

SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI – Monday 17 August 2009

National Museum, Canberra ACT

Good afternoon everyone

**UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples Professor James Anaya
Hon Jenny Macklin, MP - Minister for Indigenous Affairs
Members of the Australian Government
Distinguished guests and friends**

I am truly full of wonder and excitement to be here today in Canberra.

In standing here on this ground, I thank the Ngunnawal people for welcoming me. I have been called to this place this week and I promise to respect this land for the duration of my stay.

I thank also my family including my daughter Tasha who accompanies me here today, my countrymen and my close colleagues for their ongoing support.

I'm a long way from home here in Canberra. I live and work on the Central Dampier Peninsula in the remote North West Kimberley region of Western Australia.

I am also a traditional owner of the place where I live. This means that I was born into a distinct language group – Nyul Nyul – which informs my understanding of who I am and my relationship to others.

This includes the natural environment. At home we are blessed with many springs which are reflected in our community's name – Billard Burr – which means 'spring country'.

I'm fortunate because as I say, I live and work on my country – this is the way it turned out for me – and as the sun comes up each day, my good fortune in this way never leaves my thoughts.

My community of Billard is about 3kms from a township called Beagle Bay. Beagle Bay was a home to many Aboriginal people who, as children, were separated from their families as a result of past government policies, including my own mother Dorothy.

I've come to Canberra this week fresh from a very significant event in my community of Billard called the Blank Page Summit on Suicide.

Together with my father, Stephen Victor Snr and the rest of my family, we invited 150 people from across Australia to Billard to sit down with us on country to find ways to stop our people taking their own lives and not dying in the proper way.

The Summit came from our own journey as a family. We lost our two brothers – Stephen Jnr and Vincent – to suicide a few years ago. We found them hanging from the same fan in the same room in the same house in Beagle Bay within three years of each other.

Stevo and Goodie as we called them, were young men who couldn't see their way clear to keep on living. They chose to die by their own hands in their early twenties.

Unfortunately my brothers were not the last to die from suicide in our part of the world.

In the past two years the rate of youth suicide in the Kimberley has soared. As one of our countrymen puts it, 'We are living between suicides.'

In February 2008 the WA State Coroner Mr Alistair Hope reported his findings into 21 deaths by suicide including a 9 year old boy over the previous two year period.

In those findings Mr Hope spoke about the dramatic increase of 100% in suicide rates, the 'appallingly bad living conditions for many Aboriginal people in the Kimberley', the 'pathetic plight of the little children with bleak futures' due to widespread foetal alcohol syndrome and the ongoing grim prospects for adequate education, improved health profiles and job readiness for coming generations.

When our family read Mr Hope's findings, we were keen to find out what the WA Government planned to do about the situation.

We got nowhere. Our communications were ignored. There was a sad silence.

So we decided to take the matter into our own hands and hold a summit on suicide which we called a Blank Page Summit because a blank page is what we needed to start with.

There was no point starting with pages of problems or tinkering around the edges. That's what we all normally do with our hard problems. I mean all of us, not just Indigenous people.

So our Summit started with a blank page open to new ideas and the collective wisdom of the people we invited.

Three weeks ago we brought that powerful group of people together at Billard to help us fill up the blank page.

We left no stone unturned in the range and depth of people we invited to join the Summit. We were delighted that almost 100% of the people we invited said yes.

It turned out to be 147 people, all of whom arrived with the will and capacity to do something about this 'unnatural' disaster of suicide amongst our people.

We were joined at the Summit by the State Coroner Mr Alistair Hope. Present also were WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, WA Deputy Premier Kim Hames and Federal Minister Jenny Macklin. But importantly we also had individuals from government, NGO's, community folk and professionals in the field, so as to cover every aspect of the problem.

Today in the presence of the UN Special Rapporteur I am pleased to launch the Blank Page Summit on Suicide Communique – it sets out the work we did as 'summiteers' over those few days that we lived and worked together on country.

The Summit was a transformative event – it was not a bunch of talking heads going around in circles saying what's already been said. Nor was it a series of presentations from experts telling others what to do, or a one-way download of information. This was a strategic gathering where we started with the highest ambitions for individuals and communities across the country.

What we learnt early on in the Summit is that more people die in the state of Western Australia from suicide than road deaths and that suicide is an emerging national phenomenon.

To make serious progress, we needed to walk together in trust very quickly. By doing so, we were able to look at Australian society in its entirety and acknowledge that both our cultures are weakening. We asked ourselves - "What is our best way forward?" We

realized that it was by a call for action on the fundamental principles that are central to a successful Australian society.

Therefore as a direct result of the Summit, on behalf of Billard Aboriginal Community I now issue a call for action - some elements are relevant to the Kimberley and other elements apply to all communities where individuals and families are in trauma.

Our fundamental message is that suicide is preventable.

To ensure suicide is prevented, we need to be doing three things as soon as possible:

Number 1 – In the Kimberley, we need to create suicide-proof communities

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

The slow killers are grog, illegal drugs, child neglect and abuse and pornography.

We need three more things in this zero tolerance environment:

- i. a Community Code of Conduct to stop the rot and humbug;
- ii. a formal way of resolving our differences that works on the ground (at the Summit, Coroner Alistair Hope spoke of feuding as a trigger for suicide); *and*
- iii. better social inclusion in our communities through shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

Now the critical distinction we make here is that a zero tolerance situation must be self-imposed. This is not a call for laws to ban grog – it is about waking up as individuals to what is causing members of our community to kill themselves and adjusting our behaviours accordingly.

If I have a heart attack and the doctor says, “you’ll have another heart attack if you keep doing x, y or z” then it’s actually up to me to do whatever I can to avoid that next heart attack.

Our community at Billard is a self-imposed alcohol, drug and humbug-free zone – we have set this standard and it works every day of the year without compromise.

Can I just tell you about humbug? It is about our every day dealings. “No humbug” means to live and work with honesty and integrity – it applies to any and all communities where people co-exist.

Looking more broadly now beyond the Kimberley – for all the talk about families being the centre of our communities and our lives, I believe we actually need to be honest. Families don’t just happen.

So the second part of our call to action is training families to be families.

This is a message about ‘first principles’ – let’s start with a blueprint for a family. What is a family? What does it uniquely do? What are its characteristics? How is a family created (i.e. not just by birth)? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives, their futures, their housing, their schooling, their leisure time and their retirement? How do families interact with each other to make communities?

The beauty of the Summit is that this aspect within the call to action applies to anyone.

My family has an action plan. We don't guess about the future. We are planning our future. Every family can do this if they have access to the tools.

Turning now to the final part of our call to action - it is concerned with healing and self-care based on staged support.

We must have a means of saving the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled individuals in our communities. Let me be clear, this means that when we know people are suicidal, we must act.

It also means that we need to see dramatic changes in the way services are delivered at every stage in the continuum from the moment a person presents as vulnerable through to marked suicidal behaviour.

In my community, this also includes our own healing processes based on Aboriginal spirituality.

So to sum up – these are the three key messages which make up our call for action:

**Creating suicide-proof communities;
Training families to be families; *and*
Healing and self-care through staged support**

This is a call to action that compels us to walk together – I will now explain why.

As a primary school teacher, I've taught children suffering from the irreversible impacts of foetal alcohol syndrome. I've also read the Productivity Report about my people's disadvantage, especially as it relates to children.

I have seen children grow into teenage drug addicts in homes where parents smoke marijuana for breakfast.

I have also seen the enormous energy put into land and native title meetings compared with the low investment into strategies to strengthen family life and develop individual resilience.

I have lived through the ebb and flow of government policy making, the waves of hope and the expectation that this new program or that new policy would change things for the better. The results have been uneven, no doubt about it.

People such as me don't need to read the newspaper to know how cheap life has become in Aboriginal communities. We see it literally every day of the week.

To be truthful, I am tired of seeing a sad Aboriginal child, a mangy dog and a filthy mattress on the front page of the national print media on a regular basis.

I know housing is a continuous problem and right now, it's an issue of main focus for all of us. At the Summit we identified the issue of poor housing as a significant suicide risk for Indigenous people. But there's a piece of this housing dilemma that doesn't get talked about. It's the one that no one really wants to confront and the one we decided as a family to deal with. I'm talking about how it's been an excuse in many Indigenous communities that overcrowding is acceptable, normal and part of our culture. We let everybody and anybody into our homes. It may sound harsh but we contribute to the housing problem in this way too.

We've got to stop talking about housing and start talking about homes. I'm very particular about who comes into my home because this is where my family lives and creates its future every day. In fact, I turn away my own siblings if they arrive intoxicated. Some would say this is a rejection of my family. I say it's a strengthening and educating of my family. I will not put my family and our plans and dreams at risk. I believe every family has this aspiration. But if all that's on offer is a house without the means to create a home and a safe family, then is it any wonder the whole program is stuck and unnecessarily wasteful?

If you accept our call to action to train families to be families, then we must stop talking about housing and start talking about homes and give ourselves the chance to create functional families and suicide-proof communities.

None of this is easy. It saddens me to say that when I was growing up, we were surrounded by alcoholics and perpetrators. My parents were good people who greeted everybody in good faith and allowed them into our house in large numbers. What they didn't know at the time – they know now – is that as a 12 year old girl, I was living a chaotic and frightened life where I was often defending myself against the sexual advances of drunken relatives, pushing beds against the bedroom door and protecting my younger siblings from the same sort of attacks.

I had to wise my parents up in later life about what we'd been through and teach them that there's a difference between an open house and a safe home.

I'm so pleased to say that both of my parents are today the architects of our alcohol, drug and humbug free community that is Billard.

I'm raising difficult issues today. We raised these difficult issues at the Summit and we demonstrated that there are solutions. But it requires all of us to have a hard yarn. It's about the truth of our ways. It's about how we've neglected each other and made up excuses. It's about what we need to be doing to build a whole and functioning society.

We need a new conversation where we can talk honestly about these things. We at Billard started this process with a blank page on the specific issue of suicide.

As a nation we could start with a blank page about how we create healthy and functional homes and families, caring and well run communities and support for the vulnerable among us.

Frankly this is our golden opportunity – we must do it together. It involves all of us.

In the presence of Special Rapporteur James Anaya, I make this important point – we can only start with a blank page, if we are indeed going to have a new conversation. A blank page is what we must offer to ourselves and others. There is a great power and joy in us filling up those pages together.

It has been my privilege to stand before you today as a person from a tiny community in this vast country - I believe the strength of our humanity is what will transform Australian society now and in the future.

“We are the people we've been waiting for”.