

# REPORT OF THE 2013 ANNUAL STATE WIDE FORUM



11/9/2013

PRESENTED BY RECONCILIATION VICTORIA AND ANTAR VICTORIA

A summary of the Annual Statewide Wide Forum held at the Minajalku Healing Centre in Thornbury on Saturday 9 November 2013.

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On Saturday November 9, 2013 Reconciliation Victoria and ANTaR Victoria held their joint AGMs and State Wide Forum at the Minajalku Healing Centre in Thornbury. Around 100 people attended the day's events. Uncle Ron Jones, a Wurundjeri Elder provided a Welcome to Country. The AGMs were held in the morning, and the forum commenced following morning tea.

## PANEL DISCUSSION

A panel discussion, moderated by Mark Yettica-Paulson, reflected on how the establishment of the first Koori Court in Shepparton over 10 years ago, the Aboriginal Justice Agreement now into its third phase and the Aboriginal Justice Forum, have contributed to the relationships between Aboriginal people and other Victorians in the justice space. Panellists reflected on what can be learned from this approach, and what some of the priorities and opportunities are for the relationships between Aboriginal and other Victorians over the next decade.

Panellists were:

Dr. Alf Bamblett, Chairperson, Victorian Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee

Prof. Kate Auty, Founding Magistrate, Shepparton Koori Court

Mr. Ian Hamm, Director, Indigenous Economic Development, previous Director, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Victorian State Government

Ms Rosemary Smith, Manager Koori Programs and Initiatives, Court Services

It was a dynamic and engaging discussion. Mark asked Alf how important it was for the Aboriginal Community to have a voice, and how the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody affected subsequent developments in this space. Alf responded that, if we promote reconciliation and equality, then there is a need for "voice, opinion, direction and a face that is distinctly Aboriginal. Aboriginal people need to be able to inform, participate and be respected within the debate. We don't have true partnership, only agreements and negotiations."

"With true partnership you have something to share and you have something to give. [We] need to recognise the value add that Aboriginal people bring to the debate, we should be respected as equals. We're still found wanting in addressing the hopes and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this country."

Alf continued, "Without the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths of Custody, we wouldn't have the prominence that we have in the justice system. There is some recognition of Aboriginal participation in these kinds of things." Alf reiterated it's about Aboriginal people having a voice - Aboriginal people being able to express their voice and non-Indigenous people taking the time to listen.



ALF BAMBLETT

Ian Hamm reflected on his roles over the past 30 years and how Aboriginal voice had progressed in Aboriginal affairs. He spoke about the 67' Referendum; that Aboriginal voices driving that was relevant to its time. He said Victoria is different to what it was 30 years ago, and the complexity of issues in front of us now requires a different way of engaging, a different focus in confronting all the things that are on the agenda at the same time.



IAN HAMM

Ian believes the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) has contributed to how the relationship between the Aboriginal community and government has become more sophisticated. He believes that the community is in a better place than prior the AJA, but there a long way to go. With the Aboriginal community now part of the discussions, the relationship is evolving and changing. The changing nature of government itself means that it's role and relationship with the Aboriginal community has changed as well.

The AJA is a complex cooperative arrangement that the Aboriginal community is part of, and it would not have been possible 30 years ago. It has required the Aboriginal community to be part of this arrangement, to be part of where this is going. We need to own these things simply as citizens, to have a voice. Ian has drawn on the AJA model to inform his approach to other areas in Aboriginal affairs and the changing the nature of the relationship between community and government.

Rosie Smith spoke of how she has worked with the justice systems in both Victoria and Tasmania. In Rosie's view the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) is one of the strongest agreements between government agencies and Aboriginal communities. Community members have the opportunity to say what they want. People around the table contribute to the discussions and decisions, particularly through the community justice forums. Government and judicial representatives in that room are held accountable and have to answer the questions raised by community members. Rosie reflected how the education system had let the Aboriginal community down, with many kids going before the criminal justice system who are disengaged from the education system. Rosie said that the AJA and the 10 Koorie Courts across the state had gained an international reputation, with people interested in the processes and how the input of the Elders is incorporated. Rosie talked about the success of the men's diversionary programs, and the establishment of a women's diversionary program, which provide a culturally safe space for people to carry out their community based orders.



ROSIE SMITH

Prof. Kate Auty spoke of the complexity of the issues faced. Australia is a country that still has a constitution that can discriminate on the basis of race and does not recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples of this country. Kate highlighted that Victoria would not have the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, now in its third phase, if it wasn't for Aboriginal people having put aside legitimate grievances and come to the table for honest and honorable conversations about what was happening. The Justice Agreement made courts come to the table and it drove change. The Agreement documents are instructive. The beginning of the Agreement is linked to the failure of Native Title being recognised in this state. The Agreement made courts appoint Aboriginal Liaison Officers and Aboriginal Bail Justices, and the Koorie Court began from this. The partnership comes from enormous good will and commitment of Aboriginal



KATE AUTY

leaders. Kate stated that it's about voice and also about presence and respect. The Aboriginal Justice Agreements created the space for monumental change - it changed behavior. Space was created where people expected to be treated respectfully. Elders were given their rightful place and respected for their input.

We know we need to do better, when a 12 year old boy has been denied bail because he has given a false name. He didn't have a warrant, but didn't give his name because he thought he had a warrant. He thought he had one because many of the young people around him had one, so he spent a night in custody.

**Question for the panel from Mark Yettica-Paulson:** What are the situations where people get to work together, listen & try to understand and therefore begin to commit to learning new ways to learn together? Both the systems and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples need to learn new ways to engage and work together. As the Justice Agreement has developed, where are we at?

Ian Hamm spoke about the approach to Native Title, and that due to the failure of Native Title to recognise the rights of Victorian Traditional Owners, the Traditional Owners and the Government worked to create an alternative system – the Traditional Owners Settlement Act. What used to be an adversarial relationship between government and Aboriginal peoples became a cooperative relationship. They needed to learn how to talk with each other not at each other. In Ian's view, by and large we have gone forward, while we still a long way to go. The question now is what do we want things to look like in the year 2035?

Alf Bamblett was involved with the Deaths in Custody Review, trying to provide some answers to the families who had lost people and to provide hope for something that would come, some form of justice. The hopelessness, the anger, the frustration, the despair, all those things that were being projected by the families, it was for us to provide a solution. The issue of a voice, the ability to be able to communicate, was paramount. The justice system is a system that says "you are less than we are", a system of dominance. In communities today, Aboriginal people still suffer from deaths in custody. There is still the need for proper recognition to be given to Aboriginal people to take this forward. Partnerships require making things happen together. Alf believes that the Justice Agreement and related initiatives reflect agreement making processes, but it doesn't automatically flow that this is an accord with a partnership. There is the potential to negotiate for what is required and this depends on the place of Aboriginal people, they need to be involved, in a cycle of respect.

Rosie reflected that the oppression that Aboriginal people have faced over the past 200 years cannot be undone in 10 years. A highlight of the Koorie Courts has been the respect that Elders have and are given by all involved. Their authority has been reinforced in the community too. The numbers of Aboriginal people are still going up in the criminal justice system and the children's court. Over 1000 Aboriginal children in Out of Home Care and only 200 are placed with Aboriginal families. Government has to realise that community want to be responsible for families and children but need to be adequately resourced.

Vicki Clark reminded us that we must never forget the 99 people who died in custody, as it was their deaths that lead to the process of reconciliation. One of the key recommendations from the Royal Commission was that this country must proceed in a process of reconciliation, and Keating then called the decade of Reconciliation from 1990-2000. We must always honour those people.

**Question for Alf and Ian from Greg Kennedy (Koorie Youth Council):** Why is it important for young people to have a voice – and how have things changed from 30 years ago?

Alf responded that there needs to be new people coming through – young people need to see a place for themselves. Young people have a role and responsibility to be involved.

Rosie said that the involvement of young people in the justice forum was an important development, something that KYC has been involved with.

Ian spoke of how this is a consistent generational challenge. The young generation of people have the challenge of reshaping the lives they live, not to be the same as the generation before but to take on new challenges. Ian would like to get the point where AJA is redundant because there isn't any differentiation between the justice statistics. This generation is in some ways an affluent and aspirational community, how does that affect us socially? The pressure is to ensure we maintain a sense of Aboriginality - to maintain that sense of core identity without the indicators of disadvantage. What makes us, us? There is no one 'solution', we have to do everything, over a long period of time to address ongoing issues. We need to re-conceptualize and re-understand areas where interventions have not worked. How do people see themselves socially, how do they want to see themselves, how do we see them? I want children to have a different place in the world. We need to re-conceptualise what we mean and what we are about otherwise we are condemning the future to be the same as the past.

**Question from Lydia Thorpe:** Lydia raised concerns around where she is from, Lake Tyers which has experienced a 10 year intervention. Kids are not going to school or finishing year 12, some are practicing harmful behavior. Self-determination is key, but there are significant issues around resources and support services. There are still areas of the state that are struggling.

Ian responded that the 10 year program focused on symptoms rather than causes of issues. There are a multitude of issues that require everything over a long period of time, ie. no one solution. We need to re-conceptualise what Lake Tyers is because it hasn't worked, we got it wrong.

Closing Remarks: Mark asked each of the speakers to summarise their thoughts, hopes for the future, or advice:

Rosie - The appointment of a Children's commissioner for Aboriginal children – Andrew Jackamos - is a positive step to ensure we look after the interests of the children in out of home care.

Ian - Don't be afraid, don't let fear stop you doing things, do know what you know is right, rather than doing what you're expected to do.

Alf - Young people coming through is so important, there are issues and areas that are still of great concern.

Kate: Bend every rule you find and be agile in avoiding the blows that follow.

## WORKSHOP 1: RACISM & IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA

Speakers: Koora Cooper, Anne Barton

Facilitator: Matt Bell

Anne Barton began discussions, by placing herself in her family and Australia's history as the great granddaughter of Sir Edmond Barton, the first Prime Minister of Australia and a leading figure in the Australian Federation Movement. She explained her great grand-father was a Victorian politician who was instrumental in the formation of Australian institutions. These institutions were based on British structures - Australia was a part of huge empire with those set of values.

Anne spoke of what it meant to her to have white privilege. Anne comes from a white Anglican family, she attended a private school. She wanted to reconcile her ancestry and her great grandfather's legacy. She spoke of how the notion of white privilege should have significance for all non-Indigenous people - there needs to be space to examine and self-reflect. The ideals/understandings about Australia's First Peoples that shaped this nation and the interventions that followed, notions like to 'Soothe the pillow of a dying race', embedded a notion of superiority in all Australian institutions. To be born white and inherit this privilege means that racism goes with that. Racism is embedded in society.

Anne reflected that we learn and practice white privilege without questioning or reflecting on what this means. What are the traits of white privilege? Are they that of being opportunistic, acquisitive, knowing everything, taking no ownership of the past, 'us' and 'them' mentality?

What's our responsibility? We need to claim this identity and recognise privilege. In Anne's view, if you are non-Indigenous, even if you are poor or recently migrated, you live on stolen land. The White Australia policy is not dead, with the Northern Territory Emergency Response/Stronger Futures, the increasing high incarceration rates of Aboriginal people in the justice system, the disparity in health and education outcomes and so on. It is clear that elements of those initial policy agendas still resonate today.

Koora Cooper, a Yorta Yorta, Gunditjijimara, Wotjajbuluk, Wurundjeri woman spoke of the need to support Aboriginal children to be able to re-identify what it means to be Aboriginal, as this is harder to do when you are older. This will help young people not to believe the racist stereotypes that are portrayed in media etc. Koora explained that the experience of racism is normal for Aboriginal people, that racism is subtle. Aboriginal people have become used to it, but are now are standing up and speaking up against racism - it has become a form of empowerment. We all need to stand up against this 'normalised' racism.

Koora spoke of what could help address issues of racism, such as cultural awareness training, and learn how to deconstruct and challenge white privilege so as to unravel it.

Open discussion: Why did you come to this workshop?

The group shared how discussing white privilege helps to identify structural racism and how to change that by social inclusion, and language. White Privilege doesn't have to be about non Aboriginal people feeling guilty, but rather being aware. The group discussed bystander racism and that if you have concerns about racism you should, where safe to, defend and speak up for the rights of Aboriginal people when you witness racist comments.

There was discussion around how people from different cultures, religious backgrounds and so on had experienced racism, how through their experience they could identify with the experience felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Particularly for new migrants, media plays a big part in how the broader society views them. Empathy is crucial in being able to challenge this type of racism.

For non-Indigenous people, how do you combat feelings of shame and guilt and use the awareness of your privilege to address issues of social injustice? Feelings of guilt and shame may be natural but are not productive and paralyse people from doing something about the injustices.

One person shared her experience of being aware of racism within her own family. Her great grandmother was Wotjabuluk. Her Aboriginality was denied and hidden in her family.

When people are ignorant and uninformed it can be traumatic to deal with. Though we are a long way from invasion there is still a lack of Aboriginal history or contemporary Indigenous issues being taught or widely known.

Koora discussed the need to know our own privilege, to acknowledge that we are in our own comfort zones, and to confront our fears. Even the small things can make a difference - ie learning the local language in your area. We do it when we go overseas but do not acknowledge the wealth and diversity of knowledge that we have on this land. She asked the group to think about what you are doing as individual. You have to live with it.

Anne raised the idea of race as a construct; that of being different in skin colour or social structures (privilege). There are different layers of privilege. Anne spoke of her experience in attending a white privilege conference in the USA.

One person shared her experience of what it means to come from a bi-cultural family and having learned how to survive. She spoke of how it had been a privilege being able to share today, she felt safe to do so. It was time to take action as racism is no longer acceptable.

It is OK to ask the 'stupid questions' when you don't understand something, and Aboriginal people are often very patient people. This will help to empower ourselves as non-Aboriginal people. We need to understand that there are complex social and political structures in Koori communities, and there is a lot non Indigenous people can learn from Aboriginal people, ie. respect of Elders.

## WORKSHOP 2: VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Speakers / facilitators – Nayuka Gorrie and Morgan Coleman

A small group of participants came together and discussed visions for the future – a young peoples' focus on leadership and aspirations for future generations.

What do people want to discuss or be able to understand better from this session?

The group identified that there was still a need for the real “Australian” history to be told and understood. There were discussions around the impact of language and how the implied binary relationship between “Aboriginal” and “Issues” needed to be decoupled; cultural understanding is critical in this space.

What is the role of young people in the future of reconciliation? The group discussed the need to help build a sense of identity and Aboriginal cultural heritage in young people, this will help counteract the negative portrayal and perceptions of Aboriginal people played out in the media and broader society.

The group also raised the issue of racism, what it looks like today, has it changed? What will activism look like for future generations, are the expectations we put on young Aboriginal people too great?

What was it like for you growing up and what were your perceptions of Aboriginal people?

A clear theme that emerged from this discussion was that there was either no awareness or negative connotations when it came to what people’s perceptions were of Aboriginal people. Imagery like the ‘noble savage’ or the myth of the ‘last Aborigine’ were both raised as well as both overt and subtle racism. The media played a key role in how perceptions of Aboriginal people were formed (abuse, neglect etc). Through lack of education and little to no awareness about Aboriginal history, cultures and peoples it is understandable that there is a feeling of ‘no contact’ or segregation.

What do you think the public perceptions are now of Aboriginal people?

There is a level of acceptance of disadvantage and apathy to making change. The media continues to play a role in determining public perceptions; there is a general perception that women and children are victims, and thus a demonisation of black men. There is a focus on rural and remote communities which makes Aboriginal people living in urban environments seem invisible. Australian history pre-invasion is not often taught, it is still focussed on ‘settler history’ in schools, there is still little discussion of our First Peoples as the oldest continuing culture in the world. There are some Aboriginal languages being taught in schools but not many. Teachers do not feel confident in teaching cultural and historical lessons because they didn’t study it themselves. Universities have a fairly strong focus on teaching Aboriginal Studies.

What do you see as the ‘best case scenario’ in the future? How do you think a more reconciled Australia could look in 2035?

The group discussed the ongoing need to address areas of disadvantage still being experienced by Aboriginal people in the areas of health, housing, justice, education, and politics, need to close all the gaps! There was hope that all non-Aboriginal people would have an understanding of Aboriginal culture and would proudly discuss it as part of the nation’s cultural environment, that there would be an acceptance and acknowledgement of invasion, of the atrocities committed. Fundamental changes were also proposed, such as the development of a treaty/treaties, to have a new flag and anthem designed as well as the need to become a republic. Constitutional Recognition was also raised as something that could help reconcile Australians. Educational reform was proposed that would help to address the lack of knowledge in the general public as well as improve attendance rates for Aboriginal children.

The diversity of Aboriginal nations was discussed, and a call for a recognition of the different mobs across the country and an understanding that there should not be an assumption that there is one voice for all Aboriginal people. For culturally significant sites, it was suggested that their name be returned to their traditional name, in the language of the traditional owners (where known), or at least have dual naming. It was also seen as important for all people to know whose land they live on, who are the traditional owners in their area.

A change in perceptions and expectations was discussed as being needed, so that Aboriginal people are expected to succeed and no longer viewed in a deficit model. There is a need for Aboriginal people to be celebrated for their contributions to society, not just in art and sport. There is a need for Australia to take pride in its history and our ability as a nation to overcome the atrocious past that was a legacy of generations before.

### WORKSHOP 3: CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

Speakers: Daphne Yarram, Fran Smullen and Vicky Grosser    Facilitator: Peter Lewis

#### Daphne Yarram – National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples Board Member

Daphne explained how the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (Congress) is a partner with Recognise on Constitutional Recognition. Congress continues to have conversations about the Expert Panel’s Report and its recommendations and is watching closely the progress of this campaign. Daphne believes that it’s an important issue because it’s about how Aboriginal people see themselves in this country. Daphne asked the question, ‘In 2030 – what will the landscape of this country look like, and where will Aboriginal people be?’

The Expert Panel’s proposal does not inhibit future pursuits of Treaty, Sovereignty and a Bill of Rights. There is a connection to this proposal for constitutional change but we need to have conversations in Aboriginal communities before they are ready to engage in the broader discussions. Those acts (race clauses) are imposed on all of us but only seem to be enforced on Aboriginal people.

Daphne stated that Aboriginal people should have a special place in this country, not a privileged place but a space as the first peoples of this country.

#### Fran Smullen - Shepparton Region Reconciliation Group [SRRG]

Fran explained how the reconciliation group had applied for funding from Recognise in partnership with Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative. They had also used partnerships in the local area to help strengthen the project, such as the with the Co-op, library, youth conversations, ASHE and U3A. These partnerships were seen as vital.

The group established three guiding questions:

Recognition is an important element of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians:

1. Knowing this, is recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution important? If so, why?
2. Of all the 44 referendums held in Australia only eight have been successful, the 1967 referendum the most successful.\* What do you believe made this success possible, what factors contributed to the successful 1967 referendum?

3. How can we contribute to making this next referendum a YES vote that results in recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution?

8/44 referendums that have been held were successful. The 1967 Referendum was the most successful – what helped make this so successful? Fran spoke of her belief that it was because Aboriginal community members were involved and engaged and championed the movement for change.

For the conversations that were held in Shepparton, Aboriginal community members were involved in all but one conversation. One of the learnings from their experience was that they needed to provide Cultural Safety for Elders involved in these conversations. She also spoke of the strong sense of ‘we want to do better than this’. The conversations shared were had within people’s broader networks in Shepparton so it helped to build stronger relationships and partnerships.

In facilitating the project, SRRG found that not knowing or not being an Expert on the issues was as much a strength as it was a weakness. They were able to localise the Recognise flyers, to have local community members showing their support for the campaign.

Fran reflected on some of the messages they received from the local Aboriginal community. There was concern that there wasn’t strong enough engagement with them on this issue, one Elder said “you’re running ahead of us, we should be walking beside you.” The majority of the Australian population needs to be challenged but it is non-Aboriginal Australians that will determine the overall decision given their population proportion compared to Aboriginal people. Internationally there are different frameworks for engagement that Australia could use. ie. Aotearoa, Canada, how could this strengthen the campaign?

Fran raised the concern that the message isn’t getting out to people that aren’t aware of the proposal for change.

#### Vicky Grosser - Geelong One Fire Reconciliation Group

Geelong One Fire also received funding from Recognise to provide workshops and information sessions to raise awareness about Constitutional Recognition. Vicky spoke of how they created a project about the country that we live on with Aboriginal people and what that relationship is. There are uncomfortable conversations but this is all part of the learning process. Need to skill more people up to have these conversations; otherwise the burden is on a few.

The purpose of the Geelong Constitutional Recognition Project has been to raise awareness of Constitutional Recognition in the Geelong region over a five month period in early 2013. The tasks undertaken were:

- a. Provision of sessions to 10 local organisations / groups as stage 1 January-May 2013
- b. Evaluate and report on the outcomes to Reconciliation Australia / Recognise
- c. Review project and consider next steps

The City of Greater Geelong Council took up offer for further training. There is a want to engage with young people too, to bring them into the conversation. Vicky reiterated that there is need to connect locally as well as at a state and national level, doing this strengthened relationships with community members and other key partners.

The Geelong One Fire Project was a great success and the group is now in conversations with the Geelong Council to develop a second phase in partnership.

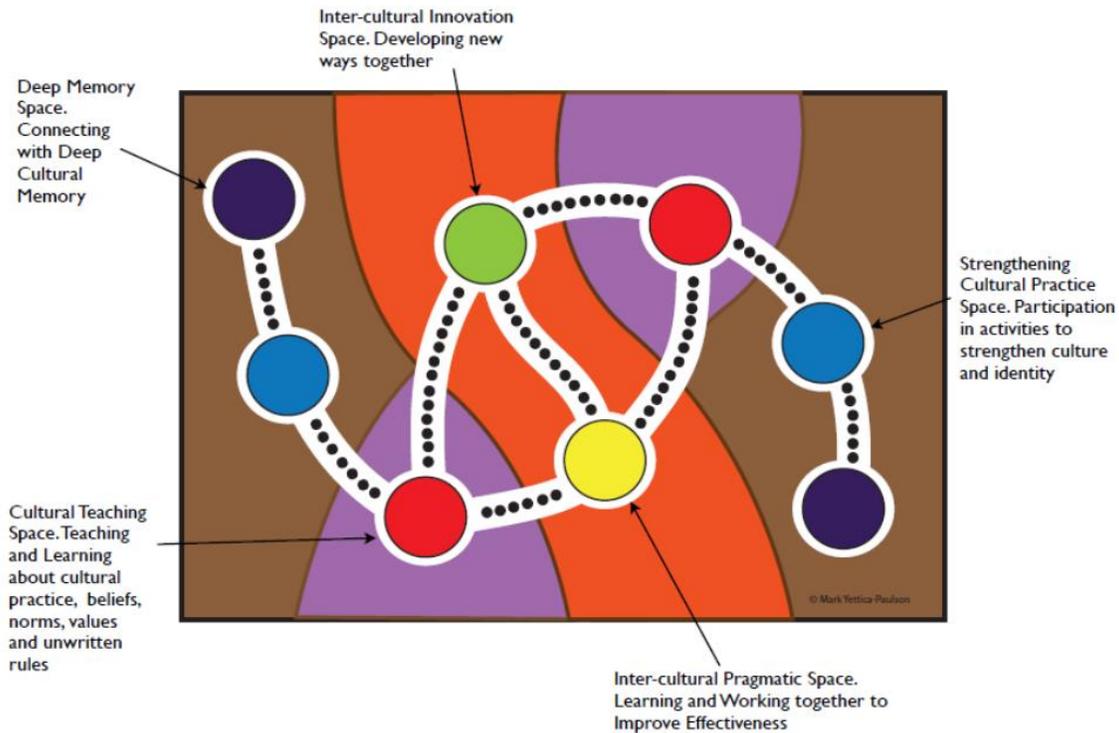
Discussion

Daphne believes that this is about how Aboriginal people are recognised by the wider community in this country. It's about elevating our place as Aboriginal people from welfare recipients to people who contribute and are actively involved in decision making. We need the space to self-determine our own future. The improvements that have been seen overseas have not happened here. Is it because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have so little control over their own lives and future? Treaty is another form of an agreement, but the constitution determines how government can implement law. The message needs to be that non-Indigenous people are not giving up anything by supporting these changes. Non indigenous people can actually gain something from the changes. We all find a sense of belonging from these changes. This is about maturing as a nation and acknowledging the past. It comes back to unfinished business; this is within a generation or two from the Stolen Generations and the 67' referendum. There is still work to be done; this is not the end point.

THE INTER-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK: MARK YETTICA-PAULSON

After providing feedback from each of the workshop sessions, Mark Yettica-Paulson reflected on the day's discussions and gave his own perspectives on the relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians, through an 'inter-cultural framework' he has developed. The framework is depicted through an artwork that Mark created, and he talked through the different components of the framework and the relationships between them. The information below is extracted from a summary paper produced by Mark in 2012.

THE INTER-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK



## WORKING WITH THE INTER-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Working with other cultures can be tricky sometimes. There are many challenges to working well together. One of the keys to success is being able to be clearer on the intent and purpose of engagement and interaction with other cultures. The Inter-cultural Framework identifies various Cultural Spaces and recognises their value and significance.

**The Deep Purple Space** serves to connect cultures to deep memory. This is where mythologies and legends are connected to our modern reality. The Purpose and Intent of this space is to re-affirm connectedness, belonging and to gain wisdom.

**The Blue Space** serves to gather people together to participate in activities to strengthen identity and belonging. The Intent and Purpose of this space is to activate cultural expression and affirm distinctiveness.

**The Red Space** serves to teach others about culture. The Intent and Purpose of this space is to transfer knowledge about culture.

**The Yellow Space** serves to foster pragmatic work alongside each other's culture. The Purpose and Intent of this space is to gain enough knowledge and respect to work efficiently and effectively together.

**The Green Space** serves to cultivate innovation in practice and ideas for cultures to work together. The Intent and Purpose of this space is to challenge current conventions and explore new ideas, options and practices.

Working through these spaces, it is possible to improve your understanding of cultural dynamics at team, organisation and stakeholder levels. It can be applied to various forms of difference and cultural expression.

## CLOSING CEREMONY

Following Mark's presentation, Reconciliation Victoria Co-Chair Vicki Clark facilitated a moving closing ceremony, which invited participants to form a circle and take in turns to collect some Lake Mungo sand – from Vicki's mother's country – from her mother's Coolamon in the centre of the circle. In silence we held the sand in our hands while Vicki spoke about her country, evoking the power and significance of the land we held in our hands, before inviting us to return the sand to the Coolamon, as a symbolic act of reconciliation, handing the land back to its people. It was a fitting end to a memorable and meaningful day.



## A PERSONAL REFLECTION - BY PRIYANI MADAN

My eyes closed as requested, I felt the warmth of the grains of sand in my hands that were from Mungo, taking me back to my time there only two weeks ago – I remembered the sand dunes spread across the rolling plains as far as the eye could see and the animal prints that were softly embedded in the ground. As Vicki's voice echoed in my ears to imagine what life would have been like 10, 20, 30 thousand years ago at Mungo, I remembered that only two weeks ago I was basking in the sun at Mungo imagining the same thing. And then I became very aware of the feeling of warmth and connection that washed over the whole room and the connection in Vicki's voice as she spoke of the land her mother is from.

Saturday 9th of November 2013, 9.30am I arrived at the Minajalku Healing Centre in Thornbury for the ANTaR and Reconciliation Victoria Annual General Meetings. A newbie to this scene, I was unaware of what to expect. After a recent journey down the Murray-Darling Basin with Engineers Without Borders, visiting Traditional Owners and living on Country, I was inspired to get involved. After a bit of Googleing, a soy latte and a 15 minute search for a car park, here I was.

In the middle of the vibrant and colourful space filled with Aboriginal art work and Indigenous flags, we all perched on the edge of our fold-up seats, eager to listen, learn and contribute. The program began with a Welcome to Country by Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Ron Jones, whose ancestor is the remarkable William Barak. Wearing a traditional Possum Skin Cloak he spoke of his connection to Wurundjeri country, his family lineage and Welcomed everyone to his land.

AGM's followed and although I was new, hearing the ventures of both organisations was exciting and heartening. Upon return from my trip I transitioned from being surrounded constantly by passionate, young activists where there was never a dull conversation to the apathetic nature of the corporate world and had struggled adjusting. Being surrounded again by caring and optimistic volunteers was invigorating.

As formalities concluded and an appetising morning tea was devoured, a compelling forum commenced with four esteemed speakers: Dr Alf Bamblett, Ian Hamm, Prof. Kate Auty and Rosemary Smith. The discussion was on "Priorities and opportunities for the relationship between Aboriginal and other Australians" and was moderated by the charismatic Mark Yettica-Paulson. Dialogue regarding the Shepparton Koori Court was instigated by Prof. Kate Auty, former Koori Court Magistrate. The impacts of this Court system were discussed and how the outcomes of decisions made in this successful court positively impact the community. Stories of troublesome young men whose lives would have been detrimentally affected by going to jail and who instead turned their lives completely around were very inspiring. Mild debate began as the topic of Justice Agreements was broached – Ian Hamm and Dr. Alf Bamblett contested whether these were equal and worthwhile relationships.

Subsequently more delicious food was ingested alongside riveting one-one-one conversations with the Chair of ANTaR, David Collis and Project Support Officer at Reconciliation Victoria, Damian O'Keefe. Both spoke to me about their personal journeys and how they ended up here today.

Three workshops held concurrently in the afternoon included: "Constitutional Recognition", "Visions for the Future: Perspectives from Young Aboriginal People" and "Racism and Identity". Following my trip down the Murray-Darling Basin, I was compelled to go to the "Visions for the Future" workshop to understand what action was possible from this energy I found in me. We heard from two extraordinary young Indigenous people about their own life journeys and how they surpassed the low expectations and stereotypes thrust

upon them. Together the group discussed the tragic past, the challenges of the present and our vision for the future, with the target year of 2035.

Such visions included complete education reform, constitutional recognition and a Treaty, Australia becoming a republic, renewal of all national symbols (including replacing the Union Jack with the Indigenous flags) and all gaps to be closed. We were quite excited with all our idealistic visions and although they are distant triumphs, I felt invigorated to begin forging our way towards them.

The day ended with a closing ceremony performed by Vicki Clark, Co-Chair of RecVic and a descendant of the Muthi Muthi people. Her mother is from Mungo and the ceremony was very moving, including her bringing some of the land from Mungo. We all individually pressed our hands into the Mungo sand, took a few grains back with us and felt the sand warm our palms. With everyone's eyes closed, Vicki prompted us to feel a connection to the land and as we felt the warmth of the sand in our hands, she took us to the historical Mungo land.

As a final act of reconciliation we returned the sand, symbolising the returning of the land back to their true owners – a vital step in moving forward together.

Reflecting on everything I learnt and everyone I met on Saturday, I feel empowered to pursue my own reconciliation journey, especially surrounded by a support network of such inspiring, exceptional and visionary activists. Words by Mark Yettica-Paulson will remain with me as I endeavour on my journey: "Do what you know to be right instead of what people expect you to do."