

Where I Belong

Episode 2: Delvene Cockatoo-Collins

Podcast transcript

Wendy Love:

Years before she rose to fame as the Queensland artist who designed the medals for the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games, Delvene Cockatoo-Collins lived in South Australia with her husband and three children.

Delvene Cockatoo-Collins:

We had a beautiful home, beautiful life, but there was always something not right.

WL:

During her 10 plus years living in Adelaide, the pangs of homesickness plagued her. She missed her real home in Quandamooka Country, on Minjerribah, North Stradbroke Island; a beautiful, subtropical island just off Brisbane in Moreton Bay.

DCC:

And I knew that I wanted to come home eventually, I just didn't know how or when. It's an absolute yearning to come back, like even when you're living away, even when you have a home, you know that you're supposed to be somewhere.

WL:

The strong pull to return back to her land, where her family, her Ancestors, the Nunukul, Ngugi, and Goenpul people have lived forever, had always been there. She enjoyed raising her three boys in Adelaide, but she felt they were missing out on a lot too.

DCC:

They had this Aboriginal dance group that they would do their traditional dance, but it was Kurna Country dance. And they were learning Kurna language and then all this time it was like it's really special what they've got, but they really should be learning they're own. And that was always in the back of my head.

WL:

She had moved to Adelaide for her husband, Che Cockatoo-Collins.

You may have heard of him. He played AFL for the Port Adelaide Magpies. Kind of a legend of the sport. So, in 2000 she moved down there with her son Sachem. In the years that followed, Che and Delvene had two boys together, making them a family of five.

But by 2010, the guilt and the struggle of living so far away from her family was becoming too much to bear. She was worried her boys weren't bonding with her parents the way she had hoped.

Delvene needed to be a short stroll away from her mum, not a plane ride. And her boys were getting older. If she wanted their childhoods to be steeped in Quandamooka culture, in the traditions of the island, of her family, she had to do something soon. Her oldest, Sachem, was about to become a teenager.

MUSIC

WL:

It was a big decision, knowing the kids would have to leave their schools and friends behind, but in 2012, the family farewelled their lives in Adelaide and moved up north - back to Minjerribah.

DCC:

It was all kind of a little bit romantic, really, you know, that my intentions were to ensure that I wasn't going to be responsible for my own children losing their connection.

WL:

Delvene knew bringing her boys back to their cultural home would forever change them. What she didn't know, however, was that this homecoming would become transformational for her own future in making her the respected artist and designer she is today.

THEME MUSIC

WL:

From Museum of Brisbane, you're listening to *Where I Belong*, a show that tells stories about fascinating and creative people shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love.

On today's episode, Delvene Cockatoo-Collins. How living back on her ancestral land allowed her to create art the whole world sees, and how her son's struggle to adapt ultimately brings about a profound revelation.

MUSIC

WL:

When I meet Delvene for the first time, she greets me with this broad, warm smile. Her kind brown eyes welcome me into her studio and retail store in Goompi, Dunwich, where she sells her own line of artworks and designs. Pottery, framed prints, stationery, hand-printed textiles. I had taken a water taxi over to see her, that got me to Minjerribah, North Stradbroke Island, in 20 minutes.

I look around Delvene's shop while she takes a phone call. Her art clearly reflects the place she makes it all on. Intricate drawings of the island's wildlife: turtles, seashells, the white heron and the Sugarbag Bee. And the Migaloo, the elusive white humpback whale that migrates through the bay each year. Her style reminds me a bit of those scientific illustrations, but softer, more delicate, the colours she uses reflect the island too - dusty pinks, earthy yellows, rusty orange.

I walk over to a rack of hand-printed linen tops and hanging from the ceiling above it is this incredible life-size sculpture of a mermaid: her arms stretched forward, as though she's swimming, the tail made entirely of large seashells. It's a work Delvene made in honour of her Ancestors, who told stories about a mermaid in Moreton Bay.

We leave the store and walk over to her house where she tells me about some work she's been doing on Minjerribah. How she's been combing through archives to recover the hidden histories of Quandamooka, to help her understand what happened to her ancestors, and why her people are the way they are now. Like how her grandmother's grandmother, a free woman, was later taken away to work on a mission in the 1860s.

DCC:

It's like, that's my grandmother's grandmother - the same relationship I have with my grandmother. So, all this stuff happened to them because of other people's decisions and where this is led to me. So, I feel a sense of responsibility. I look at that stuff and I think well, my grandmother's kind of telling me I need to do something with it.

WL:

The spoken and written words of her grandmother influence her practice deeply and she's also working to bring back stolen artefacts from museums in the UK and the US, including a satchel that was stolen from Quandamooka in 1853 and taken to the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

MUSIC

WL:

We sit down and she tells me a bit more about the move back in 2012 – how the boys had been excited to live on the island. Sterling was 5, Preston 8, and Sachem... well Sachem was 12 at the time, and his excitement began to wane some in the days leading up to the move, when it really sunk in that he wouldn't be finishing primary school with the friends he'd had since kindy.

Sachem Parkin-Owens

I don't think I understood until, even now, like I still am learning about the emotions that were brought up through that move, that big change.

MUSIC

WL:

Delvene of course hoped the transition would be a smooth one. After all, she'd been dreaming about it for years, being back on Minjerribah – the place she learned to count numbers by playing cards with her cousins, where her mum taught her how to sew, where she walked the island gathering flowers as a young girl. But once they were actually there, the jitters set in. Her decade-long plan to connect her kids with her culture, with her family, was finally being put to the test.

DCC:

There was an excitement, but I think the reality hit once we were here. Yeah, so not until we were here did it really, I think saw the impact... and it's not what I imagined, I imagined everything to be lovely.

WL:

And a lot of it was lovely. I mean, they were living on Minjerribah, a subtropical island, the second largest sand island in the world, 38 kilometres in length. It's certainly one of the most beautiful places I've been to. Where you can walk along the cliffs of the Gorge, and peer down at the turquoise ocean churning below you. Where pandanus palms hold onto the rocky sides of earth jutting out to Moreton Bay, and huge kangaroos hop through the bush. There are heaps of freshwater lakes, wetlands and sandy beaches.

DCC:

The island has this sense of space and peace, and, you know, the natural environment here on the island, I think, allows you to stay somewhat relaxed, because of the absolute beauty that's around. I know that would exist in other places, but the lifestyle, you know, there's so many memories attached to it that you want to have and continue to live that, you know... going back beach,

getting eugaries, going to Myora, getting under the cool water, you know, body surfing. There's that whole close proximity of lovely things to do that allows you to just really have a nice life.

WL:

But as idyllic as the island is, the reality was that 12-year-old Sachem was having a hard time. And he didn't know what to do with those feelings. When they'd bubble up to the surface, anger would sometimes come out.

SPO:

I was a very extraverted person. Like when I was younger I was very out, and I think it showed mostly like within ego-driven decisions, and actions and behaviours. I wanted to always be the centre of attention. When I'd go home, I'd get angry at Mum and yell and say some really mean things. I spent a lot of time by myself.

WL:

It took time for his former football star stepdad Che Cockatoo-Collins to adjust too. But for different reasons.

DCC:

You know, a pretty big identity in Adelaide. Especially when he was playing, he'd be recognised, and so coming here, which has happened, Che here on the island is Uncle Che, Delvene's husband (laughs). So, it's been a big shift for him as well.

MUSIC

WL:

Delvene continued to worry about Sachem, but she was also trying to figure out her own role in this new life. And what came natural to her, what she found joy in, was making her art again.

Back in her uni days, at Griffith University in Brisbane, she would make these small sculptural artworks using quampi shells, these pearl oysters found on the mudflats along Moreton Bay. She sold them through a few shops in Brisbane.

But once she moved to Adelaide, she stopped making them. I mean, those quampi shells were 2,000 kilometres away.

DCC:

Mum did send some down, but I just couldn't keep up so I stopped working with those shells. When I came back, I started making again because the resources were here.

WL:

She'd walk the island, collecting materials for her artworks – clay from the foreshore, local pigments, and in no time she rebooted the art practice she had left behind years ago.

Hearing Delvene talk about the making of her art, with such reverence, the meaning, and the story imbued into each piece, I'm struck by how deeply integral her connection to family and place is to her process. She draws so much of her inspiration from her mother, Evelyn Parkin, and her grandmother, Bethel Delaney.

DCC:

The way that Mum and my grandma have lived here and shown me the way that they've lived, I feel like it's art in itself. The way you know, Mum moves through and observes seasons and the ways she looks forward to different things, you know, different parts of the year. So, for me her whole life, I feel, is art. Mum's pretty special.

WL:

Delvene was happily transitioning to life back on the island. Daily visits with her mum and other family. And she was making art again, though at this point it was just a passion thing for her, making gifts for family, not something she thought she could make a proper living from. She was still doing work for a communications company. But as happy as she was to be back on Minjerrabah, on Straddie, she could see it was going to take longer for the others. Everyone was adapting at their own pace.

MUSIC

WL:

One night, when she was away for work, the boys stayed over with their grandmother, Evelyn.

DCC:

...and there were curlews outside.

WL:

Curlews are these nocturnal birds. They have these funny long legs, and their call kinda sounds like a haunting wail or crying baby. They're all over the Quandamooka region.

DCC:

...and Preston was not familiar with that sound, and he ran and raced in and jumped into the bed with Nan. So I thought, aw he's right (laughs), at least he can find comfort.

WL:

This felt like a turning point for her, the same boys who had been reluctant to stay with their Nan in the past, were now finding security and a sense of belonging with her.

MUSIC

WL:

Being the youngest, Sterling was pretty quick to settle into the rhythms of the island. Preston followed suit not long after. Sachem, on the other hand, was still struggling.

MUSIC

WL:

Sachem's last name is Parkin-Owens. He's Delvene's son from a previous relationship. His biological dad is African American, from Florida. When the boys first moved to Minjerribah they all went to Dunwich State School. But the following year, Sachem started high school. He got a scholarship to a private school on the mainland, south of Brisbane.

SPO:

And I think that once I had been separated from my family, that's when I really started to understand how affected I was by the big move.

WL:

Trying to navigate his way through grade 8, as an Aboriginal, African American young man, at a majority white private college, in a whole new city, was a lot to deal with to say the least. He says he would lash out at school, acting out of hurt or fear or shame. He didn't know how to process the huge changes he was going through. And he says he didn't talk about it with anyone, even his mum.

DCC:

That kind of anger at me, I can look back and say that he was probably grieving what he knew as his childhood.

MUSIC

WL:

Coming up after the break: Delvene discovers her true purpose on Minjerrabah. Also, a transcendental experience opens up a creative dimension in Sachem.

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WL:

It's 2013 now and Delvene Cockatoo-Collins and her family are settling into their island life on Minjerrabah. They're connecting with their Quandamooka history, their aunties and uncles and cousins, and their cultural traditions. Delvene tells me about one of those traditions: collecting Heather and Boronia flowers with her mother.

DCC:

Which grow in certain areas on the island, a lot of people wanna know exactly where they grow, but it's not something that really should be known.

Particularly because it's a cultural practice – you go and collect the flowers, they're really easy to snap off and large bunches are then taken to the different graves to decorate the graves of your family. And mum took me to a new spot this time. It was just so overwhelming, you're walking through a sea of bright sort of magenta and kind of pastelly pink flowers and they're very delicate.

And so, you know, your senses are just woken up, because you're walking through, you're kind of getting a little bit scratched, but just at eye level all this beautiful pink across. It's like a paddock.

MUSIC FADES OUT

WL:

Not long after the move to Straddie, Delvene's art practice goes from hobby to side hustle. She starts selling her shell jewelry and little clay sculptures at a Quandamooka Aboriginal Art Gallery called Salt Water Murris, and before she knows it, she's getting involved in the very active arts and festival scene on Minjerribah.

DCC:

So there were all these ways of participating and, I think, when you have something like that it makes it a much easier journey than starting from absolute scratch.

WL:

And then, in 2014, the highly acclaimed artist Judy Watson comes over to the island...

DCC:

And I had some porcelain pieces made and she goes, "I can feel your finger marks in here, would you consider doing some work for me?"

WL:

Delvene says those opportunities, to work with the likes of Judy Watson and other artists put her on the fast lane to her own success. Soon she has the confidence to take her work on the road. She travels up to the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in Far North Queensland, to see if she could sell some of her new creations, including these little clay pendants.

DCC:

And the buyer from the National Museum of Australia took the lot... and it was then I thought, actually if he's interested then maybe this could work. Maybe I could have a living out of making. So yeah, that was a big shock.

WL:

And just like that, the National Museum of Australian in Canberra began stocking her pieces. After that, she took her work to festivals in Sydney and within two years, Delvene had her own registered business. She was actually making money from her art practice and not only that, through each piece she sold she was sharing stories from her culture – keeping the histories and the practices of Quandamooka alive.

MUSIC

WL:

Meanwhile, something transformational was beginning to brew inside Sachem, Delvene's oldest son. A few years after the move, Sachem's connection to his culture and ancestral history was growing, but he was still struggling to find peace within himself. He was still angry and withdrawn.

Sachem was super involved in AFL, following in his stepdad Che's footsteps you could say, and it was a good outlet for him – he could let it all out on the field. But soon, even AFL, a sport he was so good at, wasn't sitting right with him, and he began to question whether he wanted to continue playing.

SPO:

My whole life everyone had kind of driven me to be a sports person, whether it was my dad, who's Black American, he wanted me to play basketball, whether it was Che and my family here, I grew up in an AFL family. So there was a big divide in myself and then I kind of, I felt a lot of pressure from my family and from the AFL community telling me hat I need to do this and do that and I kind of just dropped it all.

WL:

One night, something happens that unlocks a creative dimension inside Sachem. He was 17 and staying up in Rockhampton, in Central Queensland. He'd been up there for a few months and had barely spoken to his family the whole time.

SPO:

And I had a dream, and in the dream I was at Myora Springs, it's not too far from here now. And it's a place where we had middens, where the ladies used to gather and they used to have shellfish, sit and talk and do weaving and bathe the kids. And everything around me was vivid greens and browns, all the trees... and it was like really vibrant colours. And then, through the trees a bunch of my Ancestors walked out, and I knew they were my ancestors 'cause I just knew in my dream... but they were black and white, as if it was like a black and white TV from back in the day. And they stood on one side of the creek and I was on the other and they were trying to talk to me. They were saying words but I couldn't actually hear the audio, but I could see their

mouths moving. And something in me, I just got this really deep anxiety and I just felt like I was just in this hole. And I started crying when I woke up like straight away... and then I picked up the phone and I called my grandmother, and she said that you'll have to find that answer for yourself, what they were trying to say. And I didn't know any other way. I didn't know any other way; I didn't know what was going on in my brain.

WL:

So he just picked up a pen and started writing this poem. Sachem hadn't written before - not like this, but the words just poured onto the page.

SPO:

Each word I speak and every poem that speaks to you, the dampened cries of my ancestors are heard too... Sky blue truths, they speak not of life and death, but rather of hope and survival. You are my young man. My Ancestors...

I didn't know what it was, I had never even read a poem in my life before, but I just started writing.

...I search for the origin of my hidden soul. Through each line and through each line that I rewrite and retell, I realise that each rhyme and each poem that I write isn't mine. They belong to the sovereign and free - *My Ancestors...*

WL:

He named that poem *My Ancestors*, and it was the co-winner of the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Indigenous Poetry Prize at the Queensland Poetry Festival in 2017.

SPO:

And that was the first installation of the poem that I had created. And then over time, I just developed it and I kept having more dreams and I kept seeing more signs just in nature and then my aunty Steph gave me a book. It was a dictionary for the island here, the Jandai language and then I picked up the book and then, words I was hearing in my head were correlating to the words that were in the dictionary and so I started writing that into the poem... and yeah, that's kind of how that whole journey started.

MUSIC

WL:

He eventually did decide to quit AFL, so he could focus on creative writing and music.

MUSIC

WL:

So, the boy everyone thought would follow in the footsteps of his stepdad, is actually following in his mother's. Both inspired by their Ancestors before them, both creating contemporary art that tells stories from their own lived experiences and the narratives of their Elders.

Sachem Parkin-Owens is 22 now. He's an emerging singer, rapper, and poet with performances in the works for this year. He actually just released his first E.P.

MUSIC

WL:

Historian Elisabeth Gondwe from the North Stradbroke Historical Museum says Delvene's work is gentle yet radical, a description Delvene happily accepts.

DCC:

You know you're telling something quite strongly but through those soft fabrics, through work on paper, through sculptural work and then using the... especially through those sculptural pieces all of the local pigments or shells or cotton tree...

WL:

Perhaps it was that gentle radicalness that caught the eye of the Commonwealth Games Federation in 2016. Delvene had actually decided not to apply to be commissioned to make anything for the Games that were going to be held on the Gold Coast in 2018. So she was shocked when she was approached to design the medals for the international event.

DCC:

'Cause we knew jobs were coming up with the Comm Games and I said I don't think I'm even going to apply for anything – it's just too much. And then the next day I got approached(laughs) it's like, would have thought? We were only just talking about it the day before, like, I don't think I could do anything on that level. And so it took me into that space of you can collaborate, you can put your ideas in and work through a project and come out with, you know, the most beautiful bits of work.

WL:

Delvene's design for the commemorative medals feature the famous and beloved white humpback whale, the Migaloo she's been drawing over the past few years. Every athlete from all 53 countries that participated in the Games received one. Her artwork also featured on the costumes the medal presenters wore and covered the enormous inflatable Migaloo that floated across the arena at the opening ceremony.

Her artwork was making its way out to the world, but if it was the Commonwealth Games that brought her work to an international audience, it's Delvene's recent commission that brings the purpose of it all back home.

She was asked to create a public artwork - a placemaker - one of many that would be installed across Minjerribah. A sculpture that not only marks the spot but reintroduces the meaning of the place and its traditional Jandai name. Hers would be placed at Point Lookout, Mulumba in Jandai, on the north-eastern end of the island.

DCC:

...and so the brief for me: "What does a place mean?". And when you look at those old photos and when you walk around the gorge and especially underneath the surf club and around the surf club, you'll see all those shell remnants. A lot of the middens have been removed so t. The midden is where you might have sat, gathered and then shared, discarded and then left, so it was a place of gathering.

WL:

She says, the middens were removed for different purposes and for her, it's about putting those shells back in place. Part of her research was walking and observing how the shells fall or are left discarded.

DCC:

But naturally in one of my walks, the shells, they come in on the tide and as the wave's going out... And on a gentle wave you can see the shell stand up. So they are forced up by the wave and they stand for a split second and they must open and then wriggle [them]selves gently into the sand. So when I saw it, it was like, oh there was like 20 to 50 shells all in a line in that low gentle wave and it was so beautiful and I was like, "That's the moment."

WL:

She sought advice from her mum, Evelyn - her rock and constant source of inspiration and knowledge. Then she consulted with some of the Elders, making sure she was telling the right story.

She worked with a team to create and build the sculpture, including her cousin, an architect, to ensure it wouldn't block the view out to sea. The pigments for the work came from an old quarry – pinks, whites and yellows, that really reflect the place and how weathered shells look. And last year, three eugarie shells – one yellow, one pink, one white – were unveiled, standing two and a half metres high.

TRANSITION MUSIC

WL:

Delvene continues to make art in her studio and run her retail shop. She has fulfilled the promise she made to herself. Her kids are well and truly connected to their culture and their land.

DCC:

And whether it's feeling like a sense of... like I have no more major questions to answer, because it's all here. I'm now seeing my mum every day and my dad's a big helper with my work. And so, I've come to know this place as an adult, you know. You know the place and a kid, you know the tides and all that sort of, the food... But it's so much greater as an adult. I feel complete.

WL:

Follow Delvene on Instagram to stay up to date with what she's working on – she's actually creating a lot of exciting stuff right now. She was recently commissioned to design all the merchandise for the Australian Pavilion at the World Expo in Dubai this year, which opens this October.

END

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Where I Belong is written and produced on Turrabul and Yaggera land by me, Wendy Love.

Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

Dylan Ransom-Hughes mastered this episode.

Special thanks to Louise Martin-Chew.

And a sincere thanks to you for listening. If you like what you heard please tell your friends, write us a review and go listen to the rest of the series - wherever you get your podcasts.