

RESETTLEMENT | Wiradjuri Gawaymbanha-gu Mamalanha

Transcript: Episode 6 | Sitting on a Barbed Wire Fence

Geoff Simpson: We really are people who belong in nature that are floundering around in the economy. I mean, it's like sitting on a barbed wire fence, you don't know which way to move.

Hi. I'm Luke Wighton. I'm a Wiradjuri man originally 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 mob from Wagga Wagga.

Geoff Simpson was born in Walgett in north-western New South Wales.

[00:02:30] Geoff: We are Yularoi people of the Gamilaroi Nation.

I don't know how you spell that. There's probably multiple spellings given we're an oral history,

Geoff is a proud Yularoi man from the Gamilaroi nation.

He's worked in several state and federal government jobs ranging from the old Commonwealth Employment Service to the NSW Environment Department.

Geoff lived happily in Walgett until his mid teens.

Then Geoff's parents shattered his world when they told him, and his brother Rod, that they were moving to some far-off place... called Wagga Wagga.

[00:03:06] Geoff: We got a two week holiday when we turned up, just as an incentive for mum and dad for us to move here because they knew we, we came, you know, screaming and, and hanging on. I thought Wagga was on the north coast, on the beach somewhere. And, I also remember leaving Walgett in tears because I'm going, 'why are we leaving this Gamilaroi Nation going to someone else's country?' I knew it was someone else's country.

[00:03:36] Geoff: I was probably, uh, not aware that it was Wiradjuri country. But, uh, I knew it was someone else's nation and I'm going, 'I don't know anything about this one. Why am I going to that one?' And yeah, we left in tears in, um, cause we're leaving all our, all our family.

[00:03:54] Geoff: Walgett was great. We had our friends. It was a real sense of community, one that we didn't have when we came here. We knew every inch of that place in Walgett, whether it was the country or, and the landscape and the people, and we knew what families and how they belonged together. And we, we didn't know any of that when we came here because we.. Oh, my cousin lived here. She was living here with her boyfriend at the time. She was the only person we knew in the town. Aside from, um, Mum's friends and Dad's friends,

[00:04:30] Geoff: We turned up in Wagga Wagga in, uh, 1981, I think. I say 1980, but my brother says 1981. Yeah, I was 15 at the time. I knew about the resettlement scheme at 15 I think, because Mum and Dad talked about it. I think they wanted different opportunities for us that we possibly didn't have in Walgett. Or they wanted to come and reconnect with their friends. So yeah we packed up and came to the big city of Wagga Wagga.

[00:05:02] Geoff: I remember when we landed in Wagga, driving down the main street and going, 'Shit! Bloody hell! Pizza! What's that?' I'd never ever seen it before. What the hell is pizza? So, we pulled up at Marilyn's Pizza joint and we had pizza for the first time ever. So just seeing things like that, just driving down a main street that was longer than 150 metres or, you know, um, and just seeing all the cars and all the lights and it was, it was incredible. And it was.

[00:05:36] Geoff: There was, there is more opportunity in, uh, and services in a place like Wagga, but at the sacrifice of community and connection, I think, you know. Which I, I know now, but, um, I mean in a town like Walgett, uh, everyone's connected and everyone's back in that, back in the day, I'm not sure what it is now because I haven't lived there for 30 odd years, maybe 40 years.

[00:06:04] Geoff: But um, um, everyone had everyone's back, you know, and um, and, and Wagga's, Wagga was not like that when we got here, and um, it's probably not like that now. You've got to form your connection. You've got to form your community, to for people to look after you and take care of you. Walgett it's a given, because we just grew up with it, you know. And anyone that goes to Walgett, they get it straight away, they feel part of it, because it's smaller, it's, it's more, um, it's more, uh, isolated, so, you're relying on everyone else.

Luckily it didn't take Geoff and his brother long to settle into Wagga Wagga. They started at Mount Austin High School and soon found that sport could help them form strong links to the community.

[00:07:06] Geoff: We pretty soon found our friendship group and subsequently introduced mum and dad to their friendship group. Dad, dad became a part of the footy and mum became a part of the footy and then we played cricket and rugby league, which was our leg in the door. The headline for me is you actually have to participate and contribute to your community if you want one. You can't just expect it to come to you.

Geoff and his family quickly built a new life for themselves in Wagga Wagga.

[00:07:39] Geoff: Mum picked up work in the school here straight away. Dad left the Namoi Valley County Council and came and worked with the Southern Riverina County Council a couple of days later, yeah. So we're back into normal life in a different location.

[00:07:52] Geoff: We moved from Walgett which uh into Tolland, which is public housing. It was the bottom of Mount Austin actually. People describe it as the ghetto or the, or whatever, public housing. They.. not many people would look at Tolland housing as an ideal living conditions, but that's what we found our um, our community down there and our friendships. All the people we played footy with and went to school with all came from public housing. It was new housing. It was flash compared to what we had. We had a two bedroom public house in Walgett.

[00:08:31] Geoff: And it was posh when we moved to Warren Place in Tolland, you know. And it was a little cul-de-sac and, but we played with.. we knew everyone in the street. It was a great place to live. Anyone who judges it never lived in it, you know? So they don't know the sense of community, I reckon. And it's strong and vibrant in those places still, I reckon. We mixed with everyone. We went to school with everyone and got along with everyone - didn't matter what colour they were or what nationality they were.

But Geoff says there was still a lot of racism running through the regional city.

[00:09:07] Geoff: I still feel it now, you know, like it hasn't changed. Um, it's difficult, I think, to, uh, I don't know, how do I say it, to be in a predominantly white community and be black, because the judgement and the, even though it's not obvious, I mean we, we can feel it.

[00:09:30] Geoff: It's no different to what it was back in the day, even though I was more oblivious to it when I was a teenager, I didn't, we didn't ... Well I don't have the wisdom that I have now about how people feel about people of a different nation. All my life playing sport, playing rugby league with, um, you know, snide remarks and comments and black so and so's. And I remember walking home one day from the Turvey shops and someone just drove past and he just started verbally abusing me just because of the colour of my skin.

[00:10:07] Geoff: And I've seen him since and made peace about it all, you know, but... Turns out, uh, we were really good friends with his brother, you know. So yeah, nothing's changed. At least people back in those days called it straight to your face whereas now you might think it and I know you think it, but you won't say anything about it.

[00:10:33] Geoff: I can see it in people's energy, you know. I can feel it in people's energy, you know. I can feel it in people's energy. So it's no better than it was back in the day. There's plenty of times when I've been ashamed of my Aboriginality as a kid. Not now though, not now. I, if anyone ever says anything, which I have never had anyone say anything to me directly as an adult off the footy field, I'd stand up and educate them on, I mean, look at the whole Yes thing.

[00:11:04] Geoff: And then I just took the view that oh, you can't, you can't teach anything to people that know everything. So I just, you just got to let people go on their journey, you know. If people feel that way, that they got to carry that around, not me, I don't want to carry it around, it's on them.

[00:11:37] Geoff: My nan Nan Ivy was part of the Stolen Generation. And, um, and she lived with us for, for years and years and years. And, and I used to talk to her about it, like, you know, cause she was removed because of the colour of her skin, the lightness of her skin, but she always told me she had a good time at Cootamundra Girls Home, right? I talked to her many, many times.

[00:12:02] Geoff: And then anyway, one day my cousin Mark took her to Cootamundra and she sat in the car and cried and wouldn't get out. Yeah, and I went, ah, she didn't have a good time at all. She told us she had a good time just to protect us, you know?

[00:12:19] Geoff: So we never really talked about that stuff, but, uh, my dad was always, uh, at the forefront of going 'I am who I am', without even saying this, 'I am who I am'. And people are going to accept me whether they want to or not. Like if you didn't accept him, he didn't care. He still treated you with love and respect and kindness. And, and that puts, yeah, puts the onus on them to go, 'shit', well, you know, without even having a conversation about it, 'what am I missing?'

[00:12:53] Geoff: Which I think is the big thing for, for non Aboriginal Australians to, like, they don't know any blackfellas. We, I say to people all the time, white people are our family, we're just not theirs. But do they do anything about it? Maybe not, but it's still planting the seed, you know.

In 1985 Geoff started his first job at the Commonwealth Employment Service.

[00:13:23] Geoff: James Ingram was the Aboriginal vocational officer charged with the responsibility to get Aboriginal people into employment. Now he said to me, he goes, 'you get your HSC and I'll get your job at the CES'. And I went, okay, right. No worries.

[00:13:40] Geoff: I had no ambitions about, about, um, any other career or I hadn't thought about it, but so, you know, I started there. And, um, I guess work, um, gave me a range of skills. So that was the federal government. And, uh, over time I moved to Narrabri to work in the CES with a friend of mine, Georgie Rose at the time, and, um, then I moved back.

During that time Geoff also became heavily involved in music. He played in a few bands - like the Murrumbidgee Country Club - and one of the most famous bands in Wagga Wagga - Foot Full of Bindies.

After he returned to Wagga in 1992, his Uncle Billy Simpson moved in with him.

[00:14:26] Geoff: And he was a singer. And so we put this band together and we just used to play covers. He was a great Elvis impersonator, a great Queen impersonator. Plus he had his own unique ability to engage an audience, you know? And so yeah, we just had this huge following and we played pretty solid.

[00:14:45] Geoff: And then when we gigged there was heaps of Aboriginal people at our gigs, you know, because we were predominantly an Aboriginal band and we had lots of Black and white followers come to our gigs for years, 10 years plus. We played everywhere. Played all over the place.

[00:15:02] Geoff: Music's a binder. So no matter what colour you are, if it makes you move it makes you move. You know, if you're standing next to someone, you're going to dance with someone. And the music we played was all from our heart. So Uncle Bill being the entertainer is, he just brought people together and people just loved and they still talk about him to this day. They love him, you know, he was just one unique talent.

After returning to Wagga Wagga, Geoff also trained as a teacher - though to this day he hasn't taught a single class. Instead, he found a deep purpose in environmental connection and cultural science.

[00:15:41] Geoff: I did a teaching degree out at Charles Sturt University and the government had changed from the Commonwealth Employment Service to the Department of Employment, Education and Training. So whilst I was working I also did a teacher's degree. I never wanted to be a teacher. It's just the opportunity presented itself. And I never taught - ever.

[00:16:02] Geoff: So then I went back into government, went into state government. I did some juvenile justice work. And then a lady, she said, 'Oh, you'd be great at this land management job'. And, um, so I applied for this, I can't remember what it was, but, uh, Aboriginal advisor for the Department of Land and Water Conservation. And that's where I really found my sense of identity. And I really found out about my Gamilaroi culture, by the people I met in that land management agency.

[00:16:37] Geoff: Three or four years ago, I finished up in the department of um, environment. I think it's a department of environment, but in the science division, doing some work around cultural science and research. And that was a great identity finder.

[00:16:59] Geoff: I spent lots of time in the bush with key people. A fair bit of time out at Lake Mungo, did some research out there. So that journey has taken me to people like Jeanette Crewe, Hewitt Wyman, James Ingram, Uncle Jimmy Ingram, Mick Kelly, Uncle Mick Kelly, Uncle Paul Gordon, um, Aunt Mary Pappin, Aunt Alice Kelly, all of those, all of those old people that I reckon they had had their eye on me for quite a time about how serious I was about identity and was I going to, take it with, um, with the responsibility and obligation that is needed.

[00:17:42] Geoff: I spent a lot of time with a lot of those different people. I reckon they gave me snippets of dribs and drabs of information here and there just to test the waters and um, I mean, that's where I, uh, I really found my purpose and my identity in doing that work around environmental connection. And um, yeah, I thank all of those people for the investment and um, now, now the responsibility is back on to me to share that with others. So that was really great work. Like I met some great people.

[00:18:23] Geoff: But when I left there, the interesting part, uh, and I was sitting at my desk one day and I go, 'You know what? Working in government, there's this, I felt this oppression forever'. Because in essence they tell you what you're worth, what time you work. They, they tell you the messaging. And, um, I think that's, I think that's lateral violent in a way because they recruit us to work with our community so that the community can inform what they do. So I'd go back and say, 'Oh, the community wants this'. 'Nah, you can't have that'. 'The community wants this'. 'Nah, you can't have that.'

[00:19:05] Geoff: The government has - whether it's state or federal - they have um their lens and that's the only lens that matters. So, I, I felt this whole oppression lifted off my shoulders when I left it, that I didn't realize I had it. And, um, even though I loved the work, I loved the people that I worked with, and the jobs were, they were fantastic. But the under, the undertone or the underpinning thing is, 'no, you do what we tell you to do', whether it's right or wrong.

Geoff says he will remain forever grateful to that diverse mob who helped him discover himself and awaken his deep connection to Country.

[00:19:49] Geoff: What I know now is that we come from the land. So if you want to know who you are, you got to get in touch with the land. And because we've spent so much time on this country we know, we know the law of the land and we belong with the species. Plants and animals are our brothers and sisters.

[00:20:11] Geoff: Now, I didn't have this wisdom when I was growing up. It was in my DNA, but I didn't know much about it. But now I do know, and this is what, this is.. So the law of the land is every, every species has a song, story, dance and language. And I always knew that I belonged with emu or feather.

[00:20:38] Geoff: I always knew that ever since I was a little kid. I don't know who told me. My, my Nan Bertha or my Aunty Jenny, or someone told me that. And so that has grown into, um, you know, we are feather people. We belong with the feather skin group. And our culture is so simple and so well organised, but that's the core of it, is that everyone belongs in a landscape.

[00:21:14] Geoff: So my feather landscape then is, I've got responsibility to grow that country for those species. And Wedgetail Eagle is very important in our skin group. And, the cultural lens of the Wedgetail is they're big picture thinkers. They fly over everything and piece the puzzle together which is, I think what I do, you know.

[00:21:42] Geoff: The law and the language and the song and the story all comes from the landscape. It's not this Western approach about, okay, here's the language we wrote down so you must speak that, speak that language.

[00:21:55] Geoff: And a lot of people say, oh, the culture's lost. Well, it can't be lost. Why is that? It's in the country. So if you want to connect with culture, the song's still there, the story's still there, the language and the dance is still there. But this Western approach takes people out of nature and makes people dependent on money and other people for their existence.

This connection to the land is part of our culture - it's in our bones. And Geoff thinks that the whitefellas are missing out by not listening to the people who have known this land for thousands of years.

[00:22:59] Geoff: We've achieved sustainability, we've achieved unity and oneness. I mean, why wouldn't you want to learn that? Everyone's in pursuit of it and not asking us. And we know that. So we go, 'Oh, well just let them go'. They've got to come and say hello and sit around the fire before they learn it you know.

[00:23:18] Geoff: And show that, uh, alright, the wisdom we're going to give you, you're going to treat it with the humility and the respect that it deserves to be treated with and you're going to do right with it. Otherwise you ain't going to get it. That's what I mean about those old people was watching me, going, 'is he going to do the right thing with it?' I think, you know, and, um.

[00:23:40] Geoff: So yeah, that's what we're missing out on. We're missing out on unity, oneness and harmony by not knowing any Aboriginal people and our ways, knowing our ways.

Geoff describes his time out at Lake Mungo working with the traditional owners as transformative.

[00:24:07] Geoff: Mungo's a special place for the planet. And it's challenging because, um, including myself, when people go out there we are often walking around the bush with tears in our eyes going, what the hell are we doing?

[00:24:24] Geoff: And that's not anyone saying anything. That's the landscape, I reckon, challenging people going, 'Are you on the right path? Are you doing what you're supposed to be doing? Are you being who you're supposed to be?' And Mungo does that all on its own. So it's challenging in that sense because we come back to town with a different lens.

[00:24:48] Geoff: And, and, I've seen many relationships break down after they come back to town because, um, people, in essence, find out their true identity, which is the thrilling part of it also. So you've got this heartache and love at the same time. But it's thrilling to, to just, for me, it's been thrilling to know who the hell I am and what role I play.

[00:25:16] Geoff: If you know your role and your purpose, everything else just falls into place. I'm not saying there's not challenges. There's lots of challenges. But you got these foundational values to call back upon at any time, which I think society has really lost its values. Values are really about money, power, greed and control. And it's not who we really are.

[00:25:40] Geoff: We really are a group of people who belong with nature and belong with each other. Now, I think culture and connection can coexist with money. It has to, because we're never going to lose it. So it's more about, okay, how much more deeper do you want to get connected? Live your purpose, live your identity, live who you are, you know?

[00:26:05] Geoff: Yeah. So who are we as a group of people? We really are people who belong in nature that are floundering around in the economy. I mean, it's like sitting on a barbed wire fence - you don't know which way to move.

One of Geoff's roles has been doing cultural conservation at a very special reserve at Lake Mungo.

[00:26:43] Geoff: Mick Kelly's, been the leader of it. He got this crown reserve called Rick Farley Reserve in honour of Rick Farley of the Farmers Federation - he brought farmers and Aboriginal people together back in the day.

[00:26:57] Geoff: So we look after that place and the big difference, we've got thousands and thousands of different species out there because we culturally conserve it and grow it. And, and we're a part of it. So we do fire cool burning practice, we do ceremony, we do song, we do story and we do deep connection.

[00:27:19] Geoff: Now if you look at the research say for example, say, World Heritage Area or Parks found, over 40 years they found 10 species - I'm making the numbers up here - but they found 10 species or 20 species over 40 years. We do research in six months and find 3000 species. So we've just got to be out there and you just got to grow their country if you want diversity.

[00:27:44] Geoff: Now, the difference with Rick Farley Reserve out at Mungo is that our driver is not money. So, we've taken the management back to it's about bringing our culture to life. So, uh, we don't have grazing on there. We have native, stuff for native species. Once you grow the country there is diversity everywhere. We've got thousands and thousands of different species.

In one trip, Geoff and his team invited Dave Hunter, Senior Threatened Species Officer in the Environment Department - and he saw a jewelled gecko. It's a vulnerable species found in parts of New South Wales and South Australia, and one that Dave had never seen before. On his first night in the camp, Dave spotted a jewelled gecko and a wood gecko.

[00:28:44] Geoff: Dave goes, I come out here to find this jewelled gecko. Well, there's two of them the night he set up. He'd never seen it in 30, 40 years of working in the field.

[00:28:56] Geoff: We've just found Harrow Wattle out there. It hasn't been seen in that part of the landscape or New South Wales for 25, 30 years. And the experts reckon the goats ate it out, you know, and they might have some truth in that. But the goats ate it out. They shit it out too. And what happens? Seed everywhere. Plants everywhere. So maybe, uh, they're an important part of the landscape and people see them as pests or weeds and rather than turn the lens onto ourselves, like who's the biggest pest and weed is, is humans, you know?

Another big revelation for Geoff has been learning about cool burning.

[00:29:44] Geoff: My first cool burn, I was nervous as hell because I still had the Western approach to burning in my mindset. Like if we all think about what's a burning regime looks like we go back to, what was the year? 2019, 2020. Like, you think about burning, we're all thinking about that, you know. That was months of smoke hanging over this city. So, um, but, you know, I'd obviously done some cool burning before that.

[00:30:15] Geoff: But, our culture's got no words around hazard and risk. Wildfire, like this is not, not in our language. I'm not saying it didn't exist, but when you have a nation of people burning, cool burning the country and knowing when to do it, through June, July, August, the approach is, um, it's, it's patch burning. Burn that

little patch like just this metre by metre just and watch it trickle around. Um and if the fire is up in the canopy, that's, that's just your ego out of control, you know. We don't want the fire in the canopy.

[00:30:55] Geoff: So it really is a trickle burn during June, July and August. And you almost need a blowtorch to get it going because it's that cold. So, um, spinifex is a little bit different. It's highly flammable. And we've got a lot of spinifex on that place. So it takes off pretty well, but it only goes a bit wild for 30 seconds like it, like it's having a little, little wild dance, you know. And then 30 seconds to a minute or so and then it just settles right down completely. Now if you're out there burning in June, July, August, you actually need to burn the country because it's cold. So you're standing out there freezing if you haven't got fire going.

[00:31:35] Geoff: But there's this whole thing around cultural fire - and it's a protection thing too. Like, I don't know, for the, for the Parkies and the Rural Fire Service, it's, it's a lot of overtime. So. I don't think they want our cool burning practices - it might impact on their overtime. But it's connection at the deepest level when you've got fire under your feet and you're walking around it and you're part of it.

[00:32:04] Geoff: So, I mean, that's the feeling on offer for people. And. so you've got to really, um, immerse in it first before, before you, uh, are able to, not master, it's the wrong word, cause we're not trying to master anything. We want to be a part of it, but be comfortable with it. You know, we burn when the breeze hits our back and it's really cold.

[00:32:30] Geoff: So we go, let's go because it's cold standing at this camp, even though we're standing around a fire. And you can feel the cold through your bones. So we take people out and just say, righto it's, it's bit by bit. So a metre by a metre. You take care of that one, you take care of that one. And don't let it be above your waist. Don't let it get up in the trees. And yeah, let's spend a lot of time out here tonight burning it you know.

[00:32:58] Geoff: And you got connection, you got unity all in the one practice because you've got responsibility. And making sure that you're burning into the wind and you don't burn at the back of the plant, you burn into the wind.

[00:33:13] Geoff: Because if there's critters in there, you send them a warning, let them know to go and find somewhere else. Because we're burning to create fresh country for those critters. We're not burning to, for kilometres or hectares, which is some of the other targets. We don't do that. We're just burning for fresh tucker.

[00:33:31] Geoff: Now, spinifex is, that's real prickly, so it'll take over the landscape if you let it. And it becomes, uh, it out-competes all the other native species. So once you burn it, you see that other species get a chance, you know. And a predominant spinifex landscape, it's got mallee, mallee tree, um, spinifex and more spinifex.

[00:33:57] Geoff: So, um, once you open that up, you get Tea Tree, you get, uh, you get Harrow Wattle. You get all sorts of species that haven't had a chance that invisible plant out there that you know. There's so much more diversity once you apply cool fire. Um. Cool fire brings the right plants. Hot fire brings hot plants. So the hot fire brings more and more um fuel and um, and we'll probably be asking the same questions that we asked back in 2019. Why are we not doing anything about it?

[00:34:32] Geoff: Because once upon a time, as I said at the start, everyone used to burn the country. You walk in a ceremony up there, you get a feed back here in three months time. There'd be kangaroo in this landscape because they'd be grazing on fresh tucker. So, um..

[00:34:48] Geoff: But now the responsibility is on a couple of agencies that ain't equipped. They ain't equipped with skills and they ain't equipped with resources. Nor do they have the right approach to it, because their approach is about, we need to burn X number of hectares this year, whereas, uh, yeah, that's the wrong driver. And it hasn't worked in 200 odd years so why keep doing the same thing? It's like buying watermelons for a dollar and selling them for a dollar and think the answer is a bigger truck.

In 2019 after a long period of terrible drought, Geoff was the MC at a corroboree at the Marrambidya wetlands in Wagga Wagga – to which the public was invited. It was a huge and moving event - what Geoff describes as the power of culture and connection.

[00:35:52] Geoff: That was sort of a defining moment in Wagga's history around having that corroboree and it just brought a lot of people together and I don't think we should lose the intent about what it offered. Because we easily go back into, into normal everyday practice.

[00:36:12] Geoff: So corroboree is about ceremony and belonging to the earth. Yeah, and all the dances that you saw that night are all part of that. The shark, the whale, the porcupine, the kangaroo, the emu dance, etc, etc. So they're all stories about who we are as a united people and what our responsibilities to the earth and each other are. And I think people felt it that night and people still feel the effect of it.

[00:36:42] Geoff: Our, uh, cultural group, we have corroborees all over the place every, every year, every second year. So it just, what led to it is funny because one of the old uncles will just say, 'right, we're having it in Wagga'. Okay. That's it. So then um Dick Green and a couple other Peter Ingram and a couple other people that, that are in that group, Joey Williams, et cetera, we just go, okay, we're here.

[00:37:09] Geoff: So we've got the relationships with the council. We've got the relationships with the community. So we just took an active role about doing some coordination, bringing it to life really. But yeah, one of the uncles'd say, right, 'Wagga this year, uh, South coast, Nowra next year', et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And I

mean, they know where it needs to happen. So we just assisted with the planning and the implementation and.

[00:37:37] Geoff: And we don't really have to think about it that much because we know what happens with it. And everyone just brings their energy from all over the state, all over the country. Um, we had people from the Territory come down for that, women from the Hunter, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So everyone just brings their connection and their energy and people have got no choice but to buy into it.

[00:38:01] Geoff: But that's the power of culture. That's the power of connection. Imagine, imagine everyone with that lens and that practice, the landscape and the people would be so different. That's still what we've got to offer.

[00:38:12] Geoff: But then I think it's on everyone else, just everyone just to find that connection and to keep practising that. It's got to become everyday business for people around connection and because culture is about reinforcing values, which reinforces identity and purpose. And, um, yeah, we're walking around without those values and without that identity, without that, uh, collective belonging with nature. So, um, that's still there for us to do.

[00:38:57] Geoff: We are nature. The trees are us, the grasses, the herbs, the forbs, the winds, the sun, the sand, the water. It's all part of who we are as a collective of people and the sooner we get back to that, the better off our society.

[00:39:11] Geoff: I had a lot of people saying, um, yeah, it'd be great if we did it again, you know, et cetera. And it would be, but, um, the opportunity to connect with culture is right under our noses every day. So you shouldn't need a facilitator or an MC to say, 'Oh, you got to do this.'

[00:39:30] Geoff: Because what we get taught is if you want to learn anything about who you are and what role you play, learn it from nature. Nature tells us what our role is. So, um, yeah, people have still got that opportunity to practice corroboree and ceremony every day if you want.

[00:39:49] Geoff: Culture is in essence about how we belong with the land and our role we play with looking after the environment. And the deeper lessons are about what does nature teach us about the values of who we are? And if that was the intent in businesses and organisations, they'd deliver something different. Their intent right now is, we've got this amount of money, we've got to do these jobs which is, yeah, it's fraught with danger.

[00:40:25] Geoff: If you look at culture from, it's got song, story, dance, language. And it teaches us about values of humility, trust, respect, patience and ego. Culture is all about values. It's totally all about values. What do we learn from nature? That, um, the mallee fowl, which comes straight out of the nest and flies into the nearest tree to get away from predators, it knows its gift straight away. We're all born with gifts. Do we practise it? Probably not. Do we search it? Probably not. Or we're still on the treadmill trying to do it.

[00:41:05] But culture, if you look at it from a Western lens, it's well planned. Everyone got a clear role and responsibility. You got to be accountable for your deliverables and you celebrate the good and bad. So if, if any organisation, business had that as their core, with a cultural lens - What's the song? What's the story? What's the dance? What's the language? What's our gift? How do I bring your gift to life in this organisation? You know, bring your gift to life in the workplace and you'll see a vibrant, happy, joyous workplace.

Geoff is a huge supporter of Aboriginal run services. And the rejection of the Voice referendum left him jaded about the nation's refusal to let go of controlling the lives of First Nations mob.

[00:42:10] Geoff: You walk into a Aboriginal Legal Service and you know the people there, or the Aboriginal Medical Service, you know the people there. You walk in a non Aboriginal one, you don't know anyone and there's judgement in them. And that's the difference. That's the big difference. And had people not had an Aboriginal Medical Service, they'd be falling off the perch at a rate of knots. That's only because they know everyone that works in there that they go and seek treatment because they're comfortable. So those kind of services are crucial. Because we don't get that kind of support in non Aboriginal services.

[00:42:51] Geoff: My thinking lately has been, I know what's best for me. You know what's best for you. You know what's best for you. Why wouldn't people want that? Why would you want me in charge of your decisions in your life? You don't. But the Voice, as a collective, they think they know better for us. And they don't know us to know better for us.

[00:43:20] Geoff: And the opportunity to connect and to learn how we achieve sustainability and unity and oneness and harmony, it's still on the table, but, uh, yeah, maybe people have to work a bit harder to get it, as they should.

[00:43:36] Geoff: I think about the Welcome to Country ceremony and I go, I wouldn't do that because why welcome people to our country that don't deserve it and they haven't earned it. That's my view on it. And I see a lot of these things in, uh, in, in art that it's just symbolism to me without telling the true intent of, um, of why it was crafted or... no-one seems to be interested in the story in it and what it really means. They just have it hanging on their wall as a, uh, as a spectacle or a showcase piece or, or their contribution to purchasing art. So yeah, I, I think, there's some great art, there's some great practitioners and people who live it and are part of it. But for me, I think it's got to go beyond the symbolism and beyond the tokenism and yeah, I don't know if they'll ever get to that.

For Geoff, one of the key parts to cultural connection and unity is the revival of languages and teaching them to the younger generation.

[00:44:56] Geoff: Well, the value in it for me is that it's the language of the land. Yeah. So if we want to belong with the land, we've got to know what the language of

the land is. All the stories are still in the landscape and the meaning and the intent, you know, that goes beyond just speaking and it comes with intent.

[00:45:14] Geoff: But once you learn that, that is really about knowing who you are and what your identity is as well. And how you belong in this landscape, how we look after it. Yes, so language is crucial to it. And I think we should all be trying to understand what the landscape is telling us.

Ivy Simpson - Geoff's daughter - is a dancer who recently performed at the 2024 School's Spectacular in Sydney, with a piece that celebrated the magic of culture.

[00:45:43] Geoff: I've got six kids by the way - that's just in case any of the other kids listen to this podcast. But yeah, she crafted this piece around, um, what we're talking about - connection, identity, and purpose. And that the magic is in the country. The magic is in our way of, uh, doing it.

[00:46:03] Geoff: She's practiced ballet her whole life and jazz and tap and hip hop. And she was a ballerina as she was telling this story. So she's walking out on the, um, Qudos Bank, um, stage to 15, 16, 000 people. So she's telling a story about song, language, skin groups and which one she belonged to and how that's helped shape her identity. And then she was sharing just about, you know, Aboriginal people do have the magic about how we live it. We live at one with this landscape and each other.

[00:46:36] Geoff: And then she transferred from this ballerina into a brolga, and they painted her on as you go. And then the Bangarra dance troupe, um, and dance students from all across the country, they just went from this ballerina dance to this brolga dance and there's, I don't know, there's probably a hundred people involved in it and it was just, we were sitting up the top and all I felt was, there it is right there, unity, oneness and harmony in the dance and the story and the song.

[00:47:07] Geoff: And the place was eerie, eerie quiet, because you could have heard a pin drop. And she just, she just had them eating out of, out of her hand. And it was just such a powerful piece, you know, that she'd crafted. She obviously shared some ideas with us and she'd crafted with, uh, Sonia, the lady at, who looks after school spec. And Sonia said 'that was one of the most powerful things we've ever done' - I think that's what Sonia said. Yeah, but it was, uh, yeah, it was a call out to the nation about, come on, we've got to do better. Let's, it's right under our noses and we can do it. What's stopping us?

Geoff's wife Bridget is his inspiration. She, like Geoff, is also heavily involved in the Wagga Wagga community and is also focused on changing the system.

[00:48:03] Geoff: She teaches well-being at, uh, at Turvey Park. And, um, she brings a cultural lens to her teaching philosophy. She's about teaching kids about nature and about values. And, uh, she has remarkable relationships with students and parents, which I think is missing in the education system.

[00:48:25] Geoff: So, you know, people are so worried about the curriculum and the content - even if you look at the word content, conning and intent, your intent is to con. That's how I see it, right? So people who teach content, um, are usually people who don't have the relationships with the students or the parents. If you want to open up opportunities for students, you've got to have the relationship and you've got to know, you've got to bring them to life in the, in the education system. And, um, she does that, you know. And people talk fondly of her.

[00:49:07] Geoff: I remember she used to work in Juvenile Justice. She taught in Juvenile Justice and we turned up to Dubbo one day and her and I are standing at the car and this young, younger, buff-looking lad come up to her, little solid fella, really well built and, um, and he goes, 'You don't remember me, do you?' And she goes, 'Yeah, I do, but I don't really know your name'. And he said, his name's such and such. This was 20 years later, you know, and she's going, 'he's brave coming to talk to me with my husband standing there.'

[00:49:42] Geoff: Like I knew what was happening straight away and he goes, 'I'm such and such you taught me at juvie' and, and he said 'You really made an impact on my life by just valuing who I am'. And, and I went, 'Yeah well that's what she does, you know'. And I've had students and parents forever come and come and say that to to to her and to me. But she builds a relationship with the parents and she, she tries to bring the kids to life, you know, and make it fun.

[00:50:16] Geoff: School's lost its fun. You know, not only does she talk about it, but the teachers we know, um, they said, 'Oh, we used to have fun.' And I go, 'Why'd you stop for?' Well, because it's all this process and tick a box and tokenism, that, um, covering your bum, you know, that's all they have to do in the job these days. So, um, yeah, she's an incredible educator and an incredible human being. Yeah.

Geoff believes that if culture was stronger within our community, the problem of a huge number of young kids ending up in the juvenile justice system could improve.

[00:50:56] Geoff: People are in that environment because they don't have hope, nor do they know who they are. They don't have identity or their values. Now, if you get culture, you get all those things. So the opportunity is there to address that easily. And people who share culture with us or who I've learned it off, we know, we've had lots of people on the edge of going into custody. As soon as they know their ceremony and their song and their story and their dance, and their identity, they're not involved in that environment. You know your purpose and your identity and your values, you're not involved in crime. You're living your gift. So, there's hope there for, for people. Um, yeah, culture's the only answer. Anything else is just putting a bandaid on a boil, you know.

[00:51:54] Geoff: You still have ups and downs, don't get me wrong, but, it costs nothing to get culture and costs \$370,000 to keep someone in custody. Hey, you know, give us \$350,000 and we'll make \$20,000 per person savings for you. Cheap!

These days Geoff feels very much at home in Wagga Wagga.

[00:52:18] Geoff: We are a part of this community. We came here not part of it, now were a part of it. I think that's been the big change. We've got friends and family all over the place. And, um, we've got our gym group, our environmental group, our music group, our, chicken group.

[00:52:41] Geoff: And I think we've made a contribution to all of those different things and all of those, uh, different opportunities that are present in Wagga. And, um, yeah, it's, we love the joint and we love the people in it. We love the landscape, even though it's winter time, but you know, we can get out to places and light the fire and yeah. It's, it is a great, great city for opportunity. It's a great city for connection, but you have to contribute to it.

Geoff says while he tries to not think about the future, he does hope it will turn out well.

[00:53:24] Geoff: I don't watch TV and I don't read the news. Because, it's a deficit model that sells headlines. So I don't, I try not to think about it, you know, that's, which is scary. That's very scary.

[00:53:39] Geoff: I want my kids to be connected. I hope they do what they love and I hope they, um, are stress free and just happy doing it. That's all.

[00:53:51] So all I want to do is play music and be in the bush and I'll be happy. But all I want to do is do the things that bring me joy. So, but I've got these foundational values and practices to come back to it and sitting in the bush and going to Mungo and spending time with no-one else is a part of that.