# Transcript of Stan Grant interview

Richard Fidler:

Today, it’s Stan Grant’s story and this is from a conversation Stan and I had in 2013. In recent days you might be aware of a powerful speech that Stan gave on racism and the Australian Dream has been posted online and it’s gone viral all over the world. Stan Grant is a TV journalist who’s hosted programs here on the ABC and on Channel 7. He’s also been an anchor and a reporter for CNN. Stan Grant has reported from many of the world’s trouble spots, he’s seen some of the best and cruelest of the world’s leaders right up close and he’s seen the results of intractable conflict in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. Stan Grant is unfailingly urbane and articulate, and well-briefed on screen. And you might be inclined to think that he would be the product of an upper middle class background, perhaps a private school in there? Well, not quite. Stan Grant has walked a very long road to get to where he is now. And the first thing he wanted to pick me up on when I spoke with him was the whole private school thing that I just mentioned.

Stan Grant:

You just described my children actually. My boys are now upper middle class background private school educated but that was far from my story.

Richard:

Are your kids at the age where they’re doing this thing where that ‘Oh don’t you know about this Dad?’ Or ‘Don’t you know about that?’

Stan:

Absolutely. And I know nothing. I know absolutely nothing. But I’m always bang onto … you know, I’ve become very old now when you say things like, ‘You don’t realise how good you’ve got it.’ They just roll their eyes.

Richard:

You know we used to have bikes and ride to our friends. Oh yeah here’s this, ‘in my day’ stuff.

Stan:

I didn’t say in my day. I still don’t think they really believe it and I’ll tell them stories about you know when I was growing up. And you see them going ‘Right, okay.’

Richard:

Yeah, there’s this kind of horror when you tell them ‘We didn’t have Wi-Fi.’

Stan:

Wi-Fi. I’m nineteenth century.

Richard:

Let’s talk about this. You’re nineteenth century childhood which was actually more in the mid-60s when you were born. Where abouts did you grow up, Stan?

Stan:

I grew up everywhere. I was born in Griffith in NSW in 1963. My father … that was basically where my father was from. He was from the Wiradjuri people, central western New South Wales. My mother was a Gamilaraay woman from Coonabarabran. Her mother was white and blonde hair, blue-eyed German stock. So, we were very mixed. But I grew up there but life was spent on the road for me Richard. We moved constantly and I mean constantly. My father was a transient saw miller, itinerant labourer and wherever the work was we would pack up and go. So, there was no continuity but there was always a sense that Griffith was a spiritual home. My family’s roots were there. My grandmother was there. My great grandmother was there. Cousins, uncles and aunties were there. And we’d always gravitate back and forth but the rest of the time we were just travelling.

Richard:

Where did you live for the first year of your life?

Stan:

Oh yeah, this is, my parents call it the honeymoon suite. It was a broken down … my mum says a model T Ford so that’s how old it was. It was a shell of a car and it was on the Three Ways Mission which was an Aboriginal reserve on the outskirts of Griffith. And it was behind my great grandmother’s house and that was where my parents spent their early marriage.

Richard:

In a car?

Stan:

In a car. In a shell of a car.

Richard:

And when we’re talking about family, how many people are living in this car?

Stan:

Well, it was mum and dad and then when I was born I was in there. Now, they would lay down the sort of remnants of the front seat and that would be their bed. I’d be sort of tucked up in the, you know, the back seat and my auntie used to be in the boot of the car.

Richard:

The rumble seat.

Stan:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly so that’s where she would sleep. And we’d go into my great grandmother’s place and you know we’d eat there and wash there. There was no running water. There was no hot water. They had those old copper boilers. So, you’d boil up any hot water to have a wash. And that was, you know, that’s where life began for me and it was you know at that point there was no real expectation that it was ever going to get any better. That was what life was.

Richard:

That does sound incredibly nineteenth century. It’s like almost a pioneer’s childhood.

Stan:

Yeah, it was like that. I always think back now and it reminds me and one of the first books, I was an avid reader, one of the first books I remember reading was Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain. And that resonated because that was the childhood. That was it. There was a great freedom because you didn’t own anything, there was nowhere to go. There was, you know, we weren’t … it was just a hand to mouth subsistence life and yeah you would find a home where you found it. And there was another place we lived in not long after we moved into a house that was often provided for saw millers and they were shacks really, sawmill shacks. And this house had been inhabited by emus. So, my mother had to chase the emus out, clean it out and then move us in. And each night the emus would come back because they were so territorial and bang away at the doors trying to force their way back into the house.

Richard:

I’ve got to say kicking emus out is really hard isn’t it?

Stan:

I know but they would come back and it was always an extended family too, it was never just us it was mum, dad, me, my grandfather, my mum’s dad would often be with us, my mum’s youngest brothers and sisters would be with us because they weren’t much older than me. My mum was quite young when she had me. There was sometimes my dad’s sister, various uncles and aunts. So, it was a gypsy caravan of people. And you know we would travel around and somehow we’d cobble enough together, you know. You would make do, there would be whatever food you could catch. Often my father would go rabbiting and you know we would eat rabbit. You know they might, mince would go a very, very long way I can tell you. And we’d just make do, but there was a great sense of belonging to that family and that was the real strength of the life, I think.

Richard:

There’s poor and there’s poor isn’t there? There’s the kind of poor which is a kind of we’re all in this together we’ll stick together and there can still be quite a bit of happiness even probably. But there’s also, you know, violent poor and squalid poor.

Stan:

And this was all there. You know I mean … It’s funny I wrote in a book ‘The Tears of Strangers’ that I talked about my family’s life and one of the things I said was you know forget about the Dreamtime. This was broken glass and mangy dogs. You know there would be fights that you’d wake up to, the smashing of glass and you’d wake up in the morning and you know you’d step outside and there would be shattered glass on the road or, you know, violence was a part of the Aboriginal existence. I think for my father and mother they were very aware of that as well. To the extent that we would have a chance in life there would be two things, one that dad would work at anything he could find and that we would keep moving. And when I look back at it now it was almost like my father was trying to outrun that life, the life that he had been brought up in, the life that we would glimpse but he would be determined to keep us one step ahead of that, just to survive.

Richard:

How did that affect his relationship with you if he was ambitious for the family and ambitious for you?

Stan:

I don’t think it was ambition, I think it was just survival, that’s all it was. I always, you know, looking at the time my father was tired all the time. You know, this is a man who would go and lump logs three times his size at a sawmill. He lost the tips of three fingers. He’d been you know when he was younger he would face enormous discrimination and violence frankly, particularly at the hands of police. In those times if you were a young Aboriginal boy growing up you would be picked up and you would be beaten up and that used to happen. He was a tent boxer. So, you know he wasn’t a big man my dad, you know relatively a small man but he’d go around in the boxing troupe and he would be banging the drum on the end and big redneck cockies, redneck farmers would come in and they would go ‘I’ll have the little blackfella at the end there’, you know. They’d get a terrible shock because he could fight like a threshing machine and he really could handle himself. But he would do whatever he could do to get by and to allow us to survive. So, my early, you know, image of my dad is someone who was tired that would often lead to irritableness and moodiness. You know I’d come home and I’d glimpse dad lying in a bath and that’s my image of my father, laying in a bath that my mother had, you know, boiled the water up in the copper, she poured it into the bath and he would lay there just mind-numbingly exhausted with his eyes closed and the water would be black from sap and blood from where he was working in the sawmill every day. He was an avid guitar player but then when he lost the tips of his three fingers he couldn’t really play the guitar anymore. You know you would go and bust your gut working in these jobs to come home and if you could put a meal on the table that was it, that was the extent of life. So, there was a distance there. And he was tough on me too because my father I think was preparing me for his life, you know. He was saying ‘This is the life that I’ve had and this is the life you’re probably going to have. So, it’s a life of tough men, you’ve got to be tough to survive and if you want to stay out of jail, if you want to be able to look after yourself I’m going to have to raise you to be a tough boy.’ And that’s what he did.

Richard:

As an Aboriginal man at the time he couldn’t have been a citizen of his own country.

Stan:

No, no, we were flora and fauna. He was a plant.

Richard:

Legally speaking. Constitutionally. With that there wouldn’t have been a shortage of people around Griffith to remind him that he was a second class citizen.

Stan:

Police, employers. Look, whenever we would go into a shop because we were travelling all the time you’d pull up at a roadside somewhere and, you know, and you’d go in and try and get something to eat you’d always be the last one served. Even still today to be honest with you, you say to dad ‘Let’s go out and have dinner.’ And he’ll sort of pull back a bit, ‘No, let’s just have it at home you know because I don’t really want to go there and be served last.’ And people will often make, within earshot, you know, disparaging remarks, black jokes. This was the existence that he had to put up with. My father is very physically Indigenous, a very dark man, very physically strong, tattooed, you know, he was a hard man. My mother on the other hand because her mother was white was very fair skinned and the children fall somewhere in between. So, when we’d go into a shop there’d often be a pecking order of colour. You would get your food according to the shade that you were. So, look it was a constant reminder. But one thing about my father is that, and I think he got this from his father, he never allowed that to eat away at him.

Richard:

Why not? How did he construct his self-respect?

Stan:

Work. I think it was incredibly important to my dad that he worked and he would not take the easy option.

Richard:

And when he couldn’t work?

Stan:

He always worked. If he couldn’t work he’d go and catch rabbits. You know, there were times when I was pulled out of school when my father couldn’t find work in a sawmill and he’d load up an old truck with fruit and we’d hit the road and I was about eight or nine at this time and we’d go on the road for two months selling fruit door to door. I’d run up the street banging on doors carrying, you know, buckets of apples and you know chasing behind my father’s car and then we’d go back and he’d load up again and we’d go out again. He always found work. We travelled the length and breadth of New South Wales. He worked you know on the dams up in Queensland at one point. He worked in sawmills. He worked on the roads. He worked picking fruit. And I think work was his self-esteem and I think to be able to come home and see that we at least had a meal, I think was a source of honour and pride for him. And you know, now that I look back on his life he’s heroic, my dad. I mean, he is an absolutely extraordinarily heroic man. And it’s an interesting story actually because he was raised … after his father went to the war, World War II and he was raised in those early years by his grandfather who was one of the last traditionally tribally initiated man of the Wiradjuri. He had his tribal scars and the tooth knocked out and he taught my father a lot about culture and a lot about language. My father was one of the last language speakers of the Wiradjuri. When he was about seven or eight after the war his grandfather was talking to him in the street one day and he called out to him in language. My grandfather was arrested by the police, arrested for speaking that language to my father. He went to jail, my great grandfather for about six months because you weren’t allowed to teach children a language. This was the assimilation policy, that language was meant to die out. When he came back he said no one will ever speak this language again. If you fast forward about forty years my father is finally finished in the sawmills because he just couldn’t do it anymore. He got a job mentoring young kids in the ACT at school there. And a linguist came to him one day and said ‘I want to find out if we can revive the Wiradjuri language and if we can write it down in a dictionary. Someone’s told me that you actually can speak it.’ And my dad said ‘You know, not for a long time.’ But he said let’s sit down and go through it. My dad found that it was dormant, it was all still there. He went onto put together a dictionary with this linguist. They then set up language centres throughout New South Wales. My father became a language teacher. He went into the jails. He went into the schools. He went into the TAFE colleges. He set them up in Aboriginal communities and he then taught another generation of Wiradjuri speakers. A couple of years ago he was given an Order of Australia for reviving a language that his grandfather went to jail for speaking. And he just called me a couple of weeks ago and said that he’s been given a doctorate from Charles Sturt University for his work with Aboriginal language. So, after the life that he had he has, you know, an Order of Australia and Dr Stan Grant senior, amazing.

Richard:

Did he teach you how to fight, Stan?

Stan:

He did. You know he said one of the first things you’re going to have to do is you’re going to have to look after yourself. That’s how he did it. You know, at the sawmill if you have a disagreement you go outside, you sort it out and you come back to work. And my father could fight. And there were two lessons he taught me. He said ‘You’re going to get into fights that’s inevitable, that’s the life you’re going to be living. So, first thing is never grab anyone by the collar because you’ve only got one hand. If someone grabs you by the collar to threaten you, then you open up on them with both hands. The second thing is if you’re ever attacked by a group of people, get up against a wall because he said there’s no way for them to surround you. Now, you’re going to have to fight them off in front of you. But they’re not going to be able to surround you and don’t go down because if you go down they’ll kick you.’ Those were the two lessons that he taught me and I had to say a couple of times when I was going to school that I had to employ that, you know, and it never left me. You know, this is street fighting, this is survival fighting and he said it’s going to happen to you. Luckily I managed to avoid that and the very first time I was actually approached by a gang of people who wanted to fight me, the last thing I did was go against a wall. I ran for my life.

Richard:

Legging it is not a bad thing.

Stan:

It’s a good option.

Richard:

Let me get out of there. You said you used to worry a lot about your dad.

Stan:

All the time.

Richard:

Why?

Stan:

I just had a sense of fear for him, you know.

Richard:

When would you feel …

Stan:

Always, always especially when he was at work. I think because he, you know, I’d seen the injuries and I’d seen the blood and the pain of working in sawmills. And I used to have this burning knot in my stomach all the time, all the time. I remember laying by the, you know, the window of the house, whichever house we were living in and we always lived on the outskirts of town so there were dirt roads and I used to always look for that dust of the ute. And if he ever he was late I would just lie there in agony thinking, ‘Has something happened? He’s not coming home.’ And when I saw the dust coming down the road I’d finally relax and I worried, I worried all the time. I worried about my dad because if he went we were finished. I worried about my mum because you know she had the kids and we didn’t have any money. And there was, you know, often there was no food, we’d have to sometimes go from town to town, you know, we’d load up the car and we’d drive from town to town and go into the various charities, the Smith family, the Salvation Army. In those days you’d go to the police and the police would give you a dole which was a food voucher, that was the dole, and then go and get food. So, sometimes my mum and my grandmother, you know, they would go to different ones in different towns and that way we would get enough to be able to buy food for the week. So, I worried about that stuff. I worried about my grandfather who lived with us all the time. You know, he’d wait for his pension cheque to arrive and then he would go and hit the bottle that night and sort of come back the next day. And you know, I’d always listen for him when he was coming home at sort of two or three in the morning. And if I heard him banging against the outside of the house I would get up and go out there and I’d bring him in and I would scrounge together any money that he’d scattered or lost and I would put it away and I would wait for a couple of days when I knew he wasn’t going to drink it again. And then you know I’d say ‘Pa, you know I’ve still got some of your money here.’ And you know so I looked out for them. I worried all the time, I was just a nervous worried kid.

Richard:

Stan, did that mean …? Did all that worry breed a desire to escape?

Stan:

I think in some sense, you know. I do remember my grandmother in Griffith had this tree out the back of her house and I used to love climbing up into that tree and I’d sit up there and I’d just think to myself, you know, ‘I just want to get out of here some way, you know there’s got to be some other life somewhere.’ And I said before I was an avid reader and I used to read about the stories of Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer, I was a great reader of Greek mythology when I was a boy. I had this book of Greek myths that my grandmother had given me and I just used to read, immerse myself, and escape into that world, where people were bigger and things could be done and they were heroic and you could overcome odds. So, I was definitely aware of that but I didn’t have a road map. You know, there was no way of getting out it, it was just a sense that ‘Gee you know there must be something more than this.’ And I also knew on another level that I couldn’t do what my dad did. I didn’t have it in me. I wasn’t as tough as him. I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t do the physical work that he did.

Richard:

So, you concluded that he was preparing you for a life that you would probably fail at, in other words.

Stan:

Yeah, well I knew I wasn’t up to it. He probably, you know, hoped that I was up to it and I think being the oldest boy he really went harder on me in that sense because he wanted to make sure that I wasn’t going to fall through the cracks. Didn’t want me going to jail. And, you know, a lot of boys I grew up with ended up in jail, drugs became a problem later on for a lot of boys that I grew up with. And so, you know, he was preparing me for that but I couldn’t do that Richard, I mean, that life. I used to go down to the mill sometimes with my dad and I’d sweep out the sawdust and I’d hang around there and I loved these guys, you know, they were tough, hard, hard men and there was something incredibly … you know you’d smell the sap in the air and the sweat and they’d sit around at smoko and they’d have their tea and their sandwiches and they were, you know, they were tough blokes. And I used to love that and I used to really admire that but I used to think ‘I don’t have this. I’m not that. I’m not tough enough for that.’

Richard:

Was there much tenderness in and around all this toughness?

Stan:

From my mother definitely because my mother, I was probably closer to her in that sense in the early stages of my life because she was a great storyteller, my mother, wonderful storyteller. And she’d sit around and she’d talk to us about her life and about … now hers is very different to my dad, my dad had an Aboriginal mother and an Aboriginal father, it was a very, you know, stereotypically, you know, Aboriginal existence. My mother had a white mother, who’s a beautiful woman, lovely woman, crazy woman but she was kicked out of home when she was about twelve or thirteen, fourteen years old by her mother. And she knew there was this Aboriginal bloke, fifteen, sixteen year old bloke who lived down by the river in a tent. And he used to whistle to her every time she walked by. So she thought, you know what, I reckon I could go in there and stay there at least tonight. Well, she moved in there and she stayed there, you know, for twenty or thirty years and had thirteen, fourteen children with him. But they were never married. But because my grandfather was living with a white woman they couldn’t live on the mission anymore. So, they were fringe dwellers and they would, you know, find accommodation wherever they could. They would pitch a humpy on the outskirts of town. Whenever they wanted the land, the police would move in and bulldoze those humpies out of the way and they’d have to move on somewhere else. And my mother used to tell me these stories about their struggle for survival, about her mother, about her father. And I had a great tenderness and a great affection and a great sort of closeness to my mother and I was very protective of her. And then later on I think, you know, I then was able to find that relationship with my father when I started to get old enough to understand. Gee, you know mum was there and she was holding that together and my dad was just out there, you know, just doing whatever he could to put food on our table. So, I’ve got a lot more respect for him. But the tenderness definitely came from my mother.

Richard:

Well, Stan your family eventually settled down in Canberra. How did life change for you then?

Stan:

Drastically. We were in Griffith and I’d settled down at school. I’d never really gone to school till I was about thirteen or fourteen. We’d start and I’d leave and, you know, it would be two weeks here, a month there, six weeks here and then not go to school for two or three months and then pick up again somewhere else. I had thirteen or fourteen changes of school before I was even, you know, out of my teens. We did the first year of high school in Griffith. I think my father probably realised then that to stay in Griffith was going to be fraught, it was going to be difficult for a teenage boy like me to come into that life. So, he got a job in a saw mill in Canberra and we moved down there. So, suddenly I’ve gone from being an Aboriginal kid in an Aboriginal community surrounded by friends and cousins and everything else to being the only, along with my sister, the only Aboriginal kid in the high school. And suddenly my identity was in question. What am I? Am I Aboriginal? You know people would go to me ‘What are you?’ I’d go ‘I’m Aboriginal.’ And they would go ‘No you’re not, you must be an Islander. Or ‘You’re not black enough.’ Or ‘You’re only part.’ I’d be like, I’d never heard this term ‘part Aborigine’ before.

Richard:

So, that’s really common for people to say, ‘Would you …’

Stan:

No, you’re not. And they’d say you’re part Aborigine. I’d never heard this term ‘part’. We were just an Aboriginal family. So, then I had to … I knew that I didn’t fit into that world in Canberra but I knew that I was no longer part of that other world either. And I think for those years I sort of hid myself away. I had my friends. I played my football. I got by, but I didn’t give anything of myself away in that point.

Richard:

Alienated teenager.

Stan:

Yeah, it was hidden and it was closed and I didn’t want to stand out. Actually, it was very funny

because a guy called John Bevan whose son Michael Bevan played cricket for Australia and John was a fantastic teacher and he pulled me aside one day because I would always pretend that I really wasn’t working, I didn’t want to shine in schoolwork.

Richard:

Why?

Stan:

I just didn’t want to stand out in any way you know. So, I was good at sport, I didn’t mind that but I’d always pretend that I wasn’t doing any work. And he pulled me aside one day and he said ‘Listen, I’m onto you. Of every other kid in this class their life is set. You know, they come from very secure families, public service families, they’ll grow up, they’ll maybe go to university, they’ll get a job in the public service and life will be what it is ordained to be.’ He said ‘But for you, I know your background.’ And he said ‘For you, life will be what you bring to it. That’s it. No one’s going to do it for you.’ And he said ‘You’re a smart kid.’ He said ‘If you want to make something of it, you start making something of it now.’ And he understood me and he got me.

Richard:

Did you believe him when he said that, though?

Stan:

Yeah, I did because he got me. He just saw straight through me. And he said ‘I know what you’re doing, you’re pretending.’ And he said ‘But these other kids can afford to do that. You can’t. If you’re going to get somewhere in life you’re going to have bring something to it.’

Richard:

So, there you were, you were found out we should say by this teacher who said ‘I’m onto you’ which is really lovely, I think it’s a wonderful thing for a teacher to say ‘I’m onto you.’

Stan:

And they care.

Richard:

How did, then, your new life begin in journalism.

Stan:

Well, I mean I wasn’t really thinking of anything like that. I loved reading. I loved stories. And I remember that period when I became aware of the world in the late 60s, early 70s which was that tumultuous period of, man on the moon, you know, the Vietnam War, the election of the Whitlam government, later the dismissal of the Whitlam Government. It was a news-rich environment and I soaked that up and I loved it. I was fascinated by it.

Richard:

Were you soaking all that up as a kid living as a fringe dweller in Griffith?

Stan:

Yeah, because I listened to ABC Radio and I used to watch ABC television. It was the only thing that we had. And yeah I was aware of it and I was fascinated by news. I used to read newspapers all the time and it was always there. So, and I loved telling stories. My mother was a great storyteller and I really picked up on that. But it wasn’t until I was actually about sort of eighteen and I’d finished school and I was working at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies just delivering mail and photocopying and that. And I’d done reasonably well in my HSC, I had no idea what I’d done to be honest. I’d just finished. I don’t even think I opened it. I don’t even think I looked at what my marks were, because it …

Richard:

What!

Stan:

It wasn’t relevant.

Richard:

Oh, really!

Stan:

No, no, no. There was nothing, there was no thought about this. No one had been to university in my family. No one had aspired to this sort of professional life. So, I just got a job delivering mail and I wasn’t thinking about it. And then Marcia Langton, who’s head of the Indigenous Studies School at Melbourne University, Monash, Melbourne, I think. But anyway she pulled me aside one day. She’s a fierce woman, I don’t know if you know Marcia? She’s fierce, you know you don’t mess with her. She pulled me aside one day and took me into the library at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies where she was working as a researcher, I think she was doing her PhD at the time. And she said ‘What are you going to do with your life?’ ‘I like …Well, why do you care? Deliver mail, I’m quite happy, you know.’And she said ‘No, you’re not. Did you finish high school?’ I said ‘Yes.’ ‘How did you go in your HSC?’ ‘No idea.’ She found out. And she said ‘You’re an idiot. You should be going to university. Do you know what your marks are? You can go to any university in Australia.’

Richard:

What were your marks?

Stan:

Ninety odd percent. I mean it was just crazy. Then she said ‘Okay, what do you want to do?’ I said ‘I wouldn’t mind being a journalist, whatever that means.’ And she said ‘Right, you’re going to New South Wales University, we’ll fill out your forms.’ She filled out the forms, she got me into study politics, history, sociology, anthropology. So, I went off to NSW uni. She put me in touch with various people who sort of … journalists that she knew to talk to me about journalism. I think that lit a fire in me and when I got there I realised ‘Wow, this is a big world. I can compete here. I’m okay at this.’ And then it wasn’t long after I applied for a cadetship with Macquarie Radio and I got it. And I found the moment I went into journalism that I could do it. I remember the first job I was ever sent out on, I’d been in there only a couple of weeks and there was a fire and no other reporter was around and the news director threw me the keys to the car and said ‘Right, you’ve got to go to this fire.’ And this was about a quarter to the hour. And he said ‘I want a report for the top of the hour.’ So, I’m driving around trying to find this fire. I could see this smoke and I drove up one road and the road was blocked, up another road and the road was blocked. Got about two minutes to the hour and he said ‘Are you right? Are you ready to go? I couldn’t say no, right? So, I said ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ And I’m thinking ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do. What am I going to say?’ So, and this has been a feature of my career. I took a turn and I saw a hill so I drove to the top of the hill and beneath me at the top of the hill was the entire scene of the fire, the fire brigade, the hoses, people outside their homes, the flames, the whole thing. Came to me, bang on the hour, clicked on the walkie talkie it was the two-way then and straight into this live report. And I found that I was a risk taker. I was someone who could perform under pressure. I could tell a story and I loved it and I was good at it. And it just sort of grew from there. I found that the thing that all those years of listening to my mother tell stories, of being around people who were prepared to take risks in life. Suddenly, there it was there for me, you know this career opened up.

Richard:

You had a job at the ABC for a while.

Stan:

Yeah, for a long time.

Richard:

At Lateline, as a TV journalist?

Stan:

I worked, again I was very fortunate someone spotted me on radio and said ‘You know you should come and work on television at the ABC. Come down and do a screen test in Sydney at Gore Hill.’ So, I came down and a lovely old man called Jim Revitt, who was the trainer of cadets at the ABC, put me through my paces and said ‘Yeah, you’ll be fine, you can do this.’ So, I started there and then Paul Lyneham, Jim Middleton, Kerry O’Brien, they were working in Canberra for the ABC and Margot O’Neill, who now works for Lateline and they said ‘Why don’t you come down to Parliament House and work for us here?’ So, I was twenty-three and I was working in Parliament House surrounded by these fantastic reporters, working right alongside Paul Lyneham who would just be … you know, he was an irascible guy, an eccentric guy, but extraordinarily generous to me, he just gave me so much of his time. Kerry O’Brien was a fantastic mentor. Then Lateline started and I went to work for Lateline as the Canberra correspondent for Lateline. And I was loving it. And then one day I got a phone call out of the blue from Gerald Stone who was at Sixty Minutes and had been in the States and had moved back to Australia and he was starting a show on Channel 7. And he said ‘Look, I’ve seen some of your work on Lateline. Are you interested in coming to work for us?’ And I just became sort of swept along by events really, I wasn’t thinking about that. But I thought, yeah, whatever. That’s what my dad used to do. You know there’s a new job down the road, you’d go. So, I went there and I worked for 7 for a few years and I didn’t like it, I didn’t really enjoy it. I didn’t really like the culture of it.

Richard:

Can I just say around this time you were hosting that show Real Life and I think this is around about the time Frontline was on.

Stan:

Yeah.

Richard:

Brilliant program and we got the sense from Frontline that you were slightly being parodied there with Mike Moore with a kind of tone, that you, as a presenter like Mike Moore had come from this kind of very bland, middle class background. And what you’ve just told me.

Stan:

Yeah.

Richard:

Is your background was not a Mike Moore childhood.

Stan:

Yeah, it was incongruous. I mean, for me to be sitting there and doing that was so strange and I felt so sort of out of place in a lot of ways.

Richard:

Because you are so urbane and charming on screen in a way that suggests the way that a lot of working class kids or lower class kids who have gone ahead by virtue of their you know industry and often are.

Stan:

Yeah, I think so misleading. Yeah, my wife calls me a ‘snob-Aborigine’. She always says that, ‘Really you should have been born in some upper class British family’.

Richard:

Lord Grant.

Stan:

That’s right, exactly. But you know I found myself there and look it was a great experience because I learnt a lot about television and how to do television. And commercial TV is very good at the bells and whistles. I worked with some terrific people, but man, I just didn’t enjoy it. I didn’t enjoy the show.

Richard:

Those shows exist … they like to frighten their audience.

Stan:

They’re horrible shows.

Richard:

How did you feel about being complicit in that?

Stan:

Well, I think I was naïve. I think that I was, sort of, propelled along by events. I didn’t do it for a long time. You know I’ve been a journalist for thirty years and I’ve probably spent about two, two and a half years doing those sort of six thirty current affairs shows. I went overseas for Channel 7 to London for a couple of years and then I came back and then I was off to CNN. But look, you know I was very naïve. I wasn’t even ready for that, be hosting a current affairs show on commercial television when I was twenty seven or twenty eight years old. I wasn’t ready for it. I had no idea what I was doing. And I was in this commercial beast where ratings were everything and you would chase ratings and inevitably the stories become increasingly dumbed down, increasingly sensationalist. They’re more about heat than light. They feed on people’s misery and misfortune. And you know I think it’s … I’ve spent a lot of my career since then probably trying to make up for it to be honest. I look at it and feel it’s a bit of a blemish, but it was also a learning experience, you know, life is a learning experience. And I did learn a lot when I was there and I worked with some terrific people. But it’s not something I’d ever wish to repeat.

Richard:

I know and then you go and make this quantum leap into CNN from there. And you were hosting, anchoring programs from Asia-Pacific. Was that Hong Kong?

Stan:

Hong Kong and then I was on the road for a long time as a reporter. And I think if I look at my journalistic career I can divide it into two and that is the pre CNN and the post CNN. CNN changed me irrevocably.

Richard:

How?

Stan:

It is an extraordinary news organisation. They are the biggest news gathering organisation in the world. It has incredibly tough standards and it’s very strenuous. There are huge demands on you and you need to immerse yourself in world events. I could be sent anywhere at any time. And I was, you know, I was running on fear. I would read four, five hours a day, everything I could lay my hands on. I was determined that I would not be caught out on anything.

Richard:

Yeah, all the best journalists are like that, I think. They have a kind of respect for the story, respect for the story generates fear.

Stan:

And respect for knowledge. They were the tools that my father had to sharpen the saws at the sawmill. I had to sharpen my mind.

Richard:

Because the worst thing you could do is go into a big event, where it’s a matter of life and death and you don’t know what you’re talking about.

Stan:

You’d be caught out in the worst possible way. And you needed to speak authoritatively about these issues. You couldn’t go on and fudge it, no one can bring you research when you’re on air in a breaking news situation, live. And I loved it. I really took to it. I anchored out of Hong Kong for a couple of years and I went on the road, I was the Beijing Correspondent. Then I worked out of the Middle East, I was a Middle East Correspondent. I covered the Iraq War, Afghanistan, Pakistan. I then went back to Beijing again as the Senior International Correspondent for CNN. I reported all around Asia. You know the Japanese quake, the tsunami, the Pakistan earthquake. I travelled up into North Korea. I just had the most extraordinary experiences. And, you know, the one thing Richard that I always say to people is that I found that I met myself out there on the road.

Richard:

What do you mean?

Stan:

I met other people who were like me. I met people in refugee camps in Afghanistan, people in Pakistan, people in Iraq. I remember meeting a man who was a Palestinian refugee who’d fled after the Nakba, what the Palestinians called the catastrophe to the establishment of the state of Israel. He’d lost his home and he moved to Iraq and he carried around a little jar of dirt with him from his home, his former home in Palestine. I met kids living in refugee camps in the Afghan-Pakistan border who lived like I lived when I was a boy. And I was moved by that and I gravitated to those human stories. I didn’t really care so much for the bang, bang of war, you know. A lot of reporters go there and they’re transfixed by that and they really want to live out some military, army fantasy. Yeah, I was in that. I saw that. I saw death. I saw suicide bombings. I was in battles and saw conflict. But I was more moved by how people survive and hold their integrity and their dignity and what gets them up every day. That was my story.

Richard:

There is so little of that kind of reporting, it seems odd to me in a way.

Stan:

There is so little of it and they were the stories that I wanted to tell. And so it changed me, you know, the whole experience. It made me feel whole as a journalist. It made me feel complete as a person, that there were people out there who lived the life … . And it made sense of the life that I lived because our people came out of conflict. Our people came out of frontier conflict. We’d lost everything. We’d lost certainty. We’d lost our land. We’d lost our economic base. We were tossed onto the margins of society. And we had to cobble together a dignified, meaningful life out of that. And I looked at these people and I said ‘That explains what I went through. We’re products of conflict. We’re products of our history.’ And that’s what really moved me so much when I was out there. And still to this day it’s why I get up and I’m so passionate about international news and trying to connect people with these stories because they are us. They are the same as us and they want the same as us. And that’s why people hop onto rickety boats and come to live here because they want to be us. They want what we’ve got. To turn them away I just feel is so shameful and I feel so motivated and moved by those people’s plight and those stories. So, CNN shaped me and changed me as a person and as a journalist and it was the most wonderful experience of my career.

Richard:

Tell me about Hamza, a boy you met in Pakistan.

Stan:

This is an extraordinary story. You know, when you go out every day, this was during the Pakistan earthquake. You go out every day and you’ve got to put together a story at CNN. We’d often go live, we do live reports, we’d go out on the road, we’d have to film in between doing lives, then edit our story in the back of a car, send that off, write a story for CNN.com, do CNN radio. It was a jam-packed schedule. But this little boy, we’d been up in a town called Bagh which is in Kashmir and it was during the earthquake. The devastation there was just extraordinary, entire villages gone, mountains that had been scythed in half. And we were filming, we had a story, it was a story of destruction, a story of misery. We were packing up at the end of the day and a little boy was bouncing a cricket ball in his hand and he came up to me and spoke really good English and he said ‘Hi, where are you from?’ And I said ‘I’m from Australia.’ And he said ‘Really?’ And then he reeled off … recited the entire Australian cricket team to me. And I looked at him and I said ‘Wow, you love cricket?’ And he said ‘Yeah.’ And I said ‘Do you play cricket?’ And he had the ball in his hand and he started to cry. And he said ‘Not anymore.’ I said ‘Why?’ And he said ‘All my friends are dead.’ He’d been away from school on the day of the quake. The quake had buried his school and three hundred and something boys had all perished. He’d been trapped under his house, Hamza, at home and he’d been rescued by his father and uncle. And he was the only boy. That was it. So, I said ‘This is our story, forget everything else, you’ve got to turn on a dime. And we went back and I met his parents. We sat down and we talked to Hamza and Hamza took me up to the school. And I remember walking through there and as I walked he grabbed hold of my hand and he pointed out where the school was and where the boys had died. Then he wanted me to go and throw the cricket ball to him, so we had a little bat and we had a little impromptu game of cricket. And months later I went back to do stories about how people were putting their lives back together again. And we met up again with Hamza and he took me back up to the school and the first thing that I saw were all of these flowers, fresh flowers that had been one flower for every boy that had been killed. And there was this sea of beautiful flowers where the school had been and where the boys were dead and Hamza took me back up there again. I’ll never forget him, he was an extraordinary boy. And these are the people that you meet when you’re on the road and they leave an indelible imprint on you and they become part of you, part of your soul.

Richard:

That’s the natural disaster. Can we talk about the crazy now? You’ve been into North Korea, which quite frankly fascinates me. I’m fascinated by the whole idea of living in a state where the state points a gun to your head and forces you to say that two plus two equals five, that up is down, black is white. Tell me about going into Planet Weird that is North Korea.

Stan:

You know I’d spent a lot of time before actually going in there reporting up on the China-North Korea border. It fascinated because … a couple of things. One, on the Chinese side you would see lights and movement and then across the river and the river was about as wide as this studio, so it’s not very wide at all. And it was darkness, always darkness. I remember being up there once and looking across and all the grass was about six foot high and I was wondering, you know, why is that? And then it was like seeing the stars at night where you see one and you see a hundred, I saw a figure moving through and it was lousy with military. And there were fox holes all along the river, trained there waiting for people who tried to escape. In the distance there was one light and the light was illuminating a picture of Kim Jong-il, the Dear Leader. So, I’d looked at this place from the outside for such a long time and then I got a chance to go in there, it was during the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea, and they were also launching a missile, a rocket. So, they brought a few reporters up into there to do this. You know, you are stepping into another planet there. It’s this Stalinist city. It’s an austere place. Pyongyang itself is a real showpiece for them.

Richard:

Yes, the showcase of the … .

Stan:

So, you go there and they’d have cars out on the road and you’d drive past the train station and all these people, this was a Sunday, most people had briefcases and suits and getting off the buses and heading to the train station. It was all for show. They put on this show because the world’s media was there. No one was going to work. But the whole place was just this showpiece and of course we had these minders with us who watched our every move. This of course was not long after the death of Kim Jong-il and we were out one day at a memorial and I asked if I could interview some local people, so they organised it and I went over and I spoke to them about what did he mean to you and so on and these people started to wail and weep and it was on cue. And our minder, fearing that he’d be caught out if he wasn’t also seen weeping, he got in front of our camera and said ‘We can’t go on, please stop the filming.’ And the tears were running down. And this was all for show. But then we moved outside of Pyongyang and we travelled on the train up through the hinterland of the country and that’s where you see the real North Korea, a harsh, barren, cracked landscape. Nothing grows there. People are starving. People have stunted growth. You know, the stories about people who will follow animals around and wait for the animal droppings to sift through and find any kernel of corn or something that hadn’t been digested properly and they would pull that out to eat it. People would strip the barks off trees and boil it to make a soup to be able to eat something.

Richard:

And yet they must attend rallies where they’ve been told how prosperous and happy they are.

Stan:

Yeah and of course all the while they’re spending a fortune on their military which is the fourth or fifth biggest army in the world. And I went to a military parade where the young leader, this Kim Jong-un, he’s not even thirty years old and is now presiding over this military empire really. And you really get the sense talking to soldiers and others that they’re still at war, this war has never ended. There’s no peace treaty, it’s just an armistice which they’ve now torn up and they look across the border and they see tens of thousands of American troops and they remember the Korean War. And they are still fighting that battle. So, as far as the regime is concerned the suffering and misery of their own people is secondary to propping up this military state with this army that shows their own people that they’re strong and holds a gun to the rest of the world’s head. That if you come and touch us, we’ll detonate the bomb, we will cause mayhem and havoc. This is about the survival of the regime and they will do anything to protect that.

Richard:

Stan, you’ve come a very long way from this childhood in Griffith and are you …? This might be hard for you to answer this, but are you alienated somewhat from the people you grew up with and that environment? I’m guessing you’re probably the most serious overachiever from your time and place.

Stan:

I feel, you know, whenever I go home, my parents live just outside Griffith now still, I never feel more at peace than when I go home, never. I sleep better when I’m at home. I don’t sleep well, too many things, you see too many things and you know you have nightmares and things. But whenever I go home I sleep well. I love the smell of it. I love the feel of it. I love the way my people speak. I love looking into the faces of people. I remember when I took my boy back home for the first time, he was about six or seven years old and we were walking down to the local swimming pool and this other Aboriginal kid was walking up and Dylan, my boy who’s sixteen now, he turned to me and he went ‘Dad, he looks just like me.’ I said ‘This is us. This is where we’re from.’ So, I feel that and at the same time I think I feel alienated from everywhere. You know what I feel alienated from Australia in some ways because you can’t separate yourself from your history. And as much as I love this country, I still feel that there was a great wrong to Indigenous people and I carry that. When I’m outside of Australia I feel incredibly liberated because I don’t have to keep fighting those old battles, but then I pine for it and I need to come home. When I go home I feel so connected, but I know that I can’t stay there anymore, because it’s not me anymore and I’ve moved on. So, you know I’m just a person who lives in the cracks, I think now, and I’m happy, I’m happy with that.

Richard:

That’s a very modern state of existence isn’t it? When you’ve been overseas of course they’ll say ‘What’s your background?’ And you’ll say Aboriginal Australia. Does that go over differently?

Stan:

Oh, differently. The first thing you do when you say it in Australia is that they go ‘Oh, how much?’ ‘What part?’ Or ‘You’re not really.’ Over there it’s like ‘Yeah, okay, fine. Okay, let’s move on.’ And they do know about it. People in China I’ve met who really knew about Indigenous people and the struggle of Indigenous people in Australia. So, you don’t meet people with that same sense of history or baggage or shame that Australians sometimes feel towards the history of Indigenous Australia. So, it’s a very liberating thing. But I love Australia. I love it. And coming back here now, you know, we have moved so far from what the life that my father had lived, the life that I lived when I first grew up. My kids have a wonderful life, they have wonderful friends from all backgrounds. And I’m really hopeful for them, because I don’t see the same knee-jerk racism or sexism or bigotry or homophobia that exists, you know, previous generation, amongst my kids’ generation. I’ve got great hope for that. And I think Australia has so much to be proud of, an extraordinary country and when you see the worst of the world you realise that this place is very, very special.

Richard:

It’s funny you know a lot of the time when people talk about Indigenous, black Australia and white Australia. Like that’s it, the country’s only made up of a minority of Aboriginal people and the rest are all Anglos. That’s kind of crazy.

Stan:

And you know what? There is no black and white Australia either because, look at me, you know, I have black and white. All Indigenous people, in NSW especially, have black and white. We’ve got white relatives. And those white relatives have black relatives. It’s all one story, you know. It’s one country and it’s one story. And I think we get beyond this separation I think we’d be so much better off because we share the place. And the stories my mother told me, they’re the stories of all of us.

Richard:

So, given that you were, just finally having this amazing career doing reporting from China for CNN, what has brought you back to Australia?

Stan:

A sense of family. My parents are getting older. I never wanted to get that phone call that you know that one of my parents had passed away and I was on the other side of the world. My boys had been back for boarding school when we were away and I was missing them and I hadn’t seen them enough. Our youngest boy is about to go to school. And I had this great opportunity to come back for Sky. You know they contacted me and said ‘Come back and be international editor, do world news, do a world news program every night.’ And every night I can go on air on news night and I can connect the dots. I can bring all of that experience to bear and I can tell people what it’s like to be in North Korea. What it’s like to be in a refugee camp in Afghanistan. What it’s like to be in Iraq or, you know, and I can peel back those layers and on some way just connect with people. So, it was a chance to come back to do a great job and to be with my family and I really missed Australia, the smell and the light and the sound and the voices and the faces and the … I just missed it so much.

Richard:

It’s great to have you back Stan. Thank you so much.

Woman:

This is Conversations with Richard Fidler on ABC Radio.

Richard:

I spoke with Stan Grant in 2013. And we’ve put a link to Stan Grant’s amazing speech on our website abc.net.au/conversations. I’m Richard Fidler, thanks for listening.

Woman:

You’ve been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Richard Fidler. For more Conversations interviews please go to the website abc.net.au/conversations.