

The Elders' Voice

When Elders speak, we listen.

Welcome to The Elders' Voice. Where Elders are at the heart of every step we take on the journey to Treaty.

The Elders' Voice – made by Elders, led by Elders

Elders are fundamental to who we are as First Nations peoples. Elders are the keepers of our culture – their knowledge guides us on all matters. When it comes to Treaty, their voices must be heard.

The Elders' Voice will be a council of Elders, whose wisdom and cultural authority will help guide the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria on the journey to Treaty. If you're an Elder, we want to hear from you! Help us shape the Elders' Voice and create a better future for our children and grandchildren.



**FIRST PEOPLES'
ASSEMBLY OF
VICTORIA**



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What is the Elders' Voice?

The journey so far

Our communities have said time and again that the journey to Treaty must be guided by a council of Elders. As such, an Elders' Voice is being established by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.

We are meeting and yarning with Elders from across the state so they can help us design the Elders' Voice.

This process is being led by Aunty Charmaine Clarke (Gunditjmara) and Uncle Andrew Gardiner (Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung), Co-Chairs of the Interim Elders' Voice. Aunty Charmaine and Uncle Andrew are yarning with as many Elders as possible to ask questions like:

- What is Eldership?
- What defines an Elder?
- Who do you think should sit on the Elders' Voice?
- How should we structure the Elders' Voice meetings?

Interim Elders' Voice gatherings:

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 health restrictions, many Elders' Voice gatherings were postponed in 2021. Other gatherings were moved online, via Zoom, or scheduled as one-on-one phone calls.

The health and safety of our Elders is paramount. Aunty Charmaine and Uncle Andrew hope to visit all regions across Victoria in 2022, to make sure they're yarning with as many Elders as possible. We'll try to hold these gatherings face-to-face where it's safe to do so. Keep checking our website for up-to-date information about Elders' Voice gatherings happening in your region, but don't forget – you can call Aunty Charmaine and Uncle Andrew at any time to have a one-on-one yarn with them over the phone and have your voice heard! You don't need to wait for a face-to-face event in your region.

Call us on the number below and we'll schedule you in for an Elders' Voice yarn!

When Elders speak, we listen.



Elders' Voice
Hotline

Call us for a yarn on
1800 TREATY

Are you an Elder? We want to hear from you!

Call 1800 TREATY (1800 873 289) to have a yarn with Aunty Charmaine or Uncle Andrew about how we should design the Elders' Voice. Or get in touch with us via email: eldersvoice@firstpeoplesvic.org

And don't forget to check our website for events and gatherings happening near you:

firstpeoplesvic.org/elders-voice/

All Elders are paid a sitting fee for their time and contribution at gatherings

Meet Our Interim Elders' Voice Co-Chairs



Aunty Charmaine Clarke Ngatanwarr!

Aunty Charmaine has lived several lifetimes in one. A self-described “wanderer”, she’s travelled the country since her teens, meeting and mingling with mob from every corner of the continent and working in just about every kind of job you can think of! Now Aunty Charmaine calls Peek Whurrong Country home and is grounded by her work teaching, helping Community and devoting her time to ensuring Elders are at the heart of the Treaty process.

Tell us some of your story.

I’m a Gunditjmara woman. I’m Stolen Generations. My siblings and I were taken off my parents when I was two and a half, so back in 1968. We were raised in orphanages in Ballarat. That’s where I grew up until I was 16, when I left and went to Melbourne. I joined the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy as a trainee dental nurse.

Moving to Melbourne was about finding my identity. It was a good experience, mixing with mob from all over the state and interstate. It was a vibrant and active Aboriginal community. As a teenager, I sought my mob. And importantly, I wanted to connect with my own family. My dad died when I was 14. That was the impetus for me leaving foster care. I thought, ‘I can’t wait any more to be reunified with my family.’ Getting back with them had been on the cards, and when he died, that dream of us being a family again died with him. That’s when I ran away from my foster family. I lived with my mum temporarily in Ballarat after dad died. It only lasted a short while as mum certainly wasn’t able to meet my needs emotionally when she was going through such extraordinary grief.

I’ve always been a bit of a wanderer. I went interstate then moved back to Victoria and lived with my mum a lot longer. At 17, I volunteered at Lake Condah Mission on an archeological dig. After a few months, I got my first gig as a trainee regional site officer, identifying and protecting Aboriginal cultural sites. It was a fascinating career. Just seeing the landscape in a different way, seeing it as a living landscape, something that’s inalienable from us.

I’ve done dental nursing, I’ve done archeology, I’ve worked at the Australian Heritage Commission in Canberra, I’ve done politics – I ran for the Senate in 1998. I was a journalist with ABC Radio for two years.

Now at the age of 54, I’ve come home and I don’t think I’ll do too much travel any more. I’m a lecturer at university now, and I’m a researcher in family violence. My passions are the environment, our cultural heritage, making sure that the story and narrative of our history, not just our contemporary history but our pre-history, is more fully understood.

*“We’re all constantly learning,
and Elders contribute to that learning.”*

Tell us about your Country.

Both my parents are Gunditjmara people. My father is Peek Whurrong. His clan's area is around Warrnambool and Port Fairy. My mum is Cart Gundidj, which is down around Mount Clay in the west of Gunditjmara Country, near the South Australian border.

Why did you want to become an Interim Elders' Voice Co-Chair?

I have a real fondness for Elders. There's a lot of experience that Elders have. Also, when I was growing up with my mum and my Elders around me, there was an absolute clarity of respect. In my travels around Australia, that is everywhere. Elders are respected. The knowledge that Elders have, the cultural integrity that Elders bring to all discussions and to learning. We're all constantly learning, and Elders contribute to that learning. Elders are an anchoring point for Community and in any political discourse. The Elders' Voice is probably the first platform state-wide that really recognises that and gives them that platform.

Why is the Elders' Voice important to the Treaty process?

Without a doubt, Treaty would have no real credence without the Elders' Voice. The way the Elders' Voice sits alongside the Assembly, it has oversight and a cultural advisory role within the framework development and other elements around Treaty. It's not just honorary, but it's essential culturally that we have that process. It also grounds us, me personally, as an Assembly Member, and the various hats we all wear as Aboriginal people. Elders' Voice is there to remind us to be truthful and faithful to our own cultural heritage and our values – the value of being an Aboriginal person. Elders are the bearers of keeping our values and keeping us strong in our culture.

What message do you want to give to Elders about the Elders' Voice?

It's theirs. This belongs to them. And it's about time. This is a recognition for Elders that's overdue. And a recognition that they can actually have some pivotal influence on the Treaty process.



Meet Our Interim Elders' Voice Co-Chairs



Uncle Andrew Gardiner:

Wominjeka!

A proud Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung clansman, Uncle Andrew has travelled up and down the country, including as far north as Cape York, working in various community roles. Back home on Wurundjeri Country, he's settled into life working to advance community health and improvement and now with the Treaty process and his most important role yet – grandfather of 5 and step-grandfather of 9 – a total of 14 grandkids.

Tell us some of your story.

I was born in north west Victoria, at a little town called Donald and lived in Charlton until 1969 before my family moved to Melbourne.

After school I got involved with Aboriginal Hostels Limited, a national hostel accommodation chain for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I worked with them till 1989, then I went to work with the Dandenong Aborigines Co-op as Manager for about two years developing community programs and services to respond to needs. From there I took on a role at Aboriginal Affairs Victoria as a Resource Officer, developing capital projects and community consultations and engagements across the state in many communities through to the end of 1997. Then I moved up to Cairns in Far North Queensland early 1998 and spent about eight years up there, working with state government on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy and engaged with remote communities establishing community justice panels, and some start up projects with seed funding, like local women's shelters and closure of taverns. In 2001 I transitioned to Centrelink that enabled me to engage many communities around Cape York and into the Torres Strait till 2005.

After that my first grandchild was born in 2004, so in 2005, I moved back to Melbourne to help out with grandparent duties and then in November of that year I married my lovely wife. In early 2006, I was lucky to take up a role at the Dandenong Aborigines Co-operative again. Initially managing across the organisation, and in 2009 with significant expansion and strategic growth the CEO position was established, and I successfully operated in that role for 12 years between March 2009 to February 2021.

More recently I started at the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation in March 2021, doing the Traditional Owner Treaty Engagement work which has directly supported my representation on the First Peoples' Assembly, I reckon this has been transformative.

I am also a current board member of Bubup Wilam Child and Family Services.

*"We respect you. We want you to be involved.
We need you to participate"*

Tell us about your Country.

Our totems are Bunjil the creator in the form of the Wedge tailed Eagle, Waa the protector in the form of the Crow, others are the Bat, and the Bronze winged Pigeon.

Our traditional country extends from the eastern bank of the Werribee River, beyond the Great Dividing Range in the north, and east to Mount Baw Baw and then down to Mordialloc Creek. For thousands of years our ancestors had ceremony with all groups of the Kulin Nation, particularly with the Wada wurrung and the Boon wurrung people. 12,000 years ago, there was no bay, it was a valley with Birrarung flowing through it. The Boon wurrung people would have travelled straight across the valley and up onto what is now the Bellarine Peninsula, which would have been seen as a mountain range.

Eventually, the water level rose as the Ice Age melted forming the Bay, and so we allowed the Boon wurrung people to go around on an access track right to Mt Cottrell then south west to Geelong. We allowed them to have access rights to do that ceremony and vice versa for the Wada wurrung people to come and do ceremony out at Narre Narre Warren.

Why did you want to become an Interim Elders' Voice Co-Chair?

When I saw the advertisement about it and understood that I'd been nominated, I considered it to be a priority. To be asked to do that amongst the 30 other Assembly members, knowing that there was likely to be a female Co-Chair, it was a good opportunity to have both men's business and women's business contributions. An important thing is engaging with Elders in the process. I felt a responsibility to participate and talk with Elders on the Treaty process so they got a fuller knowledge to help deliver an overarching Treaty.

Why is the Elders' Voice important to the Treaty process?

The intention is to provide oversight to the Assembly's work. For them to participate, they need to be represented and they need to be briefed prior, so they can make a positive contribution. There's no point in the Assembly just going ahead with various arrangements. It gives it cultural protocol and authority, it gives it cultural recognition, it gives it cultural acknowledgement that our Elders can participate and help lead their communities to participate in the Treaty process.

What message do you want to give to Elders about the Elders' Voice?

We respect you. We want you to be involved. We need you to participate. The fundamental thing is, 'When Elders Speak, We Listen' and 'We love our Elders'.

Meet Our Elders' Voice Coordinator



Drew Berick

Drew Berick is the Elders' Voice Coordinator at the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.

Drew is a Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta man with more than 10 years' experience in native title and 20 years' experience working with Community.

Drew, why is the Elders' Voice so important?

The establishment of the Elders' Voice is a vital part of the overall Treaty process in Victoria. Elders play such an important role in our community where we are guided by their knowledge, insight and wisdom.

The Assembly is getting our people ready for Treaty negotiations, so that we'll be in the best possible position to negotiate strong Treaties when the time comes. We need the Elders' Voice to guide us through that process. Our community members have indicated time and again that an Elders' Voice will form a critical part of the Assembly's governance.

We've had lots of consultations with Elders to date, mostly in regional areas where the impact of COVID hasn't been as bad as Metro Melbourne, meaning Elders were able to gather safely in person. However, COVID has definitely been a major disruption since the beginning of the process. Luckily, our Members recognised this and voted to extend the timeline for the process, which means we can take more time to ensure we're able to travel across Victoria and yarn with as many Elders as possible. It's important that Elders aren't rushed through this process. They need the time to be consulted on their own terms.

The Co-Chairs have had meaningful engagement with Elders so far where we've sought feedback on the Elders' Voice model and we're excited to get back on the road, travelling the state, safely, to have these important conversations. We also encourage Elders to call the Elders' Voice Hotline at any time, on 1800 TREATY (1800 873 289), to organise a one-on-one yarn with Aunt and Unc and tell us their thoughts on the Elders' Voice.

Elders are a critical part of our community. Their knowledge and wisdom are fundamental to shaping us as Aboriginal people and to help guide the Assembly through the Treaty process. We hope to be able to engage with you soon. We want you to be part of this historical process and we want you to have your say.

When Elders speak, we listen.

"They are our knowledge holders and our teachers".

Yarning With Elders

Meet Uncle Rob!



Robert William Lowe was raised on Framlingham Aboriginal Station, outside Warrnambool. A highly respected Peek Whurrong Elder, Uncle Rob has received numerous awards for his service to community, including Victorian Senior of the Year Award 2018 and Warrnambool City Council's Community Achievement Award 2014. He is also a recipient of the prestigious David Uniapon Award for writing and the national Kookaburra Award from Parks Victoria for his commitment to managing state parks and reserves.

Uncle Rob has volunteered extensively across a broad range of sectors and applied his deep cultural knowledge to improve social justice outcomes for koorie communities. Uncle Rob is a founding member of the Maar Land Council and Eastern Maar native title, and was founding director and a past chairperson at both the Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative and the Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Co-operative.

Uncle Rob, tell us a bit about your background?

I was born in Melbourne. My mother was Amy Clarke Lowe, my father was Robert Lowe from Bendigo. I was raised on a creek in Bendigo and then we went to Framlingham Mission when I was three. I spent all my life in the area and was raised in the mission until I was about 21 and then I moved into Warrnambool.

The things I can remember, going right back to the early days, was my mum facing a lot of trauma with the State Government and permit control- just the things you had to do to gain permits. What they were trying to do at that stage was move her off Framlingham Mission where she was born. She brought her family back in 1950 to live on Framlingham.

My grandfather was sick at that time and she wanted to spend some time with him before he passed away. For some reason, the State Government and the Protection Board didn't agree with it, so she had to go through a lot of red tape, a lot of nasty stuff we had to go through. It wasn't that peaceful, but it was still enjoyable being raised on the mission, because we learnt so much from my uncle and my grandfather Norman Clarke.

I went to school on Framlingham Mission. I always classed myself as a professional wagger! Most of my time was spent on the riverbank, listening to my uncle and learning the stories.

In the last 40 years, I've been involved in Indigenous programs and setting up different organisations. I'm married, we've got three kids, ten granddaughters, seven great-grandkids – we've got a nice little family!

"Most of my time was spent on the riverbank, listening to my uncle and learning the stories"

Why are Elders crucial to our culture?

From a young age, growing up on the mission station, you learn from your Elders, you respect what they do, you watch them. They teach you things that a lot of kids aren't taught today. That's where the Elders are important. How far do we go in teaching young ones? Some young ones today don't want to sit down and listen to an old voice telling them about the past.

How do you define 'Eldership'?

To me, it can define anything or anyone. You're not classed as an Elder because of your age, you could be classed as an Elder when you're 21. At 21, someone could be looking up at that person and that person could be a mentor. There's different versions of how you class an Elder. Sometimes I don't even do it to myself, I class myself as an apprentice Elder, because I'm still learning.

What can Elders bring to the Treaty process?

Elders can help get through to the Government - we need to entice the government. I go back to the legacy that our ancestors left us. They left a legacy that continues on, lives on. The legacy of the 70s has gone by the wayside, we haven't got a strong enough voice in government. The government has taken everything off us, they've taken our culture off us. They've taken control off us.

We can't go out and teach kids our traditional burns they way we were taught; how to control fires. A lot of those things, that if Treaty is successful, we need to introduce those things back into the communities. And hopefully bring these young ones along. It's not about ownership or who's got the power to say this and that.

The Elders left us a legacy to share the knowledge, to share the language, to share the teachings. Somewhere along the line, we tend to forget that. We place too much emphasis on ownership – who owns this and that. That's not what we should be about. We should be about sharing the knowledge, the history, the culture, and the stories.

If we can relate that to the government through Treaty, hopefully something might change.



Uncle Rob Lowe and Auntie Charmaine Clarke. Image by Charles Pakana, Victorian Aboriginal News.

Why We Love Our Elders



respect • connectedness • knowledge • lore

Couleyah Knight (Noongah/Yorta Yorta)

"I love my Elders because they care for me and share knowledge with me."



Azarah Knight (Noongah/Yorta Yorta)

"I love my Elders because they support me with my future."



Want to be part of The Elders' Voice newsletter?

Drop us a line to share your story and be featured in our next issue of The Elders' Voice:

eldersvoice@firstpeoplesvic.org

About us

The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria is the elected voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Victorian Treaty process. We were created by mob, for mob. The Assembly is establishing the ground rules for future Treaty-making, so we can come to the negotiating table on equal footing with government. When it comes to Treaty, nothing is off the table. It's our chance to ensure we have the freedom and power to make decisions that affect our communities, our culture and our country.

There's strength in numbers. To make real change, we need to stand together. Help us shape the Treaty process by enrolling with the Assembly: **firstpeoplesvic.org/enrol/**

*Remember - our electoral roll is not connected to the government system in any way and never will be. It belongs to us.

The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria is led by two Co-Chairs: Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, a proud Bangerang and Wiradjuri woman and Marcus Stewart, a proud Nira illim bulluk man of the Taungurung nation. There are 31 elected Members who sit on our Assembly, all Traditional Owners of Country in Victoria.



*Co-Chairs of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria,
Geraldine Atkinson and Marcus Stewart.*



*Elected Members of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria at their
inaugural meeting at Parliament House.*



**FIRST PEOPLES'
ASSEMBLY OF
VICTORIA**

