

## CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

**Name:** Lisa Jackson Pulver

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**Place:** University of New South Wales, Kensington

**Interviewer:** Fabri Blacklock

### TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **FB:** This is an interview with Lisa Jackson Pulver on the 25th of February 2014 at the University of New South Wales in Kensington, Sydney. So, Lisa, can you tell me your full name and where your mob come from, please?

LJP: Yes. Lisa Rae Jackson Pulver. I've got two lines of ancestry that I'm aware of and I'm covering more – thank you very much ancestry.com. My mother was born a Smith and her mum was born up on the far north coast of New South Wales in an island in the mighty Clarence River and she fled to come down to Sydney and lived in Sydney as a Maori for a while and then, yes, eventually got back with her family and identified who she was. So that's my mum's side. And my dad's side people were Wiradjuri mob, Jacksons and the Angels(?) and all the rest of it, and they apparently came some generations before from South Australia and that's a new bit of information that I've recently found out. so I'm happily rooting through the archives, looking at all the South

Australian Jacksons and trying to work out who they are and are they related and where did that name come from because there's always a story behind how the English imposed their names along with their ways upon the mob. So, yes, so I think I basically identify as Wiradjuri.

**FB: And can you tell me when you joined the armed forces and what inspired you to join the armed forces. You were in the navy?**

LJP: No.

**FB: No, sorry, the air force, sorry.**

LJP: Get real, geez. No, we love our navy brother and sisters. We're the youngest force. I always wanted to join the military. My dad was a RAAFie, he served in the war. My grandfather served in the army, my cousins, I've got a couple of them that were army people, my mother's father died in World War II serving the navy so we're all over the shop with military service.

2.13

And I tried to join up in the late '70s and they didn't want nurses in those days which is a shame and then I tried again in the mid '80s and I tried again in the mid '90s and that started to get some traction – I'm a persistent bugger if anything – and when I started my PhD I went along and said "Please, please, please, please" and they said "You can join the Reserve" and so I got an offer and a position in the Specialist Reserve for Air Force and I'm still there although I've been posted into a position outside of what my specialisation is and that is as the Director of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Affairs in Air Force. So that's what I do today and I spend an enormous amount of time on it and it feels like I've got two full time jobs at the moment.

**FB: I'm sure it does. So can you just tell me a little bit about what your role entails in the air force?**

LJP: Yes, it's a fabulous role, actually. Originally, it was simply to be the adviser to the Chief of Air Force about indigenous matters and that has ballooned so now we're running programmes for young people, youth, on active military bases, give them a total immersion experience or as much of an experience as you can have in four nights on an active base to give them an idea of what it would be like to join the military. We support programmes with the Purple organisation called the Directorate of Indigenous Affairs called the IPRC, the Indigenous Youth Pre-Recruitment Course and that's a five, six week programme and we provide people to support, mentor and work along with army and navy and they're looking after around thirty to sixty kids per time for that period of time.

4.06 I provide a lot of awareness training across the senior leadership team so I get to do commander's calls and all the rest of it and talk to people about why it's important that we look at diversity as a real thing in workforce, in air force. I go through the stats. I'm an epidemiologist by training so I can't help myself, I've got to show them population pyramids and how that's changed over the two hundred and twenty six years and how that's going to change in the next fifty because it's all about being capable as an organisation to do what we need to do, what the Australian public needs us to do here and overseas. And so we have a massive workforce of young people that are very talented and very committed to country and I see serving in the military as being no different from any of our warriors committed to country. Yes, so a lot of my work is around explaining that and offering understanding of what that means and why they need to look at Aboriginal people as being an integral part of how it is we serve on this country, which we've been here for sixty thousand years so we know something of it and we'd like to share that. So that's my job.

**FB: Great.**

LJP: Not too much else.

**FB: So you were a nurse, you were saying? Is that correct?**

LJP: Well, I started life as a nurse, a hospital-trained nurse, and then I went to medical school and failed - you know, foster kids and partnership breakups and all that stuff impacted - and then I did a Master of Public Health degree and did a PhD in medicine and did some graduate studies in epidemiology. So I've sort of done quite a long time of study although I still didn't finish my undergraduate training.

6.01 So, yes, I started off as a nurse and a proud one at that and today I'm a senior research academic in a large university, the University of New South Wales. I head up a group called Muru Murri and I've got a good growing team of people who are working the hard work in social and emotional wellbeing, primary healthcare, public health, education. We're translating what you learn in the academy to what you do in the community and we do a lot of work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we do a lot of work with non-Aboriginal people and we're doing well. So I have two quite, that appear on the outside to be two quite different roles in life but they're actually the same. It's all about translating experience into practice and they're just two different contexts as far as I'm concerned.

**FB: And what do you think are some of the things that could be improved in terms of Aboriginal health, access to good healthcare for Aboriginal people?**

LJP: Look, education's the key, really. If you've got someone who's educated – edumacated as my aunty'd say – you change their lives, you know, they make different choices, they have different ways. And that education includes cultural education so kids being able to dance, do ceremony, sing, speak language. I mean, my God, you hear a kid sing the Australian National Anthem in language and it just makes me weep, just thinking about it makes me weep – it's fantastic. But also having people able to read and write English well and have high levels of literacy and numeracy. Our people are scientists anyhow: we have been great astronomers, we've been great navigators, we're great geographers, we know how to examine food and to know what's good and what's not good and when to eat it and how to eat it and prepare it and sixty thousand years of that kind of science has been disregarded, really, in the face of a very new science called health and medicine – you know, it's only been around for a few hundred years.

8.03

So what a lot of what I enjoy doing and translating is to get people to understand that there is a broader view and Aboriginal people have got that in bucket loads and a lot of Aboriginal people have not had the opportunity of expressing that and that expression hasn't occurred for some generations, many generations, and what we need to do is to invite people to tap back into that core understanding and to make some choices and be well and strong in those choices. So, yes, that's what I reckon's going to be the big thing with health change.

**FB: And have you ever experienced any racism in the armed forces or in life in general?**

LJP: Well, they're two different questions and it's yes to both, of course. I mean I'm a fair-skinned Koori like you and we often – well, I'll talk for me – I often have been asked “So, what part Aborigine are you?” It's like “Oh, God, here we go again”.

So I think racism exists but I think the most dangerous sort of racism is the stuff that's not spoken about when people think policies such as the ones we're driving through the academy or education or government or Defence are all about being politically correct and banging on to the loudest lobbyist group and you hear the shock jocks talking about this all the time. It's very, very dangerous, very, very dangerous. So, yes, racism is out there. I really appreciate when someone says to me “Look, I just can't get my head around what you guys are doing here. I

don't see the need, I don't see what it's about" and it gives me an opportunity then to help grow [their understanding].

10.03

But racism was something that we got grown up with. We had our parents trying to hide who they were; they had to; it was a survival mechanism and I think that has carried over and is probably part of the reason why I'm so passionate about what I do now. I think racism is one of those boils that needs to get lanced in this country because it's really driving some very nasty stuff out there and we just have to stay "Stop". So, yes, I have.

**FB: And the City of Sydney's currently building a memorial to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service Men and Women which will be going in Hyde Park. What do you think is the significance of having this memorial in Sydney for everybody to see and how does it make you feel?**

LJP: I'm dead excited about this - this is an amazing thing. I've been with the Coloured Diggers/Black Diggers ever since it started and always proudly put on my little blue uniform and marched along with people. And people come and share stories and for so long Aboriginal people were denied access to the ANZAC Day parades, they were denied access to being able to honour the spirits of our dead and people would say "Well, why them? Others died too, you know" and that's true but those others weren't denied access to ANZAC Day and to going into the RSL system or participating in repatriation and there's a hundred and one "ors". To have a place where we can go and sit and be and touch and cry and think and tell stories, it's so core.

12.02

We have a place in Adelaide that recently opened late last year, was a memorial, and originally the organisers were a bit concerned not many people would come and I got the honour of being there on that day; there wasn't enough room. It was oversubscribed by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people; people came from everywhere and people who haven't engaged with the returned service personal at all. And you would see these very old people coming, saying "This is the first time I've worn my medal since I came home" and that's powerful. So in Sydney we were the first to have the march - we got a lot of flak for it. People have become stronger because of that and recognise that people want to be able to go and sit and be and honour those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. And I think one of the important parts of it is is that for most of the conflicts that Australians have been sent abroad for occurred at a time when our people were not considered to be citizens of this land. Some people say we weren't considered to be human beings, others say that we were considered flora and fauna.

Despite which one of those we ascribe to it is the ultimate act of love and sacrifice at the risk of yourself and your community to stand up, to put on a uniform and to go and serve. A lot of our people came home and their kids had been taken away, a lot of our people came home and their land was reclaimed to be remade into so-called "soldier settlements" and when some of our people said "But, hey, I'm a soldier" they were still not allowed to get their own land as a soldier settlement, so they weren't entitled. So it's a really important place because it means so much more than those of us who are alive to be able to go and be there. We can pass the stories on to the generations but we can also respect those who had come before us. It's a big deal.

14.09 **FB: It is, yes. So you've been involved in the Coloured Diggers Project for quite some time?**

LJP: Yes.

**FB: And what does ANZAC Day mean to you?**

LJP: Well, it's always on the same day of the year, you know, 25th of April, so it's not one of those moving things. I think it's one of those days where we can start to think about what it is to serve. Some people unkindly call it a celebration of war. I don't think anyone celebrates war...

**FB: No.**

LJP: ... Not even people who send others to war or those of us who don a uniform and run off and do things. It's really about people being able to reflect on what has come before and where we want to go. Often you hear people talking about the stories and you hear others a little bit impatient about it, saying "What are you sharing those same old stories for?" but it's all about reiterating, recounting and learning from and building on that experience so that you can learn something into the future. So for me it's really all about honouring a cycle that is very much a part of humanity, unfortunately, is this thing of having to stand up and defend or stand up and fight and to make sure that the least harm comes to the least amount of people. It's about honouring, I think, also the spirits of the innocent that die. They may not have been in uniform, they may not have been active participants in a war but they're certainly the victims and so it's always a time to be able to think of them. For me as a Koori I also think of what people lost because you think about, you know, there's lots of communities gave so much: their men went away and their women went away and often they didn't come back.

15.59 Like my mother's family, she was a Legatee from a very young age, her and all of her siblings were Legatees because grandad was killed - his boat got sunk in the war – and died and so he left his wife vulnerable with all these kids, just absolutely vulnerable. So that's something that we have to think about is not only the generation that is lost but also what happens to community. The Torres Strait Islands is another example. Lost a tremendous number of young men because they all went off and so many families lost all of their kids in that so the world is a different place because of that kind of commitment and contribution. It's the least we can do is to have a place where people can share those stories and be together and hold hands and cry and laugh.

**FB: Yes. We were just talking before about the Black Diggers play and you've been involved in that. Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement in the development of that play?**

LJP: Well, it's the most amazing piece of work. Wesley Enoch is a remarkable talent.

**FB: He's very talented.**

LJP: And I was given the honour of participating in the Black Diggers Indigenous Reference Group and there were others there that were extraordinary. Uncle Harry Allie is an air force warrant officer and he's the representative air force elder today, right. So he brought to the play and to the setting up of it incredible thinking. Jackie Huggins, Ray Minniecon, Gary Oakley, Garth O'Connell, Uncle Col Watego and, of course, Uncle David Williams, all quite remarkable contributors, and what had happened by having a reference group of people who were involved in the military or people who were historians they were able to put in – if you went to see the play there were elements of it where you really felt you were there, that you were sitting around a campfire sixty years, seventy years ago with those – because they were all males – with those men in their communities and doing what they did.

18.11 It was quite a journey and you needed your tissues, right. So the story has been opened, the story has been told in a way that a lot of mainstream people are going to. When I went to see this there were a lot of people that were there that were non-indigenous and want more. It's going up to Queensland, I hear. It's going to hopefully be on tour and hopefully next year we'll see more come from Wesley and from the Black Diggers team. It's a critical story that hasn't really been told because a lot of people think "Yeah, sure, Aboriginal people, of course they went off just like any other Australian" but it was at a tremendous cost, you know, they had to leave the community. Often they were

knocked back from one recruiting office only to walk down the road or down the track or down the long paddock to go to another recruiting office and they got in. You know, what they had to do to get in and to serve and then they came home and were just treated appallingly. Some of them didn't even get their wages. The military's always been very proud they've always paid equal wages to Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike but the wages were often intercepted by the Protectorate of whichever jurisdiction these people were in or community controller and they didn't get their pay. So you've got all of this crazy stuff so, yes, Coloured Diggers or Black Diggers was just one of those really incredibly important ways to be able to share a very important story and continue to build on that and continue to bring out more elements of that so people can truly understand why we are so proud of our people in uniform.

**FB: And I've been having a little bit of trouble trying to identify more women in the armed forces. Do you have any ideas about how the armed forces might be able to attract more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to join?**

19.57 LJP: Yes, yes. Yes, we've got a programme at the moment, really exciting about this, actually. It's about women in non-traditional roles. We've got [for example] a young lady at the moment who was an air force cadet for a long, long time and she's now in university and she's studying aeronautical engineering. [We have another who wants to become a pilot. Another doing maths.]

**FB: Wow.**

20.13 LJP: So we're growing people, there are opportunities there for people to do. But the thing I find – and here I'm putting my university hat on – is that often we'll go to schools and we'll say to kids, you know, "You can be a doctor, you know what I mean. Kelvin Kong, yeah, he's an Aboriginal surgeon, first one in Australia. Tick. Here's Peter O'Mara, he's an Aboriginal doctor, one of the first ones, Dr Sandra Eades" and we share all these stories with the kids and often they'll say "Yeah, but our counsellor or our guidance counsellor or our vocational person said that we can't do that because we're just Kooris and we go to such and such a school in the region or the bush or the western suburbs of Sydney and we'll never make it". And I think it's the same story where kids have not had that real engagement with people in a consistent manner so they might meet someone in uniform – and there's plenty of us around - but they think that that's somehow unattainable because the guidance counsellor who you trust, who knows your schoolwork, says "No, you can't do that. Why don't you go off and do X, Y, Z,

something different” and pops them onto a different pathway. Now, we’ve got to overcome that. We have to say “If you really want to join the military, look, you can. You’ve got to be fit, you’ve got to be strong and you’ve got to keep out of trouble with the police because that’s a real big no-no”.

21.36 You know, “If you're a diabetic I'm sorry, we can't do that but you can join the public service in Defence and contribute that way or you can become a scientist and work for DSTO or there's a lot of different things that you can do to contribute outside of a uniform”. But I think the biggest hindrance is at that school level because that's really when people get attracted to what are they going to do when they get older and what they do want to do often is, you know, do fun stuff, do interesting stuff, do stuff they can grow with, do stuff that allows them to really self-actualise and be strong and be role models. Not everyone's going to be a first flight footballer. There's a hell of a lot of other footballers and there's lots of little things you can do for those who aren't going to make it into the top of the top. So we need to really be quite on top of what kids can do and continue to give them a strong, solid story because there is a lot out there.

**FB: Yes.**

LJP: We have entry programmes, we have support structures, we have people's phone numbers all over the place, we can provide that advice, but it often takes a particular kind of strength of the young person to say “Thank you, counsellor, for giving me that great advice but I'm still going to go down this path. I might fail but I'm still wanting to go down this path. Thank you for sharing, goodbye”.

**FB: Yes, it's those typical low expectations of Aboriginal kids – it's just terrible.**

LJP: Sure. And when they do achieve then people sort of hail them as being something miraculous or something. No. A lot of them are real smart, they're really, really talented and given half a chance, boy, oh, boy, do they show it.

**FB: Yes. Great. Well, thank you very much. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or talk about?**

23.22 LJP: Look, I think this is a conversation that's started and I would love to see these interviews built on over the years and I'd love to find a way for people to be able to contribute to the broader conversation about Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people and our defence forces and the sorts of stuff that we do do.

There's stories out there. Gary Oakley from the Australian War Memorial has been doing a project for quite a long time trying to identify diggers from the past and I think one of the things would be is if you know that you've got a relation who's an Aboriginal person who served get in touch with the war memorial because they want to hear about it.

**FB: Yes.**

LJP: Yes. So, thank you.

**FB: More of these stories need to be told.**

LJP: Oh, gosh, yeah. There's some real good ones too.

**FB: Yes.**

LJP: It's enjoyable. Thank you very much for your time.

**FB: Thanks, Lisa.**

**Interview ends**