

Seeing Our Children

A Story from our Ambassador Kylie Kwong

One of the greatest privileges of my life-to-date has been to connect and spend time with local community leader and respected spokesperson for Aboriginal Australians, Uncle Shane Phillips. Uncle Shane has cultural connections belonging to the Bunjalung, Wonnarua and Eora peoples and his innate humility and grace, remind me very much of my Mother's way of being. One of the main reasons I am drawn to South Eveleigh is about having the opportunity to learn of the rich history, culture and tradition of Aboriginal Australia, directly from the Aboriginal community itself; particularly in this historically significant neighbourhood of Redfern, which has been the site of key protests, community gatherings and significant social change since the 1960's. I also feel very inspired about being a part of this Eveleigh community because it is one in which care and collaboration radiate from its centre. Over a bowl of my Uncle Jimmy's stir-fried Hokkien noodles, Uncle Shane very generously shared captivating stories about his upbringing in this area, his rich family life and his continuing passion to empower Aboriginal people.

Remembering his childhood days spent living with his large family between The Block and Alexandria, Uncle Shane affectionately recalls; "We knew lots of mob who worked at the railways, lots of my uncles worked in South Eveleigh in the shunting yards. As a kid I remember playing on the outskirts of the big fence which ran from where the Entry Garden in Garden Street is now, all the way down to the corner, where the pub is, and along Henderson Road, where the oval is now. As kids, maybe 10-11 years old, we would sneak over the fence and climb into the trains. We knew people who were working over there so somehow we felt like we had a kind of connection to it."

Uncle Shane's older siblings left home and at the age of 12 he suddenly became the eldest kid in the house. "I felt responsible for my little brothers and sisters during that time and just after that, my parents changed their life. Mum and Dad were children of The Stolen Generations and up until I was 13 years old, they were really struggling. We'd come home from school and there were always all these strangers in our house. Sometimes this was ok with we kids, yet sometimes we just didn't want this. I always remember the adults during that time. You always remember the ones who 'saw you'; they impacted me. I wanted to be one of those adults. At Tribal Warrior I want to make sure we 'see' these children, I want to make sure that they have safety, that they are looked after. We invest in these children, that's our responsibility." Uncle Shane was referring to the 'Elders', as the adults who 'saw him'.

"The Elders were people who had influence, people who were doing alright. My parents did have it also, but at that time they were caught up in this whole cycle, because they themselves had come from trauma.

They kept feeding that trauma, but we all knew we had to stop it somewhere ... they ended up getting their life together, through finding God and that completely changed everything for us!"

As Uncle Shane proudly showed me around his workplace, he continued with his extraordinary family story of incredible courage and true transformation. I hung onto his every word, covered in goose bumps; "Mum and Dad were completely honest about where we were as a family. They ended up breaking this destructive cycle and became pillars of this community. I cannot describe how much our life changed when my parents changed. From that moment on, there was no one inside our house except our family. Mum and Dad became 'in-the-moment' lots of times, so that was really cool. Mum then started running a soup kitchen here for people who couldn't afford food. But whoever did work, would pay for their food, which then helped subsidise those who were struggling."



Precinct Story

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SOUTH EVELEIGH

The soup kitchen was in the area which is literally now Uncle Shane's office, within the Tribal Warrior space. In fact this very building (which is like a hub, is also home to: Koori Radio, the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce and Aboriginal Employment Strategy) used to be 'The Black Theatre' where a lot of Indigenous performing artists started their craft. Uncle Shane's parents were deeply engaged in the community and were directly involved in this theatre. Close family friend and local Elder Aunty Ali Golding remembers Uncle Shane's parents with great affection, she tells me, as well as The Black Theatre and the nearby Youth Club. "Aunty Ali was involved straight away with Mum's soup kitchen and she also used to run the local Sunday School. This is how I know Aunty Ali. I started playing football with her boys when I was about 10, the Redfern All Blacks, we grew up together." Uncle Shane's Mum would cook nurturing chicken soup, depending on how much money they had at the time; "sometimes there would be just enough for beef mince or whatever the cheapest meat was at the time. Lots of people who were struggling on the streets would end up coming in here to eat. Sometimes we even had baked dinners. Mum wasn't interested in making money out of the soup kitchen, so long as she could keep the food happening ... she was really good at doing that."

Like other local Elder Aunty Beryl Van Oploo, Uncle Shane has extremely fond memories of 'Snowy's Hamburger Shop', a diner-style place with about ten bench seats.



Uncle Shane Phillips w Tribal Warrior staff and students of the CSWP program

"I remember as a kid they let you go in and help cook, they were really friendly, lovely people, they had a connection with us. Snowy had this 'red-hair', I'll never forget it! Snowy was a really cool person. He grew up in a place where they gave, you could tell.

His parents taught him to give and serve and look after people. That family had it mate! They had it in spades. Everyone felt safe there, people would give their business there because they knew they were welcome." I was particularly moved by this story because for Uncle Shane to recognise this 'giving' quality in Snowy, he must have also, embodied this same quality. After hearing Uncle Shane's parents' inspirational life journey filled with such deep values, one truly understood in that moment why Uncle Shane has turned out to be the person he is today. He also grew up in a place where giving and serving others was paramount. Another favourite haunt, Uncle Shane recalls, was 'Palms Milk Bar', an American-style diner with a juke box, down on Botany Road, "They had the machine on the wall so after school you would go. They had this pineapple crush which everyone went for. Palms was owned by white people, an old man who was a really nice bloke, everyone was welcome there, that's why we used to go there."

Uncle Shane is the CEO of Tribal Warrior Aboriginal Corporation which is a not-for-profit community organisation based in Redfern. My visionary colleague, Will Walker, Mirvac's Development and Precinct Director, has instilled this culture of care and collaboration within South Eveleigh right from the start, and has often shared stories with me about Uncle Shane; "When Mirvac acquired South Eveleigh in December 2015, we wanted to build genuine connections and relationships with the key communities groups. We wanted to listen and learn from them. We felt they had a huge contribution to make to South Eveleigh and we hoped that they would feel as equally at home as the workers who would come here each day. In addition, we acknowledge the significance of Eveleigh as a place of great change, resilience and resistance and as such we believed it important to reach out to the Aboriginal community which had such deep connections with the area. One of the first groups we met was Tribal Warrior. As we got to know Shane, we saw a man doing monumental things for his people. A real leader. He educated on the history of the area. The Eveleigh Railway Workshops provided employment for many Aboriginal people and was one of the first to offer them equality of conditions with other workers. Aboriginal workers who moved in from the country often had family connections in the area which is one of the key reasons why Redfern became the centre of modern urban Aboriginal Australia. Shane was so welcoming. He was an inspiration to Mirvac.

He was part of making us aware that it is our purpose which guides us in what we do and how we do it. Without purpose we will fail. Mirvac is extremely grateful to call Tribal Warrior and Shane a friend and we are extremely excited about continuing our partnership in the years to come."

Shane tells me that Tribal Warrior was initiated and is directed by Aboriginal people with Aboriginal Elders. Tribal Warrior was established by concerned Aboriginal people with a view to spread and vitalise Aboriginal culture, and to provide economic and social stability. The Corporation provides quality training for employment skills, and extends everyday practical assistance by distributing food and groceries to struggling families. The Tribal Warrior mentoring program is a grass roots community, holistic exercise, assistance and referral program designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth of all ages. The concept is simple in design. It's all about forming good habits, guiding by example, acknowledging achievements and including everyone.

Uncle Shane speaks passionately on how powerful and successful the 'Clean Slate Without Prejudice' program (launched back in 2009), run in partnership with the Redfern Local Area Police Command has been, in giving young Aboriginal men routine and discipline. "How it works is, everyone gets into the habit of getting up early in the morning, to train together as a group, which has several positive effects; all participants are ready to go to work and/or study early, all participants fall into the positive habit of going to bed early and are not out on the street late at night and everyone shares a breakfast afterwards which allows them to sit down and discuss issues which may affect them.

Mentors are then able to guide their mentees in the right direction. Everyone in the mentoring program is encouraged to volunteer their time at Family and Cultural Day and with helping people move. The program is designed to help recidivism rates in jail, meaning we want our youth to stay out of jail through commitment to the program and learning discipline during physical training – the program has been so successful with a decrease of 70% in crime in the area! Kylie I say to the young guys, it's about getting your trauma out, parking it, and looking at strengths and finding other ways of connecting so you can unpack stuff. When Tribal Warrior first started, all we did was train with the police and whilst this was happening the young guys started to get a sense of self-worth, a sense of belonging, then they started seeing the big picture about our people. They were connected genetically to thousands of years of strength. As that happened the light came on, they became young leaders and they started to drive things." Aunty Ali remembers the specific time this great positive change began within the community, recalling Uncle Shane's exceptional communication skills and collaborative relationship with the local police; "Kylie, Shane was the only one who was able to connect the Aboriginal community with the white police, peacefully."

Uncle Shane continued, "When we all started to talk honestly it unhooked the shackles ... all the families came back to this area. We realised who we really were as people, but we also knew we had to be responsible for the change. It's just happening as we speak. We are driving it. It's not something that's going to unpack itself, we have to be a part of it. I never realised until Mum went how much I modelled myself around some of the stuff she did.

She was much more organised than I am ... she was a big dreamer ... sometimes I think to myself, it's crazy,

I've ended up being like her! My parents wanted to make sure everyone was important, that everyone had a role, that everyone got to be valued." At several stages during his childhood, Uncle Shane's family were really poor and he recalls having to line up in queues in Bathurst Street for food orders; "the way people sometimes treated me ... I thought to myself, when I get older if I ever get into a position I'm going to make sure I never treat people the way I've been treated."

When Uncle Shane's parents transformed their lives and therefore their children's lives, their whole life's goal from then on was to help people break that cycle. "They were very honest with people Kylie. Because they were trusted, people used to call them at all hours for all sorts of things. I learnt my parents' style, human beings are meant to treat each other with Care and Love, that's all it is...

And sometimes to do this, you have to be honest with people, you have to give them a kick up the backside sometimes. If we are going to be responsible for it, we need to do the whole package and that's what I learnt from Mum and Dad. That's what we want these young ones to do. If they are going to impact and empower people you have to do it the old-school way. Welfare and social work take the responsibility away from the family, you become a victim. That mentality has shackled us. So we are taking it back. This is one way of doing it. Mum and Dad always used to tell me about looking at the strengths of people. Everyone's always judging everyone, seeing what's wrong with people, never what's right. The only way people can get empowerment and change is by having Hope. So we focus on their strengths, then they keep seeing their strengths, then they build their own resilience and their own hope. Hope can change things amazingly. Lots of people have a perception that once you have trauma, you are shackled in there, but that is not the case. People can be seen, they can get out, they can break free of that. You don't have to be defined by it, that's all it is. If you are not defined by it and if you know you have a responsibility and a cause, you can change anything."

One of the qualities I observe and admire the most in Aboriginal culture is the deep respect given to the Elders. I told Uncle Shane how I had recently spent time with Aunty Ali (who used to live on The Block for many years and has recently moved) to which Uncle Shane immediately said, "Tell Aunty Ali we need her to come back to The Block. I'm going back there, and we want her to be there. We need her standard. We need people like Aunty Ali there, Elders who have knowledge, who are humble, who are drivers. That's what we need to teach our children. So the more examples of strength, of that sort of skill-set; knowledge and humility – this is all going to be good for the children, that's all there is to it. This next generation can learn if it is all in one area, we have to make it a strong community."