Karen Mundine has been involved in reconciliation for several decades, culminating in her appointment as CEO of Reconciliation Australia earlier this year. Ms Mundine is from the Bundjalung Nation of northern NSW. She was formerly the Deputy CEO of Reconciliation Australia and brings to the role more than 20 years’ experience in community engagement, public advocacy, communications and social marketing campaigns. She has held senior public affairs and communications roles with federal government departments including Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Foreign Affairs and Trade. Over the course of her career she has been instrumental in some of Australia’s watershed national events including the Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Centenary of Federation commemorations, Corroboree 2000 and the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention. Reconciliation News sits down for a chat with Ms Mundine to find out more about the achievements and motivations of the woman who now heads up Australia’s lead body on reconciliation.

IN CONVERSATION: KAREN MUNDINE

Karen Mundine has been involved in reconciliation for several decades, culminating in her appointment as CEO of Reconciliation Australia earlier this year. Ms Mundine is from the Bundjalung Nation of northern NSW. She was formerly the Deputy CEO of Reconciliation Australia and brings to the role more than 20 years’ experience in community engagement, public advocacy, communications and social marketing campaigns. She has held senior public affairs and communications roles with federal government departments including Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Foreign Affairs and Trade. Over the course of her career she has been instrumental in some of Australia’s watershed national events including the Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Centenary of Federation commemorations, Corroboree 2000 and the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention. Reconciliation News sits down for a chat with Ms Mundine to find out more about the achievements and motivations of the woman who now heads up Australia’s lead body on reconciliation.

You’ve played a key role in events of major national significance, including the Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Centenary of Federation commemorations, Corroboree 2000 and the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention. What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

Working with the Stolen Generation on the Apology, because it was such an intense personal experience. Every single Aboriginal person has been affected by policies of forced removal in some way. None of my family were taken away but there was always that threat, and they lived with that threat. And that had intergenerational effects.

Being involved in the Apology, being able to work really closely with members of the Stolen Generation. I just feel very privileged to have been actually able to help them... It just brought things home for me a little bit, in terms of who I was raised to be and what was important and how I could use these skills that I had to actually effect change in a tangible way.

What was it like to be in Parliament House on the day of the Apology?

I had been up since before dawn, running around doing work. I had been doing media training with members of the Stolen Generations to prepare them to be able to present and talk through their stories without it becoming a painful reliving of their experiences. It had been an exhausting couple of weeks. I remember that on the actual day, the people I had been working with
and looking after, I got them to where they needed to be in VIP area, and I ended up sitting in one of the galleries by myself. It was almost like I was in my own little bubble. I could see journalists and some friends in the press gallery, members of my family in the opposite gallery. And these people I had been working with so closely, whose stories I was so privileged to hear, were out on the floor. For me it was a very surreal moment of quietness just before Prime Minister Kevin Rudd started to speak.

On a personal level, what makes you passionate about reconciliation?

I was raised in a family where we were always taught to be the best that we could regardless of what that was. But also with an understanding that we had opportunities that other members of our families didn’t, that other people didn’t. And part of the deal of being given these opportunities is you have a duty to give back. So a really strong sense of social justice. And so it was about we’re off to university, you’ve got your skills, now what are you going to do with it. And that makes me passionate about these things. That spirit is intrinsic to who we are as Australians. I want to make the place better for myself, my friends, my family, my nephews and nieces.

Going forward, what do you see as the key challenges to progress on reconciliation?

An ongoing challenge for us is not being too disheartened by the setbacks. I think we have a strong network and amazing community of people who are all about change and who want to see change, but it’s not everyone. We still have to work to convince others. And that will sometimes create hurdles for us… but I guess the challenge for the moment is not to be disheartened by that. It’s too easy to give up and walk away. People have been fighting for social justice and civil rights for hundreds of years. If my forbears could stick it out then so can we.

What do you consider to be the country’s most significant accomplishment in terms of reconciliation in the past few decades?

I have been fortunate to work in this space during many important national events, but I don’t think there’s a single biggest achievement. In 26 years of reconciliation, we’ve had the Stolen Generations report, we’ve had conversations around constitutional reform, we’ve had not only the High Court’s native title decision but also native title legislation has been introduced. Reconciliation Australia now has more than 900 Reconciliation Action Plans in place. Organisations big and small are putting their hands up to say ‘we want to do something’. It’s not only up to governments. People are taking responsibility in their everyday lives – in schools and sporting clubs. So the take-home message for me is that reconciliation isn’t a single moment. There isn’t a silver bullet. I think there have been lots of small steps, some big strides, some unfortunate backward steps. Sometimes they’re moments that don’t seem especially significant but they all contribute to this bigger goal. But I do feel that we have made progress.

You sound very positive about the future. Is that fair to say?

I am very positive. There are distractions that sometimes set us back but that’s also part of being a democracy. We have to have these conversations. Even if they’re hard, even if some people don’t agree with us. If we are to be truly reconciled, then we need to have conversations.