

# Reconciliation News

Stories about Australia's journey to equality and unity

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League has its eye on the ball

The National Rugby League and Football Federation Australia have joined forces to support Indigenous players and coaches. The new partnership aims to improve the lives of Indigenous players and coaches through training, support and advocacy.

Chief Executive of Reconciliation Australia, Stephen Lewis, said: "The league's commitment to Indigenous players and coaches is a significant step forward. We look forward to working with the league to support Indigenous players and coaches and to improve the lives of Indigenous players and coaches through training, support and advocacy."

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Mark O'Connell  
relationships improved but



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Mark O'Connell  
relationships improved but



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RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA

*Reconciliation News* is published by Reconciliation Australia in May and October each year. Its aim is to inform and inspire readers with stories relevant to the ongoing reconciliation process between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

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Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

Reconciliation Australia is an independent, not-for-profit organisation promoting reconciliation by building relationships, respect and trust between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Visit [reconciliation.org.au](https://reconciliation.org.au) to find out more.

### Cover image:

*Reconciliation News* celebrates 50 editions with covers going back to 2005.



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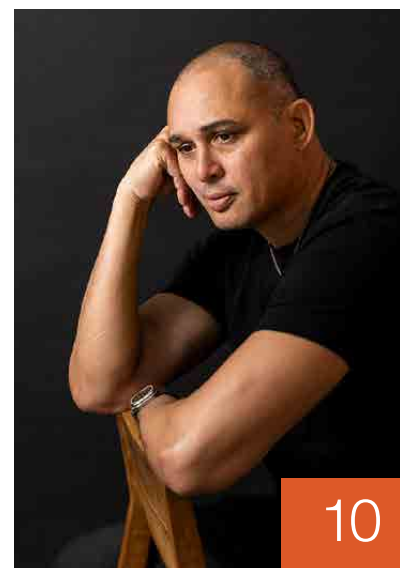
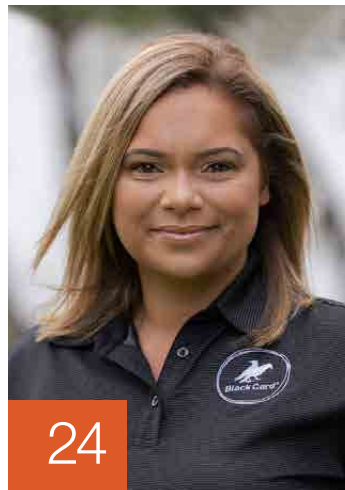
Mundanara Bayles, Supply Nation's Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year, talks legacy, success and First Nations stories.

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12: Djinama Yilaga choir at the Four Winds Festival on Yuin Country. Photo: David Rogers. 22: Meiye Roy signs 'what's up?' to her mother. Photo: Penny Smith. 24: Mundanara Bayles. Photo: supplied. 10: Thomas Mayo. Photo: Ferne Millen

# FROM THE CEO

**For 50 editions Reconciliation News has enlivened and engaged our movement through the power of stories. The highs, lows, heroes, advocates and detractors of Australia's reconciliation journey have all been reflected in its pages.**

From the very beginning the publication aimed to challenge its readership to look closer, think harder and interrogate assumptions. As my forerunner Mike Lynskey said in the first edition from 2005: 'We won't shy away from debate and will... highlight a range of opinions... [T]his is a newspaper, not a corporate mailout.'

Indeed, the front page of that first publication included the necessary truths of then-Co-Chair Jackie Huggins on the fifth anniversary of the Bridge Walks for Reconciliation: 'The emotional triumph of the bridge walks gave some people the sense that reconciliation had arrived. But the reality was that, significant as they were, the walks masked the harsh reality of a lot of what we call "unfinished business".'

Jackie knew then what we know now: facing up to truths is necessary on the road to reconciliation, no matter how painful. In fact, it is the only way to move forward.

There are many moments on this journey that trigger our instincts to look away, despair, disengage or lose hope. I see these moments as alarm bells. They are our cue to turn towards the truth – to make sure we continue paying attention and showing up wherever we can, despite our discomfort.

After all, when prejudice is ignited – leading to nuance and empathy being left by the wayside – the answer cannot be to disengage. The answer to division cannot be disconnection.

This 50th edition of Reconciliation News is being published in the wake of the no vote to the referendum on a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The aspirations of Voice, Treaty and Truth proposed in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart acted as a clarion call to the reconciliation movement, energising and breathing new life into our mission. After all, First Nations people having a say in our own affairs has been central to reconciliation since the very beginning, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called for political representation for over a century.



CEO Karen Mundine. Photo: Joseph Mayers

The harsh truth is that the referendum result is a profound disappointment to us all. Another harsh truth is that Australia has a long way to go on its reconciliation journey. And another is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were subject to profound racism and harm in the discussion surrounding the referendum.

But it is also true that six million Australians voted 'Yes'. Tens of thousands of people volunteered their time and support, and many First Nations communities, particularly in remote areas, voted in favour of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Unprecedented numbers of organisations, schools, community groups and sports teams also pledged their support.

This is not the first time the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been set back. Nor have these setbacks ever deterred First Nations Elders and leaders—the fight for justice and rights will continue. This is the truth.

Now is not the time to stop listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This edition of Reconciliation News is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people raising their voices and singing their stories despite setbacks. Mundanara Bayles hates the sound of her voice, but she's following in her dad's footsteps with her groundbreaking podcast. Once policed for speaking in Dhurga, intergenerational Yuin choir Djinama Yilaga are reclaiming their language through song. Jack Bulman couldn't find a place for Aboriginal men to get together to talk, but now his organisation Mibbinbah creates safe spaces for community to love and listen. Creating a monument to the Convincing Ground Massacre in Portland, Victoria, Walter Saunder's sculpture sparks an ongoing conversation on truth-telling in his community. Never told the language her grandmother was speaking, Denise Smith-Ali OAM has been on a quest to revitalise her Noongar language.

The truth is we all have the power to support, engage and invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. Formally, informally, at work or in your day-to-day, make the choice to listen. Make the choice to prioritise our stories, perspectives and knowledge.

Do not allow the inflamed, divisive rhetoric of the referendum lead to disengagement. Instead let it forge your resolve to listen and act. Now more than ever, turn towards the truth: we are better, stronger, more just and more equitable when we are connected.

Thank you to everyone who supported our organisation as we undertook this campaign. As we have always said, reconciliation is hard work – it's a long, winding and corrugated road, not a broad, paved highway. We appreciate you walking alongside us.



**Karen Mundine**  
Chief Executive Officer

## STAY CONNECTED, STAY POWERFUL

**Thousands of Australians advocated for a Yes vote in the referendum. Now more than ever we need to maintain our incredible collective strength and potential. Together we have the power make the change we want to see. Here are four actions you can do right now to keep up our momentum.**

### 1. CHECK ON YOUR COMMUNITY

This has been a difficult time for many. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have carried an especially heavy burden. Reach out to your community, friends and colleagues with your support. Check in and stay connected.

### 2. CALL OUT RACISM

Racist, misinformed and ignorant remarks have become commonplace and permissible, especially on social media. This hatred is unacceptable and creates lasting harm. All supporters of reconciliation are needed to stay vigilant against racism and call it out for what it is. Speak up. Report comments. Support victims.

### 3. FIND INSPIRATION

For millennia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and Elders have successfully advocated for progress and change despite profound obstacles. Research First Nations leaders and advocacy groups from the past and from today. Take strength from their perseverance and achievements. Share their stories of success with others.

### 4. KEEP UP THE CONNECTION

Many Australians volunteered for the first time in support of a Yes vote in the referendum. The organising, energy and relationships can and should be maintained. Reach out to your local reconciliation group. Connect with the Indigenous community-controlled organisations in your area and help push for change on the issues they advocate for. Stay engaged. Stay committed.



# RECONCILIATION RECAP



**NAIDOC Week**  
2–9 July 2023

NAIDOC Week, a week of celebrations and recognition of the history and achievements of First Nations people, kicked off again this year with the theme 'For Our Elders'. NAIDOC owes its origins to one of the world's first civil rights events, the 1938 Day of Mourning, which called for a national day to celebrate Aboriginal people and culture.

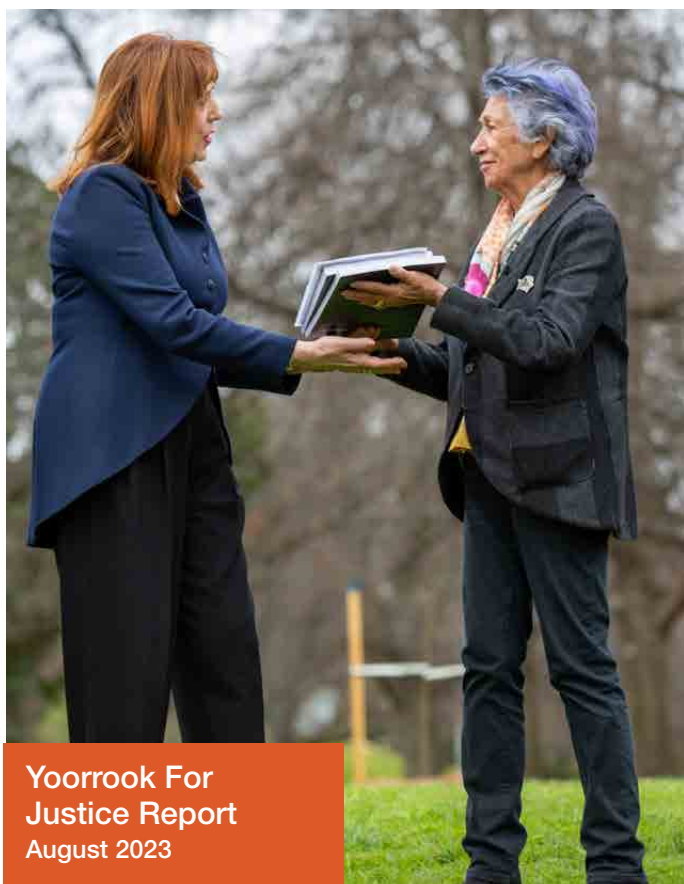
This year's theme reflected the treasured place Elders hold in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as holders of knowledge, teachers, leaders, advocates, and trailblazers. As the national NAIDOC committee wrote, 'Across every generation, our Elders have played, and continue to play, an important role and hold a prominent place in our communities and families.'

This year the National NAIDOC Week Awards Ceremony was held in Meanjin (Brisbane) with an array of talent vying for the awards. Among the winners were health pioneer Naomi Mayers (Lifetime Achievement), surgeon Dr Kelvin Kong (Person of the Year) and Meuram woman from Erub Island Lala Gutchen, (Caring for Country and Culture), for her work in revitalising Torres Straits languages.

NAIDOC Week is an opportunity for all Australians to learn about First Nations cultures and histories and participate in celebrations of the oldest, continuous living cultures on earth.

To learn more about NAIDOC Week visit: [naidoc.org.au](https://naidoc.org.au)

*Supporters at the 2023 NAIDOC week march in Melbourne. Photo: Matt Hrkac via flickr.com/photos/matthrkac, CC BY 2.0*



**Yoorrook For Justice Report**  
August 2023

The Yoorrook Justice Commission was established in May 2021 as part of the Victorian Government's commitment to negotiating a treaty with First Nations peoples in the state.

'Yoo-rrook' is the Wemba Wemba / Wamba Wamba word for 'truth', and the five Commissioners who sit on the body are charged with formally reckoning with Victoria's brutal history of mistreatment of First Nations peoples and laying the foundations for healing. It does this by initiating the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria.

In September this year the Yoorrook Justice Commission released *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*, detailing evidence of systemic injustice, including racism, discriminatory laws and policies which have caused extensive harm to the state's Aboriginal peoples. The report highlights that continuing injustices against Aboriginal people have deep roots in the foundations of the state and makes 46 important recommendations for reform.

To read these recommendations visit:

[yoorrookforjustice.org.au/recommendations](https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/recommendations)

*Chair of the Yoorrook Justice Commission Professor Eleanor Bourke AM hands the landmark Yoorrook for Justice report to Governor of Victoria Professor Margaret Gardner. Photo: Leandro Palacio, courtesy Yoorrook Justice Commission*



**Garma Festival**  
4–7 August 2023

This year's Garma Festival at Gulkula – a Gumatj ceremonial site on the lands of the Yolngu people – was particularly significant. It was the first festival since the passing of Gumatj clan leader and veteran of the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, Yunupingu, and it was at Garma in 2022 that the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, committed his government to the referendum to enshrine a First Nations Voice to Parliament.

'Not our sympathy, not a symbol – a vehicle for progress, a practical tool to make their children's lives better,' Prime Minister Albanese said of Voice to Parliament to those assembled at the festival.

Since 2006, Reconciliation Australia has hosted a select group from various sectors at Garma Festival, and this year invited a group of influential education specialists. Attendees witnessed the miny'tji (art), manikay (song), bunggul (dance) and storytelling spread across four days. The event, hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation, is an open invitation to all Australians to experience traditional culture and engage in a dialogue.

Learn more about Garma: [yvf.com.au/garma-festival](https://yvf.com.au/garma-festival)

*Reconciliation Australia's group at Garma Festival.  
Photo: Reconciliation Australia.*



**The Long Walk II**  
14 September 2023

In the 1990s Michael Long, Anmatyerre, Maranunggu and Tiwi man, and one of the greatest players to ever pull on a pair of footy boots, became the face of anti-racism in Australia. Then in 2004, in response to the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, he began an historic Long Walk to Canberra to ask then Prime Minister John Howard 'Where is the love for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?'. Michael Long became, 'A guiding figure for the reconciliation movement,' as CEO of Reconciliation Australia Karen Mundine described him.

Twenty years later in 2023 Michael Long decided it was time for another Long Walk. This time he walked in support of a Voice to Parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He walked from Wurundjeri Country to Ngannawal-Ngambri Country over three weeks, arriving in Canberra on 14 September. On his way he was joined by thousands of Australians who wanted to support his efforts for reconciliation and justice, among them many proud staff and directors of Reconciliation Australia.

To find out more about Michael Long and his Long Walk visit: [thelongwalk.com.au](https://thelongwalk.com.au)

*Reconciliation Australia staff with Michael Long at the end of his Long Walk to Canberra. L-R: Christine Wallwork, Karen Mundine, Michael Long, Mikala McConnell, Sophie Bolge. Photo: Reconciliation Australia*



**Walks For Yes**  
17 September 2023

The Walks for Yes saw tens of thousands of people flood capital cities and regional towns across Australia in support of recognising

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution through a Voice to Parliament.

Wearing t-shirts emblazoned with 'Yes' and carrying placards ranging from inspiring ('Silence never made history') to irate ('It's an advisory panel, not Armageddon!'), Australians of all ages showed up to show their commitment to a fairer and more just nation.

Adelaide kicked off on Saturday 16 September, with thousands gathering in Victoria Square before marching through central Adelaide.

Paul Kelly gave a rousing hometown performance for the crowd.

In Canberra, Ngannawal Elder Auntie Violet Sheridan addressed the crowd at the beginning of the walk, declaring 'This isn't just about the past it's about the future, our voices deserve to be heard in the decisions that shape our lives of our children, our grandchildren... This isn't a political matter; it is a matter of respect and justice.'

*Walk for Yes supporters walk along Cleveland Street, Sydney carrying signs in support to an Voice to Parliament. Photo: Pete Dovgan/Speed Media/Alamy*



# BE A VOICE FOR GENERATIONS

## NATIONAL RECONCILIATION WEEK 2023

**National Reconciliation Week this year was filled with actions, events and conversations as supporters around the nation embodied the theme *Be A Voice for Generations* in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament referendum.**

National Reconciliation Week – 27 May to 3 June – a time for all Australians to explore how each of us can contribute to achieving reconciliation. In 2023, activities during the week were made that much more significant as the nation prepared for the Voice to Parliament referendum.

The theme *Be a Voice for Generations* called on Australians to honour our long history of allyship and solidarity to tackle the unfinished business of reconciliation for the generations to come.

Giving voice to the theme was the overwhelming response to the Voices For Generations project, which saw more than 500 choirs and school groups from across the country come together to sing *From Little Things Big Things Grow* by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody; an iconic Australian song that pays tribute to the Gurindji people and is symbolic of the movement for First Nations equality and land rights in Australia. The choirs reflected the diversity of Australian society: schools, trade unions, disability groups, AUSLAN, LGBTQI+, faith-based and culturally and linguistically diverse groups participated.



On 30 May the NRW parliamentary breakfast united reconciliation supporters from around the country at a critical and historic time in our reconciliation journey. It featured a panel discussion with L-R: Craig Foster, Semara Jose, and Auntie Geraldine Atkinson, moderated by Narelda Jacobs. *Photo: Andrew Taylor*



Reconciliation NSW's community information session on the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the referendum (pictured). They also hosted an in-person and online breakfast, and launched the Schools Reconciliation Challenge Exhibition: Under One Sky. *Photo: supplied*





Cootamundra Girls Aboriginal Corporation's Sorry Day event, on 27 May was the largest gathering of Coota Girls survivors held in over 10 years. Djinama Yilaga Choir (pictured) were among the performers. *Photo: Reconciliation Australia*



Over 1,500 supporters came together in Tasmania to hear from local speakers and acclaimed journalist Ray Martin at Reconciliation Tasmania's Devonport, Launceston and Hobart breakfasts. Pictured are Ray (L) and Palawa man Ged Watts. *Photo: Chris Crerar*



Reconciliation WA hosted their virtual breakfast live from the Boola Bardip WA Museum, and held the annual Walk for Reconciliation at Kaarta Koomba (attendees pictured). *Photo: Todd Russell, The Digital Factory*



Reconciliation Australia and Reconciliation Victoria were at the Long Walk in Melbourne, with colouring-in activities and yarning circles covering self-determination, truth-telling, and the NRW theme. *Photo: Reconciliation Australia*



This year's Reconciliation SA's National Reconciliation Week Breakfast commemorated National Sorry Day. *Photo: Samuel Graves*



Thousands enjoyed the winter sunshine at Reconciliation Day at the National Arboretum hosted by the ACT Reconciliation Council. *Photo: Reconciliation Australia*



Thomas Mayo. Photo: Mitchel Drescher

# THE MOVEMENT THAT FOLLOWS THE VOICE

**Although the Voice referendum was lost, and despite the racist vitriol it unleashed, the movement for First Nations rights and recognition has grown, argues Thomas Mayo.**

As a parent of five, I am acutely aware of the way in which our children absorb everything while we try our best to protect them from the harsh realities of the world.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for my 12-year-old son's reaction to the referendum loss on Saturday. When I called my wife soon after the loss became official, to see how they were, she told me he had cried. He went to bed early, barely consolable.

We came to realise he had been feeling the weight of the referendum on his little shoulders. For the first time since the loss, I cried too.

Anyone who put up their head for 'Yes' was labelled as communists, greedy elites, puppets of the United Nations and promoters of a racially divided Australia.

The racist vitriol was at a level not seen for decades in Australia. First Nations advocates for the Voice could not speak out about the abuse without some sections of the media falsely claiming that we were calling all 'No' voters racist.


The 'No' side, on the other hand, was barely scrutinised. When their figureheads claimed racism against them, some journalists showed sympathy and the 'Yes' campaign was scapegoated. When leading

spokespeople for the 'No' campaign were racist beyond denial, their leaders doubled down defiantly and the media's focus quickly moved on.

I believe that Indigenous peoples were correct to take the invitation in the Uluru Statement from the Heart to the Australian people. We were not wrong to ask them to recognise us through a Voice.

For a people who are a minority spread across this vast continent – with a parliament that will continue to make laws and policies about us – it is inevitable that we will need to establish a national representative body to pursue justice. We need to be organised.





Delaying the referendum was never an option, not even when the polls were going south. Had we convinced the government to postpone the referendum, we would still be wondering what could have been, especially if the gaps continue to widen.

As a leader of the campaign, I accept that, although we tried our best, we failed.

An honest assessment compels me to mention Opposition Leader Peter Dutton as well. Dutton is bereft of the qualities held by the First Nations leaders I have worked with.

While Prime Minister Albanese listened to Indigenous peoples respectfully, Dutton ignored us when in power. When Albanese negotiated the constitutional alteration with the Referendum Working Group, he did so in good faith, while Dutton was duplicitous, two-faced, deceitful.

The record shows the Prime Minister followed through with his pre-election promise to hold a referendum in this term of parliament, whereas Dutton has already reneged on his promise to hold another referendum.

This is all politics on Dutton's part. If he ever becomes prime minister, it is an indication that he places no value in speaking with Indigenous people before making decisions about them.

Peter Dutton chose politics over outcomes. His career came before fairness. He sought victory at any cost.

In 2017, we were almost 4 per cent of the population calling for Voice, Treaty and Truth-Telling. As of 14 October, we are nearly 40 per cent, walking together. Just over six million Australians voted 'Yes'.

Polling booths in predominantly Indigenous communities across the entirety of the country overwhelmingly voted 'Yes'. We have thoroughly established that this is fact: a great majority of Indigenous people support constitutional recognition through a Voice to Parliament. We seek self-determination over who speaks for us. Claims otherwise are an incontrovertible lie.

To my fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I say we continue our push for our common goals. Don't be silenced. Be louder, prouder and more defiant.

To the parents I met so many times, who turned up for their first doorknock with their little ones in tow, their 'Yes' shirts worn proudly, sunscreen smeared on their faces: keep having those conversations with your neighbours at every opportunity. Keep turning up.

To the random members of the public who have hugged me, to the beautiful Elders who treated me like a son, to the fellow unionists who organised their communities and places of work, maintain the love for what makes this country unique – more than 60,000 years of continuous heritage and culture.

While the outcome was disappointing, in all my years of advocacy for Indigenous rights, I have never felt such levels of solidarity.

I have new Aunties and Uncles, like the strong Aboriginal women at Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation in Mount Druitt, who themselves have formed bonds with the local ethnic communities as they campaigned for 'Yes'. I love you, Aunties.

In this campaign we saw Liberals and Nationals give speeches alongside Labor and the Greens. We saw corporate chief executives leafleting with union officials. All denominations have prayed together.

Indigenous leaders continue calls for our voices to be heard, for reform and for justice, and we need your ongoing support.

We were always on the right side of history. Young Australians voted 'Yes' with us. Imagine what we can achieve if the over six million Australians who voted 'Yes' continue to have conversations with their neighbours, meeting No voters with an understanding that they may have voted 'No' because of the lies they were told. In time, we will turn the 'Nos' into 'Yeses'.

Let us believe in ourselves, our communities and our country, rather than looking over our shoulders at the shadows Peter Dutton has thrown across Australian politics.

When I was writing my first book about the Uluru Statement from the Heart my eight years old son asked me what the title of the book would be. When I asked him what he would call it, he proceeded to do a series of armpit farts. We both laughed. Then I told him I would call it Finding the Heart of the Nation. He asked me, 'Where is the heart of the nation?'

I put my laptop down beside me on the couch. I pulled him close. I put my hand on his chest, and I said, 'The heart of the nation is here.' The heart of the nation is still here. It always was and it always will be, waiting to be recognised by our fellow Australians.

Whether you voted 'Yes' or 'No', I say to you with humility and respect, open your hearts and your minds.

The truth should be unifying, not divisive.

This article was first published in The Saturday Paper. Go to [thesaturdaypaper.com.au](https://thesaturdaypaper.com.au) to read more.

# WE WANT TO SING LIKE OUR ANCESTORS: THE STORY OF DJINAMA YILAGA



*Cheryl singing in the Dhurga language with Djinama Yilaga Choir at the 2023 Four Winds Music Festival in Barragga Bay NSW, on Yuin Country. Photo: David Rogers*

**An intergenerational Yuin choir is helping to revitalise and renew the Dhurga language – an act that would have seen them thrown in jail only a generation before.**

Walbunga/Ngarigo artist Cheryl Davison remembers being an eight-year-old girl, watching a group of Northern Territory Aboriginal dancers perform at the local Warrawong shopping centre. She and her cousins from the NSW South Coast looked on in awe: 'I don't know who they was, but there was a big mob of them, all singing and dancing and talking in language.'

She recalls going home and telling her father and aunty about these Blackfullas she'd seen dancing and speaking in a strange language.



*It was singing in their own language that was the catalyst for people to become more enthusiastic.*

'My dad told me that I too was Blackfulla and that our people used to talk like that. I said, "Why didn't you teach us?" I felt a bit upset that we hadn't learned our language.'

Many decades later Cheryl leads Djinama Yilaga, a renowned choir made up of South Coast Yuin people, helping to revitalise her ancestors' language, Dhurga, through song.

Before colonisation of their land, Yuin people were multilingual, speaking and understanding languages of neighbouring and visiting groups. Dhurga was the mother tongue of the Walbunga people of the Broulee region and the Brindja Yuin people of Moruya. It was spoken and understood by many within the 13 tribes of the Yuin Nation.

The arrival of Europeans into the South Coast region of NSW changed everything and speaking Dhurga language became a punishable offense for Yuin.

Decades after hearing those NT dancers speaking language, Cheryl discovered that her grandmother and great-grandmother were both fluent Dhurga speakers but used to usher the kids out of the room when they spoke.

Despite this, Cheryl's Dad and the other kids would pick up words from their grandmums and if they repeated these words at school their teachers would report them to the police.

'The police turned up at Nan's doorstep and said, "You teach them kids anymore that language and we're going to chuck you in jail,"' said Cheryl. 'So, there's always been that hurt and feeling very robbed, you know of something so beautiful that we missed out on as a community.'

The Djinama Yilaga choir started in 2018 when Cheryl was working at Four Winds Festival, an annual music and culture event set in the bush near Bermagui on the South Coast.

Cheryl, with no history or background in music, organised for Lou Bennet from the iconic band Tiddas to deliver a unique workshop for the community, which led to the idea of forming a choir.

'Because I thought forming a choir would be easy!', she said. 'But it wasn't easy.'

It was difficult to keep the women engaged in choir practice and they would often drop out. Cheryl explains that in the beginning the choir only sang songs that everyone knew. 'We were just singing songs, hymns that we knew, and songs that we liked. It was hard because a lot of the women in our community are embarrassed and shy and many left after just a short time.'

'I just had to think outside of the box; what's something that would bring community in?'

Then one day during rehearsals the women started singing Christine Anu's and Tiddas' songs in language. The women sang these songs in languages that they did not understand and that did not belong to them. Cheryl had an idea!

'I thought if we can do that, if we can sing those words and memorise that language, surely we can learn our own,' she remembers. 'So that's where it all started. Let's have a crack at our own language.'

From that moment on opportunities started opening up for the choir. It was singing in their own language that was the catalyst for people to become more enthusiastic.

'When we learn our language from this Country, it gives us such a deeper connection. We don't feel like we are singing to audiences; it's like we're singing for Country more than anything,' said Cheryl. 'We want to sound like our ancestors.'

The first few songs they wrote were created from Dhurga words, but these songs suffered from a lack of grammar and syntax. Then in 2020 a Dhurga language dictionary was produced by local Yuin siblings Trish Ellis, Kerry Boyenga and Wayne Donovan and published by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

And now Moruya and Ulladulla TAFE are both offering Certificates in Dhurga language.

TAFE students agree with Cheryl that the language courses have done a lot to bring the community together. Ulladulla student Gayle Nolan told TAFE that she loves talking in Dhurga. 'It's something we've not been able to do until now. It's an amazing feeling for us to be able to hear our language in song, poetry, and stories.'

In this International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the Dhurga language of the NSW South Coast is being revitalised. Across the continent the members of Djinama Yilaga are proudly highlighting their ancestral tongue and recently the choir toured Poland to present their Yuin culture to Europe.

'We're singing our Country. Our ancestors are around us all the time. Yeah, we know that. We believe that. We feel that,' declares Cheryl Davison.



*Lisa Bulman and Jack Bulman help communities listen and love through Mibbinbah's yarning circles, where people feel safe and supported to share.  
Photo: Chris Munro*

# LOVE, HEALING AND THE ART OF LISTENING: THE MIBBINBAH STORY

**The success of one organisation's yarning circles with First Nations men has wide-reaching lessons for why safe spaces for love, conversation and deep-listening are essential to healing.**

A young man slowly rises from his chair and speaks in a quiet, hesitant voice. The other men in the yarning circle are silent as they listen intently to the young man's story of abuse, deprivation and poverty.

As the young man finishes his story the other men rise to wrap their arms around him in a show of love and compassion. He breaks into sobs, as he tells the men embracing him that he has never before shared his story.

This is just one story of many from gatherings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men from across Australia. The annual gatherings are part of the work of an organisation called Mibbinbah Spirit Healing which has been working with First Nations men for more than a decade.

Founder and Mibbinbah CEO Jack Bulman is a Muthi Muthi man who says that yarning circles, where people's stories are listened to with respect and love, have been a key part of Mibbinbah's success. 'I get to witness some really beautiful, deep hearted conversations around creating change and healing in our communities,' he said. 'The importance of a safe place where we can be listened to cannot be underestimated in our healing.'



## Searching for safety

Jack's emphasis on safe spaces can be traced to the origins of Mibbinbah when more than a decade ago he had just completed a Bachelor of Health Sciences degree and started a job with the Kalwun Aboriginal Health Service on Queensland's Gold Coast.

'My job was to get the fellas together to talk about health issues,' he said. 'We wanted to set up a men's group, but we didn't have a space for that, so we just met wherever we could. Whether it be in the park or next to the beach or whatever. But whenever we had 20 to 25 Blackfullas gathered together in public the police would come straight away and tell us to move on.'

'We couldn't go anywhere, and we couldn't talk anywhere. We didn't have a safe space to be able to come together to talk about our health issues or whatever it might be.'

Jack and some colleagues took their problem to the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health which helped establish a qualitative men's health research program. Then in 2009 Mibbinbah became a health promotion charity, essentially becoming the peak coordinating body for the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's movement.

According to Jack the key is listening. 'A lot of times people hear what others are saying, but they're not actually listening. It's really important to listen.'

'The government come in and say this is what's wrong with you and this is how we are going to fix it. But our approach is to ask about the concerns and issues and then what the solutions are as well.'

The work is hard but Mibbinbah's work is undoubtedly saving lives and protecting families from further trauma.

Jack tells the story of one man who opened up to talk about the depths of depression he was in and how he had tried to take his own life three times.

'He told us he was planning to do it again and this time he thought he would get it right, until he come to the gathering... it was an incredibly emotional time and if he hadn't had that camp he mightn't be here today, and he's done marvellous things since those times.'

## The power of love

Jack sees a side of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men that defies stereotypes.

'One of the big strengths of our men is they wanna talk about love which I don't think other people get to hear. They see an angry black man, but we see the best man. We see fellas that want to talk about love, who wanna be there for their families.'

Which is why, after advice from different Elders in the communities they visited, the organisation stopped working exclusively with men and invited women and children to their gatherings and yarning circles.

Lisa Bulman is a Gunditjmara woman and since 2014 she's been one of Mibbinbah's leading facilitators. She thinks the inclusion of women and children into their work has been a critical development for the organisation.

'I think that both sides get to listen to each other, start to better understand each other; understand what the males want, what the females want and what the kids want, what Elders want. I think that all sides get heard, which then creates the change,' she said.

She agrees with Jack that yarning circles and the art of deep listening are essential to Mibbinbah's work

'Whoever's going through a tough time, there's everyone in that circle supporting that person, and what I love about the space is that people do listen to each other.'

'It's an unusual thing to hear the word love being spoken when we talk about the challenges Aboriginal people face, but there is so much love in our communities. And I think if people made the time to sit and talk to our people, they would feel that love. They would feel the connection and the support that happens in communities.'

She argues the communities Mibbinbah works with have the information, the knowledge and very often have all the answers to the challenges they face. What is missing, she suggests, is the ability of governments and bureaucrats to listen.

'I think we carry this pride of who we are and where we're from and whatever happens to us, I think that we're all able to get up and get on with it,' said Lisa. 'And I think what we do really well is support and listen to each other.'

'I just think kindness goes a long way. It doesn't matter what colour you are, where you're from. As one of the beautiful uncles in Wadeye said to us, "We all have one heart and love is love. There is no colour with love and we all should be kind to each other."'

'If other Australians could learn to listen to us, they could learn a lot.'

To support Jack and Lisa's essential work with Mibbinbah, go to:  
[mibbinbah.org/contact](https://mibbinbah.org/contact)



*Walter Saunders (R) with the newly installed Mayapa Weeyn sculpture, alongside Jason Scott who collaborated on the construction. Photo: Damian Goodman*

# IT'S ABOUT TIME THE STORY WAS TOLD: TRUTH-TELLING THROUGH ART AND CONNECTION

**A new report by Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation commissioned by Reconciliation Australia showcases community truth-telling changing narratives of our shared history. Such is the case with Mayapa Weeyn, a sculpture that has created a conversation in Portland, Victoria about who and what we commemorate.**

**Gunditjmara Original Custodian Walter Saunders created Mayapa Weeyn and co-authored this story.**

Truth-telling moments are a way to bring people together over shared histories. They begin as an invitation: a chance to learn and experience stories through a local cultural lens. But the power of truth-telling doesn't end there. Often a process is sparked – one that can change a whole community's view on their past and impact their future.

The Convincing Ground massacre is the name given to the first major recorded massacre in Victoria. It happened on the coast at Allestree on the coast of Kardermudelar (Portland Bay), roughly 10 km from the town of Portland, now the Shire of Glenelg in southwestern Victoria. Approximately 60 members of the Gunditjmara Tribe were killed in a dispute over ownership of a beached whale. Only two members of the clans survived the massacre.





In 2005, members of the Aboriginal community, through their Cultural Heritage Officer, halted bulldozing and development work at the Convincing Ground site. The community, including Walter Saunders, heavily advocated for the sacred site. Their advocacy convinced the Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal, and it was agreed the site would be set aside as a reserve.

### A new kind of monument

Walter's truth-telling advocacy didn't end there. Throughout the area there are statues of early settlers permanently promoting the 'heroic' colonial past, Walter set about creating a monument to his people to contrast this imperial narrative.

The Cart Gunditj and all 59 clans of the Dhauwurd Wurrung are commemorated in Walter's statue, *Mayapa Weeyn* (make fire). It symbolises the signal fires the Cart Gunditj lit to alert other clans when whales beached. Even though these events were noted in historical diaries and journals, Walter's story through the sculpture became an accessible way to have a conversation, sometimes in unexpected ways.

'I had to design the sculpture, buy the stainless steel and weld the five-metre-tall sculpture in my shed,' Walter says. 'I had to get it cut out by the laser cutters, purchase fasteners and welding rods. All of the shopkeepers and other people involved in that process knew the story and said "Congratulations, it's about time the story was told."'

Walter erected the sculpture in 2018 at Whaler's Lookout on Cart Mountain. With *Mayapa Weeyn* firmly embedded physically in the town, Walter continues to tell stories to residents and tourists about Convincing Ground. It's an ongoing conversation inspiring others to share truths in response. During a talk

at the local library, a resident revealed to him: 'My family killed an Aboriginal person and they threw him in the well, and then we filled up the well, and I know where the well is, Wal.'

### The conversation continues

The community is taking ownership of this shared history, restoring the site itself as a reflective area. The Gunditj Mirring corporation won a \$30K grant in 2020 and set about cleaning up the site, replacing weeds with native plants. They plan for it to be a place for learning the full history of the site and to 'contemplate a healing future'.

While these plans are underway, an annual smoking ceremony has been taking place at the site on 26 January, led by Gunditjmara man, Chris Saunders. Over a few years the small number of attendees grew to a crowd of 300. Chris says, 'At first, it was just family and Elders ... But now, it's shifted to include the wider community, which we wanted to see all along.' A private ceremony for Traditional Owners is held at dawn beforehand.

Later in the morning, another smoking ceremony takes place for the wider community at 'the Ploughed Ground' in Portland. This area is claimed to be the spot where the Henty family first ploughed the land, 'introducing' European farming to Victoria. A memorial stone stands 'in commemoration of the discovery of Portland Bay by Lt James Grant' in 1800. However, there's evidence of Gunditjmara people cultivating the land well before settlers arrived.

### A shared story and steps forward together

With truth-telling spreading through the community through experiential and informal processes, the community

is inspired to know more. They're questioning what's around them, and what to do about it. Two years after *Mayapa Weeyn* was installed, local Gunditjmara resident Shea Rotumah called for the council to assess their stance on the colonial monuments. The mayor committed to auditing the monuments and better understanding their significance.

As the community explores its history more deeply, Walter points out that people must be appropriately supported to meaningfully participate in community truth-telling, should they wish to do so. He also emphasises it's about embedding agency and sovereignty rather than victimhood.

Over the decades of truth-telling for this community (so far), discussion has moved away from a debate about whether a massacre happened or how many people died. It has become about increasing recognition of and respect for the significance of these events for Gunditjmara people.

People are taking more initiative to learn truths in histories, knowing more about their effects on Aboriginal people and the community. They're being proactive, sharing the commemoration event through advertising in the community and on Facebook. For this coastal Victorian community, it's a step forwards together – to better understanding and eventual reconciliation.

*The Recognising community truth-telling: An exploration of local truth-telling in Australia report documents 25 community truth-telling projects, including 10 in-depth case studies. Read the full report at:*

[reconciliation.org.au/publications](https://reconciliation.org.au/publications)

*See more of Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation's research:*

[deakin.edu.au/adi](https://deakin.edu.au/adi)

# WHAT NEXT FOR RAPS AFTER THE REFERENDUM?

In late October Reconciliation Australia hosted a webinar for Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) partners to talk about reconciliation after the referendum. With over a thousand participants, CEO Karen Mundine and RAP General Manager Peter Morris discussed why RAP organisations must increase their work for First Nations justice. This is a summary of their thoughts.

The referendum is still fresh in everyone's minds, and it will take time for us to come to terms with the result and what the next steps are.

While public figures reassured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that the referendum was 'not about them,' the personal toll of the outcome is inescapable. It is therefore crucial that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – as well as non-Indigenous allies – are given space and time to process the outcome.

For the RAP program, this also means acknowledging that the RAP network is diverse and comprises of both people from areas with a strong Yes vote and people from areas with an overwhelming No vote. Consequently, the task for RAP partners is to not jump too quickly to 'What's next?'

## Relationships led by listening

The national dialogue has provided conflicting commentary on the future of Australia's reconciliation process post-referendum. This confusion comes down to inconsistent views on what 'reconciliation' means.

At its heart, reconciliation is about building stronger relationships between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. That work was made harder by the referendum. But, now more than ever, the work to build respectful relationships is critical.

Many RAP organisations accepted the generous invitation in the Uluru Statement from the Heart and supported the Yes campaign because they had seen the positive results of listening. Thousands of RAP organisation have seen firsthand that listening has delivered more welcoming workplaces, better ways of doing business, more diverse supply chains, and better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader community.

It is now the job of non-Indigenous people to show up and bring more Australians with them. The 6.2 million Australians who voted Yes and the 60,000 volunteers are the potential for the future of this movement.



*The referendum might mean the community expects organisations to move faster, be braver and invest more resources to drive change.*

## Ways forward

The referendum outcome does not change the aspirations of First Nations peoples. Voting patterns in remote communities all over the country showed overwhelming support for the Voice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, affirming findings from the Australian Reconciliation Barometer and polling during the campaign.

In addition to the Voice, the Uluru Statement from the Heart calls for treaty: a process for ethical agreement making; and truth-telling: a process that underlines the truths of our shared history that is respectful, and First Nations-led. The principles remain deeply important to advancing justice.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an invitation to the Australian people and, by extension, to Australian organisations. Every RAP organisation must reflect on how they listen and respond to the voices of First Nations stakeholders. They must consider their commitment to ethical agreement making with First Nations partners. And they must consider their role in telling the truth about their organisation's history and our shared history as a nation.

Reconciliation Australia's vision for reconciliation is based on five interrelated dimensions: race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity, unity and historical acceptance.

While all five are relevant to the referendum outcome, race relations and historical acceptance stand out. The campaign laid bare the long road ahead for Australia when it comes to race relations. The referendum saw an upsurge in racism and clearly indicated the need for concerted efforts to address it.

We also saw the need for historical acceptance. We must acknowledge that a lot of people who voted 'No' did so because of their lack of historical knowledge and lack of relationships with First Nations people. Many do not believe that there is a discrepancy in the experiences of First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia.

## The role of RAPs

As a nation, we have yet to reach that tipping point where most Australians understand our history and how it impacts the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We know that when employees are engaged in their organisation's RAP activities, that begins to change. Cultural awareness training helps them understand truths about our history. Aboriginal and Torres Strait employment and procurement strategies provide pathways to build relationships with First Nations people. Engaged employees are more active, brave and passionate about reconciliation.

For those newer to the RAP network, it is important to understand that the framework is sound. It has delivered better outcomes for thousands of diverse Australian organisations for almost 20 years. The referendum does not change the relevance of those strategies. But it might mean the community expects organisations to move faster, be braver and invest more resources to drive change.

For those leaders in the RAP network, the referendum outcome poses an existential question: what does your leadership truly mean? Are you committed to transforming your business, your sector, and our country? Will you lean into your leadership? Will you redouble your efforts to listen to the voices of First Nations peoples? Will you tackle racism head on? Will you commit to truth-telling?

And to every individual employee of a RAP organisation, the referendum outcome is a challenge to be courageous and take reconciliation beyond your workplace and into your communities, friendship groups and families. Education is vital – encourage the schools and early learning services in your area to develop a RAP.

These next steps will be difficult, but it is critical that RAP partners play their part. The referendum has shown us the scope of the barriers, but every one of us has the power to listen to, and hear, the voices of First Nations communities and partners in every aspect of our work.

Despite the recent setback, the work of reconciliation is needed now more than ever.



Denise Smith-Ali has dedicated her life to revitalising her Noongar language.  
Photo: Grace Burmas, ABC

# NI! (LISTEN!) WE ARE BRINGING OUR LANGUAGE BACK!

**The UN's International Decade of Indigenous Languages started in 2022. We sat down with Denise Smith-Ali OAM, a Noongar woman of the Kaneang and Wilman clans of the people of southwestern Australia, who is working hard to revitalise the Noongar language.**

## *What can you tell us about the Noongar language?*

The Noongar language has three major dialects for fourteen clans. It's one language with the main differences between the dialects is a lot of vowel changes. You get many words that are pronounced the same but might be spelt differently.

The language that's used today is a very contemporary language – it's not the same as the old traditional Noongar language.

I work at the Noongar Boodjar Language Centre where I continue to work on my language as a senior linguist. It's really fantastic! We have other trainee linguists coming up here, learning more about our Noongar.

## *How much was Noongar spoken when you were growing up?*

I remember a bit of the language being spoken. My grandmother was over a hundred years old when I was a teenager, and she hardly spoke English – Noongar was her language. But sadly, no one ever suggested I record her. No one said, 'Your Grandmother is speaking Noongar'. But she did write a word list of 150 Noongar words about 130 years ago. She loved it!

I knew some language but not a lot, because I was put into a mission and that stopped people speaking language. But it didn't stop me from finding out what happened, and why our language was being lost and how to stop that loss. So, I became very curious about my language and my identity.



*I've always said we must keep these small campfires burning. Let them burn and let people grow in their knowledge of language and culture.*

*Why did colonial authorities and later state governments go to such efforts to stop Aboriginal people speaking their languages?*

The whole point was to make Australia become white (and we are still not recognised in the Australian Constitution as the Indigenous peoples with our own languages).

Language is our identity, our culture. Our people knew what the birds talked about; they knew all the plants and animals. It was in our DNA. The colonisers didn't want our people to speak our language and keep it strong.

They thought our culture and language 'dirty' and 'inferior', and wanted everyone to become like white people. They didn't want the world to know that we were already living here with own customary law and unique culture. So they stopped people from talking language. They tried to flog the language out of our lives.

*Tell me about bringing your Noongar language back?*

It's really hard. We had lots of words, but we had to bring the grammar back – the phonology, the morphology, the syntax. A lot of the language was written down by non-Indigenous people prior to the 1900s, so we had to locate all these resources.

My vision was to open the Noongar Boodjar Language Centre, where my people can come to be immersed in their language. We've been operating this language centre for ten years now. We started off working at my kitchen table and now we have a centre with a team of ten people.

I am also very proud to have been appointed to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group which will develop the Australian National Action Plan for the International Decade in partnership with Government. A lot of our people who struggled to save or revitalise our languages have died, they never got to see this recognition. We are so grateful, so humbled to have our language back.

*You mentioned that some of the language resources you have used were recorded by whitefellas over a century ago. What was their motivation for that?*

Like so many colonisers, the early whalers here on Noongar Country would often have not survived without the help of my ancestors. Sometimes their ships needed repairs, or they needed fresh water or food and so they started to learn some words to ask questions. Some of these early whitefella visitors started writing down words and transcribing phrases.

Many of their records were not entirely correct: they recorded our words with a European ear. So today we judge these words through diachronic linguistic analysis, which is the study of a language through different periods in history.

*How is your new Noongar dictionary being used to assist the Noongar clans to use their mother tongue?*

The dictionary we have just published is a picture dictionary and is being used in the Language Other Than English subjects in primary schools on Noongar boodjar (Country). We work closely with the education department to develop resources.

We have also produced language books on our Noongar cultural knowledge including our creation stories and some of our Elders – who never learned to read or write – wanted to hear their language so we produced talking books.

*What about whitefellas? Are they interested in learning Noongar language?*

We get many requests from local councils, clubs and corporations who want to name a room, a building, or a park with an appropriate Noongar word. Some whitefellas have shown interest in learning our language. I always encourage this. I have translated into Noongar the stories of Yagan, a Whadjuk Noongar man and one of our heroes of the resistance.

I've always said we must keep these small campfires burning. Let them burn and let people grow in their knowledge of language and culture.

*Recently the Fremantle Dockers became the Walyalup Football Club for the Indigenous round. How do renaming initiatives make you feel?*

They make feel really good because they are an acknowledgement of the right name for that place. They are giving the full respect back to those words. They are bringing back the language as it should be; these places should be named correctly. This is just one way to bring our language back.

If white people want to know the real names, the real history of a place there is always someone willing to tell it. They can come and ask.

It's about time that First Nations people had the right to speak their own languages. Around the world one language dies every two weeks. Ours will die if we don't look after them.



*Joanne Stevens demonstrates the sign 'whitefella' to researchers Cassandra Algy and Felicity Meakins. Photo: Jenny Green*

## TRADITION AND INNOVATION: DOCUMENTING SIGN LANGUAGE IN A GURINDJI COMMUNITY IN THE NT

**The Gurindji, and Dr Jennifer Green, Professor Felicity Meakins and Cassandra Algy have published the first description of sign language in Gurindji communities – a descriptive cultural world that is both useful and adaptive to change.**

Australian Indigenous sign languages appear in records that go back to the early days of colonisation. Some even speculate that the handshapes found in some forms of rock art in Australia and other parts of the world may be evidence of age-old forms of signing or signalling.

Indigenous sign languages are mainly used by hearing people. They vary across the country, and there are differences in the size of their vocabularies, with an upper limit of well over 1,000 signs, as Adam Kendon found for the Warlpiri people from the Tanami Desert.



*Change and innovation is a characteristic of all human languages, signed languages being no exception.*

Dr Jennifer Green, Professor Felicity Meakins and Cassandra Algy have published the first description of sign language in Gurindji communities – a descriptive cultural world that is both useful and adaptive to change.

People in the Gurindji community of Kalkaringi call their sign language Takataka.

Takataka is used across the generations, and young children learn some signs and simple sign phrases before they talk. Sign is used to show respect for particular kin relations.

In times of bereavement or sorry business certain relatives of the deceased observe bans of silence. Gurindji wangu (widows) sign to metaphorically 'keep the volume down' by not talking.

Sign is useful when hunting because speaking could scare animals off. Sign is also used when people are visible to each other yet out of hearing range, for example to communicate between people in cars about who is going where.

### Documenting Gurindji sign language

Between 2016 and 2018, the researchers worked closely with the local art centre, Karungkarni Art, to make video documentations of Takataka. Their recently published study is the first description of Gurindji sign.

They also made educational resources for signs. They created a set of posters and a series of short films for ICTV.

One of the posters illustrates some common kin signs. The sign for ngaji (father, also used for some aunts, nephews and nieces) is formed by touching the chin.

The sign for ngumparna (husband) and mungkaj (wife) is formed by touching the back of one hand with the palm of the other.

Apart from signs for people there are signs for plants, animals, and places, as well as signs for recent phenomena such as police and money.

### Signs of the times

Pointing is another important part of the communicative toolkit at Kalkaringi, and it almost always accompanies discussions of locations, both near and far. People point in the correct direction, even to places out of sight.

Using accurate pointing to locate places and objects is also reflected in the spoken language. As is the case for many other Indigenous peoples, Gurindji speakers use the cardinal terms north, south, east and west to describe where things are, rather than the words left and right. It is not uncommon to hear sentences like, 'The flour is to the west of the sugar on the shelf.'

Another way the Gurindji demonstrate their anchoring in the world is in their signs for time. Relating times of day to the position and path of the sun is one time-reference strategy found in some sign languages of the world. Other sign languages may use the front and back of the body, or its left and right sides to distinguish past and future.

In Takataka, 'tomorrow' is signed with an arced movement of the hand from east to west, as if tracking the sun and fast forwarding through the day. 'Yesterday' is signed with a similar arc sweeping from west to east – a day in reverse.

Other Gurindji signs, and signs from other language groups, can be found on *iltyem-iltyem*, a website dedicated to the signing practices of Indigenous peoples from across Central and Northern Australia.

### Diversity of sign languages

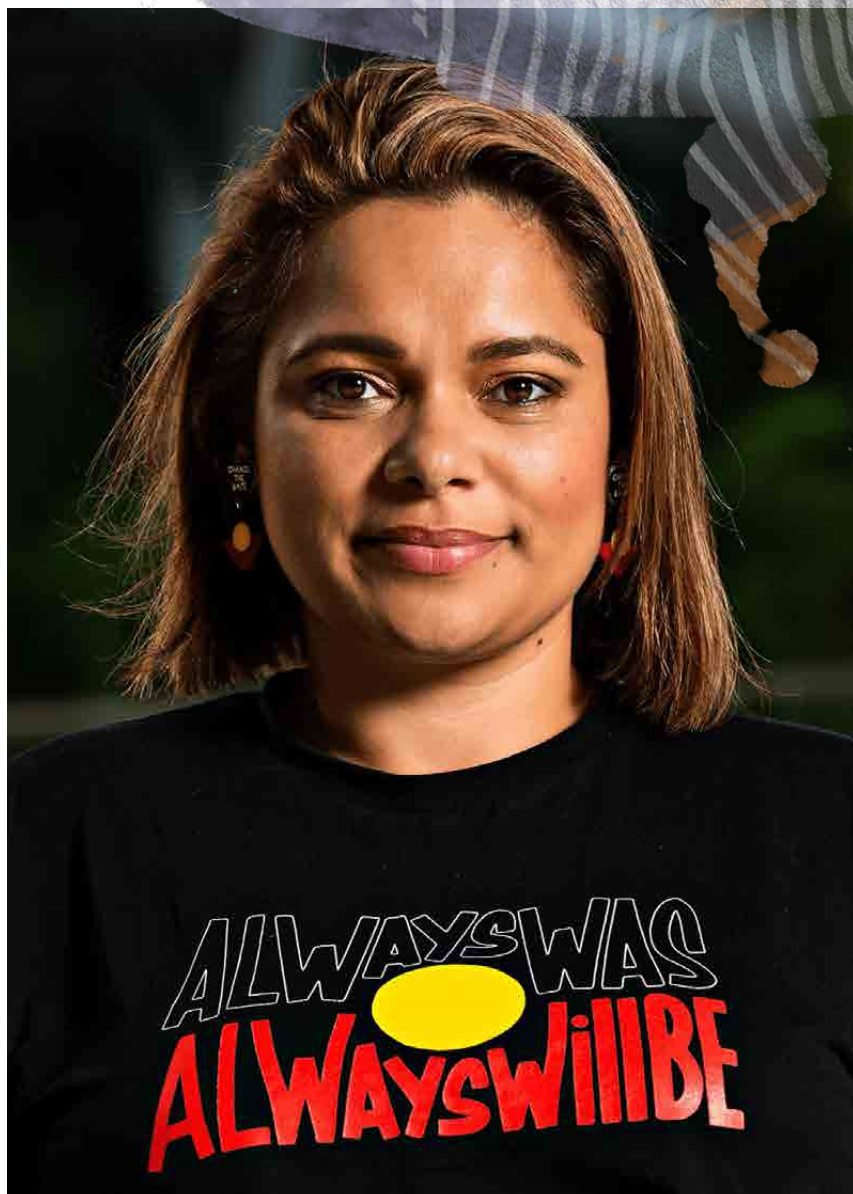
Takataka is not related to Auslan, the most widespread deaf community sign language used in Australia. However, some influences from Auslan can be seen in recent innovations to Gurindji sign.

One mother of a deaf Gurindji child spoke of how lucky she was to discover pictures of Auslan fingerspelling in the telephone directory in the early 1990s. The mother learnt the system herself and then went on to teach her child and their classmates.

The study of Australian Indigenous sign languages contributes to the worldwide picture of diversity in sign languages and shows how the human genius for communication enlists useful resources to fulfil changing needs.

Change and innovation is a characteristic of all human languages, signed languages being no exception.

This article was first published on The Conversation. Read more: [theconversation.com/au](https://theconversation.com/au)



# MUNDANARA BAYLES: DRAWING ON HER FAMILY LEGACY AND MAKING HISTORY

**Mundanara Bayles was awarded Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year at the 2023 Supply Nation Supplier Diversity Awards. She also hosts the first Indigenous podcast signed to the iHeart Radio network. NITV's Madison Howarth caught up with her to talk success, First Nations stories, and taking up the torch from her dad, Tiga Bayles.**

Mundanara Bayles is a force to be reckoned with, but it should come as no surprise. The Wonnarua, Bundjalung, Birri-Gubba and Gungalu woman is from a staunch family of activists, creatives and storytellers.

Her Dad, the late Tiga Bayles and grandmother, Maureen Watson, were pioneers of Blak media, starting Radio Redfern back in the 1980s. In the decades that followed, Tiga would establish himself as 'the voice of Indigenous Australia' founding the National Indigenous Radio Service. He would also serve as CEO at Brisbane Indigenous Media Association for 20 years, which was founded by his late uncle, Uncle Ross Watson, and is the home of 98.9FM.

Now, Mundanara carries the torch in much the same way for today's audiences, on her podcast, Black Magic Woman, which has just joined iHeart Radio's podcast network — the first Indigenous podcast to be signed. But, she admits, she didn't think radio was for her.

*Despite hating the sound of her own voice, Mundanara Bayles was inspired by her father Tiga Bayles and followed in his broadcasting footsteps to become the first Indigenous person to be signed with iHeart Radio's podcast network. Photo: supplied*



'I actually hate the sound of my own voice, believe it or not!' she laughs.

Reflecting on the legacy of her father, she says it was being 'immersed in the environment as kids' that made it feel right to start her own podcast.

As well as a history-making host, Mundanara is the co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of BlackCard, a cultural capability training organisation. The organisation celebrated its 10-year anniversary during NAIDOC Week this year, with Mundanara interviewing acclaimed Wiradjuri journalist, Stan Grant, on stage at an event to mark the occasion.

And for all her hard work, Mundanara was awarded Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year at the 2023 Supply Nation Supplier Diversity Awards. But it wasn't always this way: Mundanara's story of success is one of joy, strength, love and grief.

## Finding her way

When she was 18 her mother passed away suddenly. It turned her world upside down.

'I just finished year 12 and had the world at my feet,' she said. 'That moment really changed my whole life. That grief really struck me to my core.'

Mundanara said she started to go down the wrong path when Tiga stepped in.

'Dad said, "why don't you come down to the radio station?" He said, "The skills that you're going to learn in this industry will take you into any workplace in any industry and will probably take you around the world."'

Mundanara worked at the radio station for seven years listening to her father in meetings and learning his way of connecting with people.

'Every time I heard him speak he moved people,' she says.

She witnessed firsthand just how far sharing Blak stories and platforming Blak voices could take someone and notes his inimitable ability to connect with local mob in Redfern as a Dawson River Murri.

'My Dad's ability to communicate across all these cultural barriers... I don't think we'll ever see, or hear another Tiga Bayles,' she said. 'He was one of a kind.'

The ease with which talking and capturing an audience came to Tiga shines through Mundanara.

'If we're not telling our stories to help fill that gap in terms of lack of education and lack of awareness, or even the fact that Australia and Australians are still in denial of this country's history,' she says. 'We need to tell these stories.'

As well as Tiga, Mundanara draws strength from those who came before who didn't get the chance to speak up. Her grandmother was part of the Stolen Generation.

'My Nan never got to tell her story,' she said. 'Our Old People, their fight, their struggle and their challenges... we've got to pick up where they left off.'

Mundanara hopes the partnership with iHeart, and her story, will inspire others to share their own experiences.

'I want our mob to feel comfortable in telling their stories,' she said. 'I want our mob to see the beauty and to feel proud of belonging to the oldest living culture in world history. Having a podcast to help share our story gives mainstream Australia an insight into our lives, into our experiences, into our challenges.'

From her work in cultural capability training at BlackCard to amplifying Blak voices on Black Magic Woman, Mundanara calls her work 'self-determination in action'.

'What's important to me is that the next generation can see it's doable,' she said.

Reflecting on her Dad's legacy and the lessons he instilled in her and her sisters, I ask if she thinks he'd be proud of how far she's come.

'I always think about him on the hardest days, the most challenging days. I know he's proud and I always channel his energy when I feel a bit uncertain.'

'Our old people are always there, you've just got to speak out to them.'

And her own legacy?

'I've never really thought about it,' Mundanara said. 'I want our people to feel celebrated in our own country. I want to create a society that really celebrates our culture, our history. I want my children to grow up and be proud of who they are and where they come from. And that's really hard.'

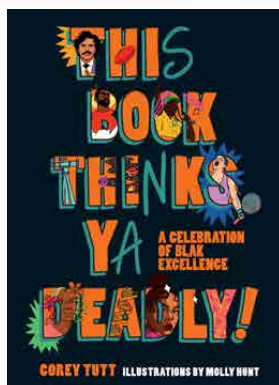
'I just hope with every BlackCard course and with every [podcast] episode that I'm able to change peoples' perspectives and to really start to see us for who we are – the First Peoples of this country, the oldest living culture in world history.'

*Madison Howarth is a Wonnarua and Yuin writer and journalist based in London.*

Listen to Black Magic Woman podcast: [blackmagicwoman.com.au](https://blackmagicwoman.com.au)

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# LOOK FOR A BOOK!



## *This Book Thinks Ya Deadly!* Corey Tutt and Molly Hunt Hardie Grant

'So how do you fit 65,000+ years of Black Excellence into a book? You can't – but it doesn't mean we shouldn't try!'

Kamilaroi man and Deadly Science founder Corey Tutt OAM and Balanggarra/Yolngu artist, animator and writer Molly Hunt have teamed up to create this beautifully illustrated celebration of Black excellence.

From sport to politics, *This Book Thinks Ya Deadly!* reflects on the careers of over 70 First Nations champions who have done amazing things in their respective fields, including Professor Tom Calma, Tony Armstrong, Dr Anita Heiss, Baker Boy and so many more.

Corey brings these profiles to life with inspiring personal stories and, together with the Molly Hunt's vibrant illustrations, the book motivates readers of all ages to ask themselves the question 'What makes me deadly?'.

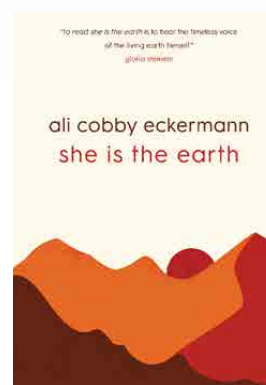


## *Gigorou* Sasha Kutabah Sarago Pantera

A comment that she was 'too pretty to be Aboriginal' at a young age set the scene for author, speaker and filmmaker Sasha Kutabah Sarago to wrestle with her own beauty and femininity for much of her youth.

This coming-of-age memoir, *Gigorou* – the Jirrbal word for 'beauty' – catalogues Sasha's intimate reckoning with her identity, heritage and what it means to be beautiful as an Aboriginal woman. And where does she find her answers? In the ancestral wisdom of 60,000 years of knowledge, of course. Sasha retraces her footsteps as a beauty assistant, model and magazine editor to where beauty began. Through the voices of her matriarchs, the creation stories of Oolana, the First Rainbow and Majal, and the spirit of Barangaroo, Truganini and Patyegarang, Sasha finds a path to redefining beauty.

At a time when women – especially First Nations women – are bombarded by sexism, racism and injustice, *Gigorou* invites us to confront and heal our relationship with beauty and ourselves, making it a vital and thought-provoking read.



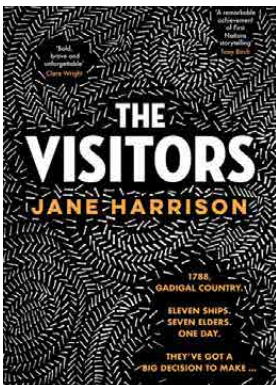
## *She is the Earth* Ali Cobby Eckermann Magabala Books

*She is the Earth* is a verse novel from award-winning Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha poet and artist Ali Cobby Eckermann that explores the power of connection to Country during times of grief and turmoil through 90 short lyric poems.

Ali Cobby Eckermann's minimalistic prose serves to deliver maximum impact, with descriptions of interruption to connection to nature and Country described with visceral emotion. Healing and yearning war in equal measure in her direct –yet musical –stanzas with birds, rocks and a cacophony of animals adding to the chorus.

This is a book you can pick up and read in one sitting or one you can take the time to absorb as you sit with the verses and their deeper meaning. It is deeply meditative, illustrating how the emotional and psychological processing of Eckermann is in tune with the natural world that surrounds her.



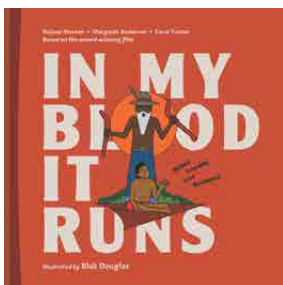


***The Visitors***  
**Jane Harrison**  
 HarperCollins

26 January 1788 is a date seared into the minds of Australians – but what were the reactions, politics, gripes and concessions made by the Aboriginal leaders who witnessed the coming of the First Fleet in 1788? In her first book for adults, Renowned Muruwari playwright Jane Harrison weaves this radical retelling of the events of 26 January from a First Nations perspective.

Seven senior Aboriginal law men from different clans gather on the cliff overlooking Sydney Cove to witness the arrival of a boat, and then soon many more. They argue, bicker and compromise, and recount how the ships arrived previously and left. Ultimately, they are seeking a unanimous decision – should they welcome these newcomers, or should they respond with force? It's a conversation that will change the course of history.

Based on Jane Harrison's play of the same name, *The Visitors* exploits the playwright's deftness for dialogue and relationships to its best. Creative, bold and engaging, *The Visitors* paints a vivid depiction of this pivotal moment in Australia's history, with complex characters that will keep you reading till its final, inevitable end.



***In My Blood It Runs***  
**Dujuan Hoosan, Margaret Anderson and Carol Turner**  
 Pan Macmillan

When Dujuan Hoosan first hit our screens in 2019 with the award-winning documentary *In My Blood It Runs*, his story both shocked and delighted audiences. The newly-released book of the same name retells Arrernte and Garawa boy Dujuan's story, this time through the power of written storytelling and art.

With beautiful illustrations by 2022 Archibald Prize winner Blak Douglas, the reader becomes immersed once again in 10-year-old Dujuan's strong connection to family, as well as the prejudice he faces from society and the education system.

We read along as he finds himself completely disengaged from school as he receives report cards based on a flawed curriculum that fails to acknowledge his knowledge of healing, culture, Country, and his grasp of three languages.

We see Dujuan start to fall under the ever-watchful eye of the police, with warnings from those in power of his supposed inevitable pathway to juvenile detention. However, this story is one of hope and self-determination, which shows the power and strength of culture, language and cultural practices in the life of a young boy who thrives as he heads bush to be with his family on ancestral lands. This is a powerful book and one to share with all generations.

