

Gary Lee interviewed by Daniel Browning, Darwin, February 2023 – Part 1

Gary Lee: [00:00:00] Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:00:02] Hey, now, Gary, it is Wednesday, the 6th of February 2023. I'm in Darwin and I'm here to do some interviews for Merbau, the Indigenous Oral History Project in collaboration with Sydney World Pride, the ABC. And I'm in suburban Darwin in July and I'm with Gary Lee. Now Gary, could you introduce yourself as fully as you would like to be introduced?

Gary Lee: [00:00:33] Okay. My name is Gary Lee. I'm a Larrakia artist, primarily a photographer, and I live in Darwin. I've lived in Sydney. Um, mainly Sydney, actually. But yes, so that's me.

Daniel Browning: [00:00:56] Anthropologists. I trained anthropologist.

Gary Lee: [00:00:59] Yeah. Well, I am also an anthropologist with honours from the Australian National University. And from there I worked at the Australia Council in Sydney. And then I had to tear myself away at the delights of Sydney. I had to. And I went back to Darwin. And then I got a job. I was the first time I applied for the dole. So I did. And then I applied for a job. There was a job in the paper. Mimi Arts and crafts and Katherine. And you know, I thought, I've got to try for that job. It said. So I did, and I got it. But the boss at the time, and I will tell you that he was the he is the best. Second boss. Second boss. I've had I had two very good bosses, Chips Mackinolty, and he worked there and he said, yes, he's I have respect for him. He, you know. So I went there and he said, But then the day before I was to go, I, I went to her, but I trained my ankle ankle and I could walk on a bloody crutches. And I said, Now come down still, you can sit and get better. And, you know, so I did that. I went out to Katherine. I loved it. I loved that job so much that that's when I decided that I have to. Become an anthropologist, and I was meeting a lot of anthropologists through Amy. Mimi and I applied for two universities. I'd Sydney University in Canberra, I ANU in Canberra. And but the thing with Canberra won out for me because I had met a professional, professional anthropologist, Nick Pederson, and I loved and I also had meet and met a

girl. Anyway, so I went there and I decided to go to ANU and that was the best decision I made because then I, you know, I did get a lot of experience there and stuff.

Daniel Browning: [00:03:23] And let's start at the beginning though, because when were you I guess when you're writing your own story, you're writing your memoir at the moment, but tell us where it all starts. You know, your parents, your family and Darwin. Well, you were you born?

Gary Lee: [00:03:41] I was born in 1952.

Daniel Browning: [00:03:44] You're the only queer to offer the either are born. Thank you for that. 1952. The only queer I've spoken to who's been willing to say what year they were born.

Gary Lee: [00:03:53] Oh, yes. No, no, no, no. 92 and.

Daniel Browning: [00:03:56] 52.

Gary Lee: [00:03:58] And this May. I'm going to be 71.

Daniel Browning: [00:04:01] One day in.

Gary Lee: [00:04:02] May 18th.

Daniel Browning: [00:04:03] My God, I'm 23rd.

Gary Lee: [00:04:06] My. My is a good year. I can tell you some good, good friends.

Daniel Browning: [00:04:11] So your mum and dad tell me a little bit about them.

Gary Lee: [00:04:14] Okay. So my mum, her mother married, was married to John Cubillo and he was the son of Antonia Cubillo and Lily McKenzie. Lily and Lily McKenzie was the daughter of a Scottish free settler called.

Daniel Browning: [00:04:38] William.

Gary Lee: [00:04:39] Mccarthy. Yes, sorry. And George Mackenzie had come to town in the very, very early days.

Daniel Browning: [00:04:49] He was one of the first settlers.

Gary Lee: [00:04:50] He was he, he he his family were living in gay rock in Scotland, and they decided to sell everything. They were printers and things like that and move to Australia, which was really unusual. There's about 11 of them, but they had a bit of money, I think, obviously. So when they came to Australia they could go anywhere because they were free. Sometimes they weren't. So that's when when George Mackenzie turned 21, he got he got his inheritance, which must've been a lot of money. So he decided to come up to Darwin because he had a brother who was working at the Palmerston shop up here and he came up and worked for us and so that's how he came up to here at the time.

Daniel Browning: [00:05:37] So was it Port Essington then Back in those days it wasn't Darwin, was it?

Gary Lee: [00:05:40] I was porters and George McKinley came up in There were it's well documented. There's a famous photo of 11 white peer pioneers in Darwin and they, the businessmen and George McClintock is there. So at that time there was the law. Was that you that Aboriginal women were not allowed to have it. All white men were not allowed to cohabit with Aboriginal women. No, no, no. But the irony is there were three main Dutch Dashwood, who was my great uncle, and George Mackenzie and somebody else I can't remember. Anyway, they each had.

Daniel Browning: [00:06:27] Three, three of these early settlers had Aboriginal wives just.

Gary Lee: [00:06:31] Just as Dashwood he had a and she married George Mackenzie's son Jack. So.

Daniel Browning: [00:06:42] And that's your Uncle Jack is. So there was Jack and Lily. Magdalena. Now, Lily is your on your grandmother. Maternal.

Gary Lee: [00:06:52] Great grandmother.

Daniel Browning: [00:06:53] Maternal.

Gary Lee: [00:06:54] And so Antonio Kabila came from the Philippines, Bohol, and he came via Sydney. A lot of people were going to Darwin to work in the mining industry or sailing, and he was a sail maker. And he came and he he was indentured to George Mackay to work for him. And he had, he had a yacht, he had a few boats and things. Yes. And he, yes, but the woman he had the two children to Minnie. Minnie Dual. She didn't live with him. She didn't.

Daniel Browning: [00:07:38] He is Larrakia, which is where your Larrakia heritage comes straight from her.

Gary Lee: [00:07:42] So George would take care of his her welfare. And also he he was bringing up the two children. They had a faithful caretaker, if you like, or art form. And they, you know, he looked after them.

Daniel Browning: [00:08:05] He was entrusted to look after the kids. On behalf of George, Kitty.

Gary Lee: [00:08:08] And everything like that.

Daniel Browning: [00:08:09] So and they carried his name to like the children.

Gary Lee: [00:08:13] Yes. He was definite. He wanted them to take his name. And who's to say.

Daniel Browning: [00:08:20] What happened to me?

Gary Lee: [00:08:22] Minnie kept visiting and she had another baby, Jack. And then her. She was photographed by false like a lot of low key people. And eventually we don't know what her in the records, but the records for her were lost. But the record for

Jack McKenny and his two children were very rich and he he had properties and stations and everything like that.

Daniel Browning: [00:08:55] So Minnie was, you said false. Paul False was the police magistrate in Darwin and he had some kind of official role and he also was kind of an amateur ethnologist. He took photographs of all Larrakia mobs.

Gary Lee: [00:09:12] He was the first. Police commissioner in Darwin. And he worked for the police in South Australia. But it was also I met a photographer and he had one of those.

Daniel Browning: [00:09:31] Long camera's.

Gary Lee: [00:09:32] Long. I should know about it. And he brought up and he started taking photographs. But that's. That's why these photographs are so beautiful, because he he one thing about his photograph he really wanted to capture. I mean, he did draw doctor up the pictures. He made them. But that's okay. That's irrelevant.

Daniel Browning: [00:09:53] So so some of them were bare chested, for instance, when they wouldn't have been. We're looking at there's a picture of a billiard book that one of the Larrakia elders that folks took. And it's here on an image that you one of your works where you one of your nephews, Shannon, is the kind of modern day bulimic.

Gary Lee: [00:10:17] That's right. I wanted to show the connection between Billy Mook, who was 16 in the picture. And I cost to put next to it a photograph of a. My nephew Shannon. And the false fathers are black and white and the beautiful C.P.R.. Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. And and I wanted to photograph him in color, so I just wanted to I was telling talking about the beauty, the the fine, you know, the proud look and all that. And then I did that with his mother. There was a photo of her Mini, and he's my niece, Me, him. He was also grandmother. And she was also the same age as Minnie. So she was 25, I think.

Daniel Browning: [00:11:17] And Billy Mock, is there a family connection? I mean, he obviously is Larrakia. You're you're all connected, but there is.

Gary Lee: [00:11:22] No family connection with us. No, but I'm. Oh, yes. Yes, he is. He was the first Larrakia person when the survey party arrived in Fox Hill, and there were all these key people up in the bushes looking and they were threatening them with the spears. And then as they got up on the hill, like, I see these lucky people and they came out and they were going to throw the spears. And then Billy, a 16 year old, he was already a man and he had and he stepped forward and he stopped them and he went to the it was he was the surgeon on the and Billy took off seed necklace, red seeds. And we tried to find out what kind of seeds and they were crabgrass seeds, the black and red seeds. And he gave it to this and that was so then Billy was used by sort of like a conduit between and he became very, very important. He was also one of the first three Larrakia people who were sent to Adelaide by, but after they were there.

Daniel Browning: [00:12:47] For enforcing them.

Gary Lee: [00:12:49] Yes. That would just to be on show? Yes. And then after they finished at the wherever they had to do it. Guess what? It was like, okay, bye bye.

Daniel Browning: [00:13:08] Make your own way home.

Gary Lee: [00:13:09] Yes, I'm Adelaide and there was one rich white man there. He felt sorry for them. He said no. So he paid their passageway and ship because otherwise they didn't know where they were going. So it was terrible. But that brilliant book was one of those boys. So early on he had an idea of Down South people and so and then he helped the government before work.

Daniel Browning: [00:13:34] As a diplomat. He was also, well, travel, yeah.

Gary Lee: [00:13:37] Interpreter All that.

Daniel Browning: [00:13:39] And it's like one of the key Larrakia ancestors.

Gary Lee: [00:13:42] Yes. He's one of the few Larrakia men that is photographed quite often from when he was 16, right up until he's 50.

Daniel Browning: [00:13:52] So now your heritage, you touched on it, I think Filipino, very many Aboriginal heritages Naki Larrakia being the primary one but yeah, biggest mob German, the German then.

Gary Lee: [00:14:10] German. Yes indeed. My father's Scottish. Yes, that's on mum's side, German and my father's side. His mother was born south of Broome. It's called the Bay. No, it was on the other end. So you get Broome and then there was something that's kind of dirty or carried out to Broome. And his her father was her mother. Her mother was what you'd say was a light one. Yes, light one. She wasn't a dark one, but the father was a German policeman. Um. Cool. How can I not forget his name? It's just there. Um.

Daniel Browning: [00:15:17] It doesn't matter.

Gary Lee: [00:15:18] It does, because that was her name. Um.

Daniel Browning: [00:15:24] You remember? We'll come back to it.

Gary Lee: [00:15:26] He was a German man. He was a policeman there. He came out from Germany for the war. He went to America, didn't like it, Went down to Albert to end up in Perth, liked it, talked his way up, and then he was working, was got a job. I push with this colored girl? He was the manager of that.

Daniel Browning: [00:15:54] Sure it wasn't big Goodbye.

Gary Lee: [00:15:56] No, big goodbye was out during the war. So she was living down there. And she also had a brother. And he looked at them. But then when the war breaks out, well, one, all Germans became persona non grata. They had to leave and he'd be deep. Ten years.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:15] Aliens.

Gary Lee: [00:16:18] And my mama and brother were taken and put into a big by fairies.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:30] What was your Nana's name?

Gary Lee: [00:16:32] Nana. Nana. Nana. Some felt that's the name. Some felt the felt.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:40] Some felt.

Gary Lee: [00:16:41] You MP Field Pltd.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:45] Yes. She's unmistakably German.

Gary Lee: [00:16:49] And she was very proud of, as I said, I am. So that was the night he gave them the night.

Daniel Browning: [00:16:55] Can I ask, when you were growing up, did you have a sense of all of that? I know you've done a lot of work to you know, you're an author of just being German, Filipino, Chinese. Yeah.

Gary Lee: [00:17:07] Absolutely. And several have come. Well, my grandmother, she told me all about her father. He was a German man. He was very good. And that's where she got her nous to be a stunning businesswoman. And she said he was very good then. During the war, he had to leave Australia, she told me. I heard all about it before I went to high school. And he left. And he went to Indonesia somewhere. Sumatra. And he started another family. And there's a whole some felt in in Bali, but not Bali. And I said, well, you know, I was going to do to think about it, but I haven't. But I'm sure there is names. I haven't even looked. So and then she went to and then, you know, and then she met my grandfather. Now my grandfather, my dad's father. He was a Japanese Chinese man. So.

Daniel Browning: [00:18:11] Yes. So historian here.

Gary Lee: [00:18:14] About I've written a play about his, but I've never done anything about it. And most are saying you should write the play. I said, I've written it, I've just got to, but I'm just too busy. And it's it's a well, because when I had the exhibition in Beijing and Kate Krall. Actually, we're going to see you next week. She took us around and I was so grateful. I I've never been in and I had my exhibition. I had this. And then the

Chinese press came and it was so very I've never experienced. I loved it. I loved it. John Mundine was there, Gold and his girlfriend. Oh wow. And, you know, sad and so was and Jason Wing was there and he was a big thing to not that let's just, you know don't don't go out in the streets and you know and I'll sit somewhere else.

Daniel Browning: [00:19:10] Of your homelands.

Gary Lee: [00:19:11] And I said, let's go. So while they're eating at the hostel, we went down to get in here and then there's no way. I mean, the guy right there was the local scene, the restaurants and no white person. Let's go. We had a bowl of beautiful food anyway. What was that telling you?

Daniel Browning: [00:19:31] I was just. We were talking about the family. But you had a sense of being all of those things.

Gary Lee: [00:19:36] So my grandfather, my father's father, in about 18 something, I'll have to look up the date. 1830, 40, 50, maybe. John No. Harry Lee SU So his name was Lee Su. Lee Su But the eyeglasses, his name was Harry. Harry Lee Su And he, he had been living in Darwin for about 20 years. He was a businessman. He made money and gold pills, whatever. And he'd go back to. He'd been back to China, Guangzhou, Canton. Ron. I'm to his home there. And he had two wives there. That lived there for 20 years there, living there.

Daniel Browning: [00:20:32] Working here, sending the money back, all.

Gary Lee: [00:20:34] That stuff. But they go back to Darwin, you know, and doing making his money. And then one day he was apparently this is a story that my aunt is passed away and she got the story when she was not that he was riding his cat. No cars cut down by. Jen. Gen. Dan Bob Beach. Not the beach. Danny The Wharf. Not the wharf around the corner.

Daniel Browning: [00:21:11] Somewhere in Darwin.

Gary Lee: [00:21:13] Dan By the water, actually. And he was going to. And apparently he found my grandmother. And my grandmother's name was Sue Rossi. And when I

saw that 90 people, I said, Oh, that's a very old name. And I said, Well, that was her name. And I was Sue. Yeah. I said, I can write. Anyway.

Daniel Browning: [00:21:36] From where was she from?

Gary Lee: [00:21:38] She was from Japan. She was a Japanese girl. This makes people say, you should make this into a movie script. I said, Yeah, you got to pay me. And she was tattered and everything. And, you know.

Daniel Browning: [00:21:52] She stowed away on a boat or something.

Gary Lee: [00:21:54] She stowed away. She came from southern Japan just before the war, and there was just nothing.

Daniel Browning: [00:22:02] There for the second before the First World.

Gary Lee: [00:22:03] War. Yes, absolutely nothing you can imagine.

Daniel Browning: [00:22:07] And so how old was she when she started acting?

Gary Lee: [00:22:11] She was 12 when they came in 13 when she arrived. And she and other girl sat down on this boat and go somewhere to earn money or live or, you know. And they took off from their home and they stowed away on this boat. That boat was going from there to Singapore, then from Singapore to Darwin, then down to Broome. And I don't know if they were caught on the boat or anything, but they when the boat came to Darwin, she jumped the ship. The other, her other girlfriend went on to Broome, she jumped the ship and she, she didn't know what, I suppose she was starving and apparently she was really starving. And so he took her home and he fed Japanese, looked after her. 13, 14, 15, 16. She was. Became his father and he said he'll marry her. And by that time, she, she, she. She had no deep desire to go back to Japan. I think she just wanted a future for, you know. Yeah. So he married her, and then she got pregnant. Happy, happy, happy. Some at that time, a down upon creek. There was a lot of gold found down there. And he know Pine Creek just before Katherine. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:23:36] Just down that.

Gary Lee: [00:23:37] Way. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there was a lot of Chinese people there working and all Caucasians and everything. And he went. He was actually born in Brock's Creek, which is that Pines Creek. They were living there in the tents, said. And then they came back to Darwin.

Daniel Browning: [00:23:56] This is your dad we're talking about now. Is your know.

Gary Lee: [00:23:59] That my grandfather, Your.

Daniel Browning: [00:24:00] Father's father? Yes.

Gary Lee: [00:24:03] And so when he was about three or. But five years old, his father. So he gave the name James Lee. The authorities just.

Daniel Browning: [00:24:16] This is.

Gary Lee: [00:24:19] What is the Japanese stowaway? Yes. So. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And he wanted to take his wife. More recently, he wanted to show that he had a son. Now he had a daughter in. But not interested daughter. But here he has a son. Half Japanese. I don't worry. So I went by ship and I was. You know, I'd go through all the records and can't find a photo of them, but. I went to Hong Kong, which was just before Canton, Guangzhou, and I went to his house and his two wives, two Chinese or two very bitter Chinese girls. That's what I reckon. And he came back. Not only that, he had a wife, Japanese wife, which were like, but he had a son anyway. I don't know what it was like for her. But one day this is all true. People think I made it up. The two wars. Poison the food, right? So they put the poison in the food and they brought the food into him and Sawyer and. And I think that she would do the usual thing, but she would eat them. They're not like that in Australia. So the husband. At first and he dropped dead from poison. And his mother? She. She knows that. No, no, no. She knew that those two women wanted that. My grandfather. And they were willing to kill her. That was easy. People did that in those days.

Daniel Browning: [00:26:12] I killed the man that they were married to. And then previously he died.

Gary Lee: [00:26:17] So the two wives were arranging his funeral thing, and. And while they were out of the house, the little servant wasn't. Their daughter was a servant girl. She was about nine. And she said, Mrs. Lee, they will harm you. They want the baby boy. And she knew that. And she said, Oh, now we're getting out of here sort of thing. So she bundled up. She had the return ticket and then.

Daniel Browning: [00:26:51] Make their way to the ship.

Gary Lee: [00:26:52] Yes, but she said to the little girl. Where's your partner? Parent? They will kill me, maybe. And they would do that. So she said, No, you can't. She said, You come with me to help me with the kids at the baggage and everything. And she had no passport, nothing. They went to Hong Kong, went to the boat, got the thing, and she had no ticket for him, for her. And she said to the. She can speak English, by the way. She said, Oh, no, no, no. She's smart. You know, she doesn't have passport. She she has nobody. She. And the bloke said, Oh, why Durand? Now, that lady was the mother of the Chinoy families in Darwin. The Keno families are big Aboriginal families.

Daniel Browning: [00:27:40] Bad, annoying, annoy their matriarch. And she's a she's Chinese.

Gary Lee: [00:27:50] And she grew up. And years later after the war, she went back there to see. But anyway, so they took off and they got back to Australia. And then my, my grandmother's great grandmother's paternal. My grandma is buried down at the very first cemetery. And then wardens. Then the gardens. And her great gravestone is typical Japanese. The Japanese section was here. The Chinese agreed, and he chopped her name. And it was.

Daniel Browning: [00:28:29] In Japanese characters.

Gary Lee: [00:28:31] Yeah. Yes, Yes. Because. Because he grew up, she taught him Japanese.

Daniel Browning: [00:28:35] James, your grandfather? Yes.

Gary Lee: [00:28:37] He's a Japanese mother. She taught him everything.

Daniel Browning: [00:28:41] Japanese. You have a photo of her?

Gary Lee: [00:28:43] I don't have a photo of her. I've looked and looked and looked and looked at. I don't think my grandfather would have had a camera either way. Which is really sad. But the the only thing is when. When he went to Broome, he met my grandmother. The German Aboriginal grandmother. Yes.

Daniel Browning: [00:29:05] And he survived the poisoning.

Gary Lee: [00:29:08] Would you believe it, Mary Lee? Like Mama Merrily. And she. He went there. And then the next time she got pregnant, that baby looked nothing like. But you know what? Pop up. He was so like everyone, okay? Not my kid, but he would bring it up. And the next four boys were all different fathers, and he brought them up. But eventually, he. They did an unthinkable thing. They applied for a divorce. Now, in Darwin, they say, No, no, no, no. What about these people? And I was giving them.

Daniel Browning: [00:29:48] To essentially non coloured people. I mean, people have people who are not Europeans.

Gary Lee: [00:29:55] And then when he was in Broome, he met this other Japanese woman, Dirty Chai. Does that ring a bell? Cha Jimmy Cha. Jimmy Cha, Elder sister Gert. I met my grandfather, so I had three grandmothers. And dirty cha. She married Papa but moved it down. And she lived here. She was. Jd So when I went to Birmingham, I thought, I've got to beat the. Jimmy Cha. So, Ronda, now my cousin, went to the plate, the pub on the thing, and there was a thing for the Pilgrim brothers and Jimmy Cha I saw on there. I said, This must be the place. I didn't know who the Pilgrims were. Lot of the people went in there and I was saying. That's, you know, I'm on the way to brand new. That's a brand new day. They're actually singing. Wow. This is a lovely. And the packed the pub was Papped. And he was singing. You know what? This really happened. He was singing. We walked in. And maybe because we're not local, few people looked around and we got a table and he was singing with Mr. Pilgrim. And the next minute he went like, he was really looking me on the side. And he finished.

Daniel Browning: [00:31:27] This. Jimmy Cha is the famous what do you call him? Music director. I mean, composer, incredible theater maker.

Gary Lee: [00:31:35] And he said he looked at me. Well, he didn't know he'd never met before, but he looked at me and he said, That, boy, I don't think I'd run to say he's pointing at you. And I said, What do you say? Come? And I thought, Oh, no. And he said, Where are you from? And I said, I'm from Darwin. And then he said to me and I said, Great choice. My nana. Wow. I was that drunk. Want to let them? And every. Every couple of years, I went down to see Jimmy. And then another time when I was working in Sydney, the new brand new brand, brand new day was playing in Sydney. And I was at the Australia Council at that time and I went to having a rehearsal and there was Jim come and there's this famous people's photo of me, Peter, you and Jimmy.

Daniel Browning: [00:32:36] Kimberley Land.

Gary Lee: [00:32:37] Council guitar.

Daniel Browning: [00:32:39] And Jimmy Cha.

Gary Lee: [00:32:40] Aboriginal Mafia. I can't find that photo. But anyway, so Jimmy is and so I connected with him and he was, oh now this is, you know, blah, blah, blah. So I had the connection to him and my Japanese grandfather. He, and he married Gert, which I remember. We've.

Daniel Browning: [00:33:06] But let's talk about the immediate family, because your family history, we could we could spend days talking about it. It's so fascinating. But yeah, so there's ten of you I think in your. In your phone. Nine.

Gary Lee: [00:33:20] Sorry. Sorry. I gave you the wrong thing.

Daniel Browning: [00:33:22] And you are the eldest boy and the second child.

Gary Lee: [00:33:25] And then later on my, my when I went to I knew my, we had a. Terrible tragedy. My cousin. Uh, she met an Aboriginal guy friend from Port Hedland

and he, you know, he had beautiful four beautiful kids and then they moved down to Port Hedland. He wanted to. Well, he did and they were there. She was there with the four kids. She was being a good mother. She was. And he came home one day. The boy, the eldest boy, the eldest of the kids is one boy. Then there's two girls and one other boy. The eldest boy would have been about nine so he can see. And the other one was, you know, seven, six and down. And their father was a real so terribly good looking but absolutely nothing there and a drinker and spending her money you know and all that usual story and he came home one day at lunchtime it's about 1:00 or nearly 1:00 and she was cook getting lunch, making sandwiches or things for the kids. And he grabbed that knife and he stabbed her to death on the in the kitchen and in front of the kids. So what? I didn't know that. But we found out that those four kids were going to be sent to Perth, to some home. And my father said, no, no, no, no, no, don't do that. So he worked for the government at that time, so he and Mum went to. Uh, and they greatly adopted these kids. So there's ten kids in there, nine kids in the house and these other four and. Oh, wow. Rah, rah, rah, rah. But he saved those kids in a way.

Daniel Browning: [00:35:23] You know, your cousins, are they. They're related. They're blood. Blood relatives.

Gary Lee: [00:35:28] Yes, they are. Uh. But they grew up like brothers.

Daniel Browning: [00:35:33] Grew up like brothers and sisters.

Gary Lee: [00:35:35] Yes, yes, yes. So their grandfather was my mother's greatest. Eldest brother. So he is. And the niece I was talking about before, she is this girl was Louisa. She was so beautiful. I loved. Anyway, anyway, so.

Daniel Browning: [00:35:56] That happened often happens with blackfellas. We have more. Well, just just more. More people coming into the family home and the family home having to accommodate more than just people in the immediate nuclear family.

Gary Lee: [00:36:10] Yeah. Yeah, it was like that.

Daniel Browning: [00:36:12] So now. We're going to be talking about a couple of things, but I want to kind of go to when you realize that, you know, you were queer or

you were gay and what that kind of meant to you and how you how you manage to survive Darwin in the 1950s and sixties.

Gary Lee: [00:36:36] The thing was, it was a bit different from me. I knew when I was about eight that there was something wrong because I was taken at the awful. Catholic school here, St Mary's, lovely St Mary's. And it was it had to do with this ring. It's a long story. And the nuns. Oh, well, look, I was out and it's my birthday. My Auntie Nolan, who went to that Greek wedding. She loved me. She had no children. Her husband was an Irishman, blond haired, blue eyed, absolute. But she was. And she couldn't have children because he was impotent. He would say, it's you, but not her anyway. So she'd always look after me and she put me in front of a shed his cabinet with. I opened up and this little ballerina went around that she put all had costume jewelry on and I thought it was the most beautiful thing. And I would sit there and play with it. And she loved it. She let me go. I'm.

Daniel Browning: [00:37:42] Um, and there was a ring in this bike.

Gary Lee: [00:37:45] So when I went to Saint Mary's. Oh, my gosh. And my cousins can tell you stories about that.

Daniel Browning: [00:37:57] Flatow I went to Catholic school, too.

Gary Lee: [00:37:59] I went to Catholic school not most proud of it. And I do all the things, you know, I make the church every.

Daniel Browning: [00:38:06] Altar.

Gary Lee: [00:38:06] Service, how college, Holy Communion, confirmation. You know, we were there. Mom was there.

Daniel Browning: [00:38:13] Did that come down through the Filipino side that you had to be Catholic?

Gary Lee: [00:38:16] I think so. Filipinos are.

Daniel Browning: [00:38:21] So. So the ring Mary's.

Gary Lee: [00:38:23] They threw you out a little ring for my birthday. A signet ring, which I know is one that non carried a little shield rings with a little red ruby. And I probably at that time I never heard about I never thought about rings, I never looked them. But because it was on my finger, I thought it was just the most gorgeous things. I wore it as a girl and Sister Killian, I put her name there. She did long, but. And I was. Kill your sister. Kill it with a sister killer. Kill them too much sister killing. And when she had an eyes like our thing the minute I walked in, she said. Gary Lee, come here to the front. Look. Really rough, gruff talking. That's what I did. And I didn't know what you talking about. So I went up there. She grabbed. She attacked me, and she grabbed my hand and she ripped that ring up really rough. And I said my my ring. And she had a big glass job and she dropped the ring. And then she she had little bits of jewelry and other things that were confiscated by all the students and things that look like a gold bracelet there. And I thought but the mothers would say, Oh, no, that's not the word. We didn't do the right thing. So it's okay. And that at the end, the nun said, Well, at the end you can get the ring back. Oh yeah, that's it. And that. But in between that been making the kids, you'd be telling them. And then we had to learn Latin and I said to Mama and French grade for.

Daniel Browning: [00:40:07] Ridiculous ticketless Darwin. Yeah.

Gary Lee: [00:40:12] And then if we were now she'd get us to mow the lawns or pick up the stuff. And I can remember one time I read this in my memoir, my memories of the Catholic School, that, you know, there's prayers before lunch, prayers after lunch, everything. We all sit around eating sandwiches, okay, with the cousins and everything and that. And then one day this white boy, now his family is I think he's I still see his time, but. Pause. I won't say his name, but this poor boy, he came to school. They were white people. Pope. Somebody said, What trash? I said, Don't say that. You know about good people. And he came in the singlet. So what? Well, and anyway, so the nun to. To. You know, put him in his place or whatever. He at lunchtime, when the bell will read it, say the prayer. Got it. And he would walk around this big. It's still there, that big square where we'd be all sitting around and he would have to walk around while we were eating. And and when he started to do this, well, that's kind of what we're looking and say, What? What? We didn't see anything wrong with it. And this kid and he was

crying, crying, crying. And he was made to go and walk around. Honest. Utterly. They said they wouldn't do that. They did it because we saw walk around and pick up any bits of crumb or crust or anything dirty old crummy crust on the on the grounds were pretty clean, but occasionally there'd be a bit of.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:01] Wearing singlets.

Gary Lee: [00:42:03] Just on the ground.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:04] If you're wearing a thing that. That was his punishment for wearing a singlet.

Gary Lee: [00:42:07] Know it gets better. Then he was to he was to wave probably she picked up and I said.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:17] How do you mean, wear it?

Gary Lee: [00:42:19] No, eat it.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:20] Oh, my God, you're kidding me.

Gary Lee: [00:42:22] Yes. And admittedly, he didn't. He only got a handful of crumbs.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:27] To the crust, picked up anything.

Gary Lee: [00:42:31] And he was crying. Poor basil.

Daniel Browning: [00:42:34] So this is what.

Gary Lee: [00:42:36] My I you know what? Those. And she started to she was very Catholic school, Catholic Church. But in the end my mum and I said to and, but dad was very interested in education and he said what. He said what I said anyway but when I went home to tell him that day that they took the ring, he said, Oh all right. So my aunty bought me another one, had a blue stone and just don't wear it to school. So. Rod So at

the end of the day, I want to get that. Ring and the whole jar was empty. And I said, Where's my.

Daniel Browning: [00:43:19] Sent it all to Rome.

Gary Lee: [00:43:21] I said, Can I have my ring back? And she goes wandering. There is no rain. You can see it's empty out. That was it. I was bawling and moaning. And then I said to mum, you know, when I had my I had to go to the fucking piano lessons. No I didn't. Never seen a piano. Och please. Next one then. You could smell that piano, you know. Very. And now we can just with the first. I've even touched the piano. And the second thing, I got it wrong and she whacked me. But it wasn't that hard with just a tap on the knuckles. But after about four or five taps and I couldn't, and I went home and I was bawling and I said, What's wrong? And I'm sitting and I was bringing home all these horrible stories. And one part where Cherry, Cherry, my dearest cousin, just a little love. When she was about two years before me, she was in the great say, Oh, whatever, and all the Aboriginal girls, I even asked them and I said, That is our grandmother. You remember that? Oh yeah. And the nuns were making typing on it. Oh and they did wrong. And that big cracking that. Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:44:36] It happened in my school too.

Gary Lee: [00:44:38] So Cherry got up and she just pushed shove that typewriter onto the floor. Well that caused a riot rod and she stayed home for a week and she was bad. But anyway, they were not very nice, so they're tough.

Daniel Browning: [00:44:55] So when did you. When did you. We're talking about the ring, but I guess when did you have have a kind of a real kind of sense of of being of being gay and of being homosexual, if we can use that word.

Gary Lee: [00:45:10] Well, but send me to this God where to get to send me to prep primary school, which was like I was so. Fantastically free. But unfortunately, they said to me you had to repeat that year because the the the standard of the English in the at the high school said marriage was not very good at all. But there I was. I did it. And you know this Ms.. Team I've never forgotten that club one young one and if they found a child had a bit slow, they would appoint a remedial teacher with them. And you live with

them with a half an hour on Friday and you know and a lot are happy. Might might be. You know, preset English and literature and shit. But Dad also gave me books. But anyway, I. What did I do? Well, yes, because we'd moved from prep camp at that time to prep to Fanny. Bye. Which was one straight ahead, away from the beach. But I'll tell you, my parents. So by the time I was 16, I had left down. I'd hitchhiked to Sydney. The first time I experienced any racism was in Townsville when this girl said, What are you doing in this shop? That sort of thing. Anyway, I let them end up going to Sydney, working for the. Work as the. Uh. Circus. Circus story.

Daniel Browning: [00:46:57] What were you doing in the circus?

Gary Lee: [00:46:59] I went to Sydney. I went to. I had noticed I had nothing, but I was sitting there. I got to Sydney, and I had about \$0.40, a lot of hat. But I loved. I went down the first night I went in Hyde Park. There's a big statue of.

Daniel Browning: [00:47:14] Archibald Fountain.

Gary Lee: [00:47:16] Before that to Captain Cook in Hyde Park, and I had nowhere to. And so I at the bottom of that there was this bushes, and I slept in there the first night, never.

Daniel Browning: [00:47:29] At the base of the statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park.

Gary Lee: [00:47:32] That frightened me. So I got up and I walked down with him up to Kings Cross and there's the cross. And it was like buzzing. I didn't starve and everything, but I'll have to sit there near the fountain. And the prostitutes and American service side is all very swinging.

Daniel Browning: [00:47:49] There was quite what use this. You reckon.

Gary Lee: [00:47:51] 6968 bit road. No I've 6052. 52. So that I was not 70. Sixties. Yes. Wow. And these prostitutes are lovely. And they come. And this one came and said, What are you doing, darling? You look a bit young and I'm very friendly. I said you had something to greet us. Oh, probably my first big hamburger. And you come here and wait here. I've just got to do a job. You go and do a job and you come back and said

really kind to me. So all day I sit there and they're feeding me and everything. And then I, for a month, can have a dog here. And that prostitutes that. Do you have any desires at all? Not really, she said she gave me \$10 out of her. Which was a bit of money. I sit here, said, Now you go down here. And she took me to the corner where the.

Daniel Browning: [00:48:51] The Wesley Mission?

Gary Lee: [00:48:53] Yes. What's it called? It's two way.

Daniel Browning: [00:48:58] Yeah. There's the Wesley mission and. Uh, Salvation Army, you know?

Gary Lee: [00:49:04] Yeah.

Daniel Browning: [00:49:05] Wesley Mission.

Gary Lee: [00:49:07] Yeah, but it's, of course, something else anyway. And you go in there and that famous Blake Noffs.

Daniel Browning: [00:49:13] Ted Noffs that had Noffs Foundation.

Gary Lee: [00:49:15] I didn't know this at the time. And he'd go in and then he calls in. Yes. Can I have a very friendly, very kind? And I said, Oh, I'm from down a bit side, so I have to. And that's what got me through things I just said. No, as David said, just ask. And as I got no money, he said, No worries. Do you have an address for some friend? So I do. So they gave me \$20 and said, All right, my boy, get this, get a taxi and take you to this house. It was the house of a white friend who worked at the airport and the tower, and he was good pals with my father. So they lived there and not born down.

Daniel Browning: [00:50:01] Somewhere one of the suburbs of Sydney.

Gary Lee: [00:50:03] In the summer. And I just walked up there and walked on the door and I said. And I had to call him Uncle Jack and Uncle Jack. Uncle Jack. Gary, is that new house to babysit his kids. And his wife was in English. She was gorgeous, blonde,

English woman. And I said, What are you doing? But I think my father had rang him because he gave me his address and then he rang him.

Daniel Browning: [00:50:30] I knew you were running. You weren't running away. You were just. You wanted to.

Gary Lee: [00:50:33] And I said, Yes, I've got a room for you. There's room. There's.

Daniel Browning: [00:50:36] Your mum and dad knew you were off. And they didn't. They didn't object to you leaving?

Gary Lee: [00:50:41] No. They said, Alright, if you want to do that.

Daniel Browning: [00:50:43] 16.

Gary Lee: [00:50:44] I was working in the non London Prep, the prep laundromat, which is now an art gallery which. That same song is there. But anyway, we just are written.

Daniel Browning: [00:50:55] So you already finished school. You're working in the laundromat.

Gary Lee: [00:50:57] When I was 16 and the year I turned 16. Was the year that they changed the law in the Northern Territory, where you could leave school at 16 if you had a job. And 18 of my time and I said, Well, if I went to knock on that room, there was a dead mum. I said, I want to leave school. And my father, you know, he's so cool. He said that new law, I, I said, yes. I said I'm 16 now. He said, and have you got a job? I said no, but, but the next day he came back. He said, I've got you a job. Where Dad, Geez, Food centre prep, fine food, that building prep. Denise G. And David. And Cindy G. And Cindy G. Charlie's down. Born was born in prep camp. So, Gary, come, come, come. And she had all the boys. All the girls. She did all that.

Daniel Browning: [00:52:13] So I had a job and it was working at.

Gary Lee: [00:52:16] It had a job. And so I did that. And then my father, he he was telling.

Daniel Browning: [00:52:22] Me about a circus in Sydney. We were in we were in Sydney.

Gary Lee: [00:52:25] And then I was looking for Piper so that I could. Jackie bring me papers. Sydney Morning Herald So lots of jobs. And I was looking. No one wanted roustabout. What the man asked about and you know, it's isn't that and you get your board and everything and come. So I talked to the son. He said, well do you think you can do that. Yeah. I said, What rats about to help. All right. He must have rang up and the bloke ran backwards just like, how old is he? Blah, blah, blah. I must block. He was like, father figure. Alright, he's got a job. We'll be. We're leaving for Bathurst tomorrow. Bathurst didn't know where it was and we would come by and pick him up. His, the driver will come the next when this big truck came by and there's all this horse horses on the back, you know. Horse right.

Daniel Browning: [00:53:27] Yeah. Floats wait for the horses in those.

Gary Lee: [00:53:30] And the big adult horses in the street. And I said yeah here's your card. So I got in there and sitting at a big truck climb up, and it was this huge, big Irish man. He was about 6050, he was big and he was the boss. And dodgy fighters kept everything slip and he looked at me. When I walked in, I thought, Oh, he might. I used to think, Oh, maybe they don't like coloured people, but nothing. It was not. I said, Where are you from, my boy? And I said, I'm from down Darwin and they're coming. So there was off to Bathurst and then I met the crew and they were a motley crew. Some were really ex crims somewhere else. I don't know what, and yet they were so sweet to me. So eating. So you eat that sort of food. It's like big mobs of sliced bread, big mobs of salmon, devon cheese, tomato sauce and that's about it.

Daniel Browning: [00:54:40] How long were you how long we, how long were you in the circus?

Gary Lee: [00:54:44] I was in there for about. Nine months because and then after better week, I said and his wife. His wife had the alto. Sizer. She sold potato chips. Now you can buy chips. But at that time, it was very rare. And she had all and she. And now making a fortune that make our chips.

Daniel Browning: [00:55:08] You mean like chips? Yeah, the deep fried ones.

Gary Lee: [00:55:11] Yes. And there were no many rounds and they were doing it and they were killing it. So much. So we had to do it all The money wouldn't fit in it too. So we just dropped the money on the floor and there was all this money all on the floor. I think we had chips.

Daniel Browning: [00:55:27] Just potato chips. Hot chips.

Gary Lee: [00:55:29] Yes, hot chips. So. And then I said to, she was lovely Jean, she had a bit of a limp, but she was sweet, she gentle. Not like when I heard Frank about yelling at these workers. But when he came in, he's taught me very gently. Not at all. How sweet. And then I said to Jane, We're having a bit of a break and chip. And I said, You know, I can cook, you know. Because I could I could carry down stuff. And you know what kind of. Sorry. What? What, what kind of I said, Well, with rice and this could be a curry. And she was just staring at me and I thought I did this somewhere. Can you? Yes. So, would you like to cook a curry for me and Frank? My husband and I had a daughter and a son. Tell me about that. Um.

Daniel Browning: [00:56:33] So can the cook.

Gary Lee: [00:56:35] Well, not really that I became their cook, because when I cook.

Daniel Browning: [00:56:40] And this is the manager effectively, and his wife. Yes. Whatever you call a circus manager and.

Gary Lee: [00:56:46] Ah, yeah, he was the he was the honorable thing. And I said well he, you know, he knows what's what and I cook this big curry down curry well and rice, but I never saw them eat rice. They probably don't eat that us but me living on rice And I put it there and there were the four of them, the mom and father and the girl. And the girl was about 1617. The boy was just about to be conscripted. Poor thing he didn't want. He got killed in Vietnam anyway. Um, and I cooked this curry, and they didn't say anything. They. Wow, I love the lot. Can you cook tomorrow? Well, I can cook this one thing the one time I can cook. Bully beef and rice. Bully beef. What's that? Corned beef

in there, Dad? Yes. And how many things you need? I said about ten. All right. And I cooked up just a plan. Well, I absolutely thought it was lovely.

Daniel Browning: [00:57:59] And then I got staple body beef and rice, isn't it? I got down Catherine, Catherine or Catherine when.

Gary Lee: [00:58:06] I cook everything like that. And I love it. And then But then there was a wide that's lunchtime and they, it was very much but she said Jane said the wife mum if you, if you like you I'll keep your money, you don't have to spend anything and it's like a saving thing. And I said all right then. So I didn't miss it and I built up this little bit of money by the time I. You're right. About the time that was okay, we went all around. All around New South Wales. Victoria, some of the most racist little town we went to the first time I saw. Cool. It was passed back. Reporting to the standards where the. The. Um, the circus was setting up for a week, and then we went in and the girl was the name of it, and she had her own big semi. She knew she was drawing them since she was ten or something. So she pull up in the main set outside of hamburger place. Now, I've just been introduced to her, but it's not just indoor hamburgers. And so do you want a hamburger? Yes, but come on then. Went into the. And you know what? She didn't. But I felt something because the way the old people are coming out or I don't feel like I want to be here and the barracks are two hamburgers. He said to who's the other one to who's the other one? And he looked over at me. But she was she said to my friend. So I didn't say nothing. When it came out. I looked out I didn't see before. Looked out, and opposite was another milk bar. All the blacks were there and I was. I'm not as flash as this one. And I thought I had is another. I just don't know know that they're not allowed to come in here and all this. That's the first experience I had about. And I thought, that's wrong. And then I know no notice it when we go to these places. The Aboriginal people would be there, but the white people were there.

Daniel Browning: [01:00:40] It's terrible. Very, very much in outback New South Wales.

Gary Lee: [01:00:45] Very present. But it was a shock to me. So but by the time I just I, I had received two letters from Uncle Jerry. Now, when he went to London, he went overland.

Daniel Browning: [01:00:59] Is your mother's prince is her death, brother.

Gary Lee: [01:01:02] Blonde one.

Daniel Browning: [01:01:04] Blonde, blue eyes.

Gary Lee: [01:01:06] And he. A he used before he went. He said to me, Here you are. He gave me a record player. I was eight. It was one of those ones where you it was electric and you put the like. But it was very old fashioned, put the thing. And then he said he had a box. And it's a box of all these epi records that he continuously catalogued and everything in the box and said.

Daniel Browning: [01:01:33] And his entire record collection and his record player, he said.

Gary Lee: [01:01:37] These are for you all. He said, you know how to operate the thing. Yes. I go, Oh, I had my eye and I was right. And, you know, it was in that I was all Billie Holiday, all old jazz, and I never really heard of it. So I put Billie Holiday and well, and all those old jazz songs. And the other one was Mel Toma and Perry Como and all that. So but the records and I did it. So he was sending me to letters and it sent a letter from an India and that signed to I'll ring, I'll ring up home now. So you know I think I think I want to he was giving me an idea that, you know, and he was saying you should come see travel more traveled. You know.

Daniel Browning: [01:02:27] This is your Uncle Jerry.

Gary Lee: [01:02:29] And he really encouraged me. That's what it's like in Second Fathers.

Daniel Browning: [01:02:32] He's he'd have traveled. I mean, you went to India. He spent a year in Calcutta. So. So when did. I'm just what I'm what I actually want to talk about. Talk about is when you realized you were gay. And because I think, Well, yeah. How did you how did you how did you make it through? Just just briefly like you see, because I know there were there was a there was a beat here and there were there were places.

Gary Lee: [01:02:58] We hadn't I hadn't discovered that. And then when I was 12, my friend is always a white friend. Passing power down. Sorry, Gary.

Daniel Browning: [01:03:09] I've run out of time.

Gary Lee: [01:03:11] Oh, no. Oh, well, sorry.

Daniel Browning: [01:03:14] We just stop there. We'll stop there and get a tape to.