

Weaving cultural connection, stitch by stitch

Story by **Emma Masters.**



Page left: One of Aunty Ellen's early weaving works. Above: *Kondoll the Whale*, by Ellen Trevorrow with Ngarrindjeri weavers, 2017. Photo: **Johanis Lyons-Reid.** ©2022 Change Media.

For renowned Ngarrindjeri artist and Elder Ellen Trevorrow, the intricate weaving of dried, freshwater rushes collected from around the Coorong isn't just about making beautiful, sculptural pieces she exhibits in galleries around the globe. To the woman known by most as Aunty Ellen, it's also about sharing her knowledge of the ancient practice and passing it on to younger generations.

Learning how to weave in her late twenties was an experience that changed Ellen's life and mission. 'I was taught to weave by Elder Aunty Dorrie Kartinyeri at a special workshop back in 1982,' Aunty Ellen says. 'I'd watched my grandmother weave until I was eleven and then came to live at the Coorong fringe camp here, so from eleven to twenty-seven years old, that's the time that weaving wasn't around.' 'It was very, very important that Aunty Dorrie revived the weaving. So to have it going again was brilliant and from that day on I really thank her for bringing that back to us. From then it became my main aim in life to keep it going.'

And Aunty Ellen wasted no time. Within a year of the seminal workshop, she and her sister began teaching weaving to students

at the local Meningie Area School. By 1986, a family group including Ellen's husband, Ngarrindjeri leader Tom Trevorrow, had established a place they called Camp Coorong, where people could gather to listen and learn about local culture and heritage. They also built a museum to hold important artifacts, photos and stories.

'That's what Camp Coorong was all about – sharing and bringing people together,' Aunty Ellen explains as we sit in the main camp hall. 'We'd always work weekends with the uni groups and have full schools during the week.'

'We've had big groups through here and then you also see the young ones bringing their family back when they visit the area. The percentage of non-Aboriginals that've been here is big, and there's all different cultures that have come through here, and they're carrying their culture to us as well. It created work for our community. It was good.'

After three decades of successful operation, Camp Coorong was forced to close in 2017 due to a lack of funding. However, Aunty Ellen along with family, friends and the backing of some business groups are working to get it back up and running again. 'We just want to keep it going and especially with our young ones, that we're leaving something behind for them,' she says. 'It was a big change emotionally and an obstacle in my way, but it didn't stop me from weaving, so that healed me and continues to heal me.' >



Top: Auntie Ellen at Camp Coorong holding an early weaving work. Above left: Ngarrindjeri woven sister basket and carry basket, by Ellen Trevorrow, 2017. Photo: **Johanis Lyons-Reid**. ©2022 Change Media. Above right: Nanggi (sun) yalparar (rays) lakun (weaving) created as a collaborative artwork between Dr Jelina Haines, Auntie Millie Rigney and Auntie Ellen Trevorrow, commissioned by the United Communities with support from Guildhouse.

In recent years, Auntie Ellen, her family and longtime friend and artistic colleague Dr Jelina Haines have undertaken weaving projects that have grown in size and scale. In 2018 they created and exhibited a woven sculpture of kondoli, a four-metre long whale that's an important Ngarrindjeri ngartji, or totem. 'A lot of freshwater rushes went into that kondoli,' she tells me with a smile. 'It was in the South Australian Maritime Museum first, but now it's gone to the Museum of Natural History in Le Havre, France. And we've got another kondoli in the South Australian Museum and that one's diving from the second to the first floor.'

Auntie Ellen has also created a monster-sized Murray cod, or pondi, which is Auntie Ellen's totem and another important ngartji to the Ngarrindjeri. The five-metre long fish, which spans four-metres in width, will be on display in the South Australian Maritime Museum from June this year.

'That one went from my kitchen into my lounge room, so I ate and slept and everything around it,' she says. 'It was a ten to thirteen hour a day job for a long time, a lot of commitment. One day I'm watching

my son working on it and I'm thinking to myself, am I gonna be able to finish this in time? It is huge. Both my sliding doors had to come off to get it out of the house.'

Auntie Ellen says her work has always involved her children and family, from her earlier years to current times. 'It's my healing, it's my therapy and I do a lot of thinking, and I've always got children around me,' she says. 'They always like when I'm weaving, they'll come and pick up the piece and do some weaving themselves if I put it down. And so I leave them in that part of the piece that I've been working on. 'We're letting them know that they're a part of that, they've had their hands on this weaving, that they've touched it, and we're keeping it going within them. When you're weaving, you're creating. Stitch by stitch you're making a connection. So there's that connection and it's bringing people together.'

Note: All artworks are collaborative pieces, with Auntie Ellen as the senior cultural weaver, Dr Jelina Haines, who is taught by Auntie Ellen's knowledge of Ngarrindjeri weaving/cultural stories, Bruce Trevorrow, who makes the metal framework, and family and friends who added their stitches onto the woven work.

