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Full transcript of
an interview with:

Mark Waters

Conducted on: 23 May 2019

Interviewer: **Allison Murchie**

Transcribed by: Deborah Gard

For:

The **Don Dunstan Foundation**

20th Anniversary Oral History Project

1999–2019 celebrating 20 years of action for a fairer world



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION 20th Anniversary **ORAL HISTORY** PROJECT

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

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A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

A dash, – indicates a pause or a digression as occurs in informal conversation.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that has not been possible to verify to date.

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This is Allison Murchie interviewing Mark Waters at the State Library on 23rd May 2019 for the Don Dunstan Foundation 20th anniversary. As I've explained, we are doing a series of interviews with people who knew Don or are associated with the foundation in some way. I'd like to just get a little bit of background on you first. Could I have your full name?

My name is Mark Waters.

No middle name?

It's Leslie, but I tend to go by Mark Waters.

Where and when were you born?

I was born in Adelaide in 1956.

Could you tell me a little bit about your work history, basically what you've been doing in your career?

I describe myself as social work trained and youth work experienced. I spent the last four decades in the community sector working in street-work on Hindley Street managing a small team in drug and alcohol work with young people, in mental health employment and training, and then moved into social policy in a whole range of areas looking at building community. My last role for the last eight and a half years was as State Manager of . That's where I probably had the most to do with the Don Dunstan Foundation.

Expand a little bit on that 40-year career – that's a hard area to work in.

I'd say I'm a survivor.

Yes, I don't know anyone who has worked 40 years in that sector.

I know a whole bundle of us because there are a whole lot of us who were around in the late '70s and early '80s and we were a great support network to each other. I think that's really quite significant. People like Mark Henley and myself have been in the sector working away, collaborating and doing stuff together. We started the Youth Affairs Council in 1980 – they are about to turn 40. For the last couple of years I've been their president, so I've maintained an interest in the youth sector right throughout as a voluntary area. I'm a life member of SACOSS – the South Australian Council of Social Services, and have sat on their policy council through a number of iterations, so keeping a broader head-set than I think just direct care and direct practice has been fundamental to me. I've really been interested in giving back to the university sector so I've always supervised social work students. I'm a Flinders University graduate so I tended to work with Flinders students primarily. We've done some interesting things in that area as well.

What attracted you to that area initially?

Youth work?

Yes.

I suppose I was always destined to work as a social worker. As an 18-year-old I was in the US for a little while. I lived there for a year and I had a mate who was working in a youth centre in Newark in New Jersey. It was a tough community – detention centre, lots of African American inmates/residents. It really was quite clear that that was an area that I would probably end up in, working with young people. I took the obligatory year off between my undergraduate Arts degree before I went on to the Bachelor of Social Administration, because that was required at the time. I went teaching swimming to kids with disabilities. One of the groups was the Autistic Children's Association, ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) South Australia. They said, 'We've got a social skills job going,' so I took that on. I was the first adolescent social skills trainer for autistic kids in the late '70s. I was still in my pathway towards university and I'd started part-time university and working in that area – tough, challenging kids. The level of family breakdown with kids with autism is one of the highest levels within the disability sector.

A job came up opening up a youth service in Hindley Street on Friday and Saturday nights as an information centre and I won a youth work role in that, which really meant that I could do my part-time studies very effectively. Three years later I was still there and still surviving. The first night we were in the centre about 70 Aboriginal kids dropped in and a number of them were still there three years later and a number we visited in detention, et cetera. After that, a) I think I can survive anything and, b) I learned just to be very steady and measured and not panic and think within the centre but also think outside the centre. It was probably the best grounding I could have had.

Absolutely. That's an incredible involvement in youth, and particularly black youth, Aboriginal kids, who are always at the end of the queue, aren't they?

Yes.

So maybe not an unusual leap that you moved to reconciliation. How did that opportunity come up?

Well, it felt as though it was sort of a job that I was coming to forever, that everything I had done in preparation was leading to that point. It's a job that requires a fair bit of diplomacy, a sense of understanding how community and community building goes, an opportunity to work at the celebratory end of some amazing Aboriginal people in connection with doing some remarkable things which aren't heard about in the media.

Because that's a good news story!

Yes, they're good news stories, but at the same time recognising that it's all being done with a view to address the inequity and disadvantages that Aboriginal communities face.

Are we making progress in that area?

I think we are. I think the close-the-gap target shows that in some areas we are. Once again, I work with some amazing Aboriginal professionals who are transforming Aboriginal education and Aboriginal health. We're seeing Aboriginal doctors come through and Aboriginal lawyers come through, and they will be the ones who create change. The work of reconciliation isn't about affecting them; it's actually about opening up the hearts and minds and the ears and eyes of the non-Aboriginal community. I was fortunate in having Elliott Johnston as the patron when I started. Elliott was the Royal Commissioner into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and wrote the report that recommended that there should be reconciliation in Australia. He sat me down within the first few weeks and basically said just always remember this is about the 97% of the non-Aboriginal community. It's not up to Aboriginal people to fix this stuff for themselves; it's up to us to create the environments within which they can excel. Elliott's story is a fascinating story, and his book, *Red Silk* – it's all steeped in the Dunstan era as well.

Yes, as soon as you said Elliott, I immediately went to his *Red Silk*.

Yes, and having been to that book launch with Chris Sumner doing the launch – when Elliott passed, he maintained his energy and his interest and his mind until he was 93, but four weeks before he died he insisted on coming to a board meeting, which is really unusual for a patron. He just eyeballed the board and said, 'Whilst the data shows that there have been less Aboriginal people harming themselves or being harmed in the justice system since I wrote the report, at that time it was 14% incarceration for Aboriginal people, now it is 26%.' He exhorted the board to remain in the justice space to keep trying to affect what could happen. There was a man whose report was before its time.

And Elliott was before his time in many ways.

Yes, but they implemented the bits which were the practical bits – fix the hanging points, fix the physical design, et cetera, fix the supervision. He wrote recommendations in relation to police interaction and that most Aboriginal people are accelerated in the system because of police initial intervention. He wrote recommendations about education, housing, employment, family relationships, health, as well as reconciliation. Most of those recommendations probably haven't been implemented.

They did the easy ones.

They did the ones that would affect their statistics, so it's a compliance exercise. I think that we should go back to the deaths in custody and systematically go through the recommendations and translate them into today's context and today's language and today's targets.

When was that original report done?

1991. When Elliott passed we were looking for a patron and Chris Sumner, Attorney-General in the Dunstan Government –

I've interviewed Chris as well.

– and launched *Red Silk*. I just went, Chris has to be the person, it's a natural follow-on. Chris maintains his passion for seeing justice being done in a different way, seeing community justice systems – and I've maintained my passion about justice reinvestment and how that should be seen out in the community.

You've led very, very nicely to your involvement with the foundation, haven't you?

I think so.

I think that's a pretty good lead-in.

Well, the natural segue is that our other patron is Lowitja O'Donoghue. Since 2007, which was the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, in that year Lowitja gave an oration for the Don Dunstan Foundation, which now is known as the Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration, and that has been an annual oration.

I've been to nearly all of them and I'm quite familiar with the process but for those who are listening to this, they may not be. They've probably heard of Lowitja but they wouldn't know, necessarily, about the orations. Do you want to give the background of how that actually came about?

During Reconciliation Week, the oration has become one of the signature events of that week. She said that it's always been on the Tuesday, which is only complicated when you've got two Tuesdays because Reconciliation Week is actually eight days, not seven. It is bookended by the anniversary of the 1967 referendum on May 27th, next Monday, and the anniversary of the Mabo case on June 3rd, the handing down of the court case findings on Mabo. So they are the two signature movement changes really.

I didn't actually know why it was that week.

And it's not a Sunday to Sunday.

I knew it was eight days but I've never even thought of the significance of why that particular eight days, so thank you.

That's part of the education to the non-Aboriginal community, that we just need to keep focusing on what does this reconciliation thing mean and why these dates are significant [for the movement].

I think the oration does that very well simply by the choice of speakers.

Very much so. Lowitja has up until the last few years maintained a really strong interest in nominating her speaker, making sure that she contacted and contracted with them to do the job that she wanted done, and there have been no speakers who have declined, even to the point that Paul Keating came a few years ago and gave the most amazing oration around land rights, Native Title, and where we could have been or where we should go in the future. All of these orations are part of the Don Dunstan Foundation website. They are all accessible – they are accessible to read and they are accessible to listen to. It's been, pre-blog times, one of the best opportunities to look at thinking and thinkers in the Aboriginal space. Since 2011 – so that means I'm up to my ninth oration now, and even though I've moved on from the Reconciliation SA State Manager role - - -

You're staying with the oration.

I'm [volunteering as] her driver.

Oh, well!

So I'm picking her up and making sure she gets there, so just being with her to be able to achieve that - - -

We, through Lynn Arnold, are trying to organise an interview with her for this project. We'll go and visit her at home, but depending very much on her health because I believe she is getting frail.

I think it depends on her health.

Yes, we're leaving it very, very open. Lynn goes to see her, I think, every month or so.

He does, and Lynn and I are in conversation.

It's just one of those things that we hope we may be able to do but it's not a pressure thing.

Lynn as well as being significant within the Don Dunstan Foundation has been a reconciliation ambassador, has been a real beacon in looking at influencing the community sector and the

church sector to focus upon Aboriginal employment and Aboriginal opportunity. Lynn is somebody who has been a really strong supporter of the reconciliation movement.

I must say when he gave his speech a few years ago, not just a one line Aboriginal introduction but a whole slab and he actually put it past Lowitja to make sure he was saying it properly. It was an amazing commitment to actually learn that and to do it.

To learn [Kurna and] Pitjantjatjara is incredible.

I know that he is a genius but, even so, it was a fairly inspiring moment when he did that.

I remember Lynn – and this is all pertinent to the Don Dunstan space – I think having that sense of where do you get the opportunity to talk to and hear from change-makers? Where are the influencers? I always remember Lynn talking about 49% of the world's Indigenous languages that are spoken by 10 people or less are Australian languages. He was doing a whole lot of ethnographic studies and language. When I heard him say that I went, what? This is just extraordinary.

And who knows that fact? No-one.

No. Then you think about it and you think, as a society how is it that we've got to that point? Speaking language was illegal. You read Stan Grant's book and he describes walking down, I think, the streets of Dubbo with his grandfather, and his grandfather leans over to his eight-year-old grandson and mentions a couple of words in his own language and the next day he was arrested. When you actually make it illegal to speak language it dies and we've been part of that language aside – I don't know quite how to describe that. I would sometimes go on a stage and talk about an elderly Aboriginal woman about to pass her passing breath and knowing that with her dies the language, that nobody else is speaking it. If you don't have names for things, if you're not allowed to put your cultural stamp with your language on things, what does that mean? What does it mean to the death of culture not just the death of language? There's an amazing movement at the moment to rebirth the languages and reclaim them and spend time to bring that oral culture back, and so that is a significant piece of work that needs to be done.

Hasn't the museum been working quite strongly in that area with some of the lost languages?

The University of Adelaide has been doing a whole lot in Barngarla area. The University of Adelaide has done a lot down with the Boandik community in the South-East. They've certainly got a very strong Kurna program – where I was heading with this, like with many things these are circular conversations, Lynn took the time to learn Pitjantjatjara but I think

now the lingua-franca on this space being Kaurna is the challenge, and he has done that as well to take that next step to focus upon the Kaurna language and actually learn that. He's always very self-effacing in terms of 'with apologies to Kaurna speakers', but he actually does a pretty serviceable job.

That's what Lowitja said to him, because he read it in front of her first to make sure he was saying it correctly and using the right words, and she was very impressed. He doesn't go around talking about that – it was simply because I was interviewing him and we were talking about it. As you said, he's very self-effacing, but he is also a huge leader in getting messages out, and very effectively.

Yes, and he's got the platform to do it. To have that status as former premier, former leader of World Vision, former head of Anglicare, and now sitting in the Cathedral. His role is sort of the priest around town.

He established that role. That was part of his deal in becoming a priest, that he got to do that.

Yes, and I've gone on his radio show a couple of times and just the feelers that he's got to extend into community are quite significant.

I turn up at the talk every year, pay my \$20 or whatever. Tell me about behind the scenes. What is the process you and Lowitja go through to get that organised?

Well, knowing Lowitja, she is somebody who very much knows her mind and so it is about making sure that her wishes are respected whilst, at the same time, not overburdening her or putting too many demands on her. As an attendee of the Don Dunstan Foundation Oration you would also know there's the singing of the Freedom Song afterwards. Bringing together and making that happen doesn't necessarily just happen. That's the sort of organisation behind the scenes that needs to be done – making sure that the guest lists are looked at, the promotions are looked at, the ability to look at the title and how that pans out. Much of that is the logistics for the Don Dunstan Foundation but wherever possible and wherever needed Reconciliation SA would provide a little bit of support.

Within the context that Reconciliation Week is not a quiet week – it's one where there's a major breakfast at the beginning of the week or launching into community events all over the place and Reconciliation SA also took responsibility for the Aboriginal Veterans' Commemorative Service on the last Friday of Reconciliation Week every year. So it is trying to concertina all of that together whilst making sure that Lowitja's interests and needs and wants are attended to.

How does she pick a speaker? I've got the list here and they are all incredibly well-known throughout Australia – they are all what I would call high-flyers. I probably haven't read a couple of the early ones but I've read nearly all them or

attended them, and you're never disappointed. Does she discuss with them what she wants them to talk about? How does that come together?

I think it's a process of what's the topic of the moment as well as who has the messaging or profile to be able to speak to that topic. So bringing Senator Dodson, Noel Pearson, Paul Keating – this is the ilk of people who are in that mix. It would be good with this interview to actually highlight that list.¹

Actually, you've done that, so that people listening to this can simply go to the Don Dunstan website, look at the oration and click whether they want to listen or read. They are easily downloadable; you can print them off or read them later.

I actually think there's a book in it at some stage.

I think there has to be because there have been enough of them now that it's a substantial body of work.

Whether it's the best six or 10 or 12 - - -

Maybe that's something we could discuss with David [Pearson] because they're looking for exciting things to do this year, like they are going to re-issue Don's original cookbook in a slightly different format towards the end of the year. We're having the Dunstan 101 event at the end of this month when the website will be launched, so that would fit in perfectly. People would buy that – it's a good way of celebrating the oration, isn't it? I will raise that formally.

So Lowitja would bring those two components together in terms of the topic of the day, and who could present on that. That was her call. As she gets older and - - -

How old is she now?

I think she's 86 – August is her birthday, so getting close to 87.

The reality is that that will always continue in her name, but then who will take over?

She's aware that that reality is changing, that whilst the oration may continue in her name, her capacity to be planning and influencing and participating is going to change.

Maybe that will be something the foundation will discuss with her, obviously, as to how it will continue.

Yes, or life circumstances will resolve it.

¹ Orators: Lowitja O'Donohue 2007; Tim Costello 2008; Jackie Huggins and Fred Chaney 2009; Ray Martin 2010; Paul Keating 2011; Michael Kirby 2012; Olga Havnen 2013; Patrick Dodson 2014; Marcia Langton 2015; Lynn Arnold 2016; Frank Brennan 2017; Noel Pearson 2018; David Rathman 2019.

Yes, things like that just happen. Tell me about your relationship with Lowitja.

I find that's something that I would need to be really guarded about.

OK.

Lowitja is an incredibly private person and I would never want to be seen to be talking for her or about her or without her knowledge and consent, but South Australia is a small town. It's spread out a fair way but we're a small town. My father was a Methodist minister and led Christian Endeavour. There would be Christian Endeavour camps and Lowitja was on Christian Endeavour camps, and Dad was one of the leaders. So as well as having a professional bond, we've been able to identify a personal bond. A lot of that is around a very complex faith journey and story and this is where Lowitja occasionally talks about her stolen story, but very selectively and in a very protected way. Sometimes she has been attacked on that. In print, there's been material from the Andrew Bolts of the world and suchlike that have challenged the so-called stolen. So you think about the context of the 1940s and '50s, and earlier, the 1930s, and the churches were part of the machinery. The apology that Kevin Rudd gained – the churches needed to stand up and recognise that they were part of that journey. She has told me that one of the things that she rails against the church for is because having been part of the material taking of children, and causing part of the problem, they then walked away from community. So on a second front that actually left and fractured community. That's something that really angered her. She has this very strong personal faith and loves singing the hymns and has very fixed ideas in terms of what a church worship life is about but at the same time there are all of these elements of social context and church history that also needs to be recognised. That's probably as much as I can say about that.

I'm quite comfortable with that, in fact it's interesting that her sister was my neighbour for many, many years but I didn't know that until she died. She and her husband were lovely neighbours and everybody really liked them. Suddenly we didn't see her; it was a very quiet passing. Then someone told me and I'd had no idea. Again, a very private person. I don't know how religious she was but I got the impression she was a very committed person from the conversations that I did have. Again, what a lovely person.

One amazing story – the first Aboriginal teacher in South Australia, Amy was a real power broker in terms of forging a path for Aboriginal education and revered in the Australian Education Union very much so for that, just as Lowitja was a trailbreaker in terms of her nursing. There's a question about whether she was the first because I think there are others who claim to be the first.

I thought she was the first. It's always recorded as the first but sometimes you can never be quite sure.

There are other people who claim, so I don't go into that.

Let's just say she was one of the first.

That's what I said, she was one of the first – a trailblazer.

I just can't imagine how difficult that must have been.

I think she was certainly the first Aboriginal nurse who went on an overseas tour of duty into India where she got a lot of interest in her obstetrics and gynae midwifery nursing. The story of nursing through the '50s and what was expected of her and how she sort of made sure she had her shoes shined – it was 110%.

It had to be better than everyone else, not just as good as.

It had to be better than everyone else; never any question of being able to be picked up and fault pointed at her.

Even though with all the work that's being done on reconciliation now, not a lot of young people necessarily know that – people of our vintage, of course we know because we've admired her for so many years and we know about her history but it's a story that should be shared somehow with younger people, to realise what people have had to go through – that they weren't recognised until the 1967 referendum. Things like that, young people – it's not their fault of course, but it's an education exercise that probably needs to be reinforced.

When you think about the time of the early '60s, and this is Don's time, and this is very much the social change - - -

We had the Dunstan decade in the '70s, and being an active attorney and things like that in the '60s.

His link with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal community and Aboriginal politics was profound. The co-chair of Reconciliation SA, Professor Peter Buckskin, remembers that as a young lad over in Yorke Peninsula where the Narungga people live, that Dunstan came to town and that it was this big, big deal that here was this man who would actually spend time with Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal community, and get to understand what was happening at that time.

Which other leader in Australia would have even considered that?

Obviously the whole connection up into the APY Lands is significant as well, and land rights and suchlike, but you couldn't say that Dunstan was the only one thinking that way and certainly wasn't the only one who prosecuted that. The Liberal Party wasn't far behind in that time. Dunstan was a driver but I think there were other people recognising that the deal

needed to be rewritten, that some sense of self-governance, self-management and empowerment needed to be part of the equation, which is forward-thinking. We even struggle with that now.

Look what happened at the weekend [2019 federal election] – that’s a whole other story. You’ve got to wonder where we’re heading as a nation. I get quite challenged with the concept at times.

I think that one thing we need to keep coming back to, and that was a Dunstan lesson, is, what does it mean to be in a civil society and what does it mean to be in an egalitarian society? We Australians pride ourselves on being fair and reasonable whereas, in fact, at the moment the ‘me-tooism’, the individual prevailing, and let’s not look at a sense of fairness and how wealth gets distributed because as long as I’ve got some it doesn’t matter. The papers extolled the \$33 billion bounce in the share market on Monday, which is fine if you’ve got shares.

But most of us don’t.

Most people don’t.

I didn’t even know what a franking credit was until this election!

What does it do for the three million below the poverty line? What does it do for people on Newstart?

And the ones that might be above the poverty line but aren’t doing too well anyway.

Well, there’s a lot of struggle and if you don’t spend time trying to understand that story and go, how can you use the levers of the whole community to affect that, then the individual prevails?

Just in passing, on the election, does that sort of attitude from the Australian public after all the work you’ve done in a very long career, does that frustrate you to see this me-tooism coming to the fore and having our version of Trump?

There are aspects of it which are cyclical. The work I’ve done in the last decade in reconciliation has just cemented for me that we are a racist society. When you actually jump to that conclusion, then you realise that there are things about attitudes and the way in which we treat others that are a fundamental problem. Personally, I believe that last weekend’s election should have been about the environment – it should be about the generations of the future.

Everyone was telling you in ABC – the compass thing, or whatever they do – everyone, their top priority was the environment by a long shot.

But then 1.4 million people who respond to an ABC vote count have a particular bias and orientation which is not relevant in Townsville. We do need to think about how do we all deal with these tough issues? Rather than going, this is black and this is white, here is where we need to go because it's a simple intervention and we'll be able to do it straight away because we can do it within a political cycle. The reality is that there needs to be long-term thinkers and long-term systems in place to be able to effect that change. Rather than us saying we shall not use coal we should be saying if we were to plan a transition from coal to other power which then meant that we were able to balance our budgets better over the long-term, and you took a 20-year plan for that, what would that look like? But that doesn't reflect an election cycle.

The thing is we have a three-year election cycle. Nobody, except someone like Don - - -

These issues should not be solely political; they should not be solely scientific; they should not be solely moral; they should not be solely social. We've actually got to see them through all of those lenses to arrive at the solution. That's why I think a change-maker and change-breaker like Don is needed because presidential style campaigns aren't going to fit that. Leaders who are nuanced to the nth degree so they can never break out and show their own personality can't do that.

Well, they're not allowed to; they're so managed.

They're not allowed to, and in the Liberal Party's context, they are beholden to the few.

Or one particular few!

No, there are several.

I'm thinking of the \$60 million dollar man [Clive Palmer].

I'm thinking of Matt Canavan and - - -

You mean within the party.

Within the party – the Abbot voice, the Christensen voice, the Dutton voice, the Barnaby Joyce voice. The few actually mould what happens for the rest of the country rather than being in the interests of the country. That's not just the interests for tomorrow but interests for 100 years time.

I was thinking about Lowitja and Don because I think that whole sense of – with the oration she makes sure that Don's daughter is invited and often she is able to get there, but the last few years she has insisted on Steven [Cheng] being on the list, and recognises that he'll actually come and be sitting - - -

And he's there; he sits with her.

That's it. I find that really fascinating because I think that is a picture that puts together who Don was, who Lowitja is, and the sorts of issues that they have challenged and faced and worked through. To think, a conservative, Christian, black woman embracing same-sex relationships, and not being judgemental in that space. I think that's quite extraordinary.

Let's just stop on that really wonderful note. Thank you.

Have we done our 50 minutes?

Pretty close.

Wow! That was one of the things in my mind – I thought we do need to bring that in.

And that's a perfect way to summarise it, isn't it?

It's a perfect circle, isn't it?

Isn't it, from where you started to there? Thank you very much.

Thank you.