

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Joan Winch
1935-
Aboriginal Health Educator

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 9 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Joan Winch

Director/Producer Rod Freedman

Executive Producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2003

Study guide prepared by Kate Raynor © NFSA

Also in Series 9: Betty Churcher, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Thomas Keneally, Bill Mollison, Bernard Smith, Charles 'Bud' Tingwell

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SYNOPSIS

Nurse, midwife, academic, educator...Joan Winch has overcome numerous professional and personal hurdles to make an extraordinary contribution to Aboriginal health.

The internationally acclaimed education programs that she has established focus on preventative and holistic medicine and community participation, integrating Indigenous practices and values. In this interview, she talks about her work and philosophies, the discrimination experienced by her family and her people, and her own journey from isolation and loss to a sense of purpose and a spiritual awakening.

Joan describes growing up in Western Australia at a time when people often disguised their Aboriginality, and explains how fear and oppression affected her family. She reveals the grief she felt when her mother died, and how their connection was rekindled with the birth of her own daughter, Lillian. She recalls painful years: running away from her strict father at age 16, drinking too much, having to leave her husband—also a drinker—when Lillian was just six weeks old.

Joan had many jobs—from assisting in a psychiatric hospital to taking care of kids at an Aboriginal children's home—before taking night classes and enrolling in nursing. This interest would shape the rest of her life and give her a mission: to help the Aboriginal community.

Study tours to India and China inspired her. She started an innovative health education program at the Aboriginal medical service in Perth. In 1987, she won a prestigious World Health Organization prize, which she used to create Marr Mooditj, a health-worker training college.

Widely respected, Joan has received many other awards during her career. After officially retiring at 60, she served as Head of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University from 1999 to 2001. She continues to work tirelessly to change the way society approaches health and well-being.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include SOSE/HSIE, Health Studies, Australian History, Indigenous Studies, Women's Studies, English and Personal Development.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

The Film: Story of a Life

- Why might the filmmakers have thought Joan Winch a worthy subject to be included in this series of **Australian Biography**?
- Does your impression of Joan shift over the program's course?
- Does this program leave you with any questions about Joan?
- The programs in the **Australian Biography** series take the format of in-depth interviews with their subjects. Imagine that you are a producer on the series and that you could have access to three people from Joan's life—family, friends, colleagues, critics. Compile a list of four questions for each of these people, using this additional interview material to further develop the portrait of Joan given in this film. How would you decide who might offer a valuable perspective on her life and achievements? Consider what new details you might gather when formulating your questions. Write a production statement outlining what you hope to achieve.

- Joan shares a number of anecdotes from her life. Choose one of her stories and explain what it tells us about her. Imagine you could tell just one story from your childhood to convey a sense of you and your family. Write this story and then at the end, note what you think it reveals about you.

Joan Winch: Healing Hands

- Choose six adjectives to describe Joan.
- Would you describe Joan as an activist? Discuss.
- Make a list of three questions you would ask Joan if you had the opportunity to interview her. What do you think her responses might be?
- Joan describes living in a humpy with her parents and two brothers. What is a humpy?
- Joan describes her teenage years as 'like a nightmare'. Her mother died when she was 13 and her brothers left home to work at sea. Her father was very strict, and Joan ran away from home when she was 16 (though she returned once a week to clean the house for him!). Asked whether she still felt like a child, she responds, 'I hadn't felt like a kid since my mum died'. Imagine you are Joan. Write a letter to one of your brothers, describing your situation during these difficult years.
- At the age of 21 Joan had a spiritual dream in which her mother came to her and said, 'Joan, I'm not dead'. Describe the connection between Joan's mother and her daughter, Lillian, as Joan sees it.
- In the early 1950s, Joan worked at a psychiatric hospital as an assistant nurse. She describes it as Cuckoo's Nest to the power of ten. What do you think she means by this description? How have psychiatric institutions changed over the intervening decades?
- Soon after she was married, Joan's only child, Lillian, was born, but her husband Harry was a heavy drinker and Joan decided to leave him when Lillian was just six weeks old. How difficult would it have been as a single mother in those days?
- Joan worked for seven years at Saint Joseph's Hospital in Perth. She was given a lot of responsibility, which inspired her to attend night school, where she studied human biology. Imagine you are the ward sister at Saint Joseph's. Write a character reference for Joan.
- What qualities do you need to be a good nurse?
- What does Joan say is the most important factor in succeeding at study?
- Joan was married to Mick Winch for 15 years, but she felt that he didn't want her to pursue her work interests in local Aboriginal communities, and so the marriage ended. Imagine you are Mick. List your reasons for wanting Joan to practise conventional, mainstream nursing.
- How was Joan's bad back fixed?
- Joan was awarded the World Health Organization's Sasakawa Health Prize in 1987. She has degrees in nursing, midwifery and child development, with a Masters in Public Health and Tropical Medicine from James Cook University. These are just a few of Joan's achievements. Using information available from the references listed below, compile a resumé for Joan.
- Joan says she feels like a prisoner in the city—freedom matters the most. 'Who wants the shackles?' Describe a space or a place that has particular significance for you. What does freedom mean to you?

- Joan is driven by a spiritual force, and it is the spiritual side of life that is now most important to her: getting back to basics, getting in touch with yourself from within. What do you do for your 'spiritual side'?
- Imagine you were going to write a biography of Joan. What would you call it?
- Joan says that whenever she comes to a dead end, she stops and asks for guidance. Describe a dead end that confronted you and how you dealt with it.
- Joan describes herself as a fighter: 'You need to be strong and forceful or else you get pushed out the back door'. What other qualities account for Joan's tremendous success?
- Joan was Australian Woman of the Year in 1988. Using the internet, compile a list of women who have received this honour.

Indigenous Matters: 'The older I get, the more I believe in the old stories'.

- Joan speaks of the importance of Aboriginal culture, including art, music, dance and storytelling. Research one of these aspects of Indigenous culture and present your findings.
- During her childhood in Fremantle, Joan comments that it was common for Indigenous people to identify themselves as Indians or Maoris. (Sally Morgan writes about her experience of this in **My Place**.) Why?
- Joan's mother was a member of the Stolen Generations—Indigenous people who were forcibly removed from their families as children. Find out more about this period in Australian history and the effects it had on Indigenous people.
- Joan's father was thrown out of school at the age of 11 because he was Aboriginal, and as Joan says, 'schooling was very important to him'. Joan left school at the age of 14 and went to work in a hospital laundry. How might Joan's father feel about her achievements, given the difficulties she had to overcome? Imagine he was still alive and could deliver a speech at her 70th birthday party. What might he want to tell her?
- Joan says that during her childhood, it was against the law for Aboriginal people to speak their own languages. What was the purpose of this law? What effect did it have?
- Joan speaks of a figure from her childhood, 'the lady with the elastic arms'. What does this figure represent? When you were a child, were you scared of any particular ghouls or ghosts?
- Joan's mother was of the Martujarra people and her father was a Nyoongar. Research these two groups using a variety of sources.
- In 1989, Joan took the licensee of a hotel in Armidale, NSW, to the Equal Opportunities Tribunal for unfair treatment of Aboriginal people. How does this tribunal operate? How can you explain the persistence of racial discrimination despite laws and government bodies designed to address entrenched, systemic problems and prejudices?

Indigenous Health

- Marr Mooditj means 'good hands'. How does Joan explain the significance of this name?
- The Perth Aboriginal Medical Service, with which Joan has a long-standing involvement, is now called Derbarl Yerrigan. Find out what this Aboriginal term means.
- Joan visited India and China to research community health programs. What is the 'barefoot doctor scheme'?
- What are the key problems facing Indigenous communities in terms of health?
- Research the facts about Indigenous health and compare these with the statistics for non-Indigenous people. What factors might account for the differences? Do you think the situation is equitable?
- What is trachoma?
- Marr Mooditj offers a course in first aid. What are some of the basic principles of first aid?
- Joan has been involved in a number of field trips to research traditional medicine and foods. What can you find out about bush tucker and Indigenous health remedies?
- What does the term 'holistic' mean?
- What are some of the principles of preventative health care?
- What do you do for your health?
- Joan mentions several times the crucial importance of diet. Note down everything you eat over a period of three or four days. Now analyse your diet, according to standard nutritional guidelines.
- Research the courses available through Marr Mooditj.
- One aspect of Joan's work with Indigenous communities has been training health care workers to act as spokespeople for Aboriginal people going into hospital. Why is this necessary?
- Compile statistics comparing life expectancy and infant mortality in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. What are the leading causes of death in Aboriginal communities?

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Indigenous Health

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