

IAN HAMM



Ian Hamm is a Yorta Yorta man from Shepparton in central Victoria. In 1964, he was separated from his family when he was three weeks old. He grew up just 50 kilometres away from them, unaware of their existence.

That changed when he went to college and met an Aboriginal education officer who asked him if he knew where he came from. Ian replied his birth name was Andrew James. The person said: “Yeah. I think I know who you are. I’ll get back to you.”

Six months later a worker from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency visited Ian in Bendigo. She told him his birth family, the James family, was a big Aboriginal family in Shepparton. Ian then realised he’d already met some of his birth family, but was unaware of their relationship.

“It blows you away. She told me I was one of five, ‘You have two sisters and two brothers’. And I asked about my mother. She said my mother died in 1966, when I was two,” he said.

“I’ve only got a few photos of my mum. It’s enormously frustrating when people say to me I’m like my mother. I don’t know what that means. It puts into perspective where you fit in. Or don’t fit in as the case may be,” he said. “The hard part of this is I didn’t meet any of them until I was in my twenties. You’ve only known each other as adults,” Ian said.

“It will be the same for anybody who’s been through this experience, the thing that’s the most confronting, the one that you live with every day—that you’ve had to start a relationship as an adult. How do you create those relationships? How do you make them work?”

He described the uncertainty of identity he felt as the only Aboriginal man growing up in Yarrowonga.

“People would tell me I’m Aboriginal, but what does that mean? My only source of information was what people told me and what I saw on television. This is the ‘60s and the ‘70s, and that wasn’t great.”

Over the years, moving forward has had its own challenges, especially in finding a way of getting on with things. “When I say heal, for me, I don’t think you get over it, you just get used to it. It’s how I get by.”

Ian says he’s largely made peace with his past, but it’s more like a cessation of hostilities than a lasting peace.

“There are days when sometimes it just gets to me. I get this overwhelming sense of sadness. And I know exactly what it is. It’s that ‘Where do I fit in?’.”