



2010 LIFE AWARDS

Category: Indigenous

Presenter: Glenn Williams, State Mental Health Coordinator, Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council

The winner of the LIFE Award in the Indigenous category is:

The Billard Learning Centre

Accepting the award is **U.N. delegate and Community representative, Mary O'Reeri.**

Located in the remote north-west Kimberley region of Western Australia, the Billard Learning Centre has distinguished itself as a capable champion for Indigenous interests, and has been instrumental in transforming relationships with governments, NGOs, businesses and individuals. In 2009, the Centre organised the Blank Page Summit on Suicide – a unique collaborative gathering held on their traditional Nyul Nyul homelands. The Summit brought together key representatives from relevant government and nonprofit organisations with Indigenous peoples from across the country to unite in breakthrough thinking about the preventable tragedy of suicide. The theme—“getting together for life”—culminated in the Blank Page Summit on Suicide Communiqué, which has been distributed to and implemented by communities nationwide, and formed the basis for a number of local and national action plans. One community, the Balgo in NSW, did not report a single death due to suicide in the year following the adoption of a Summit-inspired action plan, despite having recorded eight suicides during the preceding year. The Billard Learning centre was also involved in the Senate Inquiry into Suicide in Australia.

The Centre reprised its roles as host and organiser for the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn 2010, which was held this past July. The assembly brought together a strategic assortment of individuals from around the country to confront ‘the gap’ that currently exists between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Australia’s population. This gap extends to each group’s suicide statistics; some estimates indicate that in certain areas, the Indigenous suicide rate eclipses that of the general population by as much as forty percent. The titular ‘hard yarn’ indicated the intent to move beyond research and good intentions to the development of viable, collaborative solutions.

Within the Billard Community itself, the Centre has put in place several programs aimed at encouraging empowerment through the cultivation of self-respect and a strong work ethic. As part of one such initiative, participants who Work for the Dole sign a “no humbug” contract that enforces community standards on an individual level. The agreement encourages signees to monitor their own behavior, and to create an action plan to ensure success.

A leader by example with a knack for problem solving, the Billard Learning Centre has tirelessly and courageously advocated on behalf of its people, tackling difficult issues—land ownership, economic marginalisation and poor standards of living, as well as mental health and suicide—with strikingly positive results. In doing so, it has contributed significantly to social progress and to the establishment of effective, sustainable, community-based suicide prevention strategies in Indigenous communities throughout Australia.