



**BLANK PAGE SUMMIT HARD YARN YOUTH MOB SUMMIT COMMUNIQUÉ**

**Billard Aboriginal Community  
25-29 July 2011**

**"Our hard yarn is -  
Adults, please see us, hear us and include us. It's our  
turn because we're the next generation."**

In July 2011 in the remote North West Kimberley region of Western Australia, 142 people from remote, rural and urban communities throughout Australia gathered on spring country at Billard Aboriginal Community to ask how as a society, we can ensure that young Indigenous people may lead long, strong and confident lives.

Called the **Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob - everything is possible**, the national gathering was the third Blank Page Summit devised by community leaders, Mary Victor O'Reeri, WA Local Hero 2011 and her father, Stephen Victor Snr.

**CONTEXT**

The first *Blank Page Summit on Suicide* in 2009 was catalysed by the ongoing suicides of young Indigenous people in the Kimberley region. The Victor family lost two sons to suicide over a decade ago.

The second *Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn* in 2010 focused specifically on how Indigenous people may contribute to 'closing the gap' (the differences in life indicators between Indigenous people and others) with the theme that 'closing the gap means no more muckin' around'.

At the 2011 Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob, the framing question - **how can we ensure that young Indigenous people can lead long, strong and confident lives?** - was again triggered by the blight of continuing suicides in the Kimberley region. Since April 2010 up to 20 young people have taken their lives.

The report of the Australian Senate Inquiry - *The Hidden Toll: Suicide in Australia* - published in 2010 affirmed that deaths by suicide are significantly higher amongst Indigenous people than others in the Australian population, with young Indigenous men particularly at risk.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn incorporates these principles and processes:

Principles:

- starting afresh ('blank page')
- willingness to engage in honest and sometimes difficult conversations ('hard yarns') integral to cutting through issues and breaking new ground

Processes:

- working in general groups drawn from the body of the Summit
- working in specific groups such as NGO's, youth (males), youth (females), combined youth, government, community and by location, e.g. Balgo community (2011)
- reporting back to the whole-of-Summit gathering at staged milestones
- short presentations by guest key contributors
- contributions in creative, powerful and individualistic ways through poems, songs, plays, dance and cultural expression
- development of a Communiqué by the Co-Rapporteurs after the conclusion of the Summit which reflects the essence of the work

## **PARTICIPANTS ('SUMMITEERS')**

The work of the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn centered on the participation of 30 or so young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people alongside over 100 other participants from the community, government and NGO sectors including many non-Indigenous participants.

The Summit participants were drawn from these locations:

Adelaide, Alice Springs, Amata (APY Lands), Badu Island (Torres Strait), Bamaga (tip of Cape York), Beagle Bay, Bidyadanga, Broken Hill, Broome, Cairns, Canberra, Central/Mid-North and South Coasts (NSW), Darnley Island (Torres Strait), Darwin, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Geelong, Gibb River Road, Halls Creek, Horn Island, Kununurra, Melbourne, Mildura, Mimili (APY Lands), Mowanjum, Newcastle, Perth, Sydney, Warrnambool, Wilcannia, Wirrimanu (Balgo), Wollongong and Yarrabah.

The Blank Page Summit endeavours to include a small component of prior participants across all sectors at each Summit to provide continuity and act as 'starters' for the next Summit. Fifteen per cent (15%) of the participants at the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011 had participated in a previous Blank Page Summit at Billard Aboriginal Community in either 2009 and/or 2010.

Informing the work of the Summit were guest key contributors:

- Hon Mark Butler, MP - Federal Minister for Mental Health
- Hon Kim Hames, MLA - WA Deputy Premier and Minister for Health
- Hon Helen Morton, MLC - WA Minister for Mental Health
- Chief Justice Wayne Martin - WA Supreme Court
- Most Reverend Chris Saunders - Bishop of Broome, WA

Guiding the work of the Summit were co-rapporteurs:

- Sam Mostyn, Mary O'Reeri, Kari Kristiansen

## **OPENING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The Summit commenced with an acknowledgement that no single sector, program or government agency is responsible for enhancing quality of life for young indigenous people - we're all in it together.

Mary Victor O'Reeri, Summit Co-Rapporteur said:

*"A lot of money is being spent but not much is happening. We haven't had a really hard yarn about why things aren't changing for the better despite the money that's being spent. Hard yarns have tough consequences and bring responsibilities. But hard yarns also bring freedom. This Summit is about the youth and the hard yarn that needs to happen with the next generation. We ask you to have those hard yarns at this Summit that you don't normally have in every day life."*

## **FRAMING QUESTIONS**

Summitteers began work together by determining at the outset the key questions that needed to be asked to move to a deeper conversation about how young Indigenous people may lead long, strong and confident lives.

The framing questions which emerged were specific to the adults and youth participating:

*Youth*            Who are we prepared to be?  
                      Who do we expect adults to be?

*Adults*            When are we going to be the parents that our children need us to be?  
                      What is stopping us from being the individuals, families and communities that young people expect us to be?

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The work undertaken in asking (and seeking to answer) the initial framing questions lead to a range of early raw observations-

### **By young people:**

- Without boundaries, kids don't feel anyone cares for them.
- If a young person has no need to be somewhere, he/she is invisible.
- Parents need to know their priorities and be accountable, so we can depend on them.

In their own words:

- "As young people, it's good for us to be heard. Councils and stuff, they don't want to hear what we want to say."
- "There needs to be a change in power. There are too many wannabe Kings and Queens in our communities."
- "Parents need to be brave for their children and stand up to adults who aren't responsible."

- "Parents should know when to get help for themselves. If they have an issue, they should try to fix it before they start hurting their family."
- "We need to be teachers to our communities, show how we can do things and how we can live good lives."

**By adults:**

- There is little space to get heavily involved in long-term prevention when everyone is fully focused on crisis intervention.
- Government doesn't know best.
- Government does want to be part of a process of change for the best.

In their own words:

- "Listening to the hard yarns is important. I feel happy and I feel strong. When I go back, I'm going to try and hug my young people and communicate - we've got the power to make things better."
- "When I go back to my community, I will be listening."
- "My challenge is to tell my children and my grandchildren that I love them."
- "The hard yarn is telling the truth - no more lies."

**CASE STUDY: Billard to Balgo - community to community**

Wirrimanu (Balgo) is a community in East Kimberley scarred by past suicides. A core group of residents has been a part of each Blank Page Summit since 2009 culminating in the participation of 20 individuals in the 2011 Summit.

At the Blank Page Summit in 2010, the community leadership of Balgo invited Billard community members to work together on developing a Summit-like process uniquely for Balgo. This request was supported by the Australian Government and transformed into the 'Stand up for Life' project centered on the power of dialogue, improved social inclusion through community conversations, better community governance based on hard yarns and localised score carding of service delivery to increase its likely effectiveness.

There have been no suicides in Balgo since 2009. Given the history of suicidal behavior in Balgo, an underlying fragility remains in the community which explains the resident's modest acknowledgement of progress to date:

*"We're not out of the woods yet. But we're definitely having more of the conversations we should be having and less of the conversations we shouldn't be having. We're on that journey, and we're getting better and better."*

After a specially convened meeting of Balgo participants during the Summit, one resident observed:

*"I've been a long time in Balgo and I've never heard the kind of sharing I heard this morning. In order to have these hard conversations you need a peaceful space. Thank you to Billard for allowing us to have this conversation - we had to come out of Balgo for this to happen."*

## **GUEST KEY CONTRIBUTORS**

### **Most Reverend Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome (WA)**

*"All of you here and the communities you live in, know somebody who's been affected or touched by the occurrence of suicide, by these deaths, by this tragic loss of life. All of us have some part to play in asking why is it so and how can it be different?"*

*The problem is here with me, as it is with you. We are part of the problem and part of the solution. We have the answers within. We ask the question - do we have the courage to say what we truly feel?"*

### **Hon Mark Butler, MP - Minister for Mental Health (Cth)**

*"The very high rate of suicide has not been going down for well over ten years. It is stuck very stubbornly at that very high rate. It is an affliction that particularly affects young people. This is a cause of profound tragedy across the Australian community. Any premature death is a cause of grief and suffering for family and friends and a community. But a premature death through suicide compounds that grief by bringing with it also a sense of wondering whether you as a family, whether you as the community, whether we as the system, could have done something to prevent that death.*

*The wonderful thing about these Summits that have now been going for a couple of years is that they move from the wondering to the discovering and to action. That is what we need to do more and more as a nation."*

### **Hon Kim Hames, MLA - Minister for Health and Deputy Premier (WA)**

*"We want young Aboriginal people to be happy. We want them to be successful. The hard yarn is how do we get all Aboriginal communities involved in doing the kind of thing that is happening at Billard? How do we get Aboriginal people engaged?"*

### **Hon Chief Justice Wayne Martin QC (WA)**

*"The role of people in powerful positions like politicians, judges and administrators, is I think to empower Aboriginal people to take responsibility for achieving outcomes that will address the important issues that we're talking about and to provide Aboriginal people with the resources, the support and the encouragement that they need to achieve those outcomes.*

*We have heard very powerfully from young people at this Summit the sort of things they want to see in terms of responsible parenting, creating the sort of environment in which they would feel the hope and optimism that would prevent the sort of despair that is leading not only to suicide but also to reckless and offending behavior that brings them before our courts. You can't direct good parenting. You can't make orders about good parenting. You can't impose good parenting on people. It has to be encouraged and nurtured by processes that involve support and empowerment of Aboriginal people."*

**Hon Helen Morton, MLC - Minister for Mental Health (WA)**

*"To the young people here, I don't mean to scare you but you are incredibly powerful and important. My advice to you is - choose when and where to use that power. Billard opens doors for us all including yourselves. It creates all these opportunities, but you must chose to make use of it ... Now is a good time for you to show us the way.*

*My commitment to the Billard Youth Mob Hard Yarn Summit is that we will bottle the Billard Youth Mob wisdom and we're going to sprinkle it wherever we go."*

**Mr Eddie Bartnik, Mental Health Commissioner (WA)**

*"The Mental Health Commission stands for a bigger view of the world. It's not about patients and medication and hospital. It's about people and families and communities and about having a decent life and there being hope and there being recovery. People do get ill but they do get better and they do great things."*

**Dr Siva Bala, Regional Psychiatrist, Kimberley Mental Health & Drug Service (WA)**

*"Where can resilience come from? If we can't prevent trauma, we can try and put in supports around people at risk. What children need particularly is adults who can be there to be secure and in a safe place for them. That is one of the stand out messages from the young people here. Young people standing up and saying they want accountability from adults and adults to assume adult roles. This means adults might have to ask themselves some hard questions. What I've enjoyed about the audience comments here at the Summit is that it's been a transformative experience for a lot of people - the Greek word is metamorphosis - which talks about a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. That's what we see now in Aboriginal communities. Transformation is slowly happening, like with the Balgo mob. So I see hope and resilience and cause for optimism. In spite of the trauma and the historical legacy, there are people standing up for their communities creating change from within. That's what really heartens me and keeps me going in my work."*

**EMERGING HARD YARNS**

*"Some people's voices are deep inside them and it takes a while for them to come out and say what they want. Some young kids don't have the language to say what they want to say."*

Deb Olsen, Co-Summit Group Leader - Kool Kids Club (NSW)

The approaches taken throughout the Blank Page Summit promoted expressions of honesty rather than laying blame. Participants worked productively in specific groups based on their sectors and/or communities, to identify underlying issues in response to the questions raised in the discussions.

For example, in the government and NGO groups, participants resolved that much of the system they operate in is not working - not through a lack of goodwill - and that there is a fundamental disconnection between communities, government, providers and end-users (consumers) across the entire service delivery system which requires serious work.

As participants spoke about and reflected on familiar issues - culture, families, communities, shared concerns, dreams and ambitions - a series of hard yarns emerged from the group work and plenary discussions.

- There is incongruence between community needs and government perspectives which causes government agencies and NGO's to deliver services that don't accurately meet the needs of individuals and communities. The hard yarn centered on identifying the blockages to having real conversations that lead to beneficial outcomes. What's stopping us getting real?
- A provider-focused system has a detrimental effect on the quality of outcomes for Indigenous people in need, as it promotes a fear of organizational survival, unhealthy competition amongst providers, and confusion and duplication in service delivery. The hard yarn centered on the need for renovation of funding and reporting arrangements, competitive tendering processes and innovation in benchmarking standards and framing collaboration.
- There is a lack of honesty about what action, if any, will follow on from consultation by government and service providers. This can cause "kids (to) think community leaders have no power" because funding arrangements, programs and services often alter without robust communication (or remain stuck and ineffective without accountability). The hard yarn centered on having principled communication based on realistic expectations from both government and communities.
- NGO's means 'non-Government', yet if an NGO is only doing service delivery as a tool of government and not shoulder-to-shoulder advocacy with Indigenous people, then government is shaping its world rather than the NGO creating its own world. The hard yarn centered on the responsibilities of NGO's.
- Whilst it is agreed there is a relationship between government and Aboriginal culture, the actual role of government in two-way learning is unclear.
- Although increased cultural identity and knowledge may be seen as a key way of strengthening the lives of young Indigenous people, suicide (and suicidal behavior) remains prevalent in highly cultural settings.
- As individuals, families and communities become used to suicides, it becomes more challenging to move from 'who's next?' to 'never again' and to remain responsive to risk.
- Young people believe they are accountable to adults and show it, yet they perceive that adults don't seem to feel accountable to them.
- Real partnership is an enactment.
- The chicken and the egg - who goes first in changing within a family or a community?

**CALL FOR ACTION - BILLARD ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY  
BLANK PAGE SUMMIT HARD YARN YOUTH MOB 2011**

**1. A real community has a strong focus on bettering young people's lives.**

The young people at the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011 told us who they are prepared to be and who they expect adults to be. Their messages were straightforward - mutual accountability, and responsible and inclusive adults who lay a solid foundation for young people.

**2. A livable community is where generations of people can be happy.**

The young people at the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011 told us to forget about government, other services and agencies and think for a minute about the main issues that need to change in our communities that we can see for ourselves:

- designing children-friendly communities shaped by the rights of children and the power of young people to drive change
- stopping the segregation often created by funded Indigenous organisations which makes them inaccessible to community residents, particularly young people
- opening up channels of communication and participation for young people which increase their sense of belonging and put a value on their decision-making
- lessening the impact of peer pressure by developing a proper and consistent commitment to higher community standards and regulations including laws and by-laws

**3. Who prevents suicide?**

The ongoing suicides by young Indigenous people must make us stop and think deeply as individuals. To change this pattern of chronically high statistics, we need to fundamentally renovate:

- ourselves
- our attitude towards young people
- our attitude towards our living and working environments
- our approach to resource allocation at every stage of intervention from early intervention, prevention to postvention

**4. Stopping the rot of unproductive service delivery where the focus is on building organisational power and unnecessary competitiveness rather than on collaboration in the interests of quality of life for Indigenous people as end-users.**

The low level of health and wellbeing of Indigenous people in Australia today warrants real and honest assessment.

- There is a direct link between chronic blockages to improvement and the 'tick box' mentality of service providers.
- Organisations are being continually funded to deliver services that are not meeting the needs of individuals and communities.
- Indigenous consumers struggle to penetrate the jungle of service delivery to create responses that more accurately meet their needs.
- Vulnerable individuals and communities in particular, do not have an adequate say in the services that are delivered to them - things can be left to chance.

**CALL FOR ACTION BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI (28 July 2011)**

*"I want to say to the youth - you are the next leaders of this country. Keep on doing what you are doing. I want to say to the NGO's - thank you. Thank you for sharing, for bringing all those hard conversations. The government departments, the communities, thank you.*

*When I saw these young people standing up there, so confident and so pumped, and the way you conducted yourselves, the way you presented yourselves, I take my hat off to you.*

*What I take from this, is I am going to take your work, I am going to take this Communiqué and I am going to work really hard to get these messages across at a state level, at a Commonwealth level and at an international level. I'm going to take this Communiqué, this Call for Action to the world. I promise you that. I promise you children that I will do everything in my power to make your voice heard. I say, thank you so much from the bottom of my heart."*

*"There's a point when you cannot walk away  
When you have to stand up straight and tall and mean the words you say  
There's a point you must decide just to do it 'cause it's right  
That's when you become a point of light*

*All it takes is a point of light,  
A ray of hope in the darkest night.  
If you see what's wrong,  
And you try to make it right,  
You will be a point of light."*

**Point of Light by Randy Travers  
sung by Cameron Victor (accompanied by David Pigram),  
Opening Ceremony, Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011**

**ACTION MUST FOLLOW HARD YARNS**

At the conclusion of the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn 2011, the adults and youth participants made pledges to one another about what needs to change at a personal level.

**Blank Page Summiteers' pledges**

*Adults:*

*"We pledge as adults today that we will foster leadership through mentoring our young people. We believe strong leadership leads to strong, confident and livable communities. We pledge that we will send this message to other adults to do the same. We pledge we will become the adults you want us to be."*

*Youth:*

*"We need to make change together by looking at ourselves, dealing with those hard yarns and standing together as adults and youth, so we can make livable and safe communities together."*

## **PARTING WORDS FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE ADULTS AT THE SUMMIT 2011**

As we left the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn with a resolve to work towards solutions, the youth Summiteers shared something that had moved them during the week:

"You adults are exactly what we want to be like. We can look up to you because you're here to make a change. You guys are being leaders. Us young fellas have gotta realize that you're not always gonna be there and we have to step up and be like you."

### **JOHN NICHOLSON'S RAP SONG (Torres Strait Islander Youth Summiteer)**

"I'm here in a place up north from Broome  
Looking up at the stars  
Looking up at the moon  
We came on this trip to have a hard yarn  
And did I mention this is called Billard  
We're meeting many people from across the land  
I don't know where to start but it's a wide span  
To be on this land of the Victor tribe  
To have a hard yarn on how to stop suicide  
We come together under our sun  
We create a better and good outcome  
There are many issues that we fight  
The unsung heroes that stand bright  
Talk about a change for the better  
But to take action not just write it down on a letter  
Change our community, life and behavior  
For the younger generation and all to savour."