



# Didgeri, individual therapeutic conversations and No More Silence

by Anthony Newcastle



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## Abstract

This paper describes work among a group of Aboriginal men who meet regularly in Brisbane. It interweaves stories of individual therapeutic conversations, the development of a community group called Didgeri, which connects people to culture and to each other, and the creation of a social action project to reduce the shame and silence experienced by Aboriginal men who were subjected to sexual abuse in childhood. It explores how narrative therapy ideas have informed this work.

**Key words:** *Aboriginal men, narrative therapy, didgeridoo, social action, childhood sexual abuse*

A note re language: This paper includes dialogue in Aboriginal English (Butcher, 2008). Spelling, grammar and syntax may differ from what the reader is accustomed to.

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties, they will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own way, based on particular skills and knowledges. (Denborough, Koolmatrie, Mununggirritj, Marika, Dhurrkay, & Yunupingu, 2006, p. 20)

My involvement in the Aboriginal political arena is informed by having grown up in a marginalised community. The community saw itself in terms of justice and injustice, reflecting and responding to the subtle and overt prejudice of dominant groups. My growing sense of the possibilities of community development had its roots in these formative years, and was supported by my later work in Aboriginal affairs in regional and remote communities, and my work in conflict resolution processes. In my very late 30s, I entered into the performing arts, becoming a playwright, actor and performer. This provided tremendous opportunity for reflection about history and knowledge, and allowed me to find ways to tell stories of Aboriginal people and communities to black and white audiences across many parts of Australia.

As a community worker and facilitator informed by these paths, I had been using a theatre-based externalising process with groups addressing community health concerns, domestic violence and lateral violence in regional and remote communities. The use of theatre, drama and storying helped me to create the safe spaces required when having discussions about the challenges in a community. Engaging groups using theatre-based techniques to address the challenges across their lives can be useful and relevant to people's contexts. It provides opportunity for local people to feel heard and collaboratively vision their desired outcomes. However, I have come to reflect that theatre-based practice can benefit from being informed by established therapeutic foundations, such as those offered by narrative therapy. Being able to underpin theatre-based work with broader therapeutic understandings has been particularly helpful in communicating with my clients, the organisations and government bodies that engage me, particularly given that governments and organisations often approach with extreme caution any new and unfamiliar interventions.

## *My introduction to narrative ideas*

One of the counsellors from my workplace attended a two-week narrative therapy intensive at Dulwich Centre in Adelaide. When she returned, full of enthusiasm about this 'new therapy', she shared some information with me about externalising. One of the first things I read when she handed me a book on narrative therapy was a phrase: 'This makes it possible for people to experience an identity that is separate from the problem: the problem becomes the problem not the person' (White, 2007, p. 9). After a little while thinking about this idea, I decided I really liked the possibilities that came from it in terms of therapeutic discussions and discussions generally. The idea that there might be a method of therapy that separates the person from the problem, one which then encourages people to rely on their own skills or knowledge to minimise the problem's influence in their lives, was exciting and very relevant to the client groups I was working with.

Fast forward eighteen months and now that I have learnt more about the narrative framework and practice, I have come to appreciate many of its intricacies, including the delicate balance between being directive and/or influential in a person's story – or indeed the stories of groups or communities.

We do play a significant directive role ... But that's not to say that we are directing things in the sense that we are authoring the actual accounts of people's lives that are expressed in conversations. In all of these conversations we do hear, in people's stories, a whole range of expressions that provide points of entry to different accounts of their lives. (White, 2000, p. 98)

Informed by these ideas, I began to explore other ways to work with the people I was meeting that might be more collaborative and culturally appropriate, and which might allow space for a more honest and freeing counselling discussion between the client and me.

## *Individual therapeutic conversations*

When engaging in individual conversations with a client, I have been keen to explore and practice the idea of balancing direction with discovery; of being decentred but continuing to be influential in a way that assists my client to talk about the challenges that brought them to counselling, but also opens possibilities for exploring those neglected or forgotten stories that remind us of our values, strengths, purpose and possibilities.

David is a transplant recipient. An Aboriginal man from regional Queensland now living in Brisbane, David has been a truck-diver for about 30 years, both long haul and now delivering heavy loads for construction and development sites.

When David was transferred to me as a client, our first four counselling discussions were via the phone, as David was often on the road, not returning until well after 5pm. The first time we spoke on the phone was in strange circumstances. David had been on hold for some time, thinking he was going to speak to a counsellor he had spoken to before, but he was put through to me. After I introduced myself I could hear that David was struggling with his emotions.

**Anthony:** Thanks for staying with us here, David. Sounds as though there are some real emotional challenges you're dealing with at the moment, and I'm looking forward to maybe seeing if we can talk about these. What do you think is going on for you?

**David:** I don't know, I'm sorry mate. I don't know what's going on with me, I just can't seem to stop this shit, tears just well up and I can't stop them.

**Anthony:** That's okay, Brother. I know our emotions can feel as though they just sneak up on us and just take over, hey? And you're right, sometimes it can feel as though we have no control over them.

David then burst into tears and it sounded as though he was now sobbing. I sat and listened for a short moment, mindful that we were on the phone and I wanted to let David know I was still there.

**Anthony:** That's okay mate, we can just yarn you and me. Do you think you need to pull over and we talk or are you right?

**David :** Nah, I gotta keep going, gotta get this load to the bottom end of the Gold Coast. If it's alright, we can just talk, hey? I don't know what about.

I realised that David, an Aboriginal person, and I, an Aboriginal person, had now been talking for some time but had not had the opportunity to do what Aboriginal people do when we first meet and speak, that is to place ourselves Aboriginality or culturally, to describe ourselves in terms of our Aboriginality: who our people are, where they come from, who we are in this context, where we live now and why. As Aunty Barb Wingard says, 'This process all happens before we think about talking about our own lives' (Wingard & Lester, 2001, p. vi). I introduced myself to David properly.

**Anthony:** Well, maybe first things first, Brother. So you know who I am, as I said, my name's Anthony. I'm Aboriginal, my mob are the Tjingali in central Northern Territory on my dad's side and Mutijebin around the coast west from Darwin on my mother's side. I'm originally from Darwin and worked right through the Territory, through Queensland and remote communities too, but I've lived here in Brisbane for the past 22 years. What about you, where you from?

**David:** I'm from Ipswich as a kid. I've been living in Brisbane for 20 years. I'm a Kamilaroy man on my mother's side and my dad is from the Quandamooka.

**Anthony:** Kamilaroy, that's a big nation you come from there my Brother. And the Quandamooka – Moreton Bay and Stradbroke Island – you're a salt water and bore water Murri.

**David:** Yeah, but I mainly grew up around that Ipswich area and Gatton, always felt more like a country boy than anything else.

Given David was behind the wheel of a 20 tonne motor vehicle going 100km/h down the Gold Coast Highway, and given this was the first time we had talked, I hoped David and I might find something he wanted to talk about that might focus him a little. I was looking for something we may have both shared: our Aboriginal heritage or connection to place, a background growing up in the country or even children or family; something that would ground David, invite a conversation, and help to reduce the intensity of the moment, before possibly making space for David to try to make sense of what he was feeling.

Having discovered a little more about David in terms of his Aboriginal history and what he did for a living, I wanted to continue getting to know David as a person separate from his problem, and to move towards a re-authoring conversation that might give us some space from the problem story.

...re-authoring conversations...provide an opportunity for people to participate in the rich descriptions of some of the skills of living and knowledges of life that are associated with the alternative stories of their lives and their identities. (White, 2011, p. 9)

I asked David about this idea of being a country boy.

**Anthony:** When you say you see yourself as a country boy, what does that mean for you?

David described growing up in the Ipswich region before it was the big town it had grown into. He talked about being known in his community and being connected to his community in his youth, particularly through football, work and because of his father's work and workmates.

**David:** I grew up workin on the roads with the council all round that area. Just about everyone I knew growing up worked on the roads. I was only a young fella but I remember my dad and the blokes from the work crew he was part of, there were about nine or 10 of them, and even though they weren't related to us we saw them as our uncles.

**Anthony:** So how old were you when you started working with these men and how long did you work with them?

**David:** Oh, I was about 16 maybe getting up close to 17. I worked with them, watching them and helping out doin all the heavy work there with them until I was about 19. And then I got my truck licence and started workin on the trucks, hauling instead of out there on the road.

**Anthony:** So driving trucks has been a big part of your life. Have you stayed with it the whole time or have you gone away from it and come back to it across your life?

**David:** Pretty well stuck with it the whole time, been drivin for 32 years now. You gotta keep going, the old man taught me that: stay workin.

**Anthony:** A lot of years and miles under your belt. Has it been something you've stayed with because you enjoy it or has it been something you've had to do, or maybe a little bit of both?

**David:** The old man and the fellas I worked with as a young fella taught me about work and hard work. And that's what I prefer to do. I've gone away from it just for a short stint but it gets hard on the roads, people pulling out in front of you and crossing lanes, not givin you stopping time. In a fully loaded truck it gets a bit hairy some times, but yeah I like it. Pays the bills and I don't know anything about computers [laughs].

In this relatively short space of time, David's voice had cleared and we were now just yarning. This space had allowed David to talk from a different perspective, one

with some distance from the problem feelings linked to a problem-saturated storyline and with openings to his preferred identity story.

I went on to talk with David for another 15 minutes. During this time, we talked a little about those computers he didn't know anything about. We talked about heritage and identity and a little about his feelings of loneliness. We talked about the men in the work crew many years ago and this work ethic they taught David about, a work ethic which continues to be very much a part of his life. Some of our discussion was also about his kidney disease and journey to becoming a transplant recipient. I left David saying that I really looked forward to sitting and talking more about these things in his life and the things he has learnt from them that have made him the man he is today. I also said that I was really interested in this journey around being an organ transplant recipient.

Early in our conversation, I had the feeling I could assist with his apparent feeling of being unaided by inviting David to consider the skills and knowledge he carried with him across his life, possibly through a re-membering conversation (White, 2007, p.134). A danger that crossed my mind in deciding to influence our conversation along this path was the possibility that many or all of these men who were so important to David's identity may have passed away, and that his feeling of aloneness or separation might be amplified.

David and I had two more phone counselling sessions before I went to meet David at his house one afternoon. When I arrived, David met me at the door. Although he had sounded okay on the phone when I rang to advise I was on my way today, he was obviously now not in a good space as we sat on separate couches in his living room. David thanked me for coming but then quickly said, 'I hope I don't waste your time mate, I'm having a little bit of trouble thinkin and just feelin a bit all over the shop'.

David and I talked a bit about how things had been going for him and I asked about the discussion we first had over the phone when he was quite upset in the truck. David said that the talk had helped. I asked David what it was like for him during that conversation, and conversations since, where we talked about the skills and knowledges he learnt from his dad and the men he worked with all those years ago. This presented an opportunity to gain a rich social and cultural history of significant skills, knowledges and initiatives (Denborough et al., 2006). David said that it really helped to think about those fellas from the road crews, even think about their sons and family. David played football with many of the men's sons as they grew up in the region. He had a feeling of belonging at that time which he did not

have now. I asked David if he thought the loss of those connections was significant to the way he was feeling.

**David:** Yeah, that's probably it. Most of them are gone now, even my mum and dad both passed away. I've got a brother and I try to catch up with him when I can and my two sons that live with their mother. But it's hard, ya know. I'm always working. I've got some old mates but I don't really have that connection anymore, even with my Aboriginal heritage, it just feels gone.

I suggested to David that I'd like to talk a little more about those people he talked about, to find out a little more about his mum and dad too.

David said that he had learnt a lot from his mum and dad, but that he just had so much going on in his head right then that he found it hard to 'break through the thoughts'.

Remaining influential, I asked David what kinds of things he learnt from his mum and dad, and in particular if there was anything that he learnt that he now carries with him.

As we talked about learning to drive machinery with road workers, learning to handle larger rigs and about how he was taught to make sure he handled with care the responsibility of driving trucks, over time, David and I were able to thicken some of those very thin stories about his life, which he would previously mention almost in passing. For instance, through re-remembering conversations it unfolded that David's dad, as an Aboriginal man who had grown up poor, instilled a real value in David and his brother of being able and willing to talk to anyone, black or white, poor or wealthy. As a result of this value and principle, David's dad had friends from all walks of life. I asked David what it meant to him that this value or ability had been passed to him from his father. David said that it has helped in those real hard times, times when 'you just gotta talk', like when David was diagnosed with kidney disease. The disease began as an infection and although he recovered, the infection took hold again and eventually David went onto the organ transplant waiting list. His ability and willingness to talk to people helped when he was finding out from doctors and nurses what this organ transplant journey was going to be like: what to expect, and when to have the really hard talks about what might happen if or when you don't get the transplant you need to live.

By the time David's kidney was failing him his father had passed away.

When the kidney disease had really taken hold, David was still driving big rigs.

**David:** Because I knew how to talk to people, to just say what you gotta say, I went to the big boss of the hauling company and told him I had kidney disease, that I was on the waiting list for a transplant and told him I still want to drive because I gotta earn a living and I asked him if he was alright with that.

**Anthony:** And what was the result?

**David:** Well, I kept driving, but unlike the other fellas getting into their trucks with lunch boxes, I had something extra. I used to get in the truck, set up my lunch box and then hang my medical drips up in the rig. That kept my medications up-to-date while I dropped off loads around south-east Queensland.

**Anthony:** What was that like for you to do that and what would you call that - taking these actions to keep working and making way for yourself to get the medications you needed?

**David:** It's something you have to do. I've seen other fellas having to do that before when I was drivin but they never kept it up or they had to give up drivin. But I had to keep drivin and I knew if I wanted to survive and give myself the best chance to get the kidney transplant, I had to keep my drips up in the truck.

**Anthony:** What would you call that, doing all those things you need to do to survive?

**David:** I don't really have a word to call this, it's just doing what you have to do to survive.

Many of the discussions between David and I used this idea of 'doing what you have to do to survive' to encapsulate the idea that you surround yourself with the kind of people you need in your life to reduce stress in your life.

As David and I continued to talk about what he had learnt from his dad, we also talked about what David had learned from his mother. David's dad had been buried at Stradbroke Island as this was his father's ancestral home. Some years later when David's mother passed away, his mother's family wanted her buried in a small rural town outside of Ipswich, near the border in Kamilaroy country, her ancestral country and an area where she had lived her whole life. Remaining decentred and curious, I asked David what it was like to have his mother buried in the Ipswich area and his father on Stradbroke Island. David said it always felt as though they should have been buried together.

**David:** My youngest son lives with his mum. The 26-year-old lives his own life, they're good young fellas and they have Christmas with her family. I got no-one anymore apart from my brother, so every year I go on Christmas day with a lunch box and sit down at my dad's grave at Dunwich Cemetery with my mum and dad. Even though Mum is buried out near Ipswich, for me they're together there in spirit. Then the next day I go across to the Ipswich cemetery and sit down there with Mum. That's how I spent my Christmas day every year now for the last few years.

I asked David what he got from doing this, why it was important to you to go across to the island and spend the day with the spirits of your mother and father. David said since the transplant and the time leading up to it, he had thought about lots of things in his life.

**David:** When you have a talk with your mother and your family about planning your own funeral, even your own wake, you kind of think different about your life. I miss my mum and dad and just go over and sit and talk with them, talk about our lives and family with them.

David described how being on the list for organ transplantation was difficult. He had continued to work driving trucks: organising drips in the truck, making sure his diet was good, drinking plenty of water, no alcohol, all in the hope that he would get the call to get a transplant. David said there were no guarantees, but if you're not ready when the call comes then you let yourself down, and let down your family and the family of the person who donated the organ that could keep you alive. David said these were the lessons he learnt growing up, the lessons he learned from his mum and dad. It was about respect.

During these discussions with David, he talked about a gap that remained in his life. After working from such a young age out on the roads and then as a truck driver, and because work was important to him, David reflected that he sacrificed cultural and Aboriginal family connections. This wasn't because he didn't identify as Aboriginal, but because he was working. Now, at age 50, and having lost the opportunity to talk about his Aboriginal identity and connection to country with his mother and father, David said he enjoyed at least talking with me as an Aboriginal man about some of these things. Because working in a truck and haulage company, you can't talk about these things.

David began reflecting on the way some of his non-Aboriginal co-workers talked about 'Aboriginals'. 'Racism was in your face nearly every day': a truckie (truck driver)

would see Aboriginal people walking down the street or gathered somewhere and say things on the CB radio like 'sitting here waiting to go in at Woodridge and couple of drunken Abos hanging around as usual, doin nothing, drunks or drugos'. Then someone else, another truckie, would reply with 'yeah, just want to shoot the fucken lot of em, good for nothing...' David said this kind of thing goes on more than most people would admit. For years over the radio in his truck he had heard swearing and the words 'Abo', 'boongs', 'coon', 'niggas' used to describe or talk about Aboriginal people. It was really dragging him down.

He said that there were lots of good people driving trucks, but there were lots of truckies who just hated the 'Abo'. He said he had argued with people about the way they talked to him about 'boongs' and 'niggas' or 'coons' being 'just worthless, not wanting to be like everyone else in society and blaming society for themselves', but it changed nothing in the way many continued to talk. Sometimes, when you say something some fellas got worse (their language about Aboriginal people on the CB radio or in David's presence). As our discussion went on, David became more frustrated, angry and hurt about these situations.

**Anthony:** What do you think you can do or say in the face of this, if even for yourself, to protect you in some way and not really for or about the benefit of those who say these things?

Instead of engaging in this conversation, David talked about the weeks leading up to his transplant.

**David:** By the time I was getting close, the doctors told me I only had a few weeks left. My kidneys had just about shut right down. I knew I was getting close too. I had no energy left, I could hardly walk and if I did it was only a few steps. I would just about crawl to the bathroom or toilet and then all my energy was gone from that so I had to wait there till I mustered the energy so I could go back to bed. I hardly even had the breath to talk, that would take energy out of me too. My mum was with me and supporting me, not living with me but supporting me, she wasn't well herself, but she was there for me.

**Anthony:** It must have been challenging for her to watch you go through this, but as you say, she was there for you, supporting you through this as much as she could. What does that say about your mum's hopes for you, the support that she gave you even though she was not well at that time?

**David:** Well, it says she wanted me to survive, to live. And that's what she said to me, 'don't give up, even though things are bad, don't give up. If there's a chance, then there's a chance, even if it's only a small one'. She said she prayed for me all the time and that she really wanted me to have a life.

**Anthony:** And this was even during this time when you say you had no energy to go on, you had to drag yourself to the toilet. You had planned and discussed with your family your own funeral arrangements and even the wake. You were on the edge, the doctors had just about prepared you for death but your mum was saying 'don't give up'. What did that mean to you?

**David:** Well, it meant a lot. I only had weeks to go, I'd lost my father, my mum was sick, my kids weren't living with me, they were with their mum and I was on my own. All I had left was what my mum was saying to me, the support of the people from the organ donation, they were pretty good, and what I grew up with to keep going and get on.

**Anthony:** So even in the face of this most serious of things to face there were still people in your corner, and there was your mum saying 'don't give up'.

**David:** Yeah. I'll never forget the night I got the call to say that an organ was there for me. I got up to go for a piss. It was one o'clock in the morning. Just when I finished and was making my way back to bed the phone rang. Lucky I was near it and answered. They told me I had to get in there, it was ready. You only get about an hour or so. Before I got dressed I looked at my phone again and saw that I had two missed calls from them. They only ring you three times and if you don't answer on the third call, they ring the next person on the list. That organ you've been waiting for goes to someone else.

**Anthony:** Wow, so would you call that luck, that you got up at the right time?

**David:** Yeah, luck, but I think it was Mum too, her will saying don't give up. She passed away only a couple of weeks after I got that call. I had nothing left in the tank, I slept through two other calls from the hospital but something woke me up and got me up to be there when that third and final call came in...

All that and then my mum died. She went through the whole journey with me, supporting me and

then only just saw me get the transplant and passed away herself.

Knocks the wind right out of ya.

David described what it was like for him to go through the procedure that provided him with an organ from another person and how the hospital and rehab people were there to help him. David also talked about how although he knew his Aboriginal family supported him, he didn't think they really knew what to say. Quite often when he wanted to be around people from his culture and identity group it was difficult because of the restrictions he had as a new transplant recipient.

I asked David about the support he thought he needed from his community, the Aboriginal community. David talked about being so close to dying that you want to be around people. He wanted to have cultural or identity connections.

I suggested to David that if he ever wanted to come down to meet some other Aboriginal men who come together to learn the didgeridoo then he was welcome. These fellas met as a way to have some cultural connection and express or affirm their own Aboriginal identities in a big city where it is sometimes difficult to connect in a way that you want to.

During my early conversations with David, he continued to speak of this feeling of being alone and having nothing left anymore and of not knowing where he sat in terms of his identity as an Aboriginal man. As a result of our re-membering conversations some of these feelings of loss and loneliness shifted and their effects upon his life reduced.

During my work with David I introduced re-membering conversations, and we had externalising and re-authoring conversations about some of the challenges in his life. As a result, David found ways to re-engage with elements of his Aboriginal history and culture. For now, though, we will leave David's story, returning to it later. At this point, I would like to describe the creation of a community group process.

*Didgeri: A community group process connecting people with culture and to each other*

I believe that it is unrealistic to expect that individual therapeutic responses will ever be able to respond adequately. The need for organised community responses is urgent. (White, 2000, p. 33)

Some 12 months ago I let it be known among the Aboriginal community in Brisbane that each Sunday I would be at a

specific location down by the Brisbane River, sitting with about eight didgeridoos. That I would teach any Aboriginal man or young man who came along how to play. For about five Sundays I sat on my own. No-one came along. Each week I would continue to send the same message across the community. Eventually, men started to attend. From three men and boys for a couple of weeks, an additional four came along and after a number of weeks there were nine participants. Our group soon grew to 12 to 16 participants regularly attending the now-fortnightly didgeridoo lessons.

The gatherings were a mix of men who knew a little bit of their Aboriginal cultural heritage and those who knew next to nothing. My desire to create space and a place for such a group of men to engage safely around their Aboriginality was born out of my understanding of the effects of government interventions such as separation and assimilation policies.

Now, every second Sunday down by the Brisbane River a group of Aboriginal men meet to learn to play the didgeridoo. There is talk about Aboriginal identity in the twenty-first century, definitional ceremony, Dreaming stories. There is camaraderie, learning some new things every now and again (including narrative therapy terms) and lunch is provided by my wife, Lesa, each and every fortnight as her contribution to a social action. As a skilled cook, her contribution is always welcomed, and as she has said a number of times, 'not everyone wants to or can run regular groups, but I can contribute in my own way'.

### ***A space to reconnect with culture and identity***

I first met James when he came along to Didgeri in early 2016. He was brought by an Aboriginal worker, Gordon, from the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse whose position was located at an Aboriginal organisation, an Aboriginal organisation that reconnects Aboriginal people with family. Gordon said that James (who had lost his mother 15 years ago) had gone through the reunification process and had visited his mother's country out west a little earlier that year. He thought James might benefit from the opportunity to regularly meet with Aboriginal men back here in Brisbane as a way to re-engage with his Aboriginal identity.

Gordon and I had previously shared numerous discussions about the kind of Aboriginal men's didgeridoo group I wanted to establish. We believed that there was a significant number of Aboriginal people (men and women) in Brisbane who were reluctant to strongly and publicly identify as Aboriginal, either because they felt they didn't look 'Aboriginal' enough or because they didn't know enough about their Aboriginal heritage to warrant disclosure except in the right circumstances. We knew that there were many

people like James: people whose Aboriginal heritage stories were taken from them in their youth as a result of authorities and institutions removing children from their families. This may have effected them directly, or through the experience of removal of relatives one, two or even three generations earlier.

I understood well that if you don't already carry your 'Aboriginal card' (a metaphor indicating some knowledge about country and a claim to cultural identity) then this can be quite challenging if and when non-Aboriginal people might deny or diminish your claim of Aboriginality, and it is even more confronting if Aboriginal people do the same. I have sat in numerous gatherings, meetings, at conferences and even among groups of community members (black or white), government and non-government workers, where someone's Aboriginality claim was being questioned.

Although I agree that Aboriginal people often want to know 'where you come from, who your mob are and how you might be connected', how these questions are asked is really important. We must find ways to enquire that do not discourage our stolen generations coming back to us. Otherwise, if we ask in ways that diminish people's culture claims, the result is that the architects of past policies of assimilation, the segregators and the perpetrators who stole the children and tried to break down an entire culture, win all over again. Only difference is that it's now us, Aboriginal people diminishing Aboriginal people's culture claims, carrying on the work for those long past architects.

Knowing a little bit of James's story, I asked James about his Aboriginality:

**Anthony:** Have you always identified as Aboriginal?

**James:** Kind of. I think I always knew I was but my grandmother told us we were from the middle east, she didn't want us growing up as Aboriginal because of what she saw happening to Aboriginal families – being taken away and all.

**Anthony:** So what did that mean for your mother?

**James:** Well, she was sent away from where she was born and never went back there. She grew up there known by all the people and she knew everyone as well. She was about 14 when she was sent away to be trained as a domestic, to get schooled.

**Anthony:** So her Aboriginality?

**James:** Her mum tried to hide it from the people in the community but the authorities knew. So they took her away.



**Anthony:** What was that experience like for her?

**James:** She hated it, got treated real bad all the time by the white people. The man in the house she worked in was good, but the woman, his wife, treated mum like a dog. It hurt her, hurt her deep I think. Hurts me to think about it.

**Anthony:** Did she want to go back to the place and town of her birth?

**James:** Yeah, but she never made it. So years later, after she died, I went for her. Gordon and his organisation organised it.

**Anthony:** What was that like for you, to go back to your mother's town, to go back to your mother's country, a place she knew as home?

**James:** We got to the town and that was good. But when we went out bush to the country that was her traditional area, where she was running around as a kid, it was real emotional. I just had to wander off on my own away from everyone else and just started cryin out there in the bush.

**Anthony:** Where do you think these emotions that moved you to tears were coming from?

**James:** Just that she never got to see that place again. That she was taken away from there, a place where she was known and sent to someplace else and then to a home where she was treated like a mangy dog by some white woman who never really knew her for being her.

James chose to acknowledge his own Aboriginality, but quietly, just between him and his mother while she was still alive. With the experiences of his mother and the lessons of his grandmother, James's Aboriginal identity and its legitimacy continued to be something he grappled with.

**Anthony:** James, what about your brothers and your sisters, about their Aboriginality?

**James:** That's what's made it hard for me too. None of them want anything to do with Aboriginality. In fact, out of the 10 of us, a couple are real racist when it comes to Aboriginal stuff.

**Anthony:** How does that sit with you then given you do identify and your son and your grandsons identify?

**James:** Well, I don't have much to do with that brother and sister. I still love them, but it's hard. They grew up listening to and being around people who taught em that Aboriginals are drunks and no good, only after money from the government all the time, you know. But because of my mum, because she was Aboriginal and knew it, I feel it. I identify just like my mum, and my kids do too.

**Anthony:** So even now, in your mid-50s, you have family who deny their own Aboriginality and yours too.

**James:** Yeah. A couple of brothers think it's because I must be gettin something from the government. One of my brothers and a sister have gone to try and get a confirmation of their Aboriginality just in case they can get something from the government.

**Anthony:** How does that sit with you?

**James:** It's wrong, just wrong that they want to be Aboriginal just in case there might be something in it. That's why I don't talk to them much.

### *The next generation a different way*

James's 26-year-old son, Matthew, now comes along regularly with James to Didgeri. In fact, he has become acknowledged among our group as someone who shows other members techniques for playing their didgeridoo. Both James and his son are hard workers, James as a maintenance person at a warehouse on the south side of Brisbane and Matthew as a crew leader with a retaining wall and fencing company. As a result, neither man has much opportunity to associate with other Aboriginal people or engage in discussion around Aboriginal culture or identity. It wasn't until Matthew began attending with his dad that I really appreciated the significance that the Didgeri group had for both men in terms of cultural identity and, as reported by Gordon, James' case worker, in terms of their social emotional cultural wellbeing.

**James:** Ya know, Anthony, having you and Gordon and the other fellas around at Didgeri, I've seen a change in the young fella [Matthew]. He wouldn't go anywhere or do anything apart from fishing. He'd just get home from work and do hardly anything. But now he's practicing his didgeridoo, painting artwork, and even revving me up.

**Anthony:** I'm glad, Brother, real glad. What do you think it is that has helped this change for him?

**James:** Well, feelin a part of something I think. Yeah, and

how he refers to you and Gordon as Uncle, and the way you fellas talk to him, ya know, like a nephew. That means a lot to me, means a lot to him too.

As with many of the Aboriginal people I meet, James came to a gathering as an opportunity to reconnect with his Aboriginality. It also became a way for James to connect his son with his Aboriginality and what James referred to as stronger older Aboriginal men. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, to refer to someone older than you as uncle is a sign of respect and acknowledgement toward that person. To have the 'elder' then refer or engage with you as a nephew or niece can contribute quite significantly to an acceptance of you more broadly across the Aboriginal community.

In a big city with over a million people, many of the men of Didgeri are far from our ancestral homelands. I have attempted to find ways to strengthen connection, to introduce some element of ceremony to our gatherings. We now perform a particular ritual each time we meet. This is a definitional ceremony that helps to tell the story of what we have been doing and where we want to journey individually and as a group.

... definitional ceremonies are rituals that acknowledge and regrade people's lives, lives in contrast to many rituals of contemporary culture that judge and degrade people's lives ... Definitional ceremonies provide people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of carefully chosen outsider witnesses (White, 2007, p. 165).

Didgeri is transforming. While it continues to be a place where Aboriginal men come to learn didgeridoo, it is also becoming a place where we talk about challenges in our community and our responsibilities as men. Narrative ideas and language are being introduced in a way that supports collective healing. I have introduced ideas of externalising, re-membering conversations and definitional ceremony (Myerhoff, 1982, 1986; White, 2007). I have talked a little about how definitional ceremony helped a group of Jewish people now living in the USA and how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) talked about 'the danger of a single story'. I have invited discussion with some of the men at Didgeri about what Adichie's ideas might mean for the way people see us as Aboriginal men. And as importantly, what single stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. As the men engaged with these ideas, they began to respond to each other differently. This became most obvious as we worked together on the No More Silence campaign.

## *A social action project to reduce the shame and silence of Aboriginal men who have been subjected to sexual abuse in childhood*

Among the profound impacts that men subjected to child sexual abuse can experience are an overwhelming feeling of isolation, of being alone; a sense of personal failure and being somehow different from all other men. Group work plays a particularly powerful therapeutic role in addressing these impacts for men and enhancing their personal and relational well-being. (Foster & Goodwin, 2017, p. 12)

In late 2015, I met with Gordon Glenbar and Gary Foster. Gary was working at Anglicare's Living Well service with men who had been sexually abused in childhood. Gordon is an Aboriginal man who was working as a special projects officer for a reunification project linking Aboriginal people with family lost. Additionally, Gordon was supporting community members to engage with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Gordon and I have known each other a long time. We've always talked about our community, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and about the ongoing challenges our communities face in confronting the negative impacts of colonisation and resulting intergenerational traumas.

Gordon, Gary and I spoke of how to raise awareness and offer support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men who have been sexually abused in childhood. We spoke of how individuals, families and communities are often experiencing such difficulties and how many struggle to cope with daily life, and that the subject of helping men who were sexually abused as children is not talked about or referred to much at all. We discussed how difficult it is to raise this subject; how the men themselves struggle to talk about it. We acknowledged the importance of qualified and connected individuals and organisations to lead discussions and negotiate community workshops, and the extensive work done by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in addressing sexual violence. We also discussed how important it was for local Aboriginal men to take responsibility for starting supportive conversations about this issue with Aboriginal men and their communities.

### ***Inviting Didgeri***

At Didgeri, I raised the idea of the men using their voices to support men who were sexually abused as children and were now living with the consequences. We discussed the

idea of us, as every-day community members, acting to help raise awareness and offer support.

In addition to being a space where we as Aboriginal men gather to learn the didgeridoo as a way to connect or reconnect with culture and heritage, Didgeri had become a place where we talked about community, identity and culture, about raising kids and dealing with anger, about family and being a good dad or husband. All the men who come along know they are welcome to bring a son or nephew, grandson, or friend. Didgeri is a place where Aboriginal men can build and enrich connection. No alcohol or drugs, no yukai (carrying on). Boys and young men are encouraged to show respect to older men, to each other, and to the purpose of the gathering. At times wives, mothers or grandmothers do come to drop off family and say hello, but they don't stay as part of Didgeri.

This is not to say that Didgeri is in any way exclusive, rather, it's an opportunity and acknowledgement that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and young men don't have other opportunities to gather together and talk about identity and culture and maleness as a group of men.

On a couple of occasions, I had found myself standing with three or four Didgeri men, all leaning on our didgeridoos and talking about what to do about Aboriginal men who suffered abuse as children, and how to support the men and families who suffer as a result of this issue. We talked about community and organisational responses to women who have been sexually abused, and of the advocacy groups that so rightly wrap around these women. None of us could think of a group or advocacy organisation established for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men who were sexually abused as boys.

As a group, we talked about taboos and silences within the community. We talked about how men struggled; how many had attempted suicide, some dying. We talked about the guilt and pain many men carry about not having been able to protect their friends, brothers and sisters from the abuser when they were children. We very much wanted to offer support to families that were falling apart, where wives and children were seeing their husbands and fathers become changed men because demons from the past would visit them late at night and torment them during the day. We talked about how men find it difficult to talk with their families about why they are coming apart at the seams. Even though these men love their families dearly, the taboo around this issue means it is difficult to speak about. Men do what men too often do: push it down, ignore it, drink their way through it, yell at it, yell at others, feel ashamed, feel responsible, feel judged, feel alone, blame themselves, but don't talk

about it. As one man said: How the bloody hell do you talk about it anyway, and to whom?

We wanted to find ways to talk about sexual abuse of boys that invited empathy, understanding and respect, and said 'no more'. Over the weeks, we concluded that if abuse isn't talked about, then nothing will be done. Some of our discussions had long pauses, changes of subject, before resuming. Some men stood in silence. We concluded that if nothing was being done about it, and our brothers and our sister's lives were falling apart because of it, then we would do something. We wanted to address the isolation and silence. We wanted to say, 'We know this happened to you and we are sorry it did. We want you to know that you are still our brother'. We wanted to help address the fear of being judged and the feelings of shame, to say, 'The shame is not yours to carry'. We talked about the importance of speaking, not just to men who have been sexually victimised, but to men and women across our communities. We decided to call our collective action No More Silence.

The idea of creating a video to make a public statement addressing this issue started to sound important. It would be an expression of solidarity and support by community members, for community members. It would be a way to start a conversation. There was some talk about approaching well-known footballers to see if they would like to participate. I was happy that talk of footballers lasted about 10 minutes before we moved on. Real happy. The last thing I wanted was a footballer getting involved simply for their own publicity. It didn't feel as though this was the right time for the involvement of some really uninterested celebrity being pushed into a social issue photo opportunity by an equally uninterested manager. And what about their conduct on field or in a late night bar in the Valley? Again, no thanks.

We had some quiet respectful discussion about who would be involved. We did not want the message to be misunderstood because of the involvement of men facing charges of domestic violence or public nuisance. What was significant here was that we, as men from the community, were talking about supporting men who had suffered sexual abuse as boys and young men. If we put our voices and our images to this, we could bring to light something that had been almost silenced, something almost invisible. We would be saying that silence is no longer okay. We wanted to acknowledge childhood sexual abuse as a challenge in the lives of men in our community.

Over the following weeks I rang, met with, and talked to about 20 people. We decided the voices and images of some Aboriginal women would be a good thing to include in the video as although we wanted to raise the voices of men

and send a message of men's contribution, we also wanted to acknowledge an across community discussion. Two women who I approached were able to commit.

All of the Didgeri group wanted to participate in some way. There were men who straight away said, 'Yes, I want to support that and I will say it to camera'. Some said that they really wanted to offer support, but because of family, work or how their involvement might be seen, they couldn't be part of a video at present. There were men who said that although they felt for the fellas, they didn't know if they could do it, as any talk of sexual abuse of children was hard for them to be around. Those who did not appear on camera shook our hands and said, 'Good on you for doing this'. They were part of it too.

### **Making the video**

Eleven of us gathered in a studio at the 4BE Multicultural radio station at Kangaroo Point to record our parts. In order to help people relax and feel comfortable when recording their bit, we decided that in the recording room we would have only the person speaking to camera, the camera operator and me. We wanted to remove or minimise any feelings of anxiety or shame-job. But with 11 Aboriginal people together in the waiting room, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will do what we have always done. There were yarns and people talking about who their mob is and where their people are from.

Before we knew it, the waiting room emptied and everyone was now crowded into the studio.

As people felt more comfortable with each other, personal connections were made and a feeling of being in this together came over the group. People started pairing up to do their recordings, saying, 'Do you mind if I do it with Wayne, because he my cousin and we never met before'. Others would say things like, 'Brother, I never done anything like this before, can you sit with me and do one together?' Before we knew it everyone was in the room supporting each other with comments like, 'That sounded deadly [really good] what you said then, Sis'. Or, 'You two fellas looked and sounded good there when you said that'. Ownership had shifted. Now the participants were making suggestions and talking about how good it was to be involved with this project.

On this day in the studio, some of the participants spoke of how personal this was for them, their families and community. This issue affected members of Didgeri in ways that had not been discussed before that day. The gathering became an opportunity to talk and make a difference. The mood in the room changed, embracing connection, listening,

caring, sharing and laughing together, offering support and genuine regard. It felt as though we were participating in a collective social action activity.

### **Six weeks later**

It was NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee] week and the first public showing of the video would be taking place on a big screen at the Musgrave Park Cultural Centre in south Brisbane. The guests of honour would be the 11 people who participated, their families and friends. Over the weeks leading to our first showing I had been constantly asked by those involved about when everyone would get to see the video. Didgeri members would be bringing their didgeridoos to the launch and my wife offered to make sandwiches, a curry and rice and some finger food.

Gordon had been a constant source of encouragement and Gary's almost boundless energy had kept this project together. In the days before the launch of our video, I thought about the first meetings between Gary, Gordon and me. I felt so appreciative of those individuals and organisations that work to address sexual violence and its impacts on our communities. I was, however, particularly pleased that this project had been carried out by a group that many would call grassroots. I was pleased that Aboriginal men had stepped forward and committed their faces and voices. This was community taking action and responsibility for community.

I was reminded of a discussion about suicide prevention with a 72-year-old Aboriginal man on a remote Cape York community some years ago. When I asked him what we could do about the lack of counsellors and social workers and psychologists to support people in remote places like this, the old man said:

When someone is finding it hard to live, we all know they might be finding it hard to live because we are a small town. Sometimes the best thing you can do for somebody else is go and see them, and sit on their porch and have a cup of tea with them. Even if you don't know what to say about that thing that is a problem for them, you can still have a cup of tea with them. And they will know.

Through the No More Silence campaign – the talks leading up to putting the video together, the public launch of the video on a large screen at Musgrave Park, and the talks

and yarns since – a feeling of solidarity had developed among the men and had become part of the way the group interacted. Those who participated in the No More Silence campaign knew that two of our fellow men of Didgeri had been sexually abused as children. The way they responded was beautiful to see. If either of these two men talked about experiences they were having, whether these were related to the Royal Commission process or their feeling that they wanted to come along to Didgeri but not participate for a little while, it was accepted. When one man brought a letter he received from the Royal Commission asking him to give evidence, other men showed interest by reading the letter (with his permission) and/or by asking him questions about the process and who he was going to have as his support person – the letter suggested he could have one attend. While these discussions occurred, no-one sheltered the boys or young men who attended Didgeri. There was no mention of ‘men’s talk’ suggesting the boys should move off, and no secret or whispered discussions that kept others out of the loop.

I was unsure exactly when or how this degree of solidarity, camaraderie and acceptance of each other and our experiences had emerged within this group of 15 or so men and boys, many of whom had not known each other four months earlier, but it was wonderful to witness. My best guess was that it came from participation in social action in support of others. I believe this was key to the solidarity, along with a growing shared history related to Didgeri, its definitional ceremonies and its respectful purpose.

The No More Silence social action project had many effects for all of us in Didgeri. Here I will just tell two stories. The first story relates to what the project meant to James. The second story relates to what the project meant to David.

## *Being part of Didgeri’s social action*

### **James**

Two weeks after making the video, while we all sat together having lunch at one of our Didgeri gatherings, James disclosed that he really felt for the fellas that this abuse had happened to because as a kid he had been ‘touched and fondled’ by a bloke down the street from where he lived when he was about 10 years old.

When I heard James say this I was standing about a metre and a half away from the table, which had food and eating utensils across it and about seven or eight people sitting or standing around. I was standing near another man, Johnathan, who had only recently come to participate in Didgeri. As I turned to look back at the table where James

sat I heard one of the men at the table say, ‘Brother, I’m real sorry to hear that. Are you ok, Brother?’

James replied, ‘Yeah, I’m okay. Just wanted to say I know what it’s like for them fellas, even though what happened to me was a long time ago and not as bad as it was for those other fellas’. The men around the table remained calm, some pausing for a moment to acknowledge James before continuing to go about serving food and pouring drinks. One of the men said to James, ‘Here, Brother, pass me your cup, I’ll pour you a drink [of cordial]’.

As I watched on I was amazed that no-one did what I had experienced with men previously. No-one went over and gave him a big pat on the back or some other form of learnt physical male response or expression of discomfort. No-one changed the subject or let out any kind of verbal exclamation. Instead, a kind of supported enquiry occurred. One of the men asked, ‘Brother, was there anyone there to support you when it happened?’ Another added, ‘Yeah, Brother, you were only a little kid’.

James said that yes, his mother and a male neighbour went down and had it out with that fella straight away. He could hear the neighbour yelling and his mum screaming at the fella.

**One of the men:** So how did that happen, how did they [mother and the neighbour] know, and did they know straight away?

**James:** Yeah they knew because as soon as it happened I told em. I said he called me into his house and this is what he done to me, and they seen if I was okay then went straight up there.

**One of the men:** Must have been good to have your mum stand up for you like that, hey Brother?

**James:** Yeah, we had a special bond me and my mum.

**Another of the group:** Go Mum! How good’s your mum?

**Another of the men:** And how’s the neighbour? I’m liking the neighbour.

**James:** Yeah, they were both there for me. And yeah I was only a little kid, but I still remember how they just stood up for me.

The conversation wasn’t a quick snappy back and forth affair (and James speaks with a bit of a drawl). It was a conversation by men with enquiring care.

I noticed that Gordon (the worker from the Royal Commission who first brought James to Didgeri) was also observing, standing back from the table.

**Anthony:** Wow, that was interesting.

**Gordon:** Yeah, they handled that real well, hey?

Gordon and I talked about how the men had provided beautiful support to their friend, support we couldn't imagine having being provided by these same men months earlier, particularly given the subject matter in the conversation. We continued to remind each other about it for months later. Involvement in the No More Silence campaign, and the ideas for inviting discussion that I shared from my studies in narrative therapy, seemed to have made it possible to ask different questions and to engage in different ways. This shift was almost imperceptible, and I guessed that even the men involved might have noticed only small movements towards introducing these practices into their own conversations. So much so that when these men did use a different way to communicate (dare I say, a narrative therapy way), only Gordon and I noticed.

#### **David**

It took a few phone calls and a small amount of coaxing before David came along to Didgeri. When he arrived at his first gathering, he was welcomed. As the men introduced themselves, those who knew their indigenous heritage introduced themselves in that way: 'I'm Michael, I am Maninjali, I live down at Logan. Good to see you here today'. As with most our Didgeri gatherings, there was laughter and connection, something David said he really appreciated.

That day, some of the discussion was about the upcoming No More Silence video recording. I had let David know that Didgeri was planning to make a video to send messages of support to Aboriginal men who had been sexually abused in institutions as children, and to support those men's families. Some men had already expressed they didn't think they could take part but understood why we were considering this action and supported those who would do the video. There was respectful discussion among men about personal reasons for participating or not in the video and what this meant for them.

I asked David if he thought he would like to be part of the No More Silence campaign:

**David:** Ya know, I don't get to spend time with blokes like this. To have a chance to just yarn. And learning that didgeridoo, I really enjoyed that. Yeah, I would really like to take part.

I asked David why he made this decision to take part:

**David:** I know what it's like to have to suffer in silence. I haven't been through what these fellas we're talkin to in the video have been through, but if I can take part in something that helps them and their family I would really like to do that. Ya know, something about not knowing these fellas but putting yourself in something that helps is a good thing I reckon.

We talked about how some of the men had decided not to appear in the video because 'anything to do with child sexual abuse was hard to be part of' or because they knew what some of the men back in their workplaces were like, that they would face criticisms and questions they didn't want. Knowing about David's workplace, I wanted to make sure David was okay.

**David:** Yeah, I know it sounds unbelievable but there will be blokes I work with that will make fun and criticise about this. But I'm not doing it for them, they can get fucked.

#### **The day of No More**

In the weeks leading up to shooting the No More Silence video, I felt as though I was on the phone constantly. One of the men who was going to take part in the video suggested that of course everyone was going to do it, because I had asked. He believed that because of the work I do in the community, and the 'reputation' I hold as someone who does the things I do, everyone would do it. I worked hard in these weeks, talking with and re-inviting those who wanted to participate, but also reassuring them that the decision to take part should be theirs, not because I asked but because they wanted to be a part of supporting the men and their families.

On the day of shooting we met at a local community radio station, just up the road from where Didgeri gathers each fortnight. Our camera and sound person was ready, I had some scripts that people could follow if they chose. I had arranged a sitting area outside the studio in order that we might remove any shame or embarrassment for the person or persons inside the studio. I had hoped 10 people would come. Eleven took part in the video, and 14 people turned up at the radio station.

I gathered everyone in the studio to talk through the process we would use and to introduce everyone to each other. David mentioned his name and where he was from, and two women and a young man came over to him and said, 'Hey, that family name you mentioned and that place you from,

that's our family. You're our cousin!' David was immediately introduced by his new family to the other men of Didgeri, and he was welcomed with shaking of hands and hugs. People were energised by connections across the group. David is part of Didgeri. He comes along and participates when he can, when he's not on the road. It has been wonderful to watch David's journey from my first phone call with him, when he wasn't able to finish a sentence through his tears, through the life and death experiences around his health; from his sense of disconnection from culture and his identity as an Aboriginal man, to becoming part of a group of Aboriginal men and having connections with cousins he didn't even know he had.

I have often taken an influential role in Didgeri. I have introduced discussions, telling the men of my journey through narrative therapy, and introducing them to ideas such as re-remembering conversations and externalising. These ideas reconnected David with the strengths, knowledge and skills he learnt from his parents, and helped him to externalise the anger he feels about racism and notions of the unfairness of the struggles in his journey of organ transplantation. I have seen David become stronger: stronger around his identity and stronger around his willingness to state who he is and what he stands for.

David and I have talked about what being part of the Didgeri group has meant for him. David said, 'When you stand up for people with a group of people like this it can make you stronger'.

## Conclusion

There are many stories about local initiatives to address challenges and upset; stories about people who have seen a difficulty in their community and have responded in some way, to overcome, to support others.

No-one is a passive recipient of hardship. People are always responding, whether they are children or adults. They respond to try to minimize the effects of hardship, or to try to make it stop, or to try to protect others and so on... (Denborough & Wakhungu, 2010, p. 41)

The measure of a project's success might vary depending who you speak with. But something happens when you try, when you stand together for something in your community through personal or collective agency, in a local social or cultural context.

Didgeri started as an offering, an invitation for Aboriginal men to learn the didgeridoo and, by so doing, begin to reconnect with elements of their own culture. It has become a group of men who have participated in social action together, contributing their images and voices to support men who were sexually abused and, by so doing, acknowledging and supporting these men's families. This has been a little challenging to coordinate, but ultimately beautiful to be a part of.

The individual stories interwoven through the story of Didgeri and the No More Silence campaign have taught me that although some stories are difficult to tell and challenging to stay with, if you are willing to bear witness, it can be a privilege to be part of people's transformation.

One of the men who participated in the video had experienced horrendous sexual abuse in an institution over a number of years. Often described as shy and a little withdrawn and quiet, we know also that his wife and children worry so much for him and his emotional state. He continues to be part of Didgeri. Over the months I have noticed a change in this man, a shift as he continues to be (irregularly) part of a group of men who have supported him and others who have had similar experiences; a group of men who have acknowledged the difficulties he and his family have faced. Two weeks ago, this man turned up at Didgeri on his Harley Davidson, a motorbike he had not ridden for quite a while. I asked how things were going for him. He replied:

You remember that life team you talked with us about a little while ago? [Denborough's (2008) Team of Life]. Well, it had to rattle around in my brain for a while as I worked it out, but when I think about all you fellas here at Didgeri, church, my family and the other fellas I know just like me, I remember I got a pretty good team.

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