

Standing on the outside, looking in

**"I'm standing on the outside, lookin' in.
I never strayed outside the law.
I'm standing on the outside, lookin' in.
A room full of money and the born to win.
And no amount of work's gonna get me
through the door."**

These words are from the Cold Chisel *EAST* album – my all-time favourite album – from the *Standing on the outside* track. These are the exact words that came to my mind since the 'no' vote for the Voice referendum.

Things were different before the referendum. Since it, we have seen the rise of One Nation and limited progress in Closing the Gap. In my experience, it is now deemed 'okay' to be openly racist and anti-Aboriginal. This is certainly not a whole-of-population thing, but an experience more and more young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are noticing in their day-to-day lives.

To all the champions of all ethnicities that call Australia home, we thank you for your effort and support in these troubling and tough times. This support is helping us tread water and deliver the support and opportunities necessary for Aboriginal peoples and wider communities. This support is helping us raise koolungas (children) in these circumstances, where we have seen antisocial behaviour become the norm in many communities.

This rise in racism and anti-Aboriginal behaviour will not define us. We have seen examples of many great programs and initiatives come to life in our communities to help our people. I am particularly impressed with a local sports program that is inclusive and celebrates Indigenous people.

Thumbs up for SFL

In sport, I want to acknowledge the Sunday Football League (SFL) in Perth, which caters for everyone. Ninety per cent of the participants in this program are of Indigenous background and 40% of those people have been previously incarcerated.

It is the role of the SFL to provide purpose and connection in the lives of its participants. The SFL is something participants look forward to every Sunday afternoon.

In the past two years, the SFL has gone to a special structure in our competition where we play three games at a venue which rotates every week. What we have found is that this new structure has created harmony, prevented rivalry, and contributed to an environment where families and their children enjoy the day out in a safe atmosphere.



Michael Mitchell

We provide football for people who cannot afford it and help support them through initiatives we have with Aboriginal community leaders. One of the most important things that we do is make people feel welcome and indulge in their great passion for football.

Football is a great recreational sport for the people of this region – the Noongar people. This initiative increases the likelihood of participants being involved in something that looks after their Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) and prevents them from thinking negatively. We provide a safe space where they can express themselves and feel appreciated.

The games are played in excellent spirit, with only one yellow and one red card issued so far this season. The SFL believes this encourages the participants to involve themselves in further football once the season has concluded.

The sense of extended goodwill and the mixing of families make the day an ideal place to come to enjoy life. It is a great inspiration to see children of all ages being able to kick the football, mark the football and bounce the football – showing amazing athletic ability.

We are hoping this set up will make it more comfortable for Indigenous players for years to come.

Despite a lack of funding, the SFL is a textbook case of what can happen if people put their minds to it.

Our board represents a variety of people, ranging from Aboriginal Elders through to a member of parliament, with the clubs also having strong representation on the board.



Michael Mitchell speaking at the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering 6, held in Walyalup (Fremantle) in March.

It is fantastic to walk onto the ground on match day and see people greeting each other, hugging each other and passing the day in a positive manner.

The sense of inclusion is huge. I look forward to going to the games on Sundays, seeing the crowds increasing, and families working together, respecting Elders and enjoying the game that they have loved for generations.

It is a happy place to be. It provides a sense of achievement, pride, and gives a sense of belonging. Part of life is developing positive relationships with people from a huge variety of backgrounds, and the SFL provides a unique place to do so.

With the finals approaching, we are looking forward to another successful event where people will attend in large numbers, sit back in the sun, appreciate talent, skill and sportsmanship and enjoy everything that is good about life.

Education and the Aboriginal way

In a small primary school community in WA, we see the mental health and SEWB of Aboriginal children and families as inseparable from belonging, dignity, family, culture and connection.

The period after the Voice referendum has reminded us that national conversations are not abstract for Aboriginal people. Children hear and feel the way adults talk about Aboriginal lives, rights and futures. Families carry that weight alongside the everyday pressures of poverty, food insecurity, housing stress, trauma, health barriers and the difficulty of accessing services

that feel safe and respectful.

The school-based wellbeing and engagement hub was created to respond to those realities in practical, relational ways. This program supports students and families with food, clothing, late arrivals, health and developmental pathways, family support, referrals, advocacy and connection to services. More than two-thirds of the students have accessed some form of support, and many families have received more direct assistance. Much of this work looks simple from the outside: a jumper, a sandwich, help filling in a form, a quiet check-in, a phone call, or support getting to an appointment. But for families who have often experienced systems as judgemental, confusing or unsafe, these small acts can become the beginning of trust.

Aboriginal mental health and SEWB after the Voice referendum cannot only be answered through clinical services after harm has already occurred. It also needs daily, place-based, culturally-responsive support that reduces shame and strengthens connection. A school can become more than a place of learning; it can become a place where children and families are seen, welcomed and supported without blame. The deeper issue is not only whether children are fed, clothed or referred, but whether they experience school as a place that values them, understands the weight they may be carrying, and believes they have a future.

So, despite the increased racism, there are many positive programs and initiatives. I prefer to focus on these as they are our future and give hope.

● Michael Mitchell is a Yamatji man of Nyamal and Malgana descent.

He started his working life as an electrician and then went on to play professional Australian Rules Football for Claremont and Richmond, where he was awarded goal and mark of the year (1990) and was named one of the Richmond Ten Tiger Treasures of the century by winning goal of the century (2020).

Michael began his career in Indigenous health and SEWB by developing a youth training program in the Carnarvon region, developing skills to work in the fishing industry.

He also managed and coordinated several Aboriginal community-controlled services, as well as gained a degree focused on Indigenous mental health from Curtin University.

During the 15 years he was the service manager of Wungen Kartup, an Aboriginal mental health program, there was never a suicide of a client under its care.

Michael is a member of the AFL's mental-health committee and works as a consultant in Aboriginal mental-health and SEWB.

This article is part of a series of *Koori Mail* columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities. For more information visit cbpatsisp.com.au