



Spotlight on Community Leaders

Steven (JJ) Smith

Uncle JJ is a Wailwan and Kamilaroi man living in Coonamble. He works at Coonamble AMS and has been there for 12 years. His roles within the Coonamble AMS is as an Aboriginal Health Worker and focuses on getting out into the community to help those in need of support.

He is a well-known figure within the Coonamble community and he ensures the work that he does revolves around and benefits his community. He is known as 'Uncle' by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the town. Within his role he aims to make himself as available as possible. He sees his role within the community as "to help whoever, wherever."



Temporary image

It is important in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to have supporters and listeners for those who are struggling with mental health issues. Uncle JJ explains that he is "not a counsellor, but I'm a good listener, that's all we need, that there's someone there."

When working in the mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention space, Aboriginal Health Workers are often exposed to difficult situations. It is vital that Aboriginal Health Workers also prioritise their own mental health. Health Workers must make time to debrief about the things they have seen and experienced and to see a counsellor if needed. "Even though I work here at these services, we need that kind of help too, we need to sit down with the counsellor too, it helps me."

Aboriginal Health Workers are essential as they are involved in community and have formed trust and a bond with individuals in that community. "You know everyone, you have respect in the community and you need to have trust." Uncle JJ sees suicide and suicide prevention as a whole community responsibility. "If I don't go out and get people, I will be reading about [a suicide] in the paper in the next couple of days, and I think 'I



could have stopped that. If I know someone is having a hard time, I'll go pick them up – take them down to the river or just for a drive, so they know they are not alone, and what they are feeling in time will pass.”

Some of the programs that Uncle JJ is involved in at the Coonamble AMS include the Quit Vaping program, Social and Emotional Wellbeing programs, Health Check Promotion, and NAIDOC. The Coonamble AMS also has two counsellors within the practice.

Uncle JJ is most well known to be a trusted supporter of those in the community. While he is not a trained counsellor, he acts as a listener for those going through a tough time. You do not need a referral to see Uncle JJ. “Anyone can pop into the AMS and ask to speak with me. On many occasions I have been approached out in the community, this is never a problem to me, nobody is turned away.”

Uncle JJ sees the work that he does as being specific and catered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the way he conducts himself out in the community. The way he has built himself as a trusted figure within the community takes patience and dedication.

To improve the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health is approached within Australia, Uncle JJ believes that “no one should be turned away.” Every person deserves to be supported regardless of their experiences or the issues they are facing. Having someone who listens is a greatly undervalued skill, particularly in the western approach to medical practice. Uncle JJ explains that “there are times I don't know what to say, I just sit there and listen, you just got to be there.” Uncle JJ lives by a quote that was told to him from a passed Uncle, “if you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours.”

Reach Out, Connect and Heal Our Way with NSW Ministry of Health Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Resources. Find out more here:

[Coonamble AMS](#)
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