

# Mparntwe Alice Springs Community Foundation Community Builder of the Week



## Botanist leaves her mark

**Name:** Veronica Perrurle Dobson AM  
**Who long have you lived in Alice Springs?**  
I moved to Alice Springs in the 1960s, before then I lived at the Santa Teresa Mission from the age of 9, prior to that I lived at Arltunga at the Little Flower Mission.

**Favourite sports teams, band or movie and why...**

One of my all-time favourite movies would have to be the Gods Must be Crazy, it's a very funny story about how traditional life can be severely impacted when "civilisation" is introduced to a community living a simplistic but complex traditional life based around family and community harmony, and the havoc the iconic coke bottle causes. The movie has low level violence and a happy ending, a good story and interesting and diverse characters.

**What role do you play in your community group/activity/action?**

I have worked as a translator, interpreter and educator of the Arrernte Language and Culture for at least 50 years. I co-authored the Eastern and Central to English dictionary establishing Arrernte as a written language. I've worked on supporting Arrernte in local schools, through teaching and curriculum development through both IAD and Yipirinya School.

Others have described me as a botanist and ecologist, but I would say that I just love plants, because of my plant passion I have contributed to discussions about the changing environment in the central Australian Region. My knowledge of plants and country has come from my Grandmother Eliza and Grandfather Bruce. They taught me about the value of plants in ceremony, healing, as a source of food, tools, and shelter. Plants are spiritually important for Arrernte people. I am also passionate about my grandfather's country and have worked with scientist and the Cen-



Veronica Dobson at Anthwerre (Emily Gap). 372791

Picture: FIONA WALSH

tral Land Council Rangers on water projects. I have contributed to several reports and papers on Indigenous ecology.

I worked with the staff at Olive Pink establish the bush medicine garden and at the Alice Springs Desert Park sharing Arrernte knowledge about plants. The highlight for me this year was doing a segment on Gardening Australia filmed at the Olive Pink Garden. I was also a member of the Merne Altyerre-ipehne (Food from the Creation Time) Reference Group advising on the ethical guidelines for the bush foods industry in Central Australia.

**Why is your community group/activity/action important?**

An article published in 2022 paints a bleak picture, it predicts that language loss will at least triple in the next 40 years. Without intervention to increase language transmission to younger generations, it predicts that by the end of the century there will be a nearly five-fold increase in Sleeping languages, with at least 1,500 languages ceasing to be spoken. Some parts of the world stand out as 'hotspots'

of future language loss, with the greatest absolute loss of languages predicted to occur in the west coast of North America, Central America, the Amazon rainforest, West Africa, north coast of New Guinea and Northern Australia. (Bromham, Feb 2022)

The work I have been doing is to ensure that the Arrernte Language gets recognition as important part of the fabric of Central Australia, and that there is continued investment in the language to keep it strong. We don't want our language to become another sleeping language needing revival in 20 years from now. Arrernte Language and Culture is what makes Alice Springs unique.

**Why do you volunteer? (or why did you initiate the activity/response)?**

I want to share the beauty of my language and culture with everyone. Arrernte people would benefit from understanding the old ways, where our people worked hard, had respect, and had pride in their language, land, culture, and themselves. Over the years we have lost this, but I believe that we can get it back. I am

always happy to share my knowledge to help others understand and learn the Arrernte way.

I am also volunteering, working with the Ltyentye Apurte Working Group and Central Land Council on a project to restore the old boy's dormitory at Ltyentye Apurte which will be part of the Arrernte Language and Cultural Centre for all Arrernte people. The old boy's dormitory is a stone building built in the 1950s by Arrernte men, we want to give that building new life. It is my dream that we will repatriate all our Arrernte cultural and language material to this place for Arrernte people to control and access.

**What achievements are you most proud of?**

One of my most proud moments is when my two Grandsons came home from school and tell me the new Arrernte words they have learned. I also feel proud when I'm out and about in Alice and people in their 30s walks up and say "Werte Mrs Dobson, do you remember me, I used to be in your Arrernte class at school".

**Anything else you would like to say?**

What makes me happy is seeing people using the language resources I have worked on over the years, it is important that this work (and the work of others) is not just kept locked on a shelf in the cabinet of curiosities but are used to breathe life into language and culture. This work is there to share for future generations. We are in the Decade of Indigenous Languages; it is a good time to learn more about your local Aboriginal languages.

Finally, I have had the privilege to work with some amazing people over the years, and 2023 was lost two very important people Linguist G Breen and a Senior Arrernte Women, their work on the Arrernte Language is their legacy, for the other linguists like John Henderson the work continues.

## Faces of Australia Ted Egan



## Raising a glass to characters like Charlie

In previous issues I have presented 'characters' about whom I have composed a complete song. As I have over 350 songs registered in my name with APRA/AMCOS, I hope to present many more outstanding "FACES" in that category.

Many people will know that I am responsible for the song titled The Drinkers of the Territory. Indeed, I have been castigated from time to time, people suggesting I encourage excessive libation. My response is that I am only in favour of convivial drinking; if alcohol ever costs more than money, I'd stop drinking forever.

I acknowledge that I enjoy a drink, especially if I am involved with positive people who are not seeking to get drunk, but to enjoy their leisure hours. Food is essential. I love spirited, sparkling conversations, I love to sing and be part of musical sessions that accompany convivial drinking. I have met so many interesting people over a few beers or a good bottle of wine. But never forget that food!

In 1969 I recorded the first version of The Drinkers of the Territory, with about eight verses, introducing some of the cheerful, responsible drinkers I had met since I arrived in the NT as a seventeen year old. Over the years I have added many other names and I occasionally create a new verse on the spot. My most recent verse is about Frank Dalton who for many years was Mine Host at Frank's Bar and Grill,

Wave Hill. More of young Frankie Boy later.

Today I present the one verse I composed about the late Charles Hosking, who was better known as Charlie Like, a much loved mate from the Alice. He was a famous truckie, especially known in the cattle farming cattle gamed, like. He had an old Commer Knocker truck that he registered as The Gold Seal Trucking Company Like. He said he felt that his beloved truck was "the epitome of class, like".

*In the Alice, there's a fella, we call him Charlie Like*

*He poured me a pannikin of OP Rum  
That would make a champion pike  
When I asked old Charlie for water  
To break it down by gosh*

*He said: "There's a waterbag on the truck  
If you want to have a wash! Like!*

That verse tells you so much about Charlie. On that specific occasion he was carting cattle from Mt Doreen (MTD) to Alice. I was at Yuendumu at the time, 1958. I heard Charlie's road train pull up at my house at 6 am. Typical Charlie: "Fancy a rum, like?".

Charlie was in the habit of using an appropriate, but alternative noun or adjective, often raising a laugh. He'd greet you with a "How yer goin' like?" then tell you of the Congregations on the Tanami Road like. I met him one day outside Charlie Quee's shop in Todd Street. As we talked, an attractive young girl wearing

culottes walked past Flynn Church, opposite. Charlie asked: "Ted, what do you reckon about them cures the girls wear these days, like?"

He drove his truck around Central Australia for many years, was a kind, generous man much loved by his companion Lil Finnis, who ran Don Thomas's Shop in The Mall. In those days, the mid 70s, I was doing my show at the Stuart Arms and often had a drink with Charlie and Lil - like. Then, during a dry time, I failed to see Charlie and heard that he had taken the Gold Seal truck south, as not many local stations had cattle to sell.

But three months later, there he was, back in the Bull Bar, in his regular spot, having a quiet drink. He had an arm in a sling, a big bandage around his head, a neck brace, looking dejected like. I asked: "Goodness, Charlie, what happened?" He reflectively sipped on his rum.

"Well, Ted, I took the old Gold Seal truck down south, like, and got a few contracts cartin' general goods like. Then I got this job to take a truckload to a place called Wollongong, like". I nodded my head. I'd been to The Gong many times.

**Charlie continued:** "To get to The Gong, you have to go down this monumental hill like, with a stretch called The Bulli Pass like. There's a sign for truckies: LOW GEAR LIKE. So I start dropping down gears, but suddenly the clutch collapsed somehow and I'm out of control.

Nothing I could do except hang on to the steering wheel like, try not to hit anybody. But at the bottom of the hill, there's a right turn like and I knew I wouldn't make it safely. Looming up in front of me were two houses and I crashed like, lost consciousness and woke up in the Wollongong Hospital like, three days later like. Broken arm, cuts all over me like. There was a young nurse and I asked her what had happened.

**She said:** "Mr Hosking, your truck finished up a wreck in the front of those houses. Fortunately nobody other than you was hurt and, thank goodness like, you were pulled from the truck just as it caught fire". She went on to tell me: "The house on the left was owned by Mr and Mrs Smith, like, the other was owned by Mr and Mrs Ball".

"Goodness, Charlie, what an experience. You're a physical wreck".

"Indubitably, Ted" he reflected. "But it wasn't all that bad like. The truck was insured and Christ, was I relieved when that nurse told me I'd been dragged from the wreckage by the Smiths!"

So that's my FACE for this week. We still have characters, but they don't seem to be as colourful as Charlie Like. My songs are available on ITUNES: Ted Egan. See you next week. Aritjinanga.