

True Nourishment by Kylie Kwong

A PROJECT FOR THE 22ND
BIENNALE OF SYDNEY: **NIRIN**
MARCH–OCTOBER 2020



DURING the first couple of months of COVID-19, my dear friend Kylie Kwong cooked for me. Every Saturday evening, at 5:25, or 5:55, or 6:05 pm – yes, besides her wondrous gifts as a person and a chef, she operates with military-like precision – this amazing being brought delicious and nourishing joy to my doorstep. I wanted to give something back.

So one night in July, over our first cautious dinner out together, Kylie, Kylie's wife Nell and I hatched the plan to create this record of Kylie's project *True Nourishment*, created for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, titled *NIRIN*. Kylie thoughtfully developed and planned *True Nourishment* within an inch of its life – I've seen the run sheet – to benefit equally two of her abiding passions: Wayside Chapel, the iconic Sydney charity located in the heart of Kings Cross and at Bondi Beach, and the South Eveleigh community, the new precinct located in Sydney's inner city. I don't want to speak for Kylie and no one needs to, her voice being so singular, but this is a person who is clear on what life is all about and who gets going. She pursues those things that mean something and, since closing her unfailingly superb restaurant Billy Kwong, she has done just that.

It was a fascinating process to figure out what form would best capture the passion and energy of someone who is such a 'people person', and so vivid in everything she does. How could that spirit be captured in text and a few portrait photos? Conversation seemed a natural fit for a project that had, at its heart, a profound connection with people and community. We proposed a series of conversations between Kylie and three very special people of her own choosing – Auntie Ali Golding, Jon Owen and Helen Silvia. I would do my best to direct them as a kind of gentle-touch interviewer. Christine Bootes agreed to apply her remarkable intelligence and sensitivity to record the conversations so I could focus on being the questioner, and Kylie could focus on being herself.

I think anyone would be hard-pressed to converse with four more extraordinary individuals who keep their focus on the here and now while changing the world – without ever thinking in those terms or crediting themselves with changing the world. How often do you experience a conversation that brings you to tears? And these are all people who have embraced Sydney – who live here, and who perform their good works here. How lucky we all are.

Once this was decided, we were left with the question of how to best communicate those moments. We decided to do this by capturing the essence and the context of our conversations with Jon Owen and Helen Silvia, and retaining a transcribed 'interview' approach with Auntie Ali Golding, with whom the conversation ranged more widely and whose voice we thought was best 'heard' verbatim.

We hope you, as readers, get as much out of our talks as we did. Thank you from me, Kylie, for the privilege of being involved.

Nourishing

Kylie Kwong



SOON after the COVID-19 lockdown occurred in New South Wales in March this year, I was at home trying to think of ways I could support the community while observing the restrictions. I was finding my way to adapt a project I had been planning for months as my contribution to the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, titled *NIRIN*, for Wayside Chapel and for South Eveleigh. I act as Ambassador for Food, Culture and Community for South Eveleigh and as Ambassador for Wayside Chapel.

True Nourishment was to be an enriching 'behind-the-scenes' experience at Wayside Chapel on a Sunday – a day of rest and reflection. I'd been planning a transformative experience for people to participate in. It would start with a harvesting session in the Wayside Chapel rooftop garden, followed by cooking what we'd harvested together. Next our guests and I would attend the Sunday service led by Wayside Chapel pastor and CEO Jon Owen, and Reverend Graham Long, which Jon and Graham had invited me to co-curate. Community, storytelling and shared gratitude would combine with sustainable food and native ingredients as the binding forces of this encounter.

I was also very excited about the third of three planned events for the project – a free, casual, curated community gathering of food, music, storytelling and poetry at Eveleigh Green in South Eveleigh on Saturday 30 May 2020. South Eveleigh means a lot to me, and it's where I met Auntie Ali Golding, Helen Silvia and many other inspiring individuals. Around 350 people were expected to attend 'A Place of Gathering', which we named to reflect Eveleigh's role as a gathering place for Aboriginal people before European colonisation – a place where much feasting, ceremony and conversation took place. Many people and organisations would be involved: Auntie Ali Golding (Biripi); Auntie Beryl Van-Oploo (Gamilaraay); Bundjalung educator, performer and horticulturalist Clarence Slockee; OzHarvest; Sara Mansour of Bankstown Poetry Slam; rapper DOBBY, a Murrawarri Republic and Filipino man; and the a cappella gospel choir Café of the Gate of Salvation. Food

journalist Joanna Savill would host, and I would cook and oversee.

Then COVID-19 changed everything. Our plans were halted. In those early weeks of lockdown I made calls to check in with colleagues around my local area in Kings Cross and Potts Point, and within the South Eveleigh community. Several of the people I spoke with are leaders in essential community and health organisations, and hearing about their experiences was both humbling and motivating. After twenty years of running my own business, I have a general understanding of what it is like to be the one 'leading' all the time, the one being the 'boss'; at Billy Kwong I had more than forty staff – more than forty livelihoods that I was responsible for. But speaking with these leaders, I could not even begin to imagine what they had to carry as they dealt with intense and volatile situations every day, looking after those who are most vulnerable in our society. And I could feel their innate sense of care and compassion. It was palpable.

It suddenly struck me: who was looking after *them*? How did they maintain their own mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health while dealing with everyone else's anxieties?

So, starting on Saturday 28 March, every week for almost two months I delighted in cooking simple, fresh meals for seven of these extraordinary leaders: Siobhan Bryson (CEO) and Mardi Diles (Programs & Partnerships) at Weave Youth & Community Services, Waterloo; Helen Silvia, CEO of Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC), Redfern; Ronni Kahn, CEO of OzHarvest, Alexandria; Rob Caslick, CEO of Two Good Co, Eveleigh; and Aunty Ali Golding and Jon Owen, who agreed to speak with us in the making of this document.

My cooking is always simple in method and technique, yet executed with the highest quality ingredients, and I wanted to offer the very best for these selfless, extraordinary people who take such good care of our community.

Every Friday my uncle Jimmy, who runs his family's noodle factory, dropped off freshly made Hokkien noodles to my door. I sourced fresh organic produce from my local greengrocer and bought catering packs of organic tamari and organic brown rice vinegar. My small apartment kitchen resembled a makeshift restaurant kitchen each Saturday as I prepared the Hokkien noodles, picking coriander, dill and mint, and preparing my tamari, ginger, coriander and spring onion vinaigrette. For variety, I added in dishes by local chef O Tama Carey, of Lankan Filling Station in East Sydney.

Around 2:30 pm I'd pack up seven individual bags of this food, then would spend the next couple of hours in my car, leaving the food at designated drop-off points at their homes – no physical contact. Many times I was very touched to find heartfelt, handwritten cards and beautiful gifts left on the doorsteps. Helen Silvia has a passion for gardening and now, on my kitchen windowsill, are four exquisite plants she grew from scratch and repotted. Ronni Kahn left me a cookbook

4 5 and a container of delectable, locally made labne (Greek yoghurt). Siobhan Bryson's homegrown limes have got to be the most delicious, juicy limes I've ever tasted. I use them regularly in my cooking and always think of Siobhan and all of the good work she does. On one delivery run, it was an absolute privilege to listen to Aunty Ali Golding as she proudly told me – over her front gate, with 1.5 metres between us! – about her father, who had fought at Gallipoli. Meeting Mardi Diles's beautiful Greek mum was another highlight. Roula would always be waiting on the verandah to offer me the sweetest homegrown cherry tomatoes, bird's-eye chillies, mint and rosemary, then would put her hand on her heart and say 'Thank you, *me agapi*' – 'with love'. Such simple, kind and generous thoughts and gestures brought feelings of deep connection at this time of physical distance.

We must not forget that leaders are human too and, like all of us, need time and space to let their guard down, to be vulnerable, to have a good cry. They also need comfort, nurturing and care. Giving energy to these leaders in the best way I know how – by cooking and offering food – was a small yet hopefully meaningful way to support them and, indirectly, support the thousands of people they selflessly assist each and every week.

As we gradually make it to the other side of the pandemic, we must not look at bouncing back. Instead, we could bounce forward. We need to make caring our central mission. I feel so grateful to be a part of such a collaborative and compassionate community of people.

Jon Owen
CEO and pastor,
Wayside Chapel



WHEN Kylie and Jon Owen first met at a Billy Kwong fundraising event for Sydney's iconic Wayside Chapel in February 2018, their connection was instant. 'Jon, I haven't told you this before, but I feel like you're my brother,' Kylie laughs. 'We just have this natural rapport.'

Jon grins widely in agreement. 'There's that moment when you meet someone for the first time, when you're not sure if you will fully get along,' he says. 'But with Kylie, we were able to drop that and connect immediately.'

Indeed, fostering community and connection have been core values of Jon's since childhood. Born

in Malaysia to parents of Sri Lankan and Indian origin, Jon was raised in Rosanna and Heidelberg in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. In this new environment, the family dinner table was transformed into an important locus of intercultural and intergenerational connection. Both his grandmother and mother taught him about South East Asian culture through cooking – ‘our community was in the spices’ – and relationships were cultivated through the sharing of meals. Food became an especially powerful cross-cultural connector when, during Jon’s youth, the family took in eleven asylum seekers, and guests would prepare traditional foods from their cultural background as gestures of appreciation. ‘Welcoming people into our home was a powerful thing to experience and share,’ Jon explains. ‘There was never a dull moment at the dinner table. We found people who society had pushed to the edges, and we found joy in the most unexpected of places.’

Acts of kindness and generosity also heavily inform Jon’s professional life. As the pastor and CEO of Wayside Chapel, he works alongside Sydneysiders contending with issues ranging from housing insecurity to addiction and mental illness. Jon’s profound sense of compassion for others is palpable when he speaks of his work with Wayside, and he stresses the importance of moving away from the false divisions of ‘sinners’ and ‘saints’ that are typically advanced in religious teaching. For Jon, sympathy is a dangerous sentiment because it constructs an implicit hierarchy. ‘You can’t walk alongside people when you’re sympathetic. Empathy, though, comes through vulnerability and an acknowledgement of our shared frailty. That enables us to say: this week I’ll find bread for you, and next week you will for me.’

As the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing fissures in a system already struggling to accommodate those living at the margins, Jon’s role at the helm of Wayside has become even more important. The pandemic, he hopes, will give us an opportunity to reconsider our collective identity, to rethink the systems that have not been serving all members of our community. ‘Truth comes from the edges, never the centre,’ he says. ‘How we lived before the coronavirus wasn’t working.’ As we move forward through the crisis, Jon maintains optimism that real change can occur if we start to collectively listen to, and centre, the voices of those most marginalised. ‘This is going to be a crisis of sustainability for our mental health. We need to reconstruct our identities around connection, as members of families and communities. I have ambitious hopes that we can remake the world through this.’

Not long after first meeting Kylie, Jon flew his parents up from Melbourne to cook for her. Several years later she can still recall the dishes, curries and spices that Jon’s parents served at the table that evening. ‘Jon’s mum and dad prepared Malaysian acar [pickled vegetables], beef rendang, and dhal with zucchini for us – I could taste their warm-heartedness. And there were so many synergies for me with my own Asian upbringing,’ she remembers.

Similarly, Jon rhapsodises about the meals that Kylie gave to him and his family during *True Nourishment*. ‘That gift, that food, was such a generous offering of connection and community. That is the constitutive mark of our identity as Asian people: the shared meal, the shared banquet. These ways of connecting are such core parts of my identity.’

As for Kylie, she admits that she cannot imagine her life without Jon or the Wayside Chapel. ‘It’s a very healing space. Jon and Wayside offer me, and the community, true nourishment. And that nourishment goes far deeper than the food I serve on a plate.’



Helen Silvia
CEO, Women’s and
Girls’ Emergency
Centre (WAGEC)

PEOPLE and community have always been important to Helen Silvia, and orienting her career towards social work was a natural fit in terms of aligning her values with her work. For Helen, everyone has an interesting story to be shared. ‘When I was studying, I started working with rough sleepers in Woolloomooloo – it was then that I felt like I found my people,’ she remembers. She quickly became drawn to analyses of society from a structural perspective. ‘I’ve always been interested in understanding the kinds of systems that we’re operating in,’ Helen explains. ‘These systems enable some to do very well and others to not.’

As the CEO of the Women’s and Girls’ Emergency Centre (WAGEC), Helen’s innate approachability and warmth enable her to genuinely connect to the WAGEC community. It was these traits that stood out to Kylie when they first met. ‘The day I met you at WAGEC, Helen, one of your clients walked in – a woman who was experiencing homelessness,’ Kylie recalls. ‘I observed the way you listened to and interacted with her, and I was so touched by your incredible compassion. True authenticity.’ For Kylie, the opportunity to cook for Helen on Saturday nights during the COVID-19 crisis was a way to engage with ‘an incredible member of our community who goes out and helps others, who nurtures others. Through the Biennale, I’ve been able to explore the idea of nourishment well beyond the plate.’

Helen admits that her COVID-19 highlight was Kylie’s Saturday dinners. ‘I once looked through the window and saw you running down the stairs,’ she

laughs. 'And I wanted to give you something back because I like the sense of reciprocity. I garden; I take plants or cuttings and propagate them until they've developed roots, and then pop them into little pots I make out of things I find around or collect on the street. I call them "hard rubbish" and I gave you some.' Helen's ability to turn these dinners into an act of mutual exchange also underpins an essential value for her in stewarding an organisation like WAGEC: 'Having an alignment in values between all people involved is so important. If there is an incongruence in values, then you're going to be making compromises – and you can't compromise on fundamental values. We look for people and organisations that are relational, not transactional. In fact, we seek that out: everything needs to be relational.'

Helen points to a particular moment in Australian history when transactional models of behaviour collided irreparably with relational values. In the story of Barangaroo and the Eora fisherwomen of Sydney, she notes, women traditionally fished and provided for their communities. 'Colonisers then came in with a patriarchal, transactional mode of thinking – it was an invasion – and undertook a massive haul of fish using manufactured nets and boats. They caught 4000 fish in one day, far more than what was actually needed to feed people. They presented forty of those fish to the male Aboriginal Elders. In that one action, in catching more fish than were needed and in giving 10 per cent of that haul to the men, they annihilated the women's contribution. In that one instant, everything was changed.' This story has been on her mind frequently during the pandemic, and she hopes that the crisis might present a chance to re-evaluate the profit-driven systems of value that have oppressed many communities for centuries. 'It's an immense opportunity to take stock and look at how to do things differently,' she says.

Despite the uncertainty and chaos that the coronavirus has unleashed on many communities, Helen maintains that holding onto hope, compassion and community are more important than ever. 'COVID-19 has brought about some really beautiful moments of community. We've had exacerbated mental health issues, of course, but at the same time there has been an urgency of people reaching out to help one another.' The expression of care through food has played an essential role in nourishing community. She relates the story of a mother facing domestic violence, which increased during the pandemic; a WAGEC case manager worked intensively with her. As an offering of appreciation, the woman cooked lunch from her cultural background for the case manager and the other mothers in the WAGEC community. In this instance, the act of sharing a meal became what Helen refers to as 'a beautiful equaliser, nourishment for the soul. That was a moment of hope.'

Kylie agrees. For her, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of interconnectedness: one person, one country, on the other side of the world or locally, can affect us all. 'My actions will affect your

8 9 actions,' she says. 'We are not separate, we are in this together – so let's make it work, let's look after each other. Whether you want to be a part of this or not, we are all interconnected.'



Aunty Ali Golding
Elder, Biripi Nation

AUNTY Ali Golding, a Biripi woman, grew up on an Aboriginal mission at Purfleet outside Taree. In her conversation with Kylie, below, she describes her years on Eveleigh Street in Redfern – The Block – where she lived with her family for twenty-seven years. In the 1980s she gained her Diploma in Theology from Nungalinga College in Darwin. In 2010 Aunty Ali was awarded the NAIDOC Award for Female Elder of the Year, followed in 2011 with her appointment as the inaugural Elder in Residence at the University of New South Wales, Randwick.

Kylie: Aunty Ali, I only started hanging around Eveleigh/Redfern about ten years ago, because I had my Billy Kwong market stall at Carriageworks. When I started at Carriageworks, that's when I met Aunty Beryl Van-Oploo [Gamilaraay Elder, chef and teacher]. Aunty Beryl was the first Aboriginal person I'd ever met ... Fast forward, ten years later I'm at South Eveleigh. I feel so privileged and honoured to meet people like you, Aunty Ali, and Aunty Beryl, and hear all these wonderful stories. I love the suburb and neighbourhood of Eveleigh; I love the grassroots communities around there. And I love the multiculturalism there as well. It's a really interesting place.

Aunty Ali: We moved [into The Block, on Eveleigh Street], in the late '70s ... I got married to an Englishman – married for fifty-four years, seven children. I thought we were paying too much rent with one income coming in. Too much pressure. Then I started going to the church on The Block and there was a man there – I told him about how hard it was raising children in the city on one income. He just happened to be the manager of the Aboriginal housing on The Block, Mickey [Michael] Mundine, and after the service we talked and he said, 'Look, you've got seven children. I can give you an empty house on The Block, a two-bedroom home.'

I said, 'Look, a two-bedroom home for a low rent – I want that. I'll take it. We'll squeeze and manage and

battle it out.' So, we've done that. But then I wanted to talk to my husband, as an Englishman who had never had much time with Aboriginal people. So, I said to him, 'I have an offer to move into a two-bedroom home which was very cheap – \$125 a week.' Husband said, 'How did you get that?' I said, 'It's on The Block.' Husband said, 'Where all the Aboriginals are?'

I said, 'I was offered this by the manager himself.' Husband said, 'No, they'll shoot me.'

So, I prayed about it because I believe in prayers. We spoke about it again. My daughter said, 'I got the key – Mickey gave me the key. So we'll go see it after dinner.'

All the girls were tormenting their father and he gave into them. This was a beautiful, clean, freshly painted house. Maintenance man did everything in that house. It was beautiful when we walked in that night. We smelled the cleansers. My husband said, 'Not bad, not bad.' So we moved in ...

My son got involved in sports. We got used to the people, helped the people. What I loved about The Block was that we still had our cultural ways. Kids would come around with an empty mug and ask for a little bit of sugar, or little ones would say, 'My mummy said, you have a needle and tottin [cotton]?' That is our cultural way – people coming to ask. We've got a bit of bread and butter, a bit of soup and stew. The Block took me back to my culture, our ways of giving and sharing and caring.

When I think about Redfern, it's the most put-down black community in Australia. Even outside of Australia, it's known as a put-down place. But I lived there for twenty-seven years and my kids, my husband – an Englishman, look at him – he loved it. [It was] the very first time that the football club, the Redfern All Blacks football club, they took him – never looked at his colour but at his heart. He was the first white man that they ever had in the club and it was as a treasurer.

I lived in the bottom of Eveleigh Street for twenty-seven years and people would come to me for lots of things. So I got a group going, all the Elders. The drugs were very bad. The Elders were left to look after the little children. I would put a big dinner on for the Elders, a big pot of soup or stew, and we would talk.

I've missed The Block. I left in 2001, and I missed it. I went to Darwin for two and a half years to study. When that finished in Darwin with my studies, I come back with my daughter and she had a house at Little Bay for me. I've been there for about sixteen, seventeen years in Little Bay, but I always go to Redfern. I miss it. I want to go back to Redfern. Whenever anyone criticises Redfern, I'm on them like a big black bomb. They say to me, 'Aunty Ali Golding: you could take her out of Redfern, but you can't take Redfern out of her.' I love Redfern.

When I go back into the AMS [Aboriginal Medical Service, in Redfern], AMS is the most wonderful meeting place for all of our people when we come together there. It's a big yarning there. Maybe you should go over there one day.

Kylie: Maybe I can go over with you one day.

Aunty Ali: The virus has quieted it a lot. It was a great big cultural meeting place for all Aboriginal people. Even the Elders would come from home just to come and sit in the foyer at the AMS – just to yarn, have cups of tea. Wonderful gathering place. I love the sharing and caring.

Kylie: Did you spend a lot of time at South Eveleigh specifically? When I saw Aunty Beryl recently, she said that her friends used to work there at the locomotive workshop.

Aunty Ali: The Eveleigh Markets [renamed Carriageworks Farmers Market in 2015] – we used to go there a lot, every Saturday we'd go there. Lots of friends there, living in Alexandria, that used to come there. And just up the road from there, from South Eveleigh, my granddaughter and daughter-in-law and grandkids are living there. They've been living there for years. And I've been going to visit them as well. Always around like a bad smell, hanging around everywhere.

Kylie: Aunty Ali, I understand why I'm drawn to you; you speak a lot about gathering, feeding, pots of soup.

Aunty Ali: Yes, we used to do that every Tuesday night for the alcoholics and drug addicts on The Block, and we'd all have soup out of foam cups. I would say that people need to look after themselves: health is so important. I spoke with [former NSW Governor] Marie Bashir – then we would get bread rolls from bakers, soup, buns and everything.

Kylie: I think Aunty Ali is one of the most incredible people I've ever met. She's a force of nature. Warrior woman. Her energy is so huge.

Aunty Ali: Thank you, Kylie.

Kylie: [To Barbara and Christine] And she loves the food!

Aunty Ali: I loved them all but especially the curry potato.

Kylie: It was from Lankan [Filling Station].

Aunty Ali: That was beautiful – and something with the chicken.

Kylie: A stir-fry of Saskia Beer chicken fillet with my Billy Kwong Wayside Chapel rooftop honey; potato curry; eggplant and tamarind salad; my Uncle Jimmy's Hokkien noodles.

Aunty Ali: I loved that ... I love it and I miss it, I miss your food. It was a good thing for me too because when I was locked away here with the virus, my son would go in and do some jobs in Redfern and I'm here alone and I don't feel like cooking – meat is all frozen and everything. Kylie would come along ... doing the favour for me. Kylie, I really appreciate what you've done. I've never said that to you. I really appreciate it. You're a really great person to me and you've got a double heart.

Kylie: There will be plenty more meals from me in the future. I love cooking for you.

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Design: Ricardo Felipe
Photography: Mark Pokorny (portraits) and Gary Heery (back cover)

True Nourishment was commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with assistance from Kate Mills.

I'd like to thank Barbara Flynn for helping me co-conceive and co-produce this publication. Barbara is a leading curator who works with artists on projects for the public space of cities. – KK

