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ANNUAL REPORT 2023

We acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations, the owners of the land on which we meet. Land that has never been ceded. Our culture, the colonial culture, has thrived on the back of dispossession of the Wurundjeri land and attempts to eliminate customs, language and indeed people. But they and their culture have survived. We pay our respect to the Elders past, present and emerging. The passing of knowledge has been and is secure, and we too benefit from this. We look with hope to the Treaty process here in Victoria.

2023 has been a big year for Nillumbik Reconciliation Group, but an even bigger year for the reconciliation journey more generally. At the moment we are struggling to come to terms with the result of the referendum held on October 14th. The Australian People overwhelming voted to reject the request of First Nations people, made in the Uluru Statement From the Heart. This was a modest but significant proposal, to acknowledge First Nations people in the Australian Constitution by enshrining a Voice to Parliament. This would have enabled First Nations people to have a say on policy and procedures that affect their lives. We hope and pledge to continue as allies in the journey to achieve justice for Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people, and we will be lead by their Elders and leaders in the way forward.

1. **The Committee:**

Unfortunately throughout this year we saw some resignations of committee members. However, each person mentioned below has given so much of their time to see that activities and events have run smoothly. Thank you all. Particular thanks to Jan Aitken who has shared her knowledge and skills so generously throughout the year. Also to past committee members Monique Hayes and Julie Allen for the roles they played in working toward the 25th celebration event in May.

President: Jan Mackenzie

Vice Presidents: Julie Allen, Monique Hayes

Secretary: Diana Warrell

Treasurer: Bill Pretty

Convener of the Friends of Moor-rul Grasslands: Jill Kellow

Mailing List Convener: Bob West

Nillumbik Shire Councillor: Natalie Duffy

Committee members. Jan Aitken, , Cassie May, Adrienne Jones, Jann Darvill, Kathleen Toal, David Tuke

Nillumbik Shire Council Staff assisting:

Nichole Johnston, April Wilson, Cassie Zurek

2. **Nillumbik Shire Council ( NSC)**

NRG has continued to work with the council throughout the year in various ways. Representatives from Community Partnerships at NSC attend NRG monthly meetings and provide a report on council activities. Particular thanks to Nichole Johnston, April Wilson and Cassie Zurek.

The council has provided grants throughout the year to support NRG events which will be described be referred to below.

We were delighted with the appointment of Vicky Bonafede, the first Aboriginal Partnerships Officer at NSC. Vicky attended and spoke at our AGM last year. It was wonderful to be able to seek cultural advice from Vicky directly, and to have someone to whom we could direct community enquiries. Whilst Vicky is no longer working at NSC we understand that recruitment is currently underway to fill this role.

Vicky lead the initial RAP process at the council, and NRG has been invited to participate in the next phase, the draft Reflect RAP. This will then be sent to Reconciliation Australia to be endorsed. Cassie May will be NRG representatives on this committee.

**3. Events and Activities:**

1. The activities for the year began at the **Nillumbik Shire Council’s citizenship ceremony on 26th January.** This event presented an opportunity for NRG to speak to the new citizens of the history of settlement in Australia and the outcome of this for First Nations people. Jan Mackenzie and Gillian Essex presented a speech written by Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie. It was also an opportunity to raise the issue of the privilege and importance of voting in the Referendum later in the year. While this ceremony was held on this controversial date, Nillumbik Shire Council did not called it Australia Day, which moved in part to address the controversy. We hope that further moves by NSC towards reconciliation around this date will be made in the future.
2. Jan Mackenzie and other representatives from NRG have attended the monthly **Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Consultation**  meetings organised by NSC with Wurundjeri Elders, Aunty Julianne Axford and Auntie Gail Smith. Charley Woolmore from Wurundjeri Cultural Corporation also attends the meetings. It is wonderful to have a regular opportunity to seek advice for our own activities but also to learn from the advice and ideas given on NSC programs from the Wurundjeri cultural perspective.
3. During **Reconciliation Week** Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie attended a moving **Flag Raising Ceremony** organised by NSC at the offices in Civic Drive Greensborough. Colin Hunter 4th provided a smoking ceremony and we listened to an inspiring speech by Scarlett, from the Firecarriers from Catholic Ladies College. Scarlett urged us all to learn, speak up for reconciliation and to tell the truth of the past. Then we were moved by speeches from First Nation students from Primary Schools in the Shire, who told of their experiences of learning their own history. They urged us to follow the Reconciliation week theme “ Be a Voice for Generations. Act today for a reconciled tomorrow”. Over morning tea, we talked about the hope that these inspiring young people gave us for the future of reconciliation.
4. The biggest event of the year for NRG was a celebration of 25years of Reconciliation in Nillumbik, and of the NRG. This was held during **Reconciliation Week** on 28th May. It was made possible by a Community Grant from NSC. We were grateful also for hands on support from NSC in the planning and running of the event on the day. 25 years ago, in May 1998, the then Mayor of Nillumbik made a public acknowledgement of the ownership of the land now known as Nillumbik. He apologised to the Wurundjeri people for traumas associated with dispossession. He did this in the presence of Wurundjeri Elders and handed over a document committing the Shire to ongoing reconciliation. From this public event the NRG grew. On 28th May this year, 300 people came together to hear about the achievements of that day and the next 25years. There were many links with the past. Wurundjeri Elder Ian Hunter performed a smoking ceremony and welcomed us to country as he had done 25years ago. The wonderful Djirri Djirri dancers performed. Mandy Nicholson, who leads this group was there also to represent her late father Uncle Bill Nicholson Senior, who had accepted the Document of Commitment from The Mayor in 1998. Eltham High School Symphonic Band played at the first event, and as an indication of their commitment to reconciliation the school commissioned a new work from composer Dr Jodie Blackshaw to perform on the day. Further entertainment was provided by First Nations musician Scott Darlow an exciting musician and educator. The Chocolate Lilies Community Choir under the direction of Nerida Kirov performed also. A slide show played behind the speakers on the stage, that showcased how schools and community groups in the shire are embracing reconciliation in the programs and activities they run. There were many representatives from these groups there on the day. The organising committee for this event included Natalie Duffy, Cassie May, Julie Allen, Monique Hayes and Jan Mackenzie.
5. NSC held a wonderful evening celebrating the many groups and people who volunteer within the shire. NRG were proud to receive the **Reconciliation Award** which was presented to Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie and marked the achievements of 25years of reconciliation in the Shire and the Event on 28th May.
6. Jan Aitken successfully obtained a Reconciliation grant from NSC which enabled NRG to liaise with the Aborigines Advancement League, facilitated by Vicky Bonafede. During **NAIDOC WEEK** NRG provided materials for the Elders there to decorate chopping boards. The NAIDOC theme this year was “ For Our Elders”. The boards were displayed when the group were welcomed to Edendale Farm in Eltham for lunch a few days later. A Smoking ceremony was held and then NRG members were invited to join the Elders in making possum skin bracelets. It was wonderful to welcome members of the group and the facilitators to our shire and to meet and talk with them.
7. Some members of NRG attended the **Anzac Day Ceremony**  at Kangaroo Ground War Memorial and laid a wreath in honour of First Nations servicemen, who were not treated in the same way as other returning personnel. In the same spirit a wreath was laid by NRG representatives at the **Friends of Kangaroo Ground War Memorial**  ceremony on **Remembrance Day.**
8. **Communications.**  After many years Eric Staff resigned his position as webmaster. We thank him for the time he has given us. Jill Kellow, Adrienne Jones and Jan Mackenzie have been working on updating current information on the  **Website.** This is a “ work in progress” and we are considering the best way forward to ensure our communication strategies are appropriate and up to date. Whilst Julie Allen is no longer a committee member she has taken on the role of **Facebook** coordinator. Bob West continues to send information to our **Member’s Mailing List.** We welcome any help others may be able to offer.
9. **The Gawa Wurundjeri Resource Trial** is at 873 Eltham-Yarra Glen Road, Watsons Creek. It is a short self guided walk, but NRG can arrange to lead supervised walks for community and educational groups. Diana Warrell is in charge of this and if the weather is favourable Bob West often lights a fire to sit and yarn around. There are 11 plaques around the track that provide information on Wurundjeri use of plants, animals and lifestyle. Recently a group of young people from Birribi - Youth Residential Rehabilitation Program attended. Some of the plaques have now been installed at **Edendale Farm** and they look wonderful placed around the farm in proximity to the referenced plants. It is hoped there can be a celebration of this installation sometime in the future.
10. Jill Kellow is the NRG representative and co-ordinator of the **Friends of**  **Moor-rul Reconciliation Grasslands** . Weeding and maintenance is carried out on the first Sunday of each month and helpers are very much welcomed. Morning tea is an added incentive to come along, as is the view, and the chance to become familiar with native planting. Recently a new collaboration was established between this group and **Nillumbio.** A very successful weeding day took place on a recent Saturday and as a result 12 new people were recruited to the FOMG. This year a Manna Gum was provided from Queen Elizabeth 2nd Jubilee Fund which funded tree planting all over the Commonwealth. It was sourced and planted by NSC. It represents the trees that would have been present when the site was occupied by First Nations people.
11. Bob West is the representative from NRG on the **Panton Hill Bushland Reserve.**
12. A really enjoyable part of being involved in NRG is interacting with **Community**  groups and individuals who are seeking information to further their own reconciliation activities. Some examples of these queries include, how to access a Welcome or smoking ceremony, what Indigenous plants are appropriate in this area, how to find an Indigenous artist, who might be able to design an Indigenous jersey for a sporting team, how to obtain acknowledgement signage, how to find out the Wurundjeri history and heritage in the area, and how to get started on a RAP. We do not necessarily answer all the queries ourselves but we can direct these to appropriate sources.
13. A highlight of interaction in the community was attendance at the launch of the Indigenous jersey designed for the Doug Nichols round at **Eltham Junior Foot ball Club** . Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie attended. We were moved by the personal and respectful Acknowledgement made by a club member. Colin Hunter 4th Welcomed us to country and performed a Smoking Ceremony. He explained the ceremony, and how smoke can be cleansing of the mind, body and spirit. The players enthusiastically embraced this.
14. NRG has had a long term association with **Eltham Bookshop.** They provided a display of First Nations author’s books at the 25 year celebration event in May. NRG supported the bookshop to present “ a Conversation with Alexis Wright”, who is member of the Waanyi Natiin in the Gulf of Carpentaria. She a world renowned and awarded author who is also a resident in Nillumbik. This event coincided with the release of her novel “ Praiseworthy” and was held at Edendale Farm.
15. NRG values the association and support of **St Margaret’s Social Justice Group**. Members of NRG also belong to this group.
16. **Montmorency South Primary School** include Wurundjeri history and culture in their curriculum. Some NRG members attended a “ Cultural Day” and participated in activities with the students. Tara di Bondi, specialist teacher at the school, organised an activity to support a cross cultural group from Western Australia to “ Reclaim the Void”. People across the country wove patterns onto large hoops using scraps of material. These hoops will eventually be collected and placed over the voids created from disused mines. It was fun helping the children create beautiful objects as they learnt about the country. **Eltham North Primary School** also ran a cultural day focusing on First Nations education. NRG are willing helpers when required. This school played a very big part in the development and launch of :
17. **The Eltham North Adventure Playground**. Natalie Duffy successfully organised an entry in the Victorian State Government’s “ Pick My Project”. This was in 2018, and there have been many reasons for the time delay from conception to launch. However, the hard work by the reference group, including NRG representatives, with support from NSC finally came to fruition with a launch on 30th October. Wurundjeri culture is represented throughout the playground. There is native planting, a pottery pathway made by school children under the direction of artist Mary Lou Pittard, a gathering place at the centre of which is a beautiful mosaic, pages of Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin’s book “ Welcome to Country”, and a season’s calendar. The students at Eltham North Primary School will be responsible for keeping this up to date. Eltham Men’s Shed provided an after school sausage sizzle for hungry children . Uncle Colin Hunter Jnr Welcomed us to Country, and performed a Smoking ceremony. John Terrick played the didgeridoo. The Djirri Djirri dancers and Mandy Nicholson delighted us all and invited us to join in. Young and old did just that. It was a thrill to hear Mandy and Uncle Colin using the Woiwurrung language. Vicki Ward, State MP for Eltham officially opened the playground. Of course there were speeches too, last minute cancellations and a change for the worse in the weather, but despite this it was a wonderful celebration. The installations and design will continue to tell the Wurundjeri story to all who use this popular park for years to come.
18. In February Jan Mackenzie presented at a **Community Forum** in Eltham where many volunteer groups were given 5 minutes to outline what their organisations did. It was wonderful to hear what is happening in our own municipality. We took the opportunity to offer to those present a chance to discuss the referendum later in the year by providing informative sessions. Unfortunately at that stage this offer was not taken up and neither did we attract new members.
19. Jan Aitken has attended **Yarra Plenty Heritage group** meetings with other historical societies. This ensures that the Wurundjeri history is heard as part of the heritage of this area. For the same reason Jan also represents NRG on a group of community members working towards establishing a **Nillumbik Cultural Centre.**
20. Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie represent NRG by attending **Reconciliation Eastern Metropolitan** meetings. It is important to keep in touch with Reconciliation groups in neighbouring suburbs. This group has links with Mullin Mullin Indigenous Gathering Place.
21. The **Rotary Town Fair** was held in March this year, having been cancelled from November 2022. Diana Warrell coordinated an information stall and NRG took the opportunity to instigate discussions with those attending about the Referendum. People were invited to put their inked thumbprint on a canvas in support of YES. Children also were able to join in a craft activity decorating sticks with wool in black, red and yellow.
22. Often NRG has an information stall at the **Wattle Festival** in Hurstbridge. This year it was decided to support the Jaga Jaga for Yes group’s stall in the lead up to the referendum. It was a perfect Spring day and there were many excellent discussions and engagement with the community.
23. Once the announcement was made that a **Referendum** would be held this year NRG considered ways to provide relevant information to the community. Jan Aitken and Jan Mackenzie attended the local **Oxfam** meeting to listen to and discuss Noel Pearson’s Boyer Lectures and how this related to the need for a Voice to Parliament. Jan Mackenzie invited Barbara Jackson to speak to a group of interested people about what she learned from her time working in Aboriginal Communities. Barbara recently published a book “ Crossing Cultures, an Anglo - Australian Working in Aboriginal Communities”. Barbara’s experiences lead her to become a strong supporter of the YES campaign. Jan Aitken wrote a powerful piece describing the history of settlement, past laws, and the long history of First Nations people striving for recognition and better outcomes. Jan explained that this has lead her to vote YES. Jan presented this to some community organisations urging all to learn and think about the issues.
24. Members of NRG joined **Jaga Jaga For Yes** who ran an amazing campaign. The federal district of Jaga Jaga covers Nillumbik and beyond. They recruited over 400 volunteers who handed out information and chatted to people at train stations and shopping centres, knocked on doors , made phone calls and put up VOTE YES signs. NRG acknowledges and thanks the tireless efforts of the facilitators of this group. Of course the result was devastating, but we know there is support in Nillumbik as demonstrated by the strong YES vote here. Currently we are all gathering our thoughts about the way forward. We wish to harness the support as demonstrated by the community and hope that NRG, JJ4Y, Reconciliation Banyule, and Monty Allies can develop ways to work closely together in the future as we look to First Nations leaders to tell us how to be the best possible allies. We invite all of you here tonight to join in this journey too.

JAN MACKENZIE

PRESIDENT