



**SKY'S THE LIMIT:** Montana Ahwon takes a break near her home in the Kimberley region a few days before jetting off to attend the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Image by Landi Bradshaw.

# YOUTH ADVOCATE FROM THE KIMBERLEY TACKLES THE BIG ISSUES

**In the face of adversity, Montana Ahwon is doing everything she can to create opportunities for young people in Australia's remote north-west corner.**

It was a few days before her 20th birthday when Montana Ahwon received an invitation to attend the pre-eminent forum on issues facing Indigenous peoples from around the world. The humble youth advocate from Kununurra, in far northern Western Australia, says she was shocked to receive an email from the Australian Government inviting her to be one of a handful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to participate in the 17th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues, to be held at United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York.

"When I first saw the email, I thought it was a scam," she tells *Reconciliation News* a few days before she is due to fly out.

"It still hasn't sunk in."

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is the UN's central coordinating body for matters relating to the concerns and rights of the world's Indigenous peoples. The forum holds a high-level session once a year, providing the opportunity for Indigenous peoples and member states to share knowledge and discuss issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. The forum is committed to working with governments and Indigenous peoples to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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Ahwon says she was thrilled to get the call and jumped at the chance to attend.

“I’ll soak up as much knowledge and as many stories as I can,” she says.

“And [I’ll] see if I can have some yarns.”

Despite her surprise at being invited to attend the forum, there are plenty of reasons why Ahwon stands out as an advocate for First Nations Peoples. In the past few years she has won the NAIDOC Apprentice of the Year Award, worked as a social worker with Save the Children and advised state and federal governments on issues affecting youth in the Kimberley. What makes her efforts even more impressive is the adversity she has overcome along the way.

Just a few years ago, Ahwon was in a very different place. After stints at four boarding schools, she dropped out for good at the age of 15. She enrolled in a hospitality pre-employment program, but withdrew after the death of the man she calls ‘dad’ – her adoptive father. He was a family friend and raised Ahwon from the age of two, following the death of her biological mother.

“On [my mother’s] deathbed, she asked dad if he could look after me. He wasn’t too sure about it at first... but they were gonna send me to a group home, so dad raised his hand,” Ahwon says.

They were an unlikely pair – she a Miriwong Gajeroong girl and he an Italian man who drove taxis in Kununurra – but over the years they formed a deep bond.

“It was just me and him growing up. So I was really lost [after he died].”

“And then finally I woke up to myself and said ‘I gotta do this’.”

Somehow finding the strength to get back on track, she re-enrolled in the hospitality pre-employment program and got excellent results. She went on to secure a traineeship at the Hotel Kununurra and complete a Certificate II in Hospitality. In recognition of her professional success in the face of adversity, Ahwon won the 2016 NAIDOC Apprentice of the Year Award. She says she was shocked to hear her name called out but managed to deliver an impromptu speech that received a standing ovation from the audience.

“They called my name. I thought, ‘this doesn’t sound right’,” she says.

“I got up there and I really surprised myself because I didn’t prepare a speech... I got up in front of probably 1500 people, and my speech put people to tears. I got a standing ovation. It was one of the best moments of my life.”

It was receiving the award that made Ahwon realise that she “had to make a difference”, she says. She then completed the Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Leadership program, which she credits as a formative experience. The program gave her the chance to learn about culture, history and politics, and got her thinking about the issues in her town.

“It made me question: why isn’t there much out here for our youth or our people?” she says.

“There wasn’t anything that was helping, or working as well as it should be.”

After losing her cousin to suicide, Ahwon helped organise the Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Forum in 2017. Suicide rates among Aboriginal people in the Kimberley are among the highest in the world, according to the World Health Organisation. Alarming levels of

youth suicide in the region prompted a multi-stage coronial inquiry in 2017. Ahwon and fellow forum participant, Jacob Corpus, delivered the forum’s report – including a series of recommendations – to the federal government. Ahwon and Corpus were then invited to sit on a working group overseeing the three-year Kimberley Suicide Prevention Trial.

Ahwon had another opportunity to highlight issues affecting youth in her region when she was selected as a youth delegate to the federal government’s Indigenous Advisory Council earlier this year. Asked about the issues affecting young people in her town, she identified a lack of education and employment opportunities as key concerns. She hopes these issues will be addressed in the government’s ‘refresh’ of its Closing the Gap framework.

When it comes to longer-term aspirations, Ahwon isn’t sure yet what the future holds. But as long as she is advocating for young people in her region, she knows her dad would be proud.

“My dad, he always passionate about our people, and I remember him always saying to me [that] he wanted to have a big block of land with a big house and all the kids could come and stay,” Ahwon says.

Her work exposes her to distressing and unjust situations, but the memory of her dad’s love – and the ongoing support of others in her community – keeps her strong.

“My dad was my inspiration,” she says.

“It was a strong love he gave me... Because of that, I know who I am.”