

Good Weekend – February 2012

Two of Us

Interviews by Paul Mitchell.

In 2003, Colleen Marion, 67, and daughter Jacqui Marion, 42, established the Gathering Place Health Service to assist disadvantaged Aborigines in Melbourne's west. Colleen is CEO; chairperson Jacqui also co-ordinates the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Program with Victoria Police.

Jacqui: I often tell Mum the best decision she made was to come to Melbourne in 1971. If she had stayed in remote Queensland, I'd probably have five kids and be unemployed. I was the eldest of the five children she raised on her own, and we were poor. We lived in a Housing Commission home in Maidstone, but there was a lot of love and she always instilled in us that if we wanted a good education and wanted to earn good money, we needed to go to school.

We were a close-knit family and she played the mother and father role. She was very strict. I had to be home at a certain time, even when I was 18, and now she still wants to know what I'm doing, where have I been? We are very close; we chat every day and catch up nearly every night. I'm a bit of a busybody, I suppose. We're always together, but we don't always get along. The biggest thing we share is we're opinionated and argumentative when it comes to trying to get our ideas across. She says things the way she sees them. At a public meeting, I sit there and think, "Did she just say that?" I cringe, but she gets away with it! We disagree at meetings, too, but we respect each other because we've each got something to say, even though sometimes we might clash.

When Mum and I talked about the concept of the Gathering Place back in 2002, it was a mother-daughter partnership, but it was Mum's dream and vision. She wasn't going to stop at anything.

People see her as this very strong black woman, and I suppose she's grown up to be like that. When she makes her mind up, that's it. There's no persuading her otherwise, and that can be frustrating at times. I say, "Mum, I don't think you're right, we should talk about it and maybe come up with another solution." But it's her way or the highway.

That can be hard when we're trying to work together. I'm scared of her every day, to be honest. She's warm, friendly, approachable, passionate, caring and loving, but if you get on the wrong side of her, she can be quite scary. We're both fiery, but there are times when I've just thought, "I'm not going to get anywhere, so let's just call it quits for now." I let her cool down and come back to it.

Watching her go to teacher's college while raising five kids was inspiring. What she's achieved from where we were back in the early 1970s to where we are today ... God knows where I'd be without her. If I didn't have her as a role model in my life, I wouldn't have the motivation and commitment that she's instilled in all her children.

I tell her often to look at where the Gathering Place is today. In 2002, we had no idea how big it was going to become [it started with seven clients and now has 1000]. It's been a lot of hard work, we've put our lives on hold; you just pour your heart and soul into something that you've built. She's a hands-on CEO and I

tell her she's not getting any younger. I tell her she's got eight grandchildren and that she needs to look after herself, but she tells me to mind my own business.

Colleen: She can be stubborn, very stubborn. She won't even have a little flexibility if she has her mind made up. We have arguments over lots of things, and sometimes I say, "You're not right", but she always thinks she is. She doesn't like to be beaten and she likes to be in control.

But she's been the backbone behind me creating the Gathering Place, getting all the policies in place. She is a very intelligent person and the best report writer I've ever known. Without her reports and intelligence we wouldn't have this place or the doctors and all the other services we've got for Aboriginal people. She's a very devoted person, not only to her family, but also to her job. I came from Queensland and was brought up on a reserve. Having Jacqui know about her culture – going out to hunt for traditional food and being part of that family connection – has made her a better person.

She's someone who likes to have things in place, at work, at home; her home is so neat! When she goes away, she makes sure she makes you a list, and things like that. It annoys me sometimes; I don't care if the bed's unmade or there are dishes in the sink, but there's nothing on her table or desk. And she's a clean freak.

When we go out for dinner she squirts detergent on my hands at the table and makes me wash them!

But we have a great mother-and-daughter relationship. She's always making sure I'm being looked after. She thinks the way I think sometimes, and that's why we've been so successful with this place. She has been very connected to me from about the age of five and caring in lots of ways.

I was never really worried about her when she was growing up because she's always shown me that she has a lot of strength. She always stood out as a child.

When I was a single mum, she helped me with the other siblings, she was that strong person by my side from five years of age.

That strength has come out in different ways at different times; like how she applied herself when she went to school and also when she wanted to be a police officer. Back then, because of her height, she wasn't able to be one. But she didn't give up and still ended up working with Victoria Police. I believe that being brought up in a family of very strong black women, like her grandmother, her Auntie Nell and me, that's where she gets her strength from.

She always asks me where I get my energy from and she worries about me. She's amazed that I can work here all day and then drive to an outer suburb and help a relative who doesn't have food at the moment.

She's never let me down. And I don't think Jacqui will ever let me down on anything that we want to achieve for our community and for our family. She's very family-orientated and at Christmas she's having all the family over to her place. She doesn't cook much, but she's family orientated.