

**STRONG, WELL WOMEN LEADERS – BUILDING OUR TOMORROW
REGIONAL INDIGENOUS WOMEN’S FORUM
Mt Isa, QLD**

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Thank you for your introduction, Vicki.

First of all, to the traditional owners of this land, I offer my deepest respect including to all the old people.

I would also like to acknowledge two countrywomen from this land - Shirley Slann and Kerrie Tim – both of whom I have known for some time and whom I deeply respect. Both Shirl and Kerrie have been to my community – it’s great to be here this week in your part of the world.

I would also like to thank Vicki and the staff of the Regional Operations Centre and the local women for inviting me to this gathering. Thank you Vicki for your hard work in making things happen.

It really is an honour to be here.

The first part of the name of this week’s meeting – [Strong Well Women](#) – really grabs my attention.

Tonight I’d like to share a few thoughts with you about what it means to me to be [a strong and well woman](#).

Can I start with some background remarks about my community and the work I do on the ground there.

First of all, my community of Billard is located about a 10 minute walk away from a bigger community called Beagle Bay.

Billard itself is a tiny dot - it has generator power, a couple of houses and a small a three-room bush classroom.

Like Vicki said, since 2009 we at Billard have hosted a Blank Page Summit every July.

What happens is that we invite about 150 people to join us on our land for a conversation over about a week. We call it a ‘hard yarn’.

When I say ‘hard yarn’, I mean a serious talk. We go deeper into things than what we normally do in every day life.

Over the three years since 2009, about 500 Indigenous people have come to the Summits from about 100 different communities, towns and cities throughout Australia.

As well, we've been joined by senior Commonwealth and State Ministers, judges, bureaucrats, representatives from NGO's and the corporate sector and other interested individuals.

In 2009 at the [first Blank Page Summit](#), we went deeply into suicide. Our basic question was –

Why are our people killing themselves?

This is because of the epidemic of suicides by our young people.

We have a very personal concern about suicide. We lost two boys – my brothers – to suicide as young men.

As a family, our challenge was to move from 'who's next' to 'never again'.

As we identified at the 2009 Summit, we urgently need to 'suicide proof' our families, our communities and in Australia today, our whole society due to the high number of suicides.

In 2010 at the [second Blank Page Summit](#), our work was about 'closing the gap'.

There is so much talk about 'closing the gap'.

By the government, by the NGO's and by many concerned citizens with a conscience about social justice.

In 2010 we challenged ourselves with the question –

What are we [as Indigenous people](#) doing to close [our own gap](#)?

This year in 2011 we held the [Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob](#).

We invited young people – the Youth Mob – to the Summit as our guides and our wisdom figures.

We encouraged everyone to think about the situation we're in – what we can do to make things better.

For families, for communities, for children, for women, for men – for our future.

We reminded those present that a lot of money is being spent but not much is really happening.

We said that we haven't had a really **hard yarn** about why things aren't changing for the better despite the money that's being spent.

We asked people to have that hard yarn during the Summit – to really go into the blockages to progress for our people.

We asked the young people to work with us in this deep process.

The outcome of our work this year at the Summit with the young people was a Call to Action.

I'll now share it with you.

The first outcome we reached is about **laying a foundation for young people**.

This basic bedrock is often not there.

The young people at the Blank Page Summit told us in detail who they are prepared to be. They weren't in any doubt.

They want to be a member of a **functional family**.

They want to listen and be listened to.

They want structure and boundaries.

They want to be accountable.

They do expect adults to lay a solid foundation for them – to pave the way. To be accountable to them.

And to also guide them so they can live successfully in two worlds.

Friends, we are the adults. The foundation must be laid by us.

The second point is about **livable communities**.

To be honest, some young people said they feel trapped and shut out in the communities that they live in.

Their communities aren't friendly, aren't safe, people aren't interested in them.

As well, the adults are slack, the standards are low.

This is a big hard yarn. We strive so hard to live on our land, to have housing and facilities, to hold positions of power and authority.

Yet we must ask ourselves-

Are we creating livable communities where houses are homes?

Are we creating functioning and friendly communities?

These are not questions for government.

Nor for service providers.

We aren't powerless people with no choices.

The ball is in our court about how we live, how we communicate, how we raise our families.

So a livable community is one where all the generations can live in safety and in cooperation.

And where people can resolve their differences.

A livable community is also a place where young people are valued.

The third point is a simple question-

Who prevents suicide?

I think we're probably all aware that we're in deep water with suicides by young people.

The statistics aren't going down.

In the Kimberley there have been over 20 suicides in the last twelve months or so.

This must make us stop and think deeply as individuals.

To be prepared to renovate:

- ourselves
- our attitude towards young people
- our attitude towards our living and working environments
- our approach to every stage of intervention from prevention through to early intervention, right up to postvention

The last key point we reached at the Summit was about [service delivery](#).

It was about stopping the rot of ticking boxes.

This includes the trend of building organisations for the sake of building organisations.

It's about the clogged pipes in the world of service delivery.

To sum up, this year's Call to Action is about

- **laying a foundation for young people**
- **creating livable communities**
- **renovating ourselves, our attitude and our environments**

and lastly,

- **stopping the rot in organisations and in service delivery.**

On the last day of the Summit, I could only thank those young people -

for their honesty, for their courage, for their vision and for their love.

They were magnificent in working side by side with us with optimism and with the truth as they saw it.

Talking now about [strong and well women](#).

In 2010 I was fortunate enough to participate in the UN Commission on the Status of Women Session in New York as part of the Australian Government Delegation.

Over many days we met and listened to women from all over the world sharing their experiences and knowledge of issues concerning the status of women in their countries.

I heard things I never imagined I would hear – from the Burmese women whose children were burned in front of them, about women having their babies pulled out of them during childbirth. So many stories of absolute suffering and brutality.

My experience at the UN made me appreciate my own country more than ever.

The freedoms we have to move around, to speak up and to be educated and to be employed.

Most of all, the opportunity to be [strong and well women](#) compared to women from other countries.

Going to the UN and coming in contact with these women made me think:

Don't let these opportunities pass by.

Don't take them for granted.

This involves making an effort – stepping up.

Asking ourselves-

Who are we prepared to be?

Are we prepared to be the truly strong and well women that we can truly be?

I believe we have the strength within us to do so many amazing things that can dramatically change our world and the world around us.

What we need is the [ambition](#). It won't happen by chance.

To take my own example –

I am very typical of many women of my age and my race.

I had my first two children when I was a teenager. I was a grandmother at 35 years of age.

My 20's and 30's were consumed with raising kids – my kids, my sisters' kids, my brothers' kids – and my grandkids.

In between I worked, mainly as an Aboriginal Education Assistant and then as a teacher. I managed to complete my teaching degree over a few years with the support of my husband and my mentors.

Along the way I was also working in the Beagle Bay community on a voluntary basis, trying to find ways to develop the community for the better.

During those years, I lost my two brothers as I mentioned. They died from suicide three years apart and it had a profound effect on our family.

All the time in my heart, I had a burning ambition.

It was more than a dream. It was a deep commitment to myself as a person to grow into the person I knew I could truly become.

Friends - I have never lost sight of that burning ambition despite a lot of difficult times.

The words 'remote' and 'disadvantaged' have never been in my vocabulary.

What has sustained me throughout my life is knowing what **I** can do.

Not worrying about what other people might do or weren't doing.

But me focusing on what is within **my** grasp to do.

Now there's no manual on becoming a strong and well woman – but there's a few things I can share that I think have helped me greatly to become a stronger and more well woman every day of my life.

They're not in any particular order.

Number 1 is **education**.

I'm not talking about skills – I'm talking about education.

Education was my passport to a bigger world. It has given me choices. It has given me knowledge and understanding and expanded my mind.

It has deepened my love of learning.

Number 2 is **'no humbug'**.

Humbug takes many forms.

At the end of the day, 'No humbug' means not tolerating selfish and lazy behaviour.

I have drawn that line many, many times including with my own family and my countrymen. I continue to do so.

Number 3 is **mentors**.

The influence of genuine and clever people in my life cannot be measured. I appreciate and respect everything I am able to share and co-create with people of goodwill and high integrity.

We truly are the company we keep.

At this moment, can I acknowledge my sister sitting here with me – Tauri – who has walked many miles with me over the years. Thank you.

Number 4 is **standing your ground**.

Sometimes we have to actually stand up and say something. We have the right to do that. Only we can take that right away from ourselves.

No does mean **no**. Enough **is** enough.

Standing our ground involves a lot of different situations and scenarios – preserving our physical and personal boundaries, maintaining our safety, upholding our rights as a woman, protecting our children, our finances, our time and our space. These rights have been fought for and won – don't let them go.

So these four elements are the main ways I believe we can strengthen our life base.

Through education, through inspiring company and support, through zero tolerance of humbug and through determination.

These means are within our reach.

They don't require funding.

They don't anyone's approval.

They live and breathe within our own ambition.

Ladies – don't ever cave in. Don't let bad habits or routines keep you stuck. Don't give in to keep the peace.

The truth will set you free. Be truthful. Be honest. Be inspiring.

Be everything you are and more – a Mum, a Nanna, an Aunty, a sister, a deadly friend and neighbour.

The 'more' is when we decide to really step up.

Time is running out – progress is too slow.

Let's be the people our kids expect us to be and let's get real about being the people we can truly be.