Kinchela Boys Home survivors tell of removals, sexual abuse and redemption

Transcript from ABC Radio National_Daniel Browning for Awaye! May 2017

For years, survivors have gathered for commemorations at the base of the Moreton Bay fig. *(Supplied: Peter Solness)*

A vast old Moreton Bay fig tree stands on the grounds of what was once the notorious Kinchela Boys Home — exerting a strange power over a group of Aboriginal men who once lived there.

Like a monstrous character, it looms in their collective memory, of a deeply scarred childhood. "That tree — it felt our pain," Richard Campbell says.

Richard is a former inmate of the Kinchela Boys Home, near Kempsey on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, where he was identified by the number 28.

The boys who passed through the iron gates of the home between 1924 and 1970 were not known by their names.

Many boys who passed through Kinchela's gates had a traumatic time at the home. *(Supplied: National Museum Of Australia/Katie Shanahan)*

Indeed, they were prevailed upon immediately to forget who they were.

A Gumbaynggir and Dhungutti man from Bowraville, Richard remembers the first punishment he received, on the day he arrived at Kinchela.

The nine-year-old, charged just days before at Macksville with being a neglected child, was welcomed by the balled fists of a staff member.

"First thing, he just started belting into us," Richard says.

> "He said 'you are not Richard Campbell' — bang. 'You are 28' — bang. 'You are not black, you are white' — bang. This was all in between hits around the head.

"Not with the hand, it was a fist. Imagine a grown man's fist. Welcome to Kinchela Boys Home."

A cruel separation at Central Station

Michael "Widdy" Welsh was number 36 at Kinchela.

In 1960, the Wailwan man was taken from Coonamble in the far-north west of New South Wales when he was eight years old — one of seven children removed from his mother.

Michael Welsh was separated from his family as a child and taken to Kinchela.*(Supplied: Peter Solness)*

He still recalls life before Kinchela.

"I danced around the campfire, around my grandfather's hat, with my grannies and uncles," he says.

"I used to go cray fishing, used to go pig catching, saddle the horses up — before they took me."

Escorted by welfare officers, the Welsh family was forced apart on a train platform at Sydney's bustling Central Station.

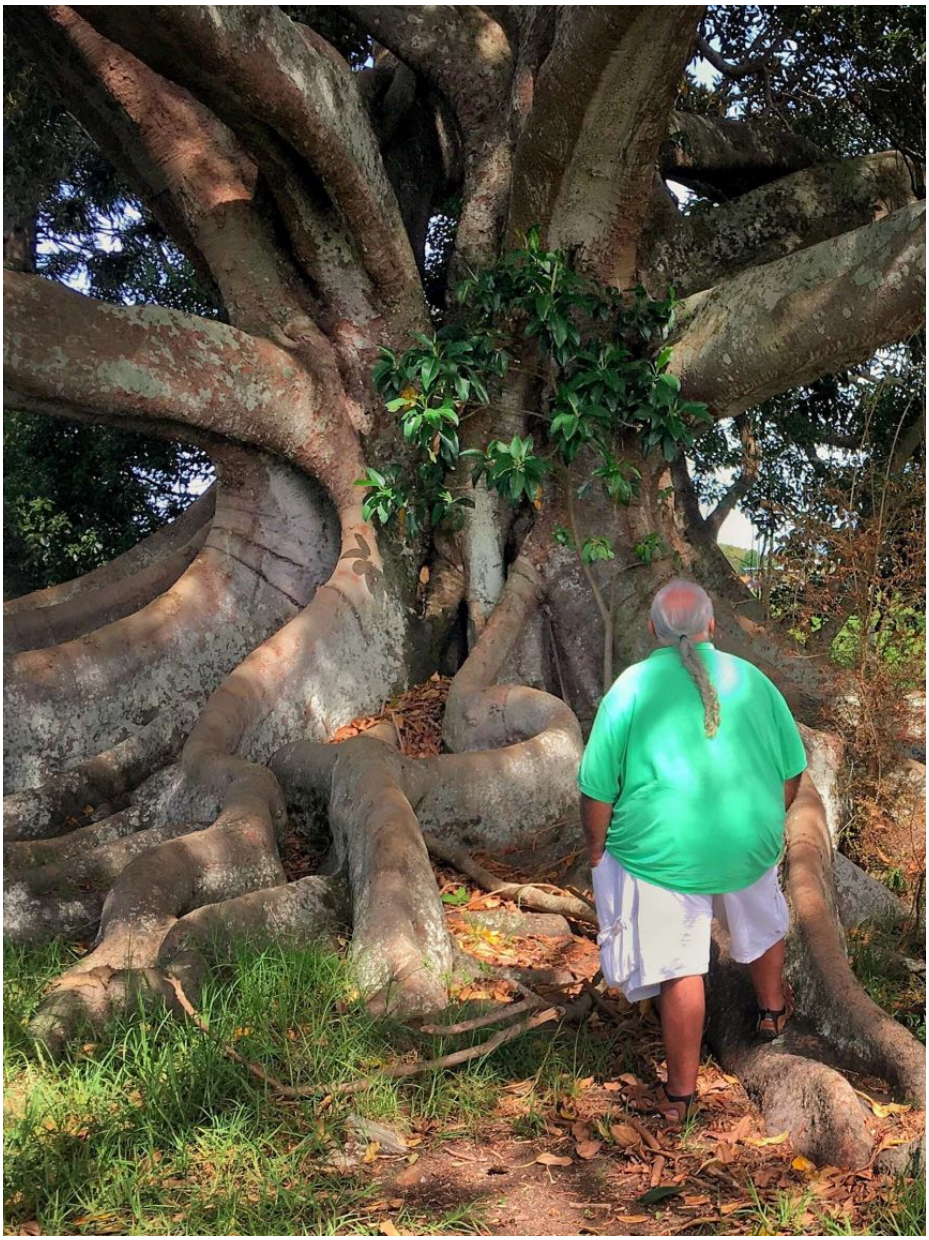
"They told us we were going on a train and our brothers and sisters were going to come on a train behind us," Michael says.

"What they were telling me, I knew that wasn't true. I didn't know what the word bullshit was, but that's what it was."

The 'crime' of being a neglected child

Richard was taken from his mother with an older brother and three younger sisters in the 1960s.

Unbelievably, Aboriginal child removals were a police matter.



Richard Campbell has horrific memories of his time at the home.*(Supplied: Peter Solness)*

It was standard procedure to charge children — babies included — with the offence of being a neglected child.

In the harsh eyes of the law, these innocent children were, to all intents and purposes, criminals.

"We went to the court in Macksville that's where they charged us," Richard says.

"From there we drove straight across over to Kinchela. Then they held us there and took off with the three younger sisters. We could hear them crying [and] screaming going down the street."

Richard's three sisters were sent much further away — to the Bomaderry Children's Home, just outside Nowra on the south coast of New South Wales.

If the forced separation, being charged by police and then bundled into cars and trains under the supervision of complete strangers wasn't traumatic enough, much worse was yet to come.

Michael says when he arrived at Kinchela, his eldest brother, 10-year-old Barry — who he calls his protector — tried to comfort him.

"We were walking through the gates, he cuddled me as we went through, and he said 'it'll be alright brother'," Michael says.

"I knew this place was no good, it was evil."

That day, after being escorted to the manager's office, Michael recalls looking out an upstairs window and seeing a boy below digging what appeared to him to be a grave.

"He was on punishment. He was going to dig that all day ... so that added to the fear," he says.

'A bonzer bunch of kids'

In 1965, a glowing report on the conditions at Kinchela was published in the widely-distributed Dawn, a monthly magazine produced by the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board to promote its activities.

"It's almost like a country club at Kinchela," the article begins.

"The boys were neglected before coming to Kinchela, but now they receive truly dedicated care and real affection from the home's mum and dad, who are manager and matron at Kinchela."

The writer concedes though that "discipline at such an establishment must be reasonably strict".

Some historical images present a sanitised view of the home, which does not accord with the accounts of survivors.*(Supplied: National Archives Of Australia/W Pederson)*

The manager, Henry Henricksen, told Dawn that he had "the most bonzer bunch of kids in Australia".

In an interesting postscript, a year after Dawn visited the home, the same man appeared before a parliamentary joint committee inquiring into Aboriginal welfare in New South Wales.

Asked bluntly whether Kinchela was little more than a "holding station", until such a time as the boys were fit to work or be boarded out, Mr Henricksen replied: "Yes, it is a pretty harsh description of it, but I say that that fits the bill".

Crying in another room

Richard's account of his own childhood differs wildly from that of Dawn.

He doesn't hesitate when asked to recount the worst of his experiences at Kinchela.

"Getting raped … that was an ongoing thing," he says.

"When he was drunk you could smell him coming in. Not only myself, other boys used to get it too.

"He'd take someone else, and you'd be very thankful. You just don't want to think about it that way — but you could hear them crying and you knew what was going on."

When Michael returned home to Coonamble just before he turned 18, he was reunited with his mother and they were able to confront their grief.

While his cousins knew his face, they didn't recognise him.

"Soon as I started talking, you'd see something in their eyes. I'd think 'shit, what's wrong, what did I say?'," Michael says.

"I realised later as time went by, I didn't speak like them — I'd changed, they'd reprogrammed our brains to be assimilated."

From alcoholism to a healing alliance

A personal war raged inside Michael for the next 45 years, in and out of the jail system, as he battled alcoholism.

Twenty years ago, the national inquiry into the forced removal of Aboriginal children, presided over by former High Court judge Sir Ronald Wilson, handed its findings to the Commonwealth in the Bringing Them Home report, including 54 recommendations.

Richard Campbell says he now understands why it's important to tell his story.*(Supplied: Peter Solness)*

At the time, Richard was oblivious.

"I was still trying to kill myself with alcohol," he says.

"What came out of it? I don't know what came out of it because they're still taking the kids away."

The trauma the boys endured at Kinchela has had one positive effect — deepening the fellowship between them. They have established an incorporated Aboriginal organisation, the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation.

"Now, I realise the importance of our stories," Michael says.

"We couldn't tell the story because we didn't think anybody would believe us. We thought everybody knew what was happening to us."

A silent witness to suffering

When the boys go back to Kinchela for commemorations, such as the 90th anniversary three years ago, both Richard and Michael zero in on that big old Moreton Bay fig tree in the grounds of the former home, which is now a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre.

As they talk, the story unfolds about why the tree is so significant to them.

Like animals, the boys were chained to the trunk of the tree overnight, as punishment for wetting the bed and failing to pass inspection, for dirty fingernails.

Worse still was done to them under the monstrous — or enfolding — limbs of the tree.

"That's where they used to chain the boys up in the night and do whatever they liked to them," Richard says.

But as they gather at the base of the tree on special occasions, redemption seems possible.

"Every time we go back, the tree has grown over the chain," Richard says.

The Moreton Bay fig tree is slowly absorbing the chain around its base.*(Supplied: Peter Solness)*

He says almost like a sentient being, the magnificent old tree had borne silent witness to their suffering.

Most of the iron links of the chain have rusted away, or been absorbed by the tree, and only the loop and a few links remain.

"It felt our pain, and it's grown over our pain — it's grown over the evil of that chain," Richard says.

Michael says he hoped he lived to see the last link of the chain disappear, swallowed up by the tree.

"That tree is our power."