

Billard community - WA community summit on Indigenous suicide communique

In July 2009 in the remote NW Kimberley Aboriginal community of Billard, 147 people from across the country with the will and capacity to effect fundamental and immediate change gathered on country to stop the epidemic of suicide by Indigenous people. The Blank Page Summit Communique, Billard Aboriginal Community writes:

'The Blank Page Summit was devised by community leaders, Stephen Victor Snr and his family including his daughter Mary Victor O'Reeri. Mr Victor Snr lost two sons to the preventable tragedy of suicide.

'The Summit was designed to unearth what isn't readily talked about, that is at the heart of renewal and repair of people's wellbeing.

'People spoke about grog and ganja, family breakdown and community decay. They described 'humbug' in its various forms including violence and feuding. The epidemic of Aboriginal suicide requires removal by zero tolerance of triggers contributing to suicide.

'Communities currently experiencing horrific youth suicide rates such as Balgo in East Kimberley were central drivers of the call to action which guided the Summit.'

Call for action

Stephen Victor Snr, Mary Victor O'Reeri and members of the Billard Aboriginal Community invite others to join them in the call for action arising from the Summit.

The key messages are to:

1. Create suicide-proof communities
2. Train families to be families
3. Encourage self-care with staged support

1. Create suicide-proof communities

Zero tolerance of those things that are killing people, either by slow suicide or self-destruction on the spot.

Create communities according to the following self-imposed conditions:

- No grog
- No illegal drugs
- No child neglect and abuse

- No pornography
- Adhere to a Community Code of Conduct
- Use of a formal dispute resolution process

Build communities based on:

- Effective internal problem solving
- Strong sense of civic virtue
- Shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

The critical distinction here is 'self-imposed' – individuals deciding in a collective setting to act in a lifesaving manner. Dispute resolution is included because of the impact of feuding in triggering suicide. In this context, adequate housing is of particular relevance. Governments can resolve how communities willing to self-impose and benchmark protective behaviours are figured within the roll-out of new housing.

2. Train families to be families

This is a message about first principles. What is a family? How is a family created? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives. How do families interact with each other to make communities?

3. Healing and self-care

When we know people are suicidal, we must have the means and capacity to act. We need to develop self-care based on staged support and the tools to engage families in their own self-care. 'Healing' includes early counseling through to therapeutic treatment, to healing processes based on Aboriginal spirituality.

Summit conveners said:

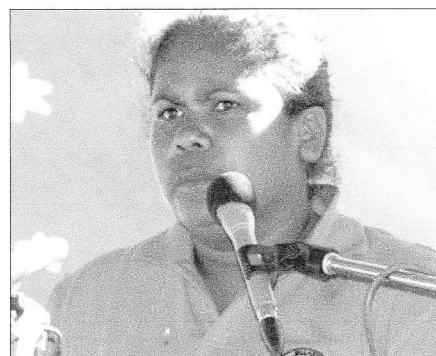
'If we save just one life through the Summit, it was worth all our hard work.'

Stephen Victor Snr (Main Person-in-Charge)

'We broke new ground – people concentrated on the future. We found out how to stop people dying from suicide.'

Lendal Victor (Young Person-in-Charge)

Edited from the Blank Page Summit Communique, Billard Community
See: www.blankpagesummit.com.au



Mary Victor O'Reeri, Billard community, gave a special presentation at the address by UN Special Rapporteur James Anaya on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous people 17 August. She said:

'We can change many things for our people if we have the will and wisdom to do it. It's time for a new conversation about what matters most for our people now.'

'Friends and countrymen, when we lost two boys — our brothers and my parents' beautiful sons — we could have become the walking dead ourselves. But our resolution was not to get stranded. This Summit is about more than hope — it is about recasting the die at the highest level within ourselves. Today has come about because we decided as a family to move out of the shadows and trust our instinct'.

SNAICC Executive Officer, Frank Hytten, who has both practice and policy experience in this area reflects on the Summit saying:

'I was privileged to attend this summit. Other people in attendance were a cross-section of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, in terms of experience, culture and expertise, but were all focused around the issues of suicide. It was clear a lot of very good work was already being done around the country, but equally, that much more needs to be done everywhere.

My only concern was that there was not more time to drill into the deeper causes of the context in which suicide amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people becomes an acceptable option – dispossession, poverty, loss of opportunity and eventually, hope for a different future. Perhaps, having got to know each other better, small groups of the same people could get together to take this step, focused not on the past, but on how macro policy and community practice change today can shape a different tomorrow.

Become a member, ACATLGN

The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network

ACATLGN links people across Australia concerned with the trauma, loss and grief experiences of children and adolescents.

www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au