

# RESETTLEMENT | Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanha

## Transcript: Episode 7 | Hit With the Trifecta

Aunty Maria Williams: Why are my people still beggars in our own country? We have never ceded sovereignty of our country. And why are we beggars? And I've made the decision I'm not going to be a beggar any more. I have seen by working for government the destruction that they have caused.

Hi, I'm Luke Wighton. I'm a Wiradjuri man from Condobolin now living in Wagga Wagga. I'm the host of this podcast series RESETTLEMENT - Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanha which means Wiradjuri Welcome to Visitors. It's all about Wagga Wagga's First Nations community.

Before white settlement, we had been living peacefully and sustainably in this beautiful part of 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.

So, let's get to know some of the proud First Nations mob from Wagga Wagga.

Aunty Maria Williams is a Wiradjuri cultural authority. She is the daughter of the late Wiradjuri Elder, Wongamarr - also known as Pastor Cecil Grant - and is the niece of Uncle Stan Grant senior and the late Aunty Flo Grant.

Aunty and her first husband Uncle Ivan ran the first Aboriginal church in Wagga Wagga. They trained under the Australian Indigenous Ministries - a Christian organisation that provides ministries to our mob.

She later worked in health and for the police - as an Aboriginal Liaison officer at Wagga Wagga and Griffith. She also joined others in the fight for Aboriginal run services.

Aunt Maria Williams is a member of the Wiradjuri Council of Elders and is a fierce fighter for self-determination.

She wasn't unhappy with the defeat of the Voice Referendum - because she wants Wiradjuri Elders to be the ones having a say on what goes on and what needs to be done in and on Wiradjuri Country.

[00:03:29] Luke W: It's great that you could take time out of your busy day to come in and record this awesome information.

Aunty's mob are Murrumbidgee River and Lachlan River people.

[00:03:40] Maria: I'm from the Marrambidya Galari clan groups. Marrambidya is my matriarchal line and Galari is my patriarchal.

[00:03:50] Maria: 1984 we arrived in Wagga. We moved here from Cootamundra where, both my then husband Ivan and I did Bible training at the old Cootamundra Girls Home. We came here because we were asked to come here and establish an Aboriginal church in Wagga.

[00:04:15] Maria: My father who's Pastor Cecil Grant, Wiradjuri name Wongamarr/Wungamaa, him and a couple of other Aboriginal pastors - and all of them were brought up under the AIM mission - believed strongly in having our own churches. So that took quite a time.

[00:04:39] Maria: Their vision, as you can imagine, weren't initially welcomed by the missionaries. So it was a struggle like all of... everything that that happens for change for First Nations people. Your challenges come with it. But eventually they did, they were successful. And on the east side, they established the double AAEF, the Australian Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship.

[00:05:10] Maria: And then they heard that around the same time without them knowing, Western Australian pastors were thinking the same thing. So they all came together. And then they became the AEF, which is the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship. So from that, and Wagga becoming a resettlement city - and with a significant population of First Nations peoples - then they thought that we needed to have an Aboriginal church here in Wagga. So that's how we came to be.

I remember going to the church Aunt is talking about as a kid.

But in the beginning, there wasn't an actual church building.

[00:05:58] Maria: Families opened up their homes and so we'd go in and have Sunday school and church in people's homes. Then we were gifted to rent a church. Anglican or Uniting because financially we were supported by the Uniting Church. Oh, it was wonderful. Even though it was lovely in the homes. But for the people to realise that they've just got their own place that they can call - we've got our church.

[00:06:37] Maria: Families - and this just wasn't Wiradjuri families - it was mainly Kamilaroi that resettled here in the early days and we've always been friends with each other and got on well. Everybody enjoyed just having their own pastor to marry them. My then husband married quite a few people here in Wagga, christened their babies and sadly also conducted their funeral services. Even though people may not necessarily have been religious people but they did really appreciate having their own to do those things for them.

[00:07:21] Luke W: Aunt, I remember growing up, going to Sunday school and I loved it. And I think that's what's missing for these younger generations today. We're not, like you said, not necessarily full on Christian or religious people, but I really did enjoy those services.

Sadly, there is no Aboriginal church in Wagga Wagga today.

It stopped operating a long time ago... and I for one feel our mob is really missing out on something special.

My brother Paul - otherwise known as Stump - has had some training from Aunt Mary's dad, the late Wiradjuri elder Pastor Cecil Grant.

[00:07:53] Luke W: I know over in Albury, I think, my brother who was lucky enough to be mentored by Wongamarr/Wungamaa, which is a really special thing - so he's kind of carrying that on a bit over there, but we don't necessarily see it so much here in Wagga. I actually miss it. If there was something here, I would go to Sunday school here and take my children along as well.

[00:08:14] Maria: A lot of their families particularly sent their children to Sunday school. And yeah, overall, I guess we had good representation at the church from families in, in Wagga.

[00:08:30] Maria: But as Luke said, all of our old people, and I'm of that era, born at a wonderful time, all the kids went to Sunday school. It was a must. The old people, 'you are going to Sunday school'. No choice, no. 'You must go to Sunday school.' And then our old people would go to church. And sadly that has been lost for one reason or another.

[00:09:01] Maria: And you can see the difference in people that have had that spiritual connection in their life to those that that haven't. So it's been a very important part of my life, growing up. Going to Sunday school, going to church, being brought up in a Christian family, as has Luke. So that's brought a lot to our lives.

Aunty was born in Griffith and like a lot of our mob back then, they moved around a lot.

One of the homes they lived in was a tin humpy. It had no running water or electricity.

[00:09:46] Maria: My family migrated from Condobolin in 1946 I think it was, after the war. A lot of families, not just my family, but kin families as well, all migrated from Condobolin to Griffith, seeking work. So it took them about a month, or a bit over a month in horse and sulkies, travelling. And when they first... Griffith didn't exist. There was the village of Hanwood. And the Condo people migrated and lived on the channel banks in tin humpies and dirt floors at Hanwood.

[00:10:33] Maria: And then my family... my great grandparents - they moved into what was known then as Bagtown, before it became Griffith. And they moved to what was known as Frogs Hollow and from there then moved to what is now known as the Three Ways Mission.

[00:10:57] Maria: And then my family went to Bilbul, Binya and then ended up in Yenda. My dad then became employed with the railways. So they moved. I went from a tin humpy, dirt floor to a tent in Leeton beside the railway line. And I think I was about eight or nine before I lived in what you call a real house with running water and electricity. Good old days. They.. They were just lovely.

Despite being forced by white authorities to live on the fringes of town, Aunty Maria remembers her community as strong and respectful, all supporting each other.

[00:11:47] Maria: Because we were all together. Even though we had, once we moved to Leeton, we'd go back every weekend and visit. My great grandfather had passed away at that time. But we'd go back, visit my great grandmother, all my cousins, aunties, uncles. And, so you never lost it. We were just one big happy mob and we all shared with each other.

[00:12:16] Maria: Nobody ever went without. Whatever was around, that, that was shared. I really enjoyed growing up with that happening. And our old people were never angry. They really practised Yindyamarra. Which means a lot of things, but overall to respect each other, to give honour to each other. Because the honour of one is the honour of all.

[00:12:50] Maria: And this is in a time when you were segregated - living on the fringes of town. Still weren't allowed into the local swimming pool, into a lot of shops. There were some that you could go into, others that you couldn't go into.

Aunty is lucky enough to remember both her great grandmother and her great grandfather and their Saturday outings. That's where they'd all get dressed up and gather in the main street of Griffith, before going to the movies.

[00:13:22] Maria: Everyone used to walk up from the mission on a Saturday morning and they'd all be done up - all dressed up. The ladies would have their hats on, the men would have their hats on. And we'd all sit in our family groups in the park in the middle of Banna Avenue. And if you could afford fish, you were lucky enough to have fish, or if you couldn't it was just chips in newspaper - wrapped up in newspaper - and a loaf of bread. And that would just be shared around.

[00:13:51] Maria: But it was good yarning. Everybody would just sit there, yarn, laugh, talk about everything that's happened through, through the week. And then my great grandmother would take all of us kids to the matinee on a Saturday afternoon. And she had a lot of grandkids, there was great grandkids, there was a big mob of us.

[00:14:10] Maria: Another cousin and I were the fairest out of all the kids and you could only sit in the front rows of the picture theatre. So, my cousin and I are all in line, see, behind Nanny, and, the fella said, the ticket person said, 'You two, you can go through'. And my cousin and I ooh. So we've taken off to go through, and our grandmother got us by the hair of the head, and dragged us back, and said, they're black. ... but they were just, they were happy days.

[00:14:48] Maria: I was fortunate to grow up to see my people with work ethics. Our men - they would go to work. Even though it was just fruit picking or rabbit trapping, they all worked and then would share their resources. And come Friday night, men'd get paid and they'd give their wife and that money for food and what have you.

[00:15:15] Maria: And then they'd go bush and drink. The men would just go off and they'd drink and they'd come back in on a Sunday afternoon and go back off to work. And I think that's changed for us too where it was just different back in those days.

Aunty is really grateful for the strong family she was raised in, but says that these days it's different for many of our mob.

[00:15:47] Maria: The majority of our young people don't want to know. And I'm guilty of it when I was growing up. And I'd say, 'oh look, them days are gone'. And it wasn't for me until I got into my late 30s, early 40s that I started to really think back on my childhood and my growing up and realising how privileged - really I'm a privileged Wiradjuri woman in my growing up and wanting to learn more and understand more.

[00:16:20] Maria: Even though I'd seen it, heard it. But I wasn't interested. Them days, they're just gone. And I think that's for the majority of people. It's around that age that we start to question who we really are and who we really want to be. And what do we want to live for ourselves? And what we want to teach to our children, to our grandchildren, great grandchildren, which I'm in that era now. It's continuing on with my great grandchildren now.

[00:16:54] Maria: But not everybody has been privileged to grow up with strong heritage and strong people around you. And that's not to say that we as a family didn't suffer and are part of the Stolen Generation. We had members of our family

removed. But there was just that sense of, I don't know, resilience, I guess, to continue moving forward.

[00:17:27] Maria: And there's a couple of cousins of mine, and we're all really close and we often have this conversation. Is... Why do we have resilience and some, we've all grown up the same and some don't. And the conversation, Is resilience something that you learn? Is resilience something that's inherent in you? Who knows? But not everyone has resilience for one reason or another.

[00:18:10] Maria: It's not just entirely as a result of resettlement, but it goes back to colonisation where so much of our culture has been lost. Because language - culture is contained within language. That's why Wongamarr/Wungamaa started the Wiradjuri language course. It began with him and he handed it then over to his younger brother.

[00:18:42] Maria: Then, moving us from traditional lands, our own clan lands onto missions. So there's been a whole breakdown of our culture, sadly. But for clans who have been able to stay together, I can only share the story that was passed to me from my grandparents, great grandmother, and my father and his siblings - that even at Condobolin before they migrated, they were family.

[00:19:19] Maria: Clans are made up of family and kin. So these practices could happen because they all belonged to each other and the behaviour of one is the behaviour of all. So traditionally, those who were not behaving as they are to behave as Wiradjuri people, it had to be dealt with.

[00:19:50] Maria: When I applied for a job with the police force here in, in Wagga and I rang my dad up, and I said, Dad, 'I've applied for a job with police. What do you think about it?' And he said, 'You know that you're going to have to deal with your own mob.' And I said, yes. But he said, 'I think you're a strong enough woman to be able to do that.' So he said, 'What else are you worried about?' And I said, 'Oh, look, you just know what the justice system's like and probably, my own people are going to turn against me. So I'm just a bit concerned about that.

[00:20:28] Maria: Is it a job that I should take on? But I really think that I can bring something to, to that position.' And he said, 'Well my girl', he said, 'If you are with police and one of your family members or kin or just any Aboriginal person is arrested, don't feel guilty about it'. And I said, 'But I would'. He said, 'No, because under our law, if you broke the law, you know law, you understand law, you're responsible for keeping law'.

[00:21:11] Maria: And in traditional times, your great grandfather who was a Wiradjuri initiated lawman, if somebody broke law, even if it was his own brother, it could result in death. Depends on the severity of the law that's been broken. I won the job and quite enjoyed my years with police.

[00:21:36] Maria: But I think to go back to Luke's question, and even in the migration from Condobolin to Griffith, we were still, because we were Condo mob originally, so

we were all together, so that stuff could work. But today, we're just so broken. So you know, there's this lack of sense of belonging. Luke and I know where we belong. We know where we come from.

Luke W: They have no identity.

[00:22:07] Maria: Exactly. But not everybody has that, unfortunately. And that is sad. And that's where we see, particularly in resettlement areas where you've got people coming from all different cultural nations and we have different languages, we have different belief systems. We're just not one people. And our young people are, 'Who am I? What am I?' And we've still got a lot of work to do around that.

As Aunty explained earlier, her forebears were displaced by white settlers after World War two and forced to move from their Country at Condobolin to Griffith.

Then in the 1970's, there was more displacement of our mob. The authorities, supposedly aiming to improve our lives, tried to move people into selected towns like Wagga Wagga... with the promise of better living conditions.

But yet again, this was more control of our mob under the colonisation of our country.

[00:23:16] Maria: We've had separation. We've had isolation. We've had assimilation. And that's what resettlement was about. It's about assimilating us. So that we would become Australians - one people.

[00:23:36] Maria: And so within assimilation, there's no recognition of who we are and what we are. It's just, you move to Wagga, you'll have better housing, better education opportunities, better employment opportunities. Those things sound good, really good, and anybody wants those for their families. But in that movement, people leave behind their social structure and just come here as you know, a nuclear family. So when it comes to yes, I've been able to get a better house here. My kids are going to school and now I'm working. But what about my children after school, before school? Holidays? I don't have any family here. Whereas before I never knew what it was to pay for daycare or preschool or anything.

[00:24:49] Maria: And I had nine kids - four of my own and five that we reared on top of that. And then there was always floor space for anybody that wanted a bed. Luke knows. That was our home. So there was no thought to that, that. And our social structure is critical because that's where grandmothers...

[00:25:13] Maria: Because aunties are not aunties, they're mothers. Right? And you're surrounded with that when you're in your own social network. I was fortunate. I had a wonderful mother-in-law, wonderful mother, sister that wasn't working. So, financially, I was the financial provider, just not for my nuclear family, but for my extended family. But they done everything else. I never had to go shopping with my children.

[00:25:48] Luke W: And that's right, like your aunties had just as much a right to chastise you as your very own mother. I remember copping a couple of clip up the ears from my aunties. So if all your aunties and uncles around that are watching over you, protecting you, guiding you, it didn't leave much room for you to get up to mischief.

[00:26:09] Maria: And we couldn't go home and say, auntie or mum, however you'd refer to it, is, just went crook on me and even smacked me. Because you'd cop it again. If you got smacked and you got into trouble, you deserved it. End of story.

Aunt dedicated much of her adult life to fighting for a fair go for our mob... and for an end to discrimination.

[00:26:53] Maria: I didn't personally suffer from racism as an individual, right? It was that racism, in the early days, of not being able to go to the public swimming pool. That sort of racism, yes, I experienced. But then, in my work, I've had to deal with racism on behalf of my people, for my people.

[00:27:21] Maria: And my work involved bringing to the attention of departments issues that were with police, issues that were in the health system. And as a result of me bringing those things to the attention of departments, we got Aboriginal liaison officers in the police force. We got Aboriginal health workers in health. And then I was the coordinator of the Aboriginal Health Program. That's prior to police. So that kind of racism, I've always fought on behalf of my people to make changes, to improve things for my people.

From the early days of the Aboriginal Church in Wagga Wagga, Aunt Maria was pushing the police for better treatment of First Nations people.

She helped change the way police dealt with juvenile crime and saw the introduction of what's known as Youth Justice Conferencing.

[00:28:27] Maria: With policing, you would see, witness, so many of our people being arrested and hit with what we call the trifecta. Okay? Resist police, assault police, that, that was just common. So it was seeing that continually. And then Ivan and I used to, along with others in the community - this is before I was working with police - we used to do a lot of work for police. So if our mob got arrested, then we would be there as a support person for them.

[00:29:12] Maria: We would witness that they would be interviewing people intoxicated. And that's a big no. So it was those sorts of things that, that we were seeing with police and thought this has to change. And then just the repeat, it's like a revolving door of particularly our younger people back then going through this revolving door of juvenile justice.

[00:29:47] Maria: But nothing was happening within juvenile justice to even then culturally connect them. And while ever our people are not culturally connected,

they're going to keep going through this door. So, my husband and I then had a meeting with Superintendent Frank Fuller and Commander Wales at the time and said, 'This has got to stop. We've got to come up with something better.'

[00:30:22] Maria: And taking it from a cultural perspective/respective, it's about if you cause injury to yourself or injury to another person, you've got to take responsibility for that. So we had this young person that we'd been working with for a long time - we'd seen the potential that he had. So they said, 'Well how are we going to do this?' And I said, okay, 'He needs to come before us, with his mother and he needs to come before us. And he needs to come before the victim.' Thus we have the Young Offenders Act from that.

[00:31:13] Maria: Initially, it worked really well. Really well. Now, I think it's just so common - it needs revival or it needs to be looked at again and some changes made to it. It is just lip service. And you do see that break down from the early days to how it is now. And then it's having the, it's having the right people in that conference.

[00:31:45] Maria: This is when I joined the New South Wales Police Force as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer and if I was participating in the conference and I'd have our young boys that would walk in with a cap on. And I'd sit there. And I'd say, 'Excuse me. Do you know you were offending me?' 'No I'm not. Yes you are. Take your hat off please.'

[00:32:20] Maria: Then you'd have the opportunity to teach them about culture. You're sitting, you're coming before an Elder and you're sitting in front of me with a hat on. I need to see your face. I'm not here to go crook on you. I'm here to support you and try and link you culturally. But it just depends who is convening the conference, who your Elder is, or your community person in the conference that can really steer our young people or attempt to steer our young people in the right direction.

[00:33:05] Maria: Unfortunately, because we go back to colonization again and the breakdown, and we've talked about the breakdowns, sadly for Aboriginal young boys and for Aboriginal men, jail, juvie is their initiation.

[00:33:56] Maria: I am a real black man or a real young boy because I've been in jail or in juvie. So they see it as their rite of passage and that breaks my heart. Because, 12, 13, they would have been going off to men's business. They would have started going through the burbang - through their initiation pathways. We don't have that anymore. So jail is the way now that I'm really black. I'm better than you because I've been to jail. And that just breaks my heart.

[00:34:48] Maria: And the same is for women because incarceration of First Nations women now is on the increase, really high. So when the young boys were going off, then the women would be taking the girls through their business as well - women's business - and preparing them for motherhood and for their next role and responsibility. We don't have that anymore.

[00:35:18] Luke W: You know I think a lot of the pain - we suffered a lot from colonization. But it's the government policies that have been put in place that have had a real massive impact on our people.

[00:35:27] Luke W: Like I'll use the Northern Territory Intervention, for example, Absolutely shocking. It was based on, I think, was it paedophilia or something like that? So when you actually look at the report and then you look at the legislation for them to go in there, cause it was about protecting the children. Well in that Act, there's not child safety, not mentioned once. When you do like your search, your word search. But you search the word land and it comes up over 900 times. There's not one word of child. There's not one word of safety. It's the government policies as well that continues to have a massive impact on our people.

[00:36:08] Maria: We've mentioned the complete total breakdown of culture. To turn this around then, it's not putting money into building more juvenile centres, more jails. Put that money into culture. So that we can rebuild. We have to rebuild.

[00:36:49] Luke W: Absolutely Aunt. Instead of building more jails, why aren't we building first class rehabilitation centres? Because that's what we need, healing, that rehabilitation, not to be locked away. I've just caught wind of they've, they've just brought out a new law, if you get caught stealing a car, that's instant two, two years jail. So how many more of our people are going to be, our jails are already full with, you know, our mob.

Aunt says she's troubled by the stories of our youth filming themselves stealing cars and speeding around - just for the thrill of the chase.

[00:37:22] Maria: For a lot of young people today, I think that's what it is. I can get away with it, I'm so institutionalised that it's a holiday in there for me.

[00:37:33] Luke W: It is. When I had a couple of visits to the juvie as well, you know I was speaking with a couple of the young boys in there. And it's like, they'd rather be in there because there's nothing for them on the outside. In there, they're getting housed, they're getting fed and they're forming this like brotherhood. That's what we need for them on the outside - to feel that same kind of brotherhood, but without the criminal activity.

[00:38:13] Maria: That's, exactly right, Luke. Now, I speak at a lot of workshops, a lot of meetings, whatever, I'm asked to speak. And people are horrified when I say we don't have an alcohol problem and we don't have a drug problem. Now. No we don't. Alcohol and drugs are only symptoms of the real problem. The real problem that we have is cultural disconnection and that's what we've got to fix. We have got to rebuild our communities, our families, and get them connected back to who they are.

[00:39:07] Maria: I'm not Aboriginal. I'm not a First Nations person. I'm a Wiradjuri person. I am a member of the Galari clan and I'm a member of the Marrambidya clan. That's who I am. I know Luke has said it, but do we really need rehabs that cost millions of dollars? For me the answer is to build our family. Start with your family.

Teach Wiradjuri way. Teach Wiradjuri law, L A W. Teach the practices of that. This is how you are to behave as a Wiradjuri person. Connect them to that. We've lost it. But there's those of us that hold that knowledge. We can get there, but it's going to be a long, slow process to get there.

Aunty and her former husband, Uncle Ivan, had a role to play in reclaiming Wiradjuri language.

They were looking for stories of our mob in a magazine called Dawn when they found a dictionary.

That led them to Uncle Dr Stan Grant Senior and Dr John Eliot Rudder, which resulted in the Wiradjuri Dictionary and app.

[00:40:47] Maria: Ivan and I went to the Aboriginal Institute of Studies in Canberra. And we were - we went there to look through old Dawn magazines for photographs and, because there was a lot of stories in the old AIM and the old DAWN that were put together by missionaries. So we wanted to go through them and compile stories and what have you.

[00:41:12] Maria: While we were doing that we just came across the dictionary. Mmmm. We were given permission to bring that home. So I rang Dad and he came over. And when he seen it he just started crying. Because he, in our family, grandfather - this is my great grandfather, Wongamarr/Wungamaa's grandfather, was arrested for speaking language in town. And he's an initiated man, the law man.

[00:41:51] Maria: So he would go bush when the war started. My grandfather - he went to war along with a lot of other men from Condo. And my grandmother had illness that took her to Sydney for long periods of time. So Wongamarr/Wungamaa was brought up by his grandparents until after the war. So, grandfather used to take him out bush with him and he talked language to him.

[00:42:21] Maria: So, Wongamarr grew up hearing language, knowing language, but knew that he couldn't speak language to protect.. 'Cause grandfather and his brother and another old man, but I can't recall his name from Murrin Bridge, they were the last three initiated Wiradjuri men and they said no more language, no more our ways. And they had to make - that seems a hard call - but they're protecting a whole nation. So that was their decision.

[00:42:54] Maria: So, Dad and Ivan and I had lengthy discussions. What are we going to do with this? And I thought, No, we need to reclaim our language, because Wongamarr was a firm believer in that culture is contained within language.

[00:43:16] Maria: And Luke and I are evidence of that, that the more you learn language, the more culture comes out in our language. So, Wongamarr started teaching it in his church and would translate language, Wiradjuri language, into hymns and choruses and all that sort of stuff.

[00:43:42] Maria: And then Wongamarr was a very busy man. So he said to his brother, 'Stan, I want you to take over the language and work on the language.' And Uncle Stan's never, ever been a political man. There was two things you would never talk to him about and that was politics and religion. Uncle Stan's a very hard worker in the background. 'I can't do that Cecil, no.'

[00:44:10] Maria: So then it came, 'You are doing it Stan'. So Uncle Stan started working on it then and then he met Dr. John Rutter and thus we have the dictionary and thus we have the language course. So it's beautiful. And just so much comes out of the language.

[00:44:35] Luke W: It's the language of this land that we're living upon. That's where it comes from. And when you look at the word Yindyamarra and all the different meanings behind that, it is so powerful in that one word. To have respect, to show honour, respect yourself, respect one another, you respect the land to show honour. Being gentle.

[00:44:58] Maria: Being gentle. Going slowly about your business. Being slow to react. And that took me a long time to learn that. And being a mother and rearing my children. As a parent you just, No. Think about it. So I got to this stage then as a parent - be slow to react.

[00:45:22] Maria: Now, how am I going to do this as a mother? So, I had - was the coordinator of Aboriginal health, I travelled all the time, and basically would be home Friday night to Monday morning. I'd ring them up. Their father would tell me, 'So and so's done this, so and so's done that'. Okay. I'd ring them up and I'd get on the phone when I'd ring every night - 'I've scheduled you in for a cup of coffee or a milkshake.'

[00:46:00] Maria: So I would. And that's when I'd work them through their behaviour, talk to them about their behaviour against Yindyamarra. 'Do you realise, do you understand whose name you carry? Do you know, do you understand who you're connected to? Is that bringing honour to your father and I? Is that bringing honour to your grandparents? Is that bringing honour to your great grandparents? You come from a line of great people. Honourable people. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

[00:46:45] Maria: Anyway, I just said my eldest daughter's just turned 51. She was mid forties. She came home to visit one weekend and she said, 'Mum, you know what? The pennies just dropped for me.' I said, 'What?' She said, 'I always wondered why you wanted us in a public place, to meet you in a public place.' I said, 'Yeah.' She said 'Because we couldn't react. We had to just sit. I said you got it love. You got it.'

[00:47:17] Maria: So much. One word. Be patient. Be patient with each other. Be gentle with each other. Move about your business quietly. Going back to my growing up, I never heard my old people speak in anger, I never. And they'd be sitting around and they'd be talking about a lot of things and yes, people had different opinions even back then.

[00:47:49] Maria: But they never spoke - but no, they'd sit there for hours and speak. But when they opened their mouth, they were dynamic. Because they're listening to you. They're thinking about what you're saying and then they give an answer. And when we're having conversation now, we're not really listening, we're cutting each other off, we're butting in.

[00:48:15] Maria: And, the three L's that Wongamarr brought us up with - look, listen and learn. Have a gentle, quiet spirit. Don't be quick to give an answer. Go about things slowly. Because they're the practices of Yindyamarra. The principles of Yindyamarra are respect and honour. But how do I practise that? All those things is how I practise it. And then you've got our key words too. Winhangagigilanha - care for each other, care for Country. Ngungilanha - share with each other. And these - that's how I grew up.

[00:49:07] Maria: It's the depth in Wongamarr. I'm extremely proud of him, love him. He was a visionary. He established the Wiradjuri Council of Elders. He commenced the Wiradjuri language. He got recognition of his Country. He was the first to get that. And now that's all around Australia – Recognition of Country. And it's wonderful to go through, drive through Country, and just see all the signs up 'Welcome to', you know. And then nation building. We are nation building. That was his dream. So he was a real visionary. And I feel very honoured to work with Elders across Wiradjuri country to be able to continue his work, his vision and particularly nation building is where we're at now.

These days Aunty Maria lives in Darlington Point, an hour west of Wagga Wagga on the Marrambidya Bila.

She says knowing her language helps her to live the Wiradjuri way.

[00:50:25] Maria: And, you say in English, you've got to care for Country. What does that mean? What does that mean for me to care for Country? Every day, I am privileged that I'm a three minute walk from my house into the bush. And I walk Country every day. And as soon as I hit the bush, I'm saying, Mandaang Guwu Baiame, acknowledging the creator. Thank you. Mandaang Guwu Baiame.

[00:51:04] Maria: What am I thanking him for? Ngurambang. Country, my Country. I'm thanking him for Marrambidya Bila - water, river. I'm thanking him for Garru. I'm thanking him for Waagan. And then I just go on naming everything in language that I'm seeing as I'm walking Country. And you feel the spirit of our ancestors. They're there.

[00:51:43] Maria: Darlington Point is a place of massacre. And you can feel your old people, if you're connected, if you're in tune. And the thing that you - not the thing, that's wrong - the person that you need to be connected to is from the beginning, Baiame.

[00:52:12] Maria: Because it's a spiral effect. We began, I have been here before the world. I have been inside Baiame. He knew me. He knew the family I was going to

be born to. He knew the Country I was going to be born on. He knew my journey and all the people that I would meet along my journey. I know I'm never going to die. I'm going to live on. Because I will return to Baiame. Because I'm not perfect, but every day I get out of bed with determination to live proper Wiradjuri way.

[00:53:12] Luke W: And I think also, that's the a big problem today. A lot of our mob are disconnected from him. And they think, oh, we don't have a God or a creator. It's like, yeah, we do. Yeah.

[00:53:24] Maria: They told us we were heathens. They come to Christianize us. Lovely that the missionaries came and we got the Bible. But we had our own spirituality well before missionaries came. And all of that comes out of language. It's that connection. Firstly, being connected to Baiame, because everything in our culture is connected.

For Aunty, the No vote in the Voice Referendum was exactly what she wanted.

She says the Wiradjuri Council of Elders already exists as a local Voice and it has work to do.

And Aunty Maria says now they also want to set up their own Wiradjuri government.

[00:54:17] Maria: It's been different for First Nations people, but for me, and I've mentioned it briefly in our talks today, I'm Wiradjuri, and I'm proud Wiradjuri. And I don't believe that anybody else has the right to speak for me. I can speak for me. And Wiradjuri people can speak for themselves. We don't need a handful of hand picked First Nations people. They don't know me. They don't know my people. They don't know my Country and yet they will make decisions to Parliament for us.

[00:55:12] Maria: Which brings me back now, Wongamarr was a visionary. He lived in Albury, we lived here in Wagga. And he'd always come over at least once a week and we'd have conversations. And I just said to him this day, 'Dad, what do you think would happen to all the assets that have been obtained under the Land Rights Act?' I said, 'Because at any time, government can put a pen through that, but yet there's huge amounts of assets'. He went, 'Oh, daughter, that's a good point you're raising'. So we kept talking as we used to. He said, 'I know what, daughter. We need to set up our own Wiradjuri Council of Elders'. I said, 'Yes, I agree'. I said, 'Because then, those assets, come back'.

[00:56:21] Maria: So we did. We called a meeting here in Wagga and about 500 Wiradjuri people from right across Wiradjuri country attended that meeting in the old regional land council building in Gurwood Street. And then history was made. Officially, the Wiradjuri Council of Elders was formed. And the Elders nominated to be on council with representation right across our country. I would have been about 45 back then.

[00:57:00] Maria: They had their first meeting and then they nominated myself, Jenny Coe and Isabel Coe to be Elders in Learning. So we came to the table, but we didn't have a say. It was look, listen and learn and do all the running around for us. It was beautiful. And so we were there, look, listening and learning for a number of years until they agreed that we were ready now to be Elders on Council.

[00:57:37] Maria: Then at that level decided that we needed a second layer. So we're about forming our own government. Okay? So I have carried on their work, their wishes, of my Elders and we have just established the Wiradjuri Billa Council of Elders. So that's, we have Elders now from communities from all of our rivers. Alright. And we've just established that. So that's the second tier.

[00:58:20] Maria: And we will speak on behalf of our people, not the Voice. I would have voted yes for the Voice if it was just about recognition. Recognising us in the Constitution would have been a big yes for me. But for the other, no. But that's me personally, my reasons why.

The Wiradjuri Council of Elders wants to negotiate a Treaty and to ensure that truth-telling happens.

But Auntie Maria admits there's still a lot of work to be done in rebuilding our nation.

[00:59:00] Maria: Most certainly I support truth telling and I do support treaty. And I believe that we are the people, the Council, Wiradjuri Council. And other nations, whatever structure they have in place, need to be talking to their people and we need to be negotiating our own treaties. Not having these hand picked people that the government put up to negotiate those things. No, that's not cultural principles.

[00:59:34] Maria: So as time goes on and we really, as I said, we're just getting established, we will be moving that way. We're also about another big thing of Wongomarr's was to rebuild our nation. Why are my people still beggars in our own country? We have never ceded sovereignty of our country. And why are we beggars? And I've made the decision I'm not gonna be a beggar anymore.

[01:00:05] Maria: I have seen by working for government the destruction that they have caused. We have wonderful, good organisations that do good work, but the majority of their time is acquitting grants. It's not building. And Wongamarr used to say, throw one bone in to a pack of dogs and what happens? We've seen it.

And Auntie Maria is determined to get a share of the wealth that's been generated by the theft of our country.

[01:00:49] Maria: But it's about us as Wiradjuri people through our Council negotiating that we get finances out of it. So we can build our own. I don't have to go to government. My people don't have to go to government. We can build what we see we need to have in our country and to reconnect our people and get the language more and more out there and culture and coming back to our true selves.

[01:01:27] Maria: That's the vision. That's the hard work. We have got to rebuild our nations. How do we do that? I'm just taking Darlington Point is where I live, okay. Massive solar panels going up on Country. Now, we're going to begin negotiating. We're not greedy people. We believe in sharing. But we are the traditional people. We get money from the solar panels. Massive.

[01:02:09] Maria: Just one property that my husband works on, they've got two built dams that hold more water than the Sydney Harbour. All the water rights that are going to farmers destroying our country. I love fishing and I loved eating fish. I still go fishing, but I don't eat fish any more that comes out of my river. Because they've got sores all over them. It's dry most of the time, unless we get rain. Seeing a lot of insects and things that are no more. Destroying Country. So how do we as Elders look after Country? It's about having a voice to these big companies, Murray Darling Basin Plan.

[01:03:14] Luke W: We went for a drive out on Country and we went and got a couple of didges and we went across the Hay Plains and the amount of cotton that we saw, just between that stretch, just in that area, was incredible. And you could see it for miles. They're raping our rivers.

[01:03:35] Maria: Cotton all around us at Darlington Point. They ruined up north, then they've come down south. And as Luke's saying, there's cotton everywhere. They assure us that they have better methods that they're using now and that none of the chemicals that they're using are going back into the river. I don't accept that.

[01:04:03] Luke W: We've just seen that big - the fish kill out at Menindee. That's also happened again, but it hasn't been televised. And they're saying it's the chemicals that they're using on the cotton.

[01:04:13] Maria: I just recently did a trip around from Darlington Point. I went to Lake Cargelligo to catch up with family there and then on to Condo. And I never thought I would ever live to see cotton, the amount of cotton being grown out at Condo. This is unbelievable. It's everywhere on our Country. So we're not going to stop it. You won't stop these things.

[01:04:47] Luke W: What are your happiest memories of Wagga?

[01:04:51] Maria: Hewitt and Dot and Aunty Val, they were very committed and their work was around establishment of Aboriginal Legal Service, establishment of Aboriginal Children's Service and establishment of Early Childhood. They were their key areas. And then, as I said, we came here with the establishment of the church, because we identified the need particularly for young people. So that, which we've talked about, providing support for people in custody and from our work with police back then was, came the establishment of the Young Offenders Act.

[01:05:39] Maria: My work with health, we were able to get hospital liaison officers into the hospitals. Aboriginal liaison officers in with police. Initially, I was employed in 1989 with Community Health to conduct a survey for them and out of that survey

came the two things. One was that the health system wasn't culturally friendly and our people didn't feel comfortable when they were in hospital. Thus we got the Aboriginal liaison officers. We got in the hospitals, just visual stuff to make people feel more inviting for them.

[01:06:26] Maria: And then the other thing that came out is that, out of the survey was people felt the need to have their own. Alcohol and drugs were the two issues that concerned people who participated in the survey. So from there, I had a meeting with Dot Whyman and a few others. And, from there, Penny Everaadt and myself went to Sydney and attended a Aboriginal Health Resource Committee back then, and lobbied for a drug and alcohol service here in Wagga. And we were successful.

[01:07:11] Maria: And then on top of that, we were also successful in getting a dental clinic. And those services were to service our communities within the Riverina. That's why our Aboriginal Medical Service now it's called Riverina Aboriginal Medical Service. So we had a person from every - all of those communities - formulated the board.

[01:07:39] Maria: And then Ivan and Ken Murray were heavily involved in the youth side of it as well. They worked with PCYC and would go and pick young people up, take them there. They would play sports. All sorts of activities would take place. Our young people were involved in putting together an alcohol campaign, so it was just, we all just worked together.

[01:08:08] Maria: That's my involvement, the establishment of the Drug and Alcohol Service. Then it went on from there to become what we have now, the Riverina Aboriginal Health Service. I was also, myself and Carol Moffat, we were working with Homecare and our people were saying that they needed their own. So we lobbied and lobbied. But we were successful in the end and we got our own Aboriginal Home Care branch here in in Wagga. That, that was really good.

[01:08:41] Maria: Also involved with the women's refuge and for women fleeing domestic violence. So worked with them and we were successful in getting another number of houses, medium term, for victims of domestic violence. And then, so much happened, I can go on and on.

[01:09:06] Maria: Then Ivan and Ken Murray, they, formed a football team to to play in. I just cried the day my sons played football with their father. And Ken Murray, - who's fondly known as Tunny - his sons to run out and play football with him. It was just, and every Saturday down at Bolton Park, you know, families would come together and, oh, it was just amazing.

[01:09:37] Maria: I have fond memories of Wagga and just loved living here. I think I ended up living here for about 20 years. My youngest son still lives here with his family. And the reason I left Wagga was when my parents passed away. I lost them three months apart from each other, and I just, they were buried at home, I had to go home. But no. Love Wagga and have really good memories of how we all worked together.

[01:10:08] Maria: In the old days it was church and sport. Sport's great to bring families together. Always church and sport that brought us together. And now it's, well, Ivan and Tunny used to then take our side to the knockout. And it's just lovely now to see the sons of the men that were involved in playing footy with Group 9 are now got Dindima and they're taking their sons to the knockout. Just to see that continuum happening, wonderful.

[01:10:53] Luke W: I know your grandchildren are very talented in sport. Can you tell us a little bit about Zaid and how's he been tracking with his footy?

[01:11:05] Maria: I never forget my son, Paul, or fondly known as Stump. He played for South Sydney and he got a football injury that ruined his career. And so he stayed sort of out and away from football for a long time. But when his son turned five and a lot of his cousins sons turned five, he must have had a long, hard think and say I can get back involved in football. So he became the coach for Brothers.

[01:11:37] Maria: These little fellas, their first games, and there's young Zaid and his cousin, Carl Little's son, Cody, here they were just running along holding hands with each other at the back. And his grandfather and father and uncle were there and they were singing out, 'Stump, make them stop holding hands and play football'.

[01:12:10] Maria: And then there was another game at where? It was a freezing day, Tumut. We went and watched them play in Tumut. And there was a little fella there and he was late. And so he gets there, and he, and Stump comes over to him and says 'I'll put you on in a minute', and he said, 'I'm here! I'm here. I'm here all because of you. I don't want to play football, it's cold. But I'm here because of you'.

[01:12:41] Maria: Oh, funny times just watching them. Paul has coached them from five and they're under 15's now. And to just see how that whole team have just come together. They're just fantastic and really talented footballers within that team.

[01:12:59] Luke W: Yeah, he's coached them for 10 years. And the last three years they've made the grand final. Two years of that they went through the whole season undefeated. Like what an incredible record.

[01:13:12] Maria: It's a real achievement for Paul as a coach. The families have just been so loyal, turning up every game with their kids. And there's only four Aboriginal kids in it. And they're just a big, happy football family. It's been incredible.

[01:13:32] Maria: But Zaid has just been outstanding. He's so committed to football. He knows what he wants to be. And he puts in the hard work to get where he wants to be young. Oh, he is. And it's not just - people recognize him. He's now been approached by NRL. So they go on attendance at school. He never misses a day of school.

Luke: A hundred per cent attendance.

[01:14:01] Maria: At school. They see him as a good mentor. He's very caring, gentle, mentors other young kids. So overall, he's just developing- he's going to be a real Wiradjuri in, in terms of sport. And it's just lovely for me as a grandmother, wherever I go, everybody comments on how he conducts himself. It's not just about his football. It's overall the young man that he's become. And a lot of credit goes to that, to Paul and Luke. Like Luke's his godfather, but culturally is his father. And so they go and do a lot of cultural stuff together.

While there are still many challenges ahead, Aunty Maria and the other members of the Wiradjuri Council of Elders hold out hope for the future.

[01:14:55] Maria: When I go back to my childhood and for those my era and around that, still facing - for me - institutional racism, but for others individual racism. And we now have worked hard and worked together here in Wagga to establish services for our people.

[01:15:24] Maria: And we have language, which it's going to assist us in rebuilding, reconnecting our people back to culture. It's looking very bright and I am so happy that the future just looks wonderful for our young people.

[01:15:48] Maria: And as the Wiradjuri Council of Elders, we don't make decisions for tomorrow. Our decisions are looking for seven generations to come. Wonderful.

And she's hopeful that non First Nation Australians will come along on the journey.

[01:16:09] Maria: How I was brought up, my grandfather, Wongamarr used to say to us, sit with the people. Sit with the people. And they were classical examples. As I said, all my old people on a Saturday morning walk up from the Three Way, sit in the ... They'd be dressed to the nines. Real ladies and gentlemen.

[01:16:42] Maria: And my grandfather used to walk the street while we were all sitting. He would walk the street and there was an old man that we called Charlie Nakanoo. And, he was an Afghan. And nobody would talk to him. Nobody. All fearful of him. And my grandfather would sit in the gutter, in a suit, and talk for hours to Charlie. And Dad was the same.

[01:17:32] Maria: Wherever people were - and he travelled Australia - he travelled around the world. And out in the centre of Australia and they'd be sitting in the red dust with people. And with his own people. It's just sit with people. Learn from people. Share with each other. Be willing to have those conversations. And listen, look and learn. And we need to do that more - because our culture demands... It demands Luke and I to share. It's a command. It's an order. We're willing to share our knowledge, our history.

[01:18:28] Maria: And another favourite word... Well it was a favourite word of my aunt's, Auntie Flo. Her favourite word in language was Maldanggilanha. Work together. Working together. And to work together, we need to build a relationship.

We need to put the effort, all of us putting the effort in to build that relationship with each other. Trust each other and come to the table as equals. And when we can do that, oh, just imagine what we can build together.

[01:19:13] Luke W: Absolutely. We've been truth telling for so long now, and I think to answer your question, it's time for truth listening. Yep. And learning.

[01:19:27] Maria: I just want to thank Aunty Maria for her time. She is an absolute asset to our community. I love her as one of my mothers. We're very close. And I have, yeah, utmost respect and love for Aunt. And we really appreciate your time here today, sharing your stories and knowledge with us. Mandaang Guwu.

[01:19:47] Maria: Mandaang Guwu Luke. And, as I said, I'm extremely proud of Luke and his work, and Paul, how they work together and with their children. It's just wonderful. So Mandaang Guwu.