

THE BLANK PAGE SUMMIT ON SUICIDE

by
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Billard Aboriginal Community,
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Extensive effort was put into making us feel welcome & comfortable for our 3-day stay at Billard near Beagle Bay

THE KIMBERLEY REGION in Western Australia is better known for the town of Broome, camel rides at sunset on Cable Beach, the ancient inland river gorges, the Gibb River Road, and the sandstone domes of the Bungle Bungles. However, for the region's longest inhabitants, the legacy of displacement, racist and segregating Government policy, conflict over land use and the current consequent issues that include poor health, child neglect alcohol abuse and suicide, doesn't feature in the tourist guides.

The Victor family members were our hosts at the Blank Page Summit on Suicide, held over three days on their traditional land in the community of Billard, about two kilometres north of Beagle Bay. The Victor family had experienced the loss by suicide of two family members, Steven Jnr and Vincent. These young men died in the same room by hanging from the same fan in the same house three years apart.

Many other families had also been recently affected by deaths by suicide in the Kimberley Region. Coroner Alistair Hope conducted an inquest in the Kimberley region in 2007/2008 - "to explore the reasons for a large

number of deaths of Aboriginal persons whose deaths appeared to have been caused or contributed to by alcohol abuse or cannabis use and also, if possible, to identify reasons for an alarming increase in suicide rates. The suicide rates of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley increased dramatically in 2006. In that year there were 21 Aboriginal self-harm deaths in the Kimberley."

The 224-page report highlighted similar issues to those experienced by many Aboriginal families living in Central Australia. Alcohol and drug related accidents, abuse and birth defects and a lack of coordinated care by Government and non-Government agencies across a range of related areas such as housing, health, education, employment, mental health and alcohol services, and child protection. The report also spoke of the ongoing premature death of adults and children, the associated unresolved grief and trauma, and the consequent lack of leadership and responsible adult role models.

Left: 'Hands of hope'

"... the underlying reasons for the distress and pain experienced by many Aboriginal people in the Kimberley appear manifest and would be obvious to any informed visitor to the region. It is the solutions to the problems which are difficult and complex."

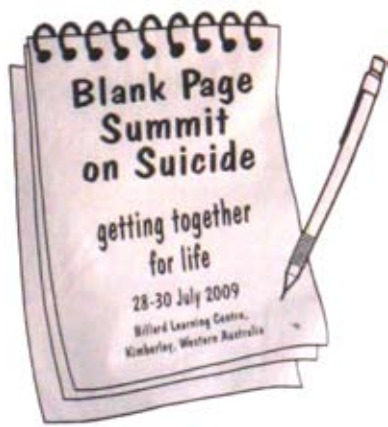
The Billard Community has been motivated by these deaths to focus their energies on the development of the Billard Learning Centre to provide a "strong life base" for young people that centres on education and meaningful work.

Stephen Victor Snr was also motivated by a lack of adequate response by the WA Government to the recommendations in Coroner Hope's Report. He and his family were more determined to do what they could to tackle the issue of suicide in the Kimberleys, leading to the planning of The Blank Page Summit on Suicide.

The title for the Summit came from the words of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples on 13 February 2008. In this speech reference was made to a new beginning, fresh thinking and local, innovative approaches in partnership with indigenous communities.

"We are holding the Blank Page Summit to help our people to stop committing suicide." (Stephen Victor Snr, Billard Community March 2009). The Summit was about planning and solutions.





Who attended ?

Over 150 people were accommodated in tents, catered for, entertained and transported to and from Broome to attend the summit. They included Indigenous people from the Kimberley region, the rest of WA and other parts of Australia, Commonwealth and WA Government representatives and the public, private and not-for-profit sector representatives.

Special guests included Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, WA State Coroner Alistair Hope, Bishop Christopher Saunders (Broome) and the Deputy Premier of WA.

What took place at the Summit?

Jenny Macklin sang "Lean on Me" with Mary O'Reeri and they both cried. Actually, there were a lot of tears and probably the summit in itself was part of the healing process for the Victor family and other Aboriginal families attending. The Billard Boys entertained us, David Pigram sang to us and a large group of people were awarded for their efforts in bringing us together. We heard some powerful speeches that helped to set the scene and ensure that we stayed focused on the issue that had brought us together.



Above: The proud display of flags at the 'main stage' where Ministers, musicians and many dedicated workers and family members from around Australia gathered to talk, share, mourn and plan a way forward



Right: Members of NPY Women's Council presenting a painting to the Victor family

Suicide is an emotively charged subject and the idea that we could sit on country together and plan for a way out of the current despair for Aboriginal people in a calm and cohesive way was mistaken thinking. The group facilitators had their work cut out for them and there were many frustrating moments for me and no doubt others during this part of the process. Many people were grieving for lost family members and may not have spoken openly about this before. It was impressive to see such a strong representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people focusing on the issue of suicide.

Valerie Foster, Janet Inyika and Maime Butler representing the NPY Women's Council presented a painting to the Victor Family with a story of white man's poisons, present-day confusion for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and solutions focused on walking the path together.



Above: Laurencia with Karen Reval from Lifeline

The Victor family and their community have taken charge of their situation. They seem well on track to achieving the outcomes that they set out to achieve for their own family and community. Collectively we developed plans and solutions for all remote indigenous communities experiencing high rates of suicide. ✕

For more details visit the summit website - www.blankpagesummit.com.au

Left: The colourful Billiard bus painted by young people from the local communities