, I eventually got on to the Wagga City Council, actually had the abattoirs at that time. So I started working for them and I was with them for a few years there. And so it was, yeah, sort of work sort of came in, in, into it. Then once, once I got work, I was pretty well, right.

[00:10:44] Greg: And when I moved here there wasn't a lot of services that you dealt with that had a lot of Aboriginal people that were in those positions. They come sort of later. You know? And, there was no AMS, and mainly the vital services that we used was sort of Centrelink until I got work and then the Housing Commission, you know, going and paying and rent and all that sort of stuff and yeah, it was just those basic things and the hospital and all that, that's what we used. You know.

While he could see the opportunities for his family in Wagga Wagga, services for First Nations families were limited... or non-existent.

[00:11:20] Greg: It was hard, but, you know, looking at Wagga, I, I, I could see that there was a lot more opportunities for, for me kids, you know, like around sporting and all that sort of stuff. And, there's a lot more to offer the kids in sporting and the best part about it, yeah it was all in Wagga and it wasn't that far away to go to, you know, if you played rugby league or if you played soccer or all those types of sporting things, it was a lot more to offer those kids and. And the schools were nice and close to where we lived and all that. It was a five minute walk to school.

[00:11:52] Greg: I think with the influx of a lot of Aboriginal people coming to town, I think council and, and organisations really realised, saying we've got a lot of Aboriginal people coming into these services, and you know, we don't understand their needs. And I think it impacted on a lot of people's health and all that because, see when you come from remote areas like, just say Walgett, somewhere like that, they had Aboriginal medical services at those places.

[00:12:18] Greg: And when they come here, there was none of those services here. And there wasn't many doctors that were bulk billing building at that time either, you know, so that caused a few issues for a lot of families. And what was happening when you get Aboriginal people coming in from those remote areas, they'd go back in the school holidays or whatever and they do all this stuff that they used to do when they live back there, like swimming in dams and all that sort of stuff. So a lot of children, a lot of kids come back with ear infections and all of those types of things. So I think the biggest impact it had on people were their health. And, it was just, yeah, as I said, from remote areas, it was really hard for those people to, to sort of actually cope at that time, you know.

[00:12:57] Greg: I've seen a lot of change. Especially now you walk down the street, like there's some Aboriginal people that are actually working in shops and all that sort of stuff where they wasn't before. Like I went into, um, La Porchetta and there was, um, there was three Aboriginal ladies working in there on the one shift and I thought that's unbelievable, you know. So you do see change and you see them at Coles and Woolworths and, you know, you see them in shopfronts, so it's really good to see that, you know, and they're young people, which is good. Yeah.

[00:13:31] Greg: I think, uh, we're just building, like we're building a large Aboriginal population here. I think it's up around a hundred, uh, three, three and a half thousand to 4,000 Aboriginal people that are living here now.

Like other mob, Uncle Greg copped racism throughout his life... He even had to face it as he prepared to get married.

[00:13:50] Greg: I married me second wife in Wagga and we hired this hall to have our, um, celebration at, after the wedding and. Anyway, my wife was non Aboriginal and she went up and paid for the hall and then I went up the day before we got married to get the keys to, um, actually pick up to go and clean the hall out and walked into the shop and I said, 'I'd just come to pick up the keys for, um, to clean the hall up for, for the wedding tomorrow'.

[00:14:18] Greg: And she sort of hes.. was very hesitant to give me the keys anyway. She said, 'I just got to ring me husband'. And anyway she walked out the back and I could hear her. And she said, 'Okay'. She said, uh, 'Mr. Packer's come for the keys'. And he said, 'yeah, well, give them to him'. And she said, 'but he's Aboriginal'. And I could hear it quite clearly. And I heard the husband sort of getting into her on the phone and said, 'hand him the keys. They've paid for it'.

[00:14:38] Greg: So yeah, so those sorts of things were happening. Oh, it didn't make me feel real good, you know, but anyway. I tell you what, we went there on the Sunday after we made sure it was cleaner that what it was when we went into it, I can tell you. Yeah, so you just do those sorts of things to just let people know, you know, we're no different to anybody else, you know.

Despite the discrimination, Uncle Greg was determined to make a good life for himself and his family in Wagga Wagga. He went from one job at the Council-owned abattoirs, to a new job at the council depot.

[00:15:10] Greg: I was at Wagga City Council in, you know, when they owned the abattoirs and then they closed it down. I had a friend that knew there was a job going there and it was under Mick Rudd and he said, 'go and see Mick'. He said, see if you can get that job. So I went up and seen Mick seven times in one day. And the seventh time I walked in and he looked at me and said, 'I'm bloody sick of you'. He said, 'be down at the depot at 7. 30 on Monday morning'.

[00:15:37] Greg: And then I was there for a few years under Mick and then I got to know Mick through football and all that because he was a really good referee and you know, and he ran the junior clubs and all that sort of stuff, the association, whatever it was. And, yeah, and that's how I got my first start there.

Like many First Nations mob who moved to Wagga Wagga, Uncle Greg found that sport helped him to make important community connections.

[00:16:10] Greg: I played rugby league, you know, for Turvey Park. And also, um, in the Kennedy Shield, that was a local pub competition, when we had an Aboriginal side in that. Tony Murray and Carl Bamblett, I got in with them and we sort of run, run the Aboriginal side that was in it, you know. And we had, you know, non Aboriginal people that wanted to play with it. We had them in the side and, you know, it was just a mixture of, of people. It was called Koori United. It was every Saturday in the local comp. That's where you sort of made a lot of connections and you found out a lot.

[00:16:46] Greg: Like when I was in health, you know, people would come up to you and say, I know it's footy, but they'd say, oh, 'Aunty what's her name's a bit crook. Did you know that?' I said, 'no, I didn't'. And then, you know, I'd just follow it up on Monday or something like that. So you found out a lot of stuff that was going on at sport through, through people, just through the, we call it the Koori grapevine.

[00:17:04] Greg: I, um, coached football. I coached hockey that I didn't know much about, and, you know, my daughter's playing hockey, so I coached that, and my son was playing rugby league, I coached that. And, you know, and I also went on to coaching Group 9 with kids and all that sort of stuff. So it was very important around sport and encouraging other kids to play. And I'd um coach cricket in the summertime and rugby league in the wintertime, you know. So it was, it was really a good thing. The kids had no transport, so you'd be a taxi running around picking 'em all up and bringing 'em to the footy and, you know, all that.

[00:17:39] Greg: And yeah, so I enjoyed, you know, doing sport with kids and that, because I, I thought for kids, it's the right direction to go in. It gives them something to look forward to every weekend and, yeah. So, no, it's a very important part in Aboriginal culture because, like you look at the Indigenous rounds now and all that sort of stuff that are played in AFL, Rugby League. Even the cars. I'm watching the race cars on and they had an Indigenous round in the race cars and they've got Aboriginal design all over the race cars. So it's very important. You know, sport and, and artwork does a lot for Aboriginal people, you know, because they tell a story in their art, you know. Yeah.

Getting involved in sport didn't just help Uncle Greg get to know the local community - it also led him to get offered a job at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital, looking after our mob.

[00:18:28] Greg: I was coaching a rugby league side in the Kennedy Shield, an Aboriginal side. Anyway, we ran a barbecue to raise some money one day. And I was down there and we had a fair few people there at it. And I was publicly talking to people and all that, saying what we were going to do and all this sort of stuff, and, uh, anyway, and then Maria Williams worked in, I don't know where she was working, but she approached me and she said, 'we've got a job going at, at the hospital. It's a hospital liaison officer'. And she said it means that there's four years of university. And what you do is you do two months, two and a half months on the job and then go down to uni for two weeks, you know. And I said, 'Oh', I thought about it and she kept at me. So anyway, I took it on.

[00:19:19] Greg: And then, and I was working on the council at that time and I was on about \$35, 000 a year, you know, and that was a bit of overtime in it. Anyway, I went and done this job and my wages dropped back to about \$20,000, so it was really hard, you know. But anyway, I got a degree out of it and all that sort of stuff. And I went on and I started as a liaison officer and what I was doing was just going and seeing Aboriginal people that come from all over the place.

[00:19:44] Greg: Like, we'd get a lot of Griffith community coming and also out from Lake Cargelligo, all those places. And I'd just go over and see them and make sure their needs are being met and, any family issues back at home, I'd ring them and all that, do all that stuff. And I remember one day I, I went up to the intensive care and it was on the sixth floor at the old hospital and I walked in and there was about six nurses there that were on a break.

[00:20:11] Greg: And I walked in, I had my tag on me saying Greg Packer, Aboriginal Liaison Officer. And I just walked in and I said, 'Oh, I've come to see a person from Griffith' and, uh, I won't say his name and the nurse just looked at me and said, 'Well, what are you, what are you going to do that we can't do?' She said, 'Are you going to do a corroboree?' And I looked at her and I said, 'Well, actually, I don't dance, but I play the didgeridoo'. And I just walked out.

[00:20:35] Greg: And as I was walking out, Pat Stevenson was the boss of the nurses, anyway - and she interviewed me for the job, Pat did and she's a lovely woman. Anyway, she come out of the elevator and she could see. And she said, 'what's wrong'? And I just told her. And she stormed up there and I was on the sixth floor and I could hear her yelling at these nurses and the elevator was going down and the voice was getting really, in a distance.

[00:21:01] Greg: Anyway, and the next day I went into work those six nurses were sitting, because I was based at Community Health, that was in the hospital grounds. And anyway, she, uh, she had the six nurses there the next morning and I took them up to my office and I just sat there and I said, 'look, my job is to assist youse'. I said, 'when you've got patients that are coming from Lake Cargelligo or Griffith or wherever', I said, 'I'm just sort of making sure that they're right and that youse are right and the communication between you and the patient is there. And also the communication between the family and the hospital and all that'. I said, 'I'm here to make your job easier'. Yeah, so there was all of that sort of stuff that was going on. They did apologise, yeah, yeah. But I think it was only because of Pat, you know. Yeah.

But that discrimination didn't make Uncle Greg feel like an outsider in Wagga Wagga.

[00:21:57] Greg: I was always an outspoken person and confident person. I get on with a lot of people and I'm sort of a person that likes to talk to people. And for me, it wasn't such a problem. But as I said, I've given you an indicator of some of the things that happened to me and that had some impact on me, you know, but for a person that's shy and all that, it'd impact them a lot more, you know, than, than what I did.

As we've spoken about in other episodes of Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanha, having Aboriginal run services is incredibly important for mob, allowing them to tap into the support they need.

[00:22:38] Greg: There was a bit of a movement sort of happening with, you know, uh, the momentum starting to build, because there was a larger population of Aboriginal people in Wagga, coming to Wagga, you know. So, the momentum was building and then, and then, you know, the Aboriginal Legal Service started then and all those types of things.

[00:22:57] Greg: You know, you had somewhere to go, like. And they had meetings and different things like that for community people to attend and all that. And then on

top of that, the Lands Council came then and, so there was a bit of momentum with the Legal Service and the Lands Council then, then the children's services and all that sort of coming in and. And there was a lot more like um, liaison officers in all different services around town, you know. Like you had them in the Housing Commission, you had them in Health, you know. And so it was mainly a lot of the vital services that Aboriginal people actually used.

The development of RIVMED - the Riverina Medical and Dental Aboriginal Corporation - was a big deal for the community.

[00:23:39] Greg: It was good to see because what I found out when I was in health, there was a, as I was saying, going back to the Aboriginal families coming here from remote areas, like the first thing they'd ask you, what doctor's bulk bill? You know? And that was a bit of a problem for, for a lot of Aboriginal families and once the, um, well, once the, the medical service opened, it was mainly, the main core of it was around doctors, seeing doctors there.

[00:24:05] Greg: There wasn't a lot of the, you know, other services that were there that they sort of tacked on as they, as they got stronger. You know, like, you know, maternal health programs, all those sorts of different things. The Otitis Media program you know, around hearing, because Aboriginal kids had a lot of, a lot of hearing problems and all that. So, but the main core of the AMS when it first started was, was seeing doctors, you know, and then, and then all, all the other services built on, onto that, you know.

Uncle Greg was part of the push to have a medical centre for First Nations mob set up in the village of Brungle, between Gundagai and Tumut.

Brungle Mission Station was established in 1888 by the so-called Aborigines Protection Board.

[00:24:50] Greg: When I was in health, because I went from hospital liaison officer to Senior Aboriginal Education Officer and then the opportunity came up for the Manager job and I got the Manager job. And that meant negotiating with all those organisations and, from, from a health perspective. And we had a really good understanding and all that on what we were doing and I'd meet with the board and, I'd try and work out a lot of, a lot of issues that were in the community.

[00:25:18] Greg: And, it was like putting that health centre at Brungle, like I was one of the main instigators of that and that was only through people that I knew. And the AMS was involved in that, like, you know, I'd get them, we'd have meetings up there in the freezing cold of a night in that old fire hall up there, you know. And, um, we'd go up there for meetings.

[00:25:38] Greg: And it was quite funny because my, my boss, and I was talking to her about, you know, discrimination and all that sort of stuff and she said, 'well, I don't see it, Greg'. She said, And I said, 'okay'. And anyway, we went up there and we had a meeting one night and there was all these farmers that came in and we're

talking about building the centre and getting the money for it. And we had it. And you know, and they were, they were objective of it. And they were saying, 'no, just give the money to the, to the Tumut hospital' and all this and yeah.

[00:26:05] Greg: And yeah anyway, it was funny because I was driving back, she said, 'now I understand what you're saying', you know. So that they've got to experience it and all that. But now we've got doctors that go out there now and the farmers go there instead of driving all the way into Tumut. So, you know, over time you win things over, you know, yeah.

[00:26:26] Greg: There's always a problem with mainstream services with a lot of Aboriginal people. Even now it's still the same, you know, like, especially the police and, uh, you know, and the youth and community services and all that sort of stuff, because they were the people that sort of took our kids away and, and.

[00:26:44] And the police are working hard of changing that. And, I've been to a fair few meetings with, with the police and all that. And, you know, they've got a lot of, a lot of activity stuff happening and, they've got liaison officers and all that. So, so, you know, I'm hoping in years to come that that will be a really good thing for the whole community.

On top of all of that, Uncle Greg was chairperson of the NAIDOC committee in Wagga Wagga for eight years - and he's a big supporter of mob celebrating culture... and sharing that pride with non-First Nations people.

[00:27:27] Greg: I was on the first ball that we held here and it was at the old PCYC club. Yeah, it was really good. It really had an impact. And we'd make sure that we involved the mayor and all that to that and they'd come. Council, like council would have a good representation there. Like it was really good. And different police. There was some police that were attending and all that.

[00:27:48] Greg: It was people of all ages, yeah. And, you know, and we, we tried to keep the costs down for, for everyone. I think, I think the tickets were \$25 bucks or something at that time and that was just to pay for the feed and all that sort of stuff and try and raise a bit of money for the band. We'd have raffles going. And yeah, there wasn't a lot of money around for those type of activities so you had to really scrape for it and all that sort of stuff.

[00:28:10] Greg: What we'd do is we give so many Elders a free ticket and make sure that they got there. And, we just made sure that they had an Elders table there and all that sort of stuff, you know, trying to cater for everybody, you know. And, and, uh, we also made sure that the band played different type of music, you know, and all that to cater for everybody. We had Foot Full of Bindis and Aboriginal bands from Canberra to come over. Yeah, it was good and people enjoyed themselves.

[00:28:36] Greg: I'd written an article in the paper on what it meant to the Aboriginal community and um, letting people know that we can actually dress up in black suits too and go out and have a good time, you know. And it was really good.

Uncle Greg fondly remembers one Christmas party when he played Black Santa..

[00:28:58] Greg: I was all dressed up and had this white beard on. I was walking around and I was, I was anyway, I was chucking lollies and minties and all that out and, and, uh, and the kids are.. And this little kid couldn't get any, wasn't getting any because the bigger kids were taking them off her. And she come up to me and she grabbed me and she pulled me. She said, 'Mr. Black, Mr. Black'. She said, 'they're not letting me get any lollies'. I said, 'well, you put your hand in that bag and grab a handful'. And I always thought of that girl, yeah. But anyway, that was, that was the story that I had when I was Santa Claus of PCYC.

Now First Nations culture, Wiradjuri language, weaving and art are all being celebrated in Wagga Wagga.

[00:29:42] Greg: I think the language course is really good and there's a lot of non-Aboriginal people actually going to that. And, I find that's good because, you know, it's a positive that, you know, you look at reconciliation and everything, and, and I just think it's great. And it keeps people employed too, you know, and, and I, I think it's important to learn it, you know.

[00:30:01] Greg: As I said, our language and, and, and artwork is a major thing for us, you know. Like they go into schools and do the basket weaving and all that, and that's very important, you know, to hear people talk. And Uncle Stan running it and doing that, dictionary - and they've got an app.

[00:30:18] Greg: I work for Local Land Services. I work with a lot of schools because I do an art program with work and it runs every two years. There's you know, a lot of signage going up now that sort of helps. And as I say, there's a lot of schools that do a competition and they ring me and I tell them to get the app on there. And I said, and 'look for a word that's close to what you want', I said. 'And have a look at it. And if you have any problems, just contact me'. And you go out, and you go out to the schools, and you might see a plant, and you know and they name it and all that sort of stuff. So it's really good to see those types of things, you know, that are happening.

Along with his desire to celebrate First Nations culture, Uncle Greg is big on teaching Aboriginal ways to heal the environment.

[00:31:01] Greg: We've got the Wiradjuri plant book that Alice Williams done from Tumut. And a lot of people are using that - farmers and everything. They look at what they're doing on their properties and all that, you know, and looking at, you know, different plants to grow around creeks and all that sort of stuff. And we talk about farming in a cheaper way.

[00:31:23] Greg: Like, I've run courses through, through Local Land Services around cultural site assessments, you know. And then what it is, it's a, it's a six month course, it's run over, over three days every couple of months. And they get a, a Certificate III in cultural site assessment and land management.

[00:31:43] Greg: You know, a farmer might call, call us up and say, 'oh, look, we need a cultural site assessment done on this here' so I contact those people that have done the training and send them out there, and they actually get paid and identify it and all that. So that's what it's about, trying to, trying to create a better understanding around cultural heritage and also some Aboriginal community people that are not working get a bit of, a bit of cash in their pocket.

Uncle Greg is involved in helping to train people in cultural burning, as a way to promote the practice to heal the land.

[00:32:19] Greg: See what you do with, with a cultural burn is you, if the wind's blowing sort of that to the right, well, what you do is you start down there. And the wind blows, well the flame comes real slow because the wind slows it down. And if you're at a cultural burn, you can stand there and you'll see lizards and insects move out of the road. When the burn goes through, you'll see them going back to their nest or whatever. You know, that's how it works.

[00:32:45] Greg: I've run the uh cultural fire and cultural burning, I've run that through my work. What we do is, a part of that, we do a four day rural fire brigade certificate. And so they do four days with the rural fire brigade and then a couple of days with, with a person that's trained in cultural burning. And he takes them out. And those four days, they do a lot of theory and also they get on the fire trucks and they unroll the hoses that put fires out. And they just love it. It's just really good.

[00:33:17] Greg: And this year we had seven students from Mount Austin High. We had 15 all up and we had seven students from Mount Austin High that done, done the burning and, and, and the course and everything like that. So it was really good.

[00:33:30] Greg: We just had it at a program finished with ANU. They wanted to do some measuring on the effects during, before a burn. during a burn and after a burn. So we done that on 30 Travelling Stock Reserves throughout Wagga and also Young. They got employed for, you know, for 30 burns. And, um, and ANU are doing all the studies now, they're still measuring it. They went out to TSRs and they, they measured out a big square patch and we burnt that. And, and, and now they're planting some plants to go with it and all that. So, and see there's not a lot of research being done in that area, and that's, that's what we're hoping to do, that. And then once we get some positive feedback, then, then we can really sell it to farmers and say, 'look, this is what you can do'.

[00:34:20] Greg: But you know, people are not going to go out and do it for nothing, you know. And if the farmers were looking at a cheaper way to, to manage their properties, that's the way to go, you know, do a, do a slow burn.

In his experience, Uncle Greg says farmers are generally really supportive of cultural burning.

[00:34:36] Greg: When we first started doing the burning, like we, uh, like we'd go out to a, uh, a travelling stock reserve. And what we do is ask the Rural Fire Brigade

in that area to attend with their trucks, you know, just in case. And the farmers are the first one there because, you know, we've got a TSR that's running wild with weeds and grass and everything, and they've got a million dollar rice crop next door. You know, and they're always saying, 'can we, can you clean up the Travelling Stock Reserve?' So, they're there with us, you know, and their first one's there and they're really keen on it. You know, the ones that live in those areas.

While being part of the growing First Nations community of Wagga Wagga is fun, Uncle Greg says these days it feels like something's been lost.

[00:35:19] Greg: It was good because we'd have meetings, start to see each other. We'd meet at the park or something like that and have conversations. And we were always keen on the old fire bucket in the backyard and having a few families around and just sitting around talking and singing and all that. And, you know, different card nights at different places and stuff like that. It was really good. Yeah. It was a bit of activity happening, a lot sort of socially like between ourselves and all that, you know.

[00:35:46] Greg: And it was really good those days, but it's sort of gone now, you know, but which is, which is sad. Because I think what happens is, the older people keep families together and they keep that contact and all that. It's, it's just like the family lunch on Sundays, that's all sort of slowly dying out. And I think as the older people pass, well, that's, those sorts of things fade out, you know.

Before colonisation, Wagga Wagga was an ancient trading and gathering place.

On Australia's bicentenary in 1988, the city hosted people who wanted to protest against the celebrations - to highlight the immense hurt that was inflicted on our community in those 200 years of colonial rule.

Then in 2019... Marrambidya wetlands on the Marrambidya Bila - was the site of a big First Nations celebration - a corroboree.

[00:36:46] Greg: It felt good, you know, to see it all, all there. And, when you look at Wagga, it was one of the meeting places and that. And, there is a bit of history here that people don't know. Down there at the wetlands, you know, that was a trading place, you know, where a lot of Aboriginal people traded stuff and, uh, you know. And there was also a crossing there too, over to North Wagga, like out, out near Charles Sturt University, that, that Aboriginal people actually run a little raft across and helped people across the river and all that.

[00:37:14] Greg: So there's, there's a fair bit of history out, out there and, and I think in that big meeting place, um, you know, when we, they walked over the bridge in '88 and all that sort of stuff, and they met, there was a lot of people travelled through and stayed there, and, you know, on buses and tents and all that, so it was really a revival of all of that, you know, so yeah.

There are currently five declared Aboriginal Places in and around Wagga Wagga, but Uncle Greg says First Nations mob wants more than 40 more cultural sites to be preserved.

[00:37:52] Greg: The men's group and that by, uh, Jacko Hampton and James Ingram and all them. They're the ones that actually put in for those, those five locations to be named an Aboriginal place. And it was, it was a lot of hard work from those fellows, you know.

[00:38:06] Greg: Local Land Services have actually got a, a cultural water licence and it's, um, and it's 2100 megalitres and we use that yearly. But at the moment, because we've only got three different sites that are on, on that licence, what we're doing is going along the Murrumbidgee River, we're identifying different sites. And once we identify those sites we're going to put into the water department and government that we want these sites added to it, so we can pump water from the river.

[00:38:39] Greg: And those five sites that are identified here at Wagga, they're, they're on it. And like the axe, the Bomen Axe Quarry and all that. So hopefully when we get that, well, then we can look at cultural activities for, for the community on those, you know, like similar to the wetlands down there. So just get some different sites. So there is planning in the future for what's going on.

[00:39:01] Greg: And, you know, we've got a lot of sites. We've got 40 something sites that we've sort of, had workshops with all the communities right along the river and we've identified 45 sites and get them on there. Well, hopefully we can start some activities for cultural activities along the river. You can't sell the water like anyone else can and all that. It's for non profit organisations. So, they can plant basket weaving grass and all those type of things. Or have a nursery and all that and grow plants and trees and all that.

In 2006, Wagga Wagga City Council employed its first ever Aboriginal Community Development Officer. But Uncle Greg thinks the council needs more than one person to properly support the community, which is still so disadvantaged.

[00:39:45] Greg: Council are trying to do a little bit more, but the problem is with those positions that they created, there's too much pressure on those people. They don't last. They're overworked. And it's like every other organisation. You get one Aboriginal person in there, but anything that comes in, that's a black issue, you've got to deal with it.

[00:40:08] Greg: And you know, and that's the same where I work, you know. And it's not necessarily all my, all my problems that come up. You know, people can actually deal with it themselves and, and just send me an email saying yes, 'this is an issue but we'll work on it and get back to you' or whatever.

[00:40:24] Greg: I think what council could probably do is probably have another three identified positions at council, you know. And they could all do different roles,

you know. But you've got one person that's doing everything, like running committees and, and yeah and doing everything, you know. And they burn out. And they've had some good people in there. Because they are a good employer of Aboriginal people out on the roads and all that and labour and all that stuff. But they, they need a good three positions in, in, in, in the council chambers to actually dealing with cultural issues.

And even though Uncle Greg wasn't elected when he stood for the Wagga Wagga City Council, he hasn't given up on the idea of having a more direct say in the community.

[00:41:10] Greg: I won't run this time, but I'm sort of close to retirement. I might run then and see how I go. I got a fair few votes the last time that I run. But anyway. I got more votes than some people that got in, because they had preferences. But I got some wrong advice actually. I was told to run under a person and I should've run as an independent.

Wagga Wagga City Council has a bit of a dark history for us black fellas.

In 1993, Councillor Jim Eldridge was found to have committed racial vilification at the Council's launch of the International Year of the World's Indigenous People.

After a welcome speech from Auntie Marianne Atkinson, Eldridge interrupted proceedings, saying, "My people came down the river and established this city when nobody other than savages had been here before. I have a right to speak for the white people... these half-caste radicals have made a claim upon the city and the people of the city and I have a right to speak on behalf of the white people in this city, against these radical half-castes..."

At the next council meeting, Eldridge called us savages and said that white people have been subjected to a reign of terror for 30 years and that the white people in Wagga Wagga understood that this was a war.

Uncle Greg laughs at his reaction back then - which was to drive a truckload of shit to Jim Eldridge's driveway with the intention of dumping it there.

[00:42:41] Greg: He was saying some unbelievable stuff that, yeah, it was inappropriate. And I remember when it happened and I was working on council and I was working on the sewerage department. And what we used to do was get a lot of rubbish in the back of the truck when we'd clean out the cages and everything.

[00:42:59] Greg: And, and it really, he really upset me, you know, I knew where he lived and I was going to go and dump the rubbish on his driveway. But only for me mate that was with me and he was an Aboriginal guy too and he talked me out of it because I was, I pulled up out the front of his house. And I said, 'no, I'm going to tip it'. But I didn't.

But... laughs aside - the Eldridge rant hurt everyone in the community.

Uncle Greg says the racist attack and the reporting of it was a big setback for the First Nations community.

[00:43:38] Greg: Well it, to me, when I was thinking about it, it's, it's all the work that's been done by all organisations and, and Aboriginal people and, like it just put us back 10 years. That's how I felt. And that's what a lot of people felt with it and in his comments. And I was a bit dirty with Michael McCormack at the time.

Back then the current Member for Riverina Michael McCormack was the editor of the local newspaper.

[00:44:06] Greg: Because he was the, what's the name of the Daily Advertiser and, uh, yeah, and there was a lot of people putting inappropriate stuff on it. And I complained to him, but he said everyone's got the freedom of speech and all that sort of stuff but, yeah.

[00:44:20] Greg: And I, I, I actually, um, exceed the first ball that I was telling you about. And, and it was around that time when he's making a lot of, a lot of noise. And I, I just said, 'Oh, we've got Jim Eldridge standing outside on a 44 gallon drum looking in.' I made a few jokes about him. So I got back to it, back at him in my own little way.

Jim Eldridge was ordered by the tribunal to pay three thousand dollars reparations to the Elder who brought the court action and he had to print an apology in the Daily Advertiser.

This was the first complaint of racial vilification to be sustained by the Equal Opportunity Tribunal since the legislation was introduced in 1989.

The decision overwhelmingly established that there is a dividing line between free speech and racial vilification.

Today, more than three decades later, Uncle Greg hopes that racism is gradually going to die out.

[00:45:17] Greg: I think it's slowly happening, you know, and I know it's sort of a bad thing to say, but people that had racist tones are slowly dying. You know, and, and there's a new generation coming through and, uh, and hopefully that'll change. And I probably won't see it before my lifetime, but, I think a lot of stuff will, will phase out and, and, yeah, and, uh, hopefully that we can all live in harmony with each other, you know. And, and that's just not quite there yet. I think it's important that we, we keep growing and looking at, and looking at positive stuff and reconciliation.