

the
LITTLE BOOK
of
GOOD THINGS

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout New South Wales and Australia. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and future. We recognise the deep connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to this land, and the vital role that Elders play as custodians of culture, knowledge, and tradition. Their wisdom and guidance are invaluable to their communities and to all Australians.

COTA NSW would like to thank Bunnings Group for their support with this project – and for supporting older Australians.

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Written by: Luisa Bustos, Manyana Creative

Photography by: Dementia Australia (Bill), Alison Hawksley (Alison and Brooke), Robin Wyatt (Kim), George Fetting (Sonny, Jill and Georgia, Uncles Widdy and Bobby).

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Get in touch

info@cotansw.com.au

PO Box Q349, Queen Victoria Building, NSW 1230

www.cotansw.com.au

Foreword

***The Little Book of Good Things* is a delightful and inspiring collection of stories about “ordinary” older Australians and the power of the greater good that a single person can contribute at any life stage.**

How we enter and navigate later life can significantly influence the way we view and experience ageing. Growing older can present enormous challenges for some people, while for others they may become mere onlookers on life, even when decisions are made that directly affect them.

The impact of this can be devastating, not just on our health, our relationships, our wellbeing and the reality of being safe, but even how we view ourselves and this stage of life. This can contribute to older people feeling invisible and that their rights are somehow not important. Older people can also diminish themselves and their aspirations such that their world gradually feels very small and disconnected, when the reality can be a much greater offering of “good things,” or even a small offering of good enough things.

This publication showcases some of the wonderfully diverse stories of ageing in Australia, which should give all Australians encouragement and hope as we grow older.

This includes the stories of Bill, who was diagnosed with Younger Onset Alzheimer’s Disease and has created a powerful community to help people to just keep swimming; Kim, who brings her childhood sustainability lessons through to her family, her work life and a broader world; Sonny, who took on a new career pathway in his 60s to find purpose and more people connections; Jill, a social advocate for ageing and dying well who works with COTA NSW and her grand-daughter Georgia to vibrantly live out that desired experience through her volunteer work; and Uncles Widdy and Bobby, forever connected by their stolen childhoods to now being collaborators in their First Nations’ communities so they can help others heal and build a positive future.

These are stories about challenges, hardships, grief and sadness; but they are also stories of triumph, wisdom, generosity of spirit, compassion, kindness and joy.

Congratulations to the team at COTA NSW who have brought these stories to life in *The Little Book of Good Things*.

To Bill, Kim, Sonny, Jill and Georgia, Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby – thank you for boldly sharing a snapshot of your life and the greater good you are each pursuing in your own way. We see you, we hear you, and we celebrate you and *The Little Book of Good Things*.

Robert Fitzgerald AM

Age Discrimination Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission



Welcome

I am so delighted to share the first edition of *The Little Book of Good Things!* Bringing this project to life has been both a privilege and a pleasure. As the CEO of the Council on the Ageing NSW (COTA NSW), I am constantly inspired by the incredible individuals I meet in my work. Through this book I hope to share a small part of that inspiration with the wider community.

My heartfelt thanks to Jill and Georgia Nash, Bill Yeates, Sonny Rosengren, Uncle Widdy Welsh, Uncle Bobby Young and Dr Kim Loo for sharing their stories with honesty and openness. Their experiences highlight the power of determination, community and connection through all stages of life.

One person who has profoundly shaped my outlook is my mother. Her life embodies resilience, courage and love. No matter her age, my mum has embraced challenges, adapted to change and lived with purpose. She was among the first female skydivers in Iran, a bold move that speaks to her adventurous spirit. In the 1980s, she left everything behind to build a new life in Australia. Through all the ups and downs of life, she has always been there for me, offering unconditional support and guidance. Today, she is a devoted grandmother, showing that the role of a caregiver only grows more meaningful with time.

“May these stories remind all of us that no matter the stage of life, there are always good things waiting to be found and the journey is never over.”

Perhaps most inspiring, though, is my mum’s humbleness. Despite facing ovarian cancer, she continues to embrace every day with grace and gratitude, never seeking recognition for the challenges she has overcome. Her strength to keep going, to always look for the good, and to focus on what truly matters, is what inspires me most about her.

But my mum’s story is not unique. Every day, older people across NSW demonstrate strength, tenacity and creativity, enriching our communities. *The Little Book of Good Things* is a tribute to them – and a celebration of the wisdom and meaning they bring to our lives.

Through these stories, I hope to not only inspire older people but also encourage business and governments to see the immense value that older Australians bring to society. By doing so, we can create a community where older individuals are supported better, with more opportunities to thrive.

May these stories remind all of us that no matter the stage of life, there are always good things waiting to be found and the journey is never over.

With gratitude,
Gohar Yazdabadi
CEO, Council on the Ageing NSW



* Voices of Solitude: Loneliness and Social Isolation Among Older Adults in NSW



Meet Bill

BILL YEATES was a high school leader and science teacher for 35 years. He loved his job and dreamed of one day becoming a headmaster. But everything changed in July 2019, when at 59, he was diagnosed with Younger Onset Alzheimer's Disease. The news was devastating for Bill and his family, coming after a period of depression. Faced with the reality he would never teach again, Bill spiralled into despair. Thankfully, a moment of realisation showed him life was too precious to give up on. Today, through determination and hard work, Bill isn't just surviving with dementia - he's thriving. With the support of his family and friends, Bill has developed a personal approach to life that is empowering him to manage his dementia and achieve new goals. He's also inspiring others living with dementia to embrace their potential and live well with dementia.

When life is worth fighting for

Overcoming a life-changing diagnosis

Bill openly admits he didn't cope well when he first heard his diagnosis. While it explained the memory, thinking and reasoning issues that had plagued him for five years, Bill was weighed down by his prior knowledge of the disease, gained from four years as joint primary carer of his father who had had dementia.

"I lost all sense of what my life meant and what my purpose was," Bill shares. "My weight blew up to 106 kilograms. I ate and drank too much. I felt sorry for myself. I retreated from society and from my community."

A few months after his diagnosis, Bill decided to take a trip to Japan for the 2019 Rugby World Cup with seven mates who were unaware of his diagnosis. What was intended to be a 'last hurrah' became the wake-up call Bill needed to start rebuilding his life.

"My father always said, 'everyone faces adversity in their lives. You struggle, you fall down, but what matters is what you do when you get back up'."

With these words echoing through his mind and surrounded by his best friends all having the time of their lives, Bill realised life was worth fighting for.

"I recognised that what I was doing was the wrong way to deal with my diagnosis. What I needed to do was work out how I was going to fight this disease."

Bill returned to Australia determined to turn what he had thought was a life-ending diagnosis into a life-changing opportunity. With the help of his twin brother Peter, he sought out a clinical trial and began searching for guidance on how best to manage his condition while continuing to live a full and meaningful life.

"I believed that there must be a way that you could actually slow down the progression of this disease, but I couldn't find anything to guide me," he explains.

That's when he decided to create his own post-diagnosis holistic care and support program, which he calls "The Tree of Awakening Your Positivity."

"What I needed to do was work out how I was going to fight this disease."

The Tree of Awakening Your Positivity

“My tree is what I use to manage my diagnosis on a daily basis,” he explains. “It’s a holistic person-centred model, which is about rebuilding and finding yourself so you can enjoy a better quality of life.”

In the process of rebuilding his life, Bill quickly learned that giving back to his community was a powerful source of positivity for him.

“When I was first diagnosed, I used to think the community should be doing things for me. One of the biggest things I’ve learnt is what I can do for the community. The concept of

While learning more about his condition, Bill became involved in advocacy work in the dementia community, taking on board positions and working with organisations including HammondCare, Dementia Australia and Dementia Alliance International to speak up for people living with dementia, raise awareness and more recently, co-design care and support programs.

Beyond his dementia advocacy, Bill has worked hard to re-connect with some of his former beloved past-

times and to pursue new challenges. After re-training, he returned to being a volunteer surf lifesaver in 2020 and since 2022, he has competed in masters swimming, fin swimming and pool rescue events. Each new goal has required Bill to develop a structured plan to guide him to success. For instance, to overcome his fear of sharks and complete his first ocean swim in 2023, Bill created his own reablement plan and employed allied health professionals to work with him.



Alison and her daughter Brooke.

Bill's energy and enthusiasm for life are infectious. At times it's easy to forget he's living with dementia when he talks about his busy schedule, future goals and achievements of the past five years. So what motivates Bill to get the most from every day?

The first, passed on to him by a former student, Alison, reminds him to never give up, no matter the challenges. It's a motto he turns to whenever he feels overwhelmed.

“This isn’t about money and becoming famous,” Bill explains. “For me ‘aiming for success’ means waking up in the morning feeling happy with what you’ve already achieved and looking forward to a new day when you can do more of it.”

“I loved being a school teacher and losing that was one the hardest things I’ve faced. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to give kids the opportunity to achieve their goals, but now I’ve been able to replace that with a new purpose.

To read more about Bill visit:
www.awakeningyourpositivity.com



Meet Kim

When DR KIM LOO was 13, her mother sent her to elocution school to refine her fast-paced speech and Western Sydney accent. The training led her to public speaking and debating competitions, where she honed her skills and learnt to clearly articulate her views. Decades later, as a General Practitioner (GP) and passionate climate advocate, Kim still draws on the skills she learnt back then, speaking out on the critical link between health and climate change through involvement in an array of health and environmental organisations. Determined to build a more sustainable world for future generations, the work Kim started in her own home now reaches far beyond her backyard.

Caring for people and planet

Living sustainably

Kim grew up in a Buddhist household in Sydney's western suburbs where sustainability was simply a way of life. Cooking with vegetables from her father's garden, composting food waste, and re-using glass jars were all normal practices in her family.

"We were very aware of food, water and energy, and I learned to value those things really early in life," Kim says. "At the time, I didn't realise this was being sustainable—it was just what we did."

That mindset has guided Kim throughout all aspects of her life. Today her home is a model of sustainable living. She has a beautiful garden she tends daily, full of fruit forests to help keep the house cool and vegetable garden beds to feed her family. Nine plump, happy chickens live in her backyard. Solar panels power energy-efficient appliances and a solar battery captures and stores excess electricity. To complete the switch to running an energy-efficient home, Kim uses induction cooking and drives an electric vehicle. She is also trained in permaculture and regularly spends time in the bush, strengthening her connection with nature.

Medicine and climate activism

Kim is deeply worried about the climate crisis and lack of action by governments at all levels. She also cares greatly for her patients and her local community. As a GP working in Western Sydney for the past 32 years, Kim sees firsthand the health impacts of climate change. Many of her patients, particularly older adults, are vulnerable to extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods and bushfire smoke. This intersection of medicine and climate reality has deepened her resolve to push for change.

Although always environmentally aware and passionate about social justice, the real turning point in Kim's advocacy work came when she electrified her home by switching to renewable energy. With her children needing less of her attention, Kim became determined to use her personal experience to educate others about renewable energy sources, the need to reduce emissions and the detrimental health impacts of the climate crisis.

In 2015, she invited her local mayor and councillors to tour her energy-efficient home. A local journalist covered her story, sharing it widely across the News Limited network before it snowballed into an article in the Daily Telegraph and a segment on Channel Seven. Momentum was building, and Kim felt the urge to do more.



Building a platform

Realising that grassroots action alone wasn't enough, Kim sought formal training. She enrolled in a six-week online course with US-based Citizens' Climate Lobby, learning how to lobby politicians effectively. In 2016, she started engaging with policymakers at all levels of government.

Keen to connect with like-minded colleagues who also wanted to make a difference, Kim joined the board of Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) and became a member of the Climate and Health Alliance. Later, she was invited to serve on the Council (and act as Climate spokesperson) for both the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), peak bodies she continues to be involved in. Kim is currently also Chair of the Hills Doctors Association and Chair of Asian Australians for Climate Solutions, a movement dedicated

to advocating for stronger climate action, sharing knowledge and inspiring sustainable and regenerative practices to protect the planet for future generations.

"I'm really proud of Asian Australians for Climate Solutions. We really got off the ground last year and are doing more and more. I'm also proud of my achievements with Doctors for the Environment Australia. There are so many highlights and little victories along the way," she says, when asked what makes her most proud.

Whether educating her patients, lobbying politicians, contributing to a strategy group, or teaching induction cooking at community events, Kim thrives on collaboration. She enjoys meeting people from all walks of life and professions.

"The really wonderful thing about advocacy is the amazing people I've met," she says. "I'm not just a single person working – I'm working as part of all these organisations."

"Older people are not powerless to improving conditions for their children or grandchildren. If you have time and you're retired, you can be a voice to advocate for things you care about."

While reaching policymakers is a current focus for her advocacy work, Kim is also motivated to ensure her patients have the practical tools and information they need to better deal with the climate impacts they face every day. In the medical practice where she works, she shares her knowledge with the wider team and provides patients with handouts from the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils and Sydney University about heatwaves and cooling down cheaply.

She also encourages her patients and other older people to take action — both for their own wellbeing and for future generations.

"A lot of my older patients now understand heatwaves are a major problem because I've been talking about them for so long. We put heat waves into care plans, and I give out flyers and brochures about how to keep your house cool and safe," she says.

"Gardening is also something I encourage," she says. "If people can touch the soil and see something grow, it increases their understanding of nature and makes them want to protect it."

Leaving a better world

For Kim, the fight against climate change is not about doom and despair—it's about taking action and inspiring others to do the same. She knows the world is getting hotter, but she believes in the power of collective effort to create safer, healthier communities.

"First and foremost, it's really important that we educate policymakers. There's so much to do," she says.

Kim emphasises advocacy and what everyone in the community can do to make a difference: "Older people are not powerless to improving conditions for their children or grandchildren," she insists. "If you have time and you're retired, you can be a voice to advocate for things you care about. Talk to your community leaders and politicians about what they need to do!"





Meet Sonny

After owning and running two successful businesses for 16 years, **SONNY ROSENGREN** thought he was ready for retirement at 60. It was finally time to finetune his golf swing, take holidays with his family and enjoy the finer things in life. However, it wasn't long before Sonny realised how much his work had contributed to his sense of purpose. Wanting to regain that sense of fulfillment, he decided to return to the workforce. Seven years after closing the doors on his businesses, Sonny laced up his work boots, donned a green apron and walked into his first shift as a Supervisor at Bunnings Caringbah in Sydney. A year into the job, Sonny says he couldn't be happier with his decision to start a new career in his third age.

Finding a new career

The mature-aged worker

Sonny now works at his local Bunnings Warehouse five days a week, supervising around 40 team members ranging from university students to co-workers in their 70s. With shifts of up to nine hours, mostly spent assisting customers, Sonny walks an average of 18,000 steps a day.

"It's a full-on job" he laughs. "You certainly go home exhausted but that's one of the upsides."

Six months before joining Bunnings, Sonny says he went through a dark period. Despite a happy home life where he wanted for nothing, no longer providing for his family had left a gaping hole in his life. With unhealthy habits and poor self-esteem, he was struggling to find his place in the world. "I was going down a slippery slope and needed to take stock of my life," he explains. "I had everything but there was no purpose. That was the important thing for me - I realised I wanted to be valued again."

Some soul-searching, along with a few lifestyle changes, led Sonny to apply for a role at Bunnings, one of Australia's leading employers of people aged over 50.

"I always thought Bunnings was a good fit for me, mainly because I'd spent most of my working life there in one form or another," he says. The retailer's highly visible older workforce in-store and in TV advertising was a major influencing factor in his decision.

The value of older workers

Colleen Starick, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Bunnings, says mature-age workers like Sonny make up to 30% of the Bunnings workforce and are highly valued for their experience and expertise. While older workers initially came to Bunnings organically, their presence is now part of a deliberate ongoing strategy recognising the skills they bring to support the customer experience and share with peers.

"Often people come to talk to us when they're 60 or 70 years old. They've been CEOs or electricians. They retire and discover life without work isn't all it's cracked up to be for them. They come to work for us, for a year or perhaps 20 years," she explains. "For Bunnings, having those skills and life experiences adds such value to our customers and team."

Bunnings prides itself on being an inclusive employer, valuing diversity in age, cultural background, sexuality, gender and ability. Sonny agrees this is a stand-out aspect of the organisation - and a reason he's so happy in his role.

"I have a great group of people that I work with, and we have a great team spirit. In my store, there are around 220 team members of all ages, all persuasions, all religions. It's such a mix. It makes you feel young again," he says.



Support from Bunnings

Colleen says Bunnings has policies and opportunities to support all team members, including targeted initiatives for its older workforce. Examples include retirement planning sessions, health and wellbeing initiatives, and a retirement checklist to ensure team members are prepared for their final weeks of work. Flexible working arrangements and leadership opportunities are also available for all, regardless of age.

“We make sure age isn’t a barrier to leadership success. You don’t have to be in your 20s to be on our future leader program, for example. Alternatively, you don’t have to be over 45 to participate in one of our advanced leadership programs, which are targeted at experienced leaders,” Colleen explains.

Left: Colleen Starick, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Bunnings.

Colleen says one of the programs that resonates strongly with their mature-age workforce, although available to all, is the innovative Travelling Team Member policy.

“This policy enables our team members to continue working for Bunnings, while traveling around Australia – picking up shifts at stores on their travel route, when and where they want to,” she says.

For their older workers, this flexibility allows them to balance travel and work, offering both accessible and affordable travel. For Bunnings, it ensures experienced workers can share their expertise in different locations, while retaining their skills and knowledge during an extended period away.

“When I applied at Bunnings. I wanted to have a feeling of self-worth again and that’s what this job brings.”

A more positive outlook

For Sonny, working at Bunnings certainly wasn’t in his retirement plan. However, with 12 months experience now behind him, he’s grateful to have discovered such a rewarding role at 67 years of age.

“When I applied at Bunnings, I wanted to have a feeling of self-worth again and that’s what this job brings,” he reflects.

“It’s certainly made my family happy and they’ve seen a very different person than I was two or three years ago. There are so many benefits that come from connecting with different people and customers,” he says.

“Going back into the workforce has given me a whole new lease on life, a sense of purpose and value, and the ability to make a bit of difference each day, whether that’s to a customer, a co-worker or myself.”

For Sonny, being part of a team, meeting people from all walks of life and solving issues for his team and customers each day has made him feel valued again.

“I love what I’m doing and I’m more content in my daily life. If I can help other people have a better day and in turn, have a better day myself, that’s all that matters.”

30% of the Bunnings workforce are mature-age workers and are highly valued for their experience and expertise.



Meet Jill

Driven by her own experiences of grief and loss, COTA NSW Community Advocate JILL NASH proudly calls herself a “dying well advocate”. She is determined to not only age well but also to prepare herself and her loved ones for the inevitable. More importantly, Jill is deeply committed to helping others navigate and prepare for a well-planned end of life. This passion is something she shares with an unexpected companion – her grand-daughter, Georgia.

“I’ve always felt acutely when I thought things were unfair and I’ve wanted to advocate for people who don’t have a voice.”

A past-time, a passion, a purpose

An eye for advocacy

Jill remembers being just nine years old when she encountered and understood her first experience of inequality. Her wealthy grandfather had passed away leaving an inheritance to herself and her brothers. Despite Jill being the eldest of the three, her grandfather’s will stipulated that decisions about when and how she would receive the inheritance be left to the discretion of her younger brothers. If you know Jill, you’ll understand why she was outraged.

“I think my passion for social justice started then. I was so angry!” she recalls.

“I’ve always felt acutely when I thought things were unfair and I’ve wanted to advocate for people who don’t have a voice.”

Decades later, Jill continues to fight for justice – whether that’s advocating for voluntary assisted dying (she was at the NSW Parliament in May 2022 when the Act was passed), saving a derelict heritage cinema in her former home town of Sawtell, or dedicating her time to her most recent passion: ensuring older people have access to the resources and information they need to age well and die well.

Finding purpose from her passion

Death and dying have been deeply personal topics for Jill ever since her husband died at 46 after a cancer diagnosis three years earlier.

“[My husband] was a gorgeous man, but a hopeless administrator. When he died, it was a nightmare. Although he did have a will, I didn’t even know who his solicitor was. There was nothing written down anywhere. I vowed that I would never leave that burden on my children,” she explains emphatically.

Busy working and raising three teenagers in the decades after her husband’s death, it wasn’t until well into retirement that Jill finally found the time to channel real energy into her passion.

“When I retired, I did lots of things, but then ageing well and dying well became my primary focus – both intellectually and socially. It serves a real purpose and I think that’s why it’s evolved from being a past-time, into a full-fledged passion,” she explains.

“It’s what gets me out of bed these days, along with my family.”

Jill’s focus is on breaking down the stigma around talking about death, encouraging more open conversations about end-of-life planning and developing ways to share resources and information to help others navigate the process.



What started as informal conversations with her own family and friends has grown into a community advocacy role where she shares her knowledge with the wider community.

Jill recalls hearing Robert Fitzgerald AM, the Age Discrimination Commissioner, once say that older people are often sidelined, merely onlookers, when decisions are made that directly affect them. His words sparked a determination in her to change that narrative.

“That’s when I knocked on COTA NSW’s door and said, ‘I want to be in the room.’”

Working with the likes of COTA NSW, her local council and her Federal Member of Parliament – and with support from her grand-daughter Georgia – Jill is devoted to making connections to reach a broader audience.

A shared mission

In this chapter of her life, Jill feels privileged to be collaborating with Georgia, who shares her passion for talking about dying and helping older people with end-of-life planning. Their partnership started back in Sawtell on the Mid North Coast some eight years ago when they worked together to design, plan and deliver an end-of-life planning seminar and handouts for residents at the retirement home where Georgia was working.

Now both living in Sydney, they are dedicated to spreading knowledge, offering resources, and ensuring that older individuals are well-equipped to plan for their final years. Jill is busy looking for opportunities to spread her messages, supported by Georgia who offers her advice, organisation (and tech) skills and ideas. Their collaboration is more than just a shared interest—it’s a purposeful effort to make a lasting impact on their community and bridge the gap between generations.

“I think engagement is the answer. Find something that you’re interested in and keep at it. Stay as connected to others as you possibly can and remember, little things matter.”

Both women bring unique qualities to the partnership and are always learning from each other. For Georgia, the treasured conversations she has with Jill about death, dying, advanced care directives and life in general help her to connect with other older people in her community – something she values deeply. It’s something she knows will be invaluable after she completes her studies in Psychology and embarks on her professional career.

“Anything that my Granny is interested in, I’m interested in these days. We’ve certainly become much closer because the issues that she holds so closely to her heart have been something that we’re able to bond over,” Georgia says.

“Being a young person in my twenties, being able to have conversations and understand the issues that are affecting older people has been really important.

“Connection and conversations are one of the most important things for me. I want to be involved in keeping the flow of conversation open intergenerationally – it doesn’t matter what we’re talking about.”

For Jill, while the practical skills that Georgia offers have been extremely helpful, forming this special bond has also brought her immense joy and pride.

“I get such a huge buzz out of Georgia and her sister Gabi coming over. I listen to them talking and they divulge things that I’m absolutely privileged to hear. It gives me an insight that’s a true, genuine lived experience into some of the things that make them happy, make them sad, make them worried. It means I’m engaged in their lives,” she says.

The key to ageing well

When asked for her advice on ageing well, Jill pauses for a moment.

“I think engagement is the answer,” she says. “Find something that you’re interested in and keep at it. Stay as connected to others as you possibly can and remember, little things matter.”

For Jill, imparting her knowledge of advanced care planning through starting meaningful conversations with people, whether through advocacy or with her family, is her foundation to ageing well.

Georgia offers a complementary perspective: “There’s a saying that’s become special in our family: T-W-O...Things Work Out. As long as you feed good energy back into the world, into your community and your people, things do tend to work out one way or another.”



Meet Uncles Widdy and Bobby

UNCLE JAMES MICHAEL “WIDDY” WELSH is a hugger. Whether you’re his family—or His Royal Highness King Charles himself—he’ll greet you with a beaming smile and a warm embrace. UNCLE ROBERT “BOBBY” YOUNG, on the other hand, is more reserved. He extends his hand in greeting, with a soft but welcoming smile. These Aboriginal Elders are survivors of Kinchela Boys Home, one of the most notorious institutions where young Aboriginal boys, stolen from their families under government policies, were forcibly placed. For much of their adult lives, Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby carried the weight of this trauma in silence. Today, as Board members of the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation (KBHAC), they are unlocking their past to heal themselves and build a stronger future for the next generation of Aboriginal Australians.

The healing power of truth-telling

Surviving Kinchela Boys Home

Uncle Widdy was eight years old when he was taken from his mother and sent to Kinchela Boys Home on the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales. Uncle Bobby was even younger—just five. There they were stripped of their language, culture and identities. Their names were replaced with numbers (Uncle Widdy was #36 and Uncle Bobby was #24), and their childhood was lost forever.

At Kinchela, the boys were put to work on the dairy and farm. They received little education and no connection to their Aboriginal culture and heritage. Some were told they were white and many believed their parents had died. They experienced cruelty and abuse and were punished with beatings, or worse, chained to a fig tree overnight.

When Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby were released at 16, they were broken and left to fend for themselves. Uncle Widdy struggled with alcohol and spent time in gaol. At 19, when his young son was taken away, he considered taking his own life. Somehow, he survived.

Decades later, the pain Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby experienced continues to weigh heavily. The deep trauma and anger they have carried throughout their lives has impacted their relationships, communities, families, children and grandchildren.

With the help of the KBHAC they have come to understand the power of truth-telling and knowledge sharing – not just for their own healing, but to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma that has endured since the Stolen Generation policies.

Finding strength in brotherhood

Like many other survivors, after leaving Kinchela Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby lived in survival mode, avoiding the past and burying their trauma. For 30 years Uncle Widdy worked as a welder, hiding behind his welding helmet to shut out the world. Uncle Bobby became a truck driver, finding solace in the long hours behind the wheel. Eventually, they realised they needed to face their past.

The KBHAC was formed in 2002 by a group of survivors who decided to reclaim their history, support one another, and ensure their stories would not be forgotten. Today, the organisation provides services and support for Kinchela survivors, their families and descendants. This includes cultural, educational and recreational programs, as well as truth-telling and family support and healing programs.

Uncle Bobby was one of the survivors to attend the Corporation’s first meeting in Picton.



“It was an emotional scene, seeing the boys again,” he recalls. Although they had grown into men, they shared a special bond.

Not wanting to bring up his past, Uncle Widdy initially resisted reconnecting with other Kinchela survivors. “I didn’t want to be any part of it or go near [the Kinchela site],” he admits. The idea of connecting with survivors and facing the past was too overwhelming. It wasn’t long, however, before he realised the importance of sharing his story.

“We’re one big family,” he says of the Kinchela survivors and their descendants. “That’s what we boys are. We all look after each other. Even though we might have a different problem, we are all still there for each other.”

Healing through action

Through KBHAC, Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby have not only found healing, but a way to make a positive difference for future generations.

“KBHAC has changed my life,” says Uncle Bobby. “They’ve taught me all these things I didn’t know how to do, like reading and writing. And to meet the rest of the brothers...there were 600, but now there are only 48 of us [survivors]...has been incredible.”

“We’re one big family... That’s what we boys are. We all look after each other. Even though we might have a different problem, we are all still there for each other.”

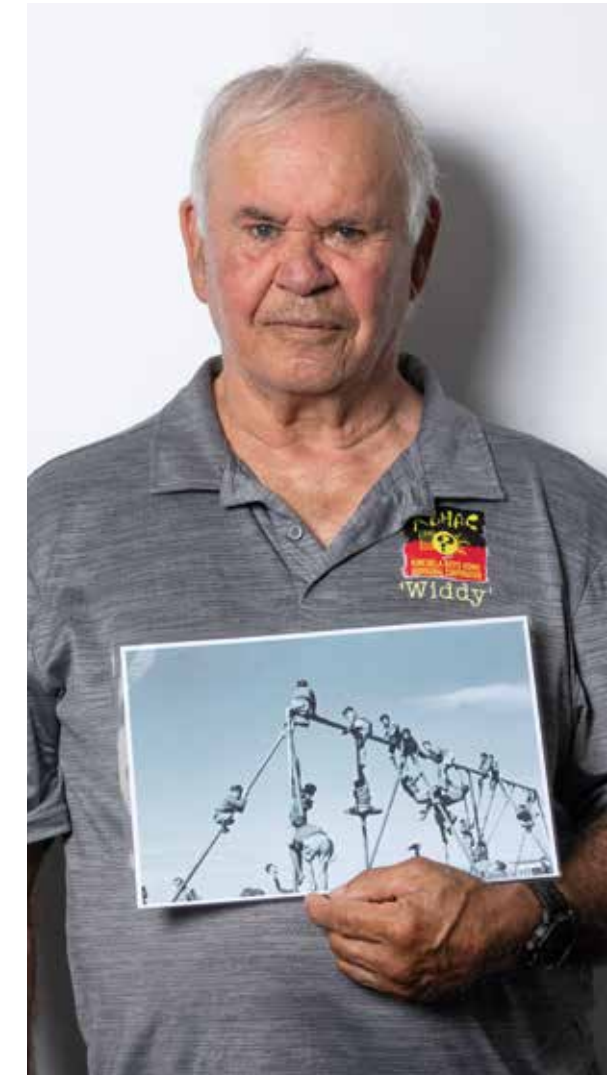
Uncle Bobby, now Treasurer of the Corporation, is at the KBHAC’s offices in Waterloo most days, participating in support groups or helping with some other activity, whether that’s working on a documentary with SBS or preparing for the Elder Olympics. On other days, he’s visiting schools, universities and communities, sharing the history of Kinchela and the Stolen Generations. This involvement has given new purpose to his life.

“I enjoy it. We go out, do our sessions and tell the truth,” he says.

As KBHAC Chair, Uncle Widdy is equally busy. He is particularly passionate about protecting Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

“We want our pain to stop with us, so it doesn’t keep hurting our children and grandchildren,” he says “That’s why we do truth-telling and share our stories.”

Together with KBHAC staff, they are also working to reclaim the Kinchela site and transform it into a living museum and healing centre.



“We walk beside each other, not in front or behind. If we’re going to get knocked over, we all get knocked over together.”



Building a positive future

Through KBHAC, the uncles have reconnected with their identities, culture and communities. They now speak about their Country and their totems – fragments of their Aboriginal cultural that were taken away from them at Kinchela. Through the safe spaces created at KBHAC, they both also talk openly about their past – sharing their truth with their families, other survivors and the wider community.

“When we [survivors] come together, you see the oldest children playing you’ll ever see in your life,” Uncle Widdy laughs. “All this is a process that will help our descendants, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren.”



Despite all the hardship, they remain hopeful about the future. “I call us a modern revolution,” says Uncle Widdy. “We’re not about killing or hurting anybody. But we do want the right for everybody to understand we’re all allowed to be treated equal.”

And although the pain will always be there, it no longer defines them.

“There are lots of beautiful stories, but there’s pain all the way through it. We understand the pain. It’s not going to go away. But when we walk together, we don’t leave anybody behind. We walk beside each other, not in front or behind. If we’re going to get knocked over, we all get knocked over together,” Uncle Widdy says.

For Uncle Widdy and Uncle Bobby, life is not just about surviving anymore. It’s about using their past—no matter how painful—to ensure the next generation of Aboriginal Australians grows up in a world where they are seen, heard and valued.





COUNCIL on
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