



WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY NUNZIO MONDIA

COVID CONVERSATIONS

Book 1 - 6

*Interviews with combined
Sweet Thursday singers.*



CITY OF VINCENT



Centrestage
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Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries

1-6 Covid Conversations Interviews: Sweet Thursday Singers

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Covid Conversations Documentary Official Youtube Video Link:

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmXNVq3yEIA>



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1 Agnes O'Kane

Agnes O'Kane I'm Agnes O'Kane and COVID, how has it struck me? Well, I have family, my son and my three grandchildren are in New York. And I would love to be able to see them, but it looks as if that's going to be a long time for that to happen. And thank goodness for Facebook and stuff, at least I can talk to them. But my youngest son was going to be married a couple of weeks ago and I had family coming out from Ireland and my son was going to come over from New York with the little grandkids, and they were all going to have this wonderful family wedding. And unfortunately, that's not going to happen now.

Agnes O'Kane But how do you deal with it? How do you deal with these changes and the huge changes that are taking place in our lives? And I think it is things like going out and enjoying the community and doing what you can in your environment to keep positive and not to get daunted by what's been happening.

Agnes O'Kane Well, my vision for the future is that we come through this thing intact. I think it probably will make us think about our lifestyles. I think it's going to have an impact. And I hope it's going to make us kinder and more considerate people and get back to the good, the basic things in life. In the busy world, we were dashing off here and there all over the globe trying to find answers to things. And it's all around us. We have to look for it. And I think we have to see the joy in every day, and we have to tell ourselves that. When you get to my age, you learn these things and I think that's the important message that I would take away and would try to give to people. See the joy in every day.

2 Alf Gaebler

Alf Gaebler My name is Alf, I'm 89 years of age with a compromised health condition with an artificial heart valve. My wife is 93 years and has frail health. Consequently, our family decided that we needed to be looked after due to the coronavirus outbreak. This was arranged by Jeannette and me staying at our daughter and eldest son's residences in Mt Lawley and Daglish on alternative months. In each case we formed a group of four individuals living together in a house. This was an interesting change of lifestyle from the point of view of my wife and myself as we have lived together in the same house in Yokine for 67 years. It was like a changing miniature nursing home, only with far better benefits than being in with people you don't know and paying for the privilege! Notwithstanding, it was a strain for us to be locked down with other people, even though there was family. And to be perfectly frank, we felt that life had changed completely.

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Alf Gaebler Many of the things that my wife and I considered to be part of our life, including our daily routine, entertainment, outings and socialising, were skewed. However, circumstances necessitated that we had to adjust and we willingly become part of another family structure albeit it was comprised of our own close kin. We became part of their lives and routines but were privileged to have our own room at each location.

Alf Gaebler Most of the altered routines were not part of our 66 years of marriage. The biggest problem that arose was regarding the severity with which our small group had to face the world virus pandemic. We were very lucky in having a son-in-law whose essential work meant that he was out in the community, and he was able to keep us stocked with food and other essential supplies. Sharing house duties presented problems when you are living in someone else's home, particularly as my domestic skills had never been finely honed. While acceptable as a 'kitchen boy' when cleaning up was concerned, sharing in the cooking was far more of a problem. However, I did make an early attempt with what could be termed my 'standard fare' when there was little chance of sidestepping the issue for me. I have to confess that my effort was one of the worst meals created and further offers to assist in this department were met with shudders! I made sure to never complain about other people's cooking.'

Alf Gaebler, It did mean that Jeannette and I had to acclimatise ourselves to different eating habits and as well as other family routines. This was exaggerated by the monthly transfer between the two households. Irrespective of such close family ties, there remain the constraints of recognising the other household rules and timetables. Notwithstanding these difficulties, there were some aspects that were an improvement on our long- practised habits However things that I would normally do, such as listening to classical music, reading, following our favourites television programs (and avoiding sport!), had to be dropped as an important part of the downside of closer community living. To be frank, I almost started to enjoy commercial television to the point where I knew what it was about and almost enjoyed football.

Alf Gaebler One aspect of this period arose from my daughter's experience as CEO of a mental health support group which afforded her an important insight into some of the great problems facing some less fortunate people in society. She had the unenviable task of presenting their essential requirements to both state and federal politicians and bureaucrats. This broad issue made our difficulties so very minor!

Alf Gaebler As far as my communal activities are concerned, I had always been very active in many organisations such as Probus, Sweet Thursday Community Choir, University of the Third Age, Epiphytic Cacti and Hoya Society, discussion groups, etc. I went to all the meetings and thoroughly enjoyed them. But I dropped them all except the choir. I found that it was difficult to establish a safe means of coping with such close communications bearing in mind how vulnerable Jeannette and I are at our time of life during such a unique and dangerous pandemic.

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Alf Gaebler For example, when I was attending a Probus Club committee meeting of our Probus Club, I was surprised to find that the members of the club wanted to continue to have their luncheons at hotels. Subsequently, I learned that one of the club members who were due to be at our committee meeting had just returned from the eastern states where his granddaughter had contracted the virus. His wife tested negative, so the husband decided not to get tested himself but to resume normal attendance at the club! This indicates how such behaviour among friends can prove so dangerous.

Alf Gaebler On the other hand, my gardening club did meet but with strict rules as laid down by recognised authorities. However, when the crunch comes people will still fraternise. That being so I didn't attend the clubs thereafter. At the moment people believe and hope that the border will be maintained. Uh, maybe not. Uh, there are big problems for the future. My wife is in such a situation that if she was to get the virus, I would lose her. My family is very aware of this. While this is so serious, to make the best of a gloomy situation, I decided that I would do something personal that I'd always been concerned about the result in public.

Nunzio Mondia Have you ever grown a beard before Covid?

Alf Gaebler Never had a beard before in my life, although I've had a moustache. The full-blown beard is such a mystery as each man's effort can be so different, good or bad! You know, it might grow a bit of a tuft here and there, be black or brown, you don't know. [Laughter]

Alf Gaebler That's it. I carry it around with me. But there's a sad part about it. Today, I went to a University of the Third Age discussion group with people I know and trust. Their remarks about the beard included, "Gee, you are so much better looking now." And I thought, "Oh I must have looked crook before!"

3 Chris Sharpe

Chris Sharpe I'm Chris Sharp. I'm the convenor of the Sweet Thursday community singers. And every week on Tuesday, not Thursday, we meet at Highgate Primary School for our regular singing session. And we were going really well at the start of the year. Our numbers were good. We were enjoying our singing and then by the end of March, the world had turned upside down. We were no longer able to meet at Highgate Primary, and we had to think about how we could continue. But we were all very keen to continue and we managed to do so by changing our format to meet up via Zoom online. And we changed our two-hour session with a tea break in the middle to a one hour. And we embraced technology, and for many of us, it was our first time meeting online.

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Chris Sharpe Zoom was not the perfect platform for us to sing because we had problems with synchronisation, but we managed that with the use of the mute button. Susan Margaret, our music director, organised a programme of familiar tunes which we generally sang along to. We had an innovative segment of karaoke and taking it in turns to come up with karaoke songs. We sang those with great gusto and thoroughly enjoyed singing those songs. In fact, we learnt some new ones, so we managed despite the difficulties to actually come up with some new songs.

Chris Sharpe And then, as the environment changed slightly as restrictions were eased, we decided we would like to sing outside. And so we met in Hyde Park on a Saturday morning in April, and about 12 of us were there. Some of us were there for the first time because not everybody had managed to meet on Zoom. It was great to be able to see everyone again and to stand in the sound shell at Hyde Park and just sing. It was a lovely morning. Coffee was on tap from over the road, nice cakes as well, and it was just a brilliant experience. So much so that we've resolved to continue.

Chris Sharpe So in fact, a week on Sunday, weather permitting, we'll be in Hyde Park again in the same spot, enjoying a Sunday afternoon of singing. So at a time of great uncertainty, being online allowed us to continue our singing and to derive enormous enjoyment from it. And we're able to combine singing with a bit of socialising.

Chris Sharpe So it kept us going so that when the restrictions were eased, we were ready to come back and sing once again together. And, because not everybody in the choir was able to join in online, it was just great to see everybody back again, face to face and in person.

Chris Sharpe We are a community choir. We come from a range of different backgrounds and experiences. We're not an audition choir, so we're very happy to have anyone come and join and sing with us. Despite all the difficulties, I think we were able to retain that sense of community and enjoy each other's company. And when the opportunity did arise, we were more than happy to go back out into the community and sing in Hyde Park once again and celebrate the fact that we could do so.

4 Janine Wells

Janine Wells Hi, my name's Janine. When the lockdown began, I noticed a huge change in our street. The first thing I did was for all my neighbours, I made face masks. I took a face mask to everybody. I couldn't believe it was such a simple thing for me to do because I'm a seamstress. I couldn't believe how grateful and relieved people felt, especially the elderly in our street when they received the small mask. It just seemed to change their posture, it was a bit of a safety net for them, even though they probably weren't going to use it. I was touched by that.

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Janine Wells I was touched by the camaraderie that existed in the street and the children playing in the street and the fathers were home so everyone was happy. Our street was fantastic. We had little meetings on Friday with a glass of wine standing in the street, not close to each other and the children frolicking and no traffic. And it was really, really lovely.

Janine Wells I think that's really hard because we've all been set back by the cases that have bubbled up in Victoria. I think that the young people are not really taking it very seriously because they're the ones that seem to be spreading it. We're lucky here. We've got none of the cases and we don't have any community transmission. But what do you say to them? "You know you're safe because of your age, but when you put your grandmother in a grave, how will you feel?" I don't know how you talk to them because they don't speak our language. They are on social media, which I am not. We hope for a vaccine that works.

5 Luke Helath

Luke Helath I'm Luke, one of the two bases. My involvement with the choir is indirectly long-standing because I was a student at the school that Margaret and Graham started. I started there back in 2001 and Susan was my music teacher, between 2001 and 2004. After that, I was getting private singing lessons with her. And back then the choir was doing Christmas carols in Perth. So, she asked me if I'd like to help out and I stayed on.

Nunzio Mondia And how was your experience throughout the COVID period?

Luke Helath My experience has been an unusual one, in the sense that I wasn't really locked down because I'm a volunteer with the State Emergency Service. So, we were often helping out at the Chittering checkpoint just by the Chittering Roadhouse on the highway.

Nunzio Mondia What are you looking forward to post-COVID?

Luke Helath Oh, I think interstate travel is the main thing because I had planned a trip to Tasmania later in the year to visit family. So that was kind of put on hold for a while. But yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing when we can make that happen again. And we've also got family in Melbourne. So yeah, to get to see them.

Nunzio Mondia Through conversations with your family in Melbourne, do you feel that they coped well with Covid situation?

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Luke Helath It's mostly been about struggling to deal with people who aren't following the rules of the lockdown as well as they should. Everyone I've talked to is trying to do the right thing at least and being sensible about it, but just dealing with people who choose not to.

Nunzio Mondia What would you like to say to those individuals who chose not to follow lockdown rules?

Luke Helath Be respectful of other people and sensible.

6 Rose Marchie

Rose Marchie I'm Rose Marchie, and I've lived in the City of Vincent all my life. I have an elderly mother who lives in Rosewood nursing home. She's 93 years old and suffers from the late stages of Parkinson's disease. COVID affected us both hard because being an ethnic woman, who doesn't speak very much English, the separation was really tough on her and on me to see her not communicating and going downhill day by day. I know the nursing home did the right thing by closing the centre down not to spread the disease. However, I don't think they handled or considered the ethnic people who don't have a voice, who are maybe immobile in bed and whose only interaction is with their loved ones. I think that we should have had access [to them] to make sure that they didn't go downhill. Because once they did reopen, I found my mother in a bad state. Although they did look after her physically, mentally there was no stimulation.

Well, I joined the choir about five years ago, and it's really relaxing and stimulating to be in the choir. During COVID, we didn't stop meeting, but we met virtually through Zoom. And it was a lot of fun and it kept us in contact and gave us a little bit of social interaction as well.

Rose Marchie Well, the hope for the future is obviously that they find a vaccine so that we can all go back to normal. It is starting to be worrying here in Australia, especially with what's happening in Victoria. But I'm just hoping that if there is now another outbreak in WA, they'll reconsider allowing loved ones some interaction with their family.

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7 Susan Margaret

Susan Margaret My name's Susan, and I direct the Sweet Thursday Community Singers. During that COVID period, because I'm an instrumental music teacher, we teachers were all hugely stressed because we suddenly had to teach online, and we didn't know how. We were running around crazy all through the holidays. And, of course, the choir had to shut down and I think it was heartbreaking for all of us, not to be singing together. Occasionally we like to perform for people, quite a lot we like to perform for people, I do. But really the main joy of a community choir is when we're singing together. And we were just really gutted to be missing that.

Susan Margaret So we started with Zoom meetings, and it was weird because you only get one voice or maybe two voices going, whatever platform you use. And there's always lag. We had to be so inventive about how to run a choir. We started out very simply, I would sing something, and everybody else would mute their microphones and sing along. And then I got a bit more adventurous, and we started to do a couple of [singing] parts. Still, everybody muting the microphone and then occasionally somebody would sing back.

Susan Margaret Then eventually I got to the point that I made some audio files and I worked out how to share those. We'd learn the separate parts and then I'd play the audio file, and everybody could sing along and hear the two or three or four parts while they were singing, which was more like a choir. The main thing that we did and the thing that worked is that we had enough chat, and we could still see actual people because we really needed that.

Susan Margaret We also worked out that we could use karaoke clips off YouTube and have the fun of just blasting through something. Because part of what we do in rehearsals is try to make sure that we have a few songs that we're just singing our hearts out. We're not trying to pick notes and get that bit right. You've got to do that too, but you've got to spend some time where you just sing and don't have any inhibition, just let it all sound.

Susan Margaret And the karaoke enabled us to do that, and it gave us that feeling of the joy of singing and you could just let loose. What had to happen over the lockdown period for me, was that those Zoom meetings became a bit of light at the end of the tunnel. Yes, we weren't singing proper choir, but it was coming back. It was going to come back. And so however stressful work was, I'd have at least that choir thing to look forward to once a week where it would feel like you were being with people like we were before.

Susan Margaret We reaffirmed for ourselves as a choir, that what we most love to do is to sing together and we need to do that. And if anybody else wants to hear us well, that's almost a bonus. How inventive and clever we were to manage it because it wasn't easy.

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Susan Margaret I heard stories from bigger choirs. With a choir as small as ours, it was possible to use those platforms and it was still workable. I think if we'd had 50, we'd have had a much harder time and probably had to do, I don't know, breakout groups or something else. We will probably keep that.

Susan Margaret I must admit that on the teaching front, having been pushed into doing videos and putting those out there for kids, I'd do that again. I'm going to keep doing it. Not as many as I did and not to replace the face-to-face teaching, because nothing really does. I think that there are a few things from this time, a few videos that have the basics. They're going to be good for the kids to access all year. And that extra communication that we did online, I'm going to keep that too. And with the choir, I think we will too. We've got a little smarter in IT. And if lockdown comes again, we know we can cope. We've got that now. I reckon we did OK. And I think in the future, we're going to find that whatever comes, we've got something that's worth having and that we can share.

8 Tim Cusack

Tim Cusack My name is Tim Cusack. I'm a member of the Sweet Thursday Community Singers and COVID has been challenging for me. I live by myself and particularly during the April-May period when we were in lockdown, I found it very challenging. From the choir viewpoint, it was exciting that the choir made the effort and particularly through our music director, Susan, made the effort to activate Zoom for us to continue choir through that period. And for me, that was really important. I'm not the only one in the choir that lives on my own, so I think those of us in that position really enjoy the camaraderie. Even though the singing wasn't that successful over the Zoom platform. The fact that we made the effort to get together at the same time each week really was terrific.

Tim Cusack Through the period we lost one of our life members, Margaret, who had been ill for some time. Sadly, she passed, and it was very difficult because none of us could go to the funeral. We celebrated her life one night and we sang the tunes that we knew she loved. And that was a great way for us to just share our loss and we felt that it really did celebrate her life. She loved this choir, and she was really committed to it over a long period of time.

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Tim Cusack I found great joy through April and May walking around the river, and I live very close to the river. But I have a demanding job and I don't do as much exercise as I should. I took the opportunity to get out of the house at least once a day and go walking. I was inevitably drawn to the river because it's so beautiful and walking around the river, using the new Matagarup Bridge and interacting with people. It felt like there were people wanting to say hello and smile and engage in that period. There were lots and lots of people out walking and families. I found that a really great part of the day and I did it every day. Every day in April and May I was out walking somewhere, mostly around the river.

Tim Cusack I walked the railway track to Cottesloe one day and I walked the railway track up the Midland line a fair distance as well. You do see things; you notice things when you're doing that type of thing you don't notice normally. Back home.. Almost all of my time is indoors, and I found it fantastic to spend at least two hours, and often more than that, outdoors experiencing the sun. As you remember, the weather was really fantastic during that period. We were blessed with an Indian summer that seemed to go on forever and that was great. Great being out and experiencing being outside and the natural beauty of Perth and trying to make the most of what was a really difficult situation.

Tim Cusack For me, the period makes you think about the value of community. I encourage people. I'm so glad I had the choir. I also study Italian and that was over Zoom. I think getting out in the community and doing things is so important. In terms of the future, I would encourage people to find a choir or whatever floats their boat. To get out and enjoy things and have lots of different experiences in your life. I think that helps you deal with the dilemmas we've been through.

Tim Cusack I'm pretty sure in my own mind that this whole COVID thing is not going away. Even when the numbers continue to decline. It's never going away I think is the reality. I'm also not that optimistic about a vaccine. I think we're going to have to get used to living in this new world, that is going to be less certain and that we might not have the complete freedoms that we've all grown up with and got used to. Making sure that you've got those connections in your families and communities. Doing things that you love and that you want to spend time on, making sure you prioritise them and don't keep putting them on the To-Do list.