
Uncle Jack Charles returns to prison

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AFL ad [voice of Jack Charles]: It's a month. A month where the mowers rattle on suburban nature strips and we smell the cut grass...

Rachel Carbonell: He's the voice promoting this year's AFL finals series, heard by millions of Australians. But the audience Uncle Jack Charles wants to reach the most is behind prison walls. For a decade, the senior Indigenous leader and actor has tried to revisit prison to mentor inmates, an idea that is supported by recent research that suggests reformed offenders make the most effective rehabilitation speakers. But his criminal history has seen him blocked by authorities, until now. RN reporter Jeremy Story Carter joined Uncle Jack outside the walls of Middleton prison, which is near Castlemaine, north-west of Melbourne, as he set about re-entering the prison that held him 10 years ago.

Jack Charles: My name is Jack Charles and I'm a self-proclaimed elder of the Boonwurrung people in Melbourne, and here I am about to step into the Middleton prison attached to the old Loddon prison from whence I last left a little over 10 years ago, 11 maybe.

Jeremy Story Carter: Well, what specifically were you in for on that very last visit?

Jack Charles: You know, cat burgling, stealing from large mansions around Melbourne. I came in as a thief, yes.

Jeremy Story Carter: And yet since then you've long been clean, and it's been a big ambition of yours to come back into prison. Why?

Jack Charles: I had that inherent obligation as a self-proclaimed elder of the Boonwurrung people in Melbourne to share the journey and showcase myself that there is a life beyond drugs, crime time, jail time and et cetera, mental disability. I have to show by example the way to go forward on this. Real black fellas oughtn't to be shooting up white powder into their veins because we start to abuse our Aboriginality ourselves, et cetera, our community, our friends, our mothers and fathers, basically our concept of Aboriginality. If we took...as I've taken my Aboriginality seriously enough that I should be a key player in trying to save other lives and get them to start thinking about their own lives and that.

I can work on people individually and it has worked so far. It's only on the street. I've conned them using my fine art of conmanship to jump onto the methadone, really take yourself seriously. If you're going to jump on the methadone, be a real black fella, don't dabble.

Jeremy Story Carter: We're standing out the front of Loddon prison. I'm not able to go inside the prison with you today. I don't know what it's like on the other side of this wall or any prison walls, but what I can imagine, as we've seen individuals walk past us today, these are people who have done some wrong and maybe also have a sort of fractured sense of identity. So what is it you think that you can impart to

them? Is it about planting a seed of thought before they leave prison, that actually there is this great alternative?

Jack Charles: That's the idea. There was a program here run by Aunty Lorraine Peters and her daughter, called the Marumali Program, and that was the program that actually tweaked my consciousness of my Indigenousness, that I should take myself more seriously. So undertaking that was the most important part of doing my jail time. It was the program that awoke me to the full sense of why I shouldn't be in jail, why I should take my Indigenousness more seriously, the fact that I could be a key player in this, doing what Aunty Lorraine Peters did.

Jeremy Story Carter: There has been a long-standing criticism that there have not been culturally appropriate rehabilitation programs for Indigenous prisoners. Can it be in a situation as simple sometimes as having someone of an Indigenous background who has lived experience and can just talk one-to-one with these people?

Jack Charles: Yes, I think that's the way to go about it. If I can start the ball rolling with myself, and hardest with the well-being officers that run the programs here...and I was always wanting to do something but confounded all the time of being left out of the loop, you just continue on your merry way making the wrong choices et cetera.

Jeremy Story Carter: Well, we do see high rates of recidivism with indigenous offenders. As somebody who has been through that experience, why do you think that is?

Jack Charles: Because there is basically no community centre for us to come out towards. The point is, I have to show by example the way to go forward on this.

Jeremy Story Carter: Do you think there is something that can only be communicated by somebody who has been through the prison system to existing prisoners?

Jack Charles: They can get an intimation by somebody who is really serious about wanting to change the course of people's lives, that's what the well-being people are here for, but they can only do so much. But if you had somebody with the lived experiences such as myself, there would be others but they've got to come out of the woodwork. I have to showcase, do it myself so that others can come out of the woodwork and raise their hand. And obviously the penny has dropped, the prison system has seen and remembered what I did when I was a prisoner and doing time. I was the head potter at the prison in the Castlemaine jail, I ran a tight ship. You weren't allowed into Psycho Ceramica...that's what I called my pottery shops in the nick...you weren't allowed into Psycho Ceramica if you were Rohypnoled and Serepaxed off your tits. So the point was I have to show by example. It was a place of sanctuary within a prison setting.

Jeremy Story Carter: Well, it has been a very long road, about 10 years to get back inside a prison. How are you feeling right now as you're about to walk through those doors over there?

Jack Charles: It's a wonder I can fit through the doors. I am pumped up, and it's really exciting because I know it just may influence their own journey.

Jeremy Story Carter: What are you going to tell them?

Jack Charles: I don't know what I'm going to tell them. I'm dying to see what kind of questions prisoners will ask of me.

Jeremy Story Carter: Do you reckon we could have a chat when you come out the other side?

Jack Charles: Of course we can, yes, not a problem.

This dreaming has been a long held dreaming of mine, is that we would have the Nindabya workshop in Collingwood, Fitzroy, for you to come to and do something. All the cottage industries, things that you've been doing here, studying, you can complete at the Nindabya workshop. We'd have computers and things like this. You know, CBOs can be done, community-based orders can be done, and parole people can be assured that this was the place to send people if they were coming into Melbourne with nothing to do with their lives, both black and white. It's only a dreaming, it's a wet dream, unfulfilled as yet. But if you put it out long enough, it might happen.

Dearie me, here I am, back out there. What a show! I believe that most of us impressed each other, the prisoners with their absolutely concentrating, hanging on my each and every word, because this had never happened before, somebody that they know very well, that they've done time with, shared jail time with, but they know the journey, they know the story.

Jeremy Story Carter: Who were you speaking to in there?

Jack Charles: A bunch of...a wide variety of prisoners, and many Aboriginal. So the Q and A they were a little bit...you know, one person did ask a question when he thought, well, nobody is asking, I'll ask a question.

Jeremy Story Carter: What did he ask?

Jack Charles: What's it like coming back, how does it feel? It's the endgame of a long journey, of pushing the bars to try and get me back in, I've made the first move. I've come in and...let's see where we go from here, let's see where they go from...who knows, there might be one amongst that mob or a couple of them that might have the urge to take the system by working on themselves in order to undertake what I've just done. So yes, it was great, also being the first time back in the nick. So that was a highly emotional experience.