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The Blank Page Summit on Suicide

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Thank you Mary for your introduction.

And your wise and gentle words.

I pay my respects to all the elders past and present on whose land we are meeting today.

I pay my respects to Mr Stephen Victor, his wife Dorothy, Mrs Mary Victor O'Reeri and all of the members of the Victor family at Billard Aboriginal community.

And to the elders from across the land who have travelled from all parts of Australia to be here.

I particularly acknowledge Mr Paul Sampi – distinguished Bardi elder.

Often words like honour and privilege are spoken too lightly, too easily.

But today I want to say, with all my heart, that it is truly a great honour and privilege to be back at Billard for your forum.

Because you are strong and self reliant people.

Mary and Stephen.

And your sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews.

All of you knowing who you are, where you are going and how you intend getting there.

I first travelled down the bumpy road from Beagle Bay to Billard three months ago.

I had absolutely no idea what to expect.

Stephen – traditional owner and wise leader.

And how could I have anticipated Mary?

From the minute we met something clicked.

I'm pretty sure many people feel that way about Mary.

Her words have stayed with me and always will.

She said we are modest people, but successful.

Successful, not by accident but through our own efforts.

She told me too that we are people who have known great tragedy.

And she was sad because I would not meet her brothers Stephen Junior and Vincent – young men in their twenties lost to suicide.

Mary said as a family they could have been bitter and angry and stayed inconsolable forever.

But instead they channelled their grief.

Because through the deaths of these much loved young men they were determined to learn more about life.

Which is why we are all here today.

Starting with a blank page we are here to learn, to talk of our experiences and, in many cases, to ease the pain by sharing the burden of loss.

And can I say to Stephen and Mary, after the forum, I want to have a long discussion with you about what everyone wrote on that blank page.

When I look around at what you have done here - the huge logistical challenge of getting hundreds of people to Billard from all over Australia I am in awe.

Where once was bare ground is now the Learning Centre - home to the Billard Literacy and Numeracy Program.

Its construction gave the building team new skills in project management, design and construction.

And the fantastic Billard Bus – amazing what you can achieve when you let the kids loose with a few cans of paint.

As I said I'm in awe but frankly I'm not surprised.

It's what you'd expect from people who asked themselves, "what can we do as Aboriginal people, to close the gap?"

And who decided they could do a lot.

And got on with doing it.

It's what you would expect from people who have developed and adopted their own community code of conduct.

A code which requires everyone to act with care and thought and strong ethics.

It's all about self-reliance but at the same time being there to give someone a hand when they need it.

Helping each person get their lives together through My Action Plan or MAP as it's called.

Understanding the great power of learning, tackling problems like alcohol and drugs, organising your money, improving health, getting a job.

Giving purpose and meaning to life.

And now, tackling the tragedy of suicide.

Which means grappling with some difficult questions.

All of us who are parents have asked these questions.

Why do our young people fall into such despair?

How do we help these young people withstand the inevitable conflicts and pressures of growing up?

What are the warning signs and when should we intervene?

And how do we save those who are already struggling – with substance abuse, family violence and mental health problems?

How do we deal with the terrible phenomenon of suicide clusters?

West Australian Coroner Alastair Hope, who is here at the forum, confronted some of these issues when he investigated the deaths of 22 Kimberley men and women.

Twenty-one suicides in 2006 alone, one of them an eleven year old boy.

He painted a picture of failed communities where conditions were, in his words, "appallingly bad" and where the "plight of little children is especially pathetic."

We must face up to the brutal realities of life for many people in these communities.

As one contributor here today puts it – "these are communities which are living between suicides."

Today I would like to pose another question.

As we work together to tackle this tragic pattern of self-destruction among our young people, we must ask ourselves where does responsibility lie.

I do believe it's the responsibility of government to shape a society which protects and nurtures our people, especially the most vulnerable.

A government which gives our people the structures and support they need to live safe, healthy and productive lives in strong, resilient families and communities.

That's why this Government is determined to make sure that all children go to school and get a good education.

So they grow up safe and well in families where parents have jobs.

Where they have pride in what they do and who they are.

It's why we are working so hard to overcome decades of failure which have left too many Indigenous families and children living in appalling squalor.

And it's why we will harness all our efforts to stop the abuse and neglect of children, family violence and alcohol and drug addiction.

Sometimes being a responsible government demands tough decisions.

We've made tough decisions already and we will continue to make them.

Because every decision we make must be in the best interests of those who are most vulnerable – especially children.

But governments can't and shouldn't be responsible for everything.

There must be individual responsibility. And people must look out for each other.

Just like Mary and Stephen do.

And Emily Carter and June Oscar, in Fitzroy Crossing and Doreen Green and Robyn Long in Halls Creek who took matters into their own hands.

They saw the hopelessness and despair caused by alcohol and decided to do something – winning alcohol restrictions despite strong opposition.

Of course taking responsibility for yourself has many faces.

You don't have to look further than little Daneyo here in Billard.

Daneyo is only seven years old but he already has an impressive sense of responsibility.

He took a lot of convincing to miss school today to be here.

It's great to see you here today Daneyo.

But you're right – school is very important.

Last time when I left Billard and said goodbye to Mary and Stephen they said to me - travel well, keep up the good work and let us know if you need us for anything.

Since then, their words have played on my mind.

Over the last few weeks as I've been thinking about coming back to Billard I've been thinking about them again.

When I made the connection with a song which I love and have often sung with my family.

It's a song, written by an African American who found himself far from home, missing his family and his hometown.

I think the lyrics reflect why we are all here today:

*Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend
I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need
Somebody to lean on*