

## WITH VICTORY THERE IS SURVIVAL

By all measures John's recovery has been remarkable. He now lives by himself in Northcote and is proud of his independence. But for a man who has worked hard for everything he ever had, he still appreciates the support he gets to do the little things in life.

22

Photo: Disability Attendant Support Service Inc.

John Kuhl is a survivor. All his life he has been fighting. Not because he liked fighting particularly, but because there was nothing left to do: in the schoolyard when he was the only dark skinned boy on the football team; in the pub after work, where aboriginal men weren't allowed to drink; and today in his Northcote home, when his aging body just won't do what its told.

John has a lot of sayings, but the one I like the most is, "Nothing was ever given to me: I had to earn it!" His eyes sharpen and his voice hits you like a bullet, but what truly makes this saying powerful is when you consider just how much has been taken away from John in his life.

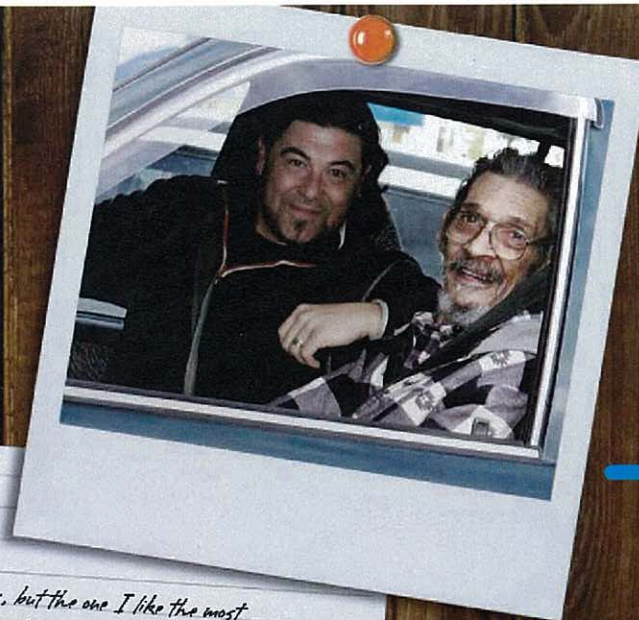
At the age of seven, John, who is a Yorta Yorta man from northern Victoria, was taken, along with his three sisters from his home on the banks of the Murray River near Echuca. The local authorities had decided to claim the land and that meant that the family had to move. The children were taken away "for their own protection" and after four years in a Box Hill Boys home John joined his sisters at an orphanage in Ballarat, but he never saw his father again. Not only did John lose his childhood, he lost his family, his sense of belonging and his culture.

John was thrown into a new world with new rules and he had to adapt. The first rule was that you had to work. At school there was reading, writing and AFL, and John excelled at all three. And the second rule was; you're on your own. Even with his sisters at the same school he found he had to stand up for himself. "I've always taken care of me and mine" John would say, pointing a bony finger squarely at my face. His hands are worn and I can see the truth of what he says. This hard work and resilience would carry him and his family right through his career.

John was still working hard four years ago when he was hit by a tram in Clifton Hill. Suddenly, at the age of 68, he was fighting again, this time for his independence. He had to re-learn how to walk in hospital and his left lung had collapsed, leaving him feeling tired like never before.

By all measures John's recovery has been remarkable. He now lives by himself in Northcote and is proud of his independence. But for a man who has worked hard for everything he ever had, he still appreciates the support he gets to do the little things in life. He has an Occupational Therapist who helped him get used to living back at home, support workers help him organise bills and do the shopping, and team of community nurses. In fact he is surprised that people are eager to help him now; when he gets on the trams these days kids get up and offer him a seat.

It's still hard work, especially walking about, but that doesn't stop him looking after himself, and it certainly didn't stop him getting down to Tasmania with a support worker for a holiday earlier this year. John Kuhl is a survivor and with a little help he'll keep on fighting for a long time to come.



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*John Kuhl*

23

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