

JustComment

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First peoples, first priority, what priority?

Ten years after the year 2000

bridge walks for Reconciliation around the country, the journey between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is still incomplete. To 'see it through', Reconciliation must be a part of our everyday lives. For Cassandra Gibbs, Indigenous Education Officer at the Edmund Rice Centre, and member of the CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee, small daily actions are as important as 'big picture' ideas.

How do you think non-Indigenous Australians should get involved in justice issues affecting Indigenous Australians?

It depends on what they feel comfortable with, and that, for whatever degree of involvement, it is kept on their agenda throughout the year. Many people want to get involved and want to get active. If you want to be involved then work with people who are being directly affected. Sometimes that means waiting to be invited into communities, waiting to be invited into that conversation.

It's not just an 'issue', it's not just a story... you are talking about someone's life.

What is your advice for someone in that situation?

A little bit of patience, and not to give up or to walk away. Keep putting your feelers out and keep showing your interest. The key to working with Indigenous communities is to be invited into those conversations.

How much emphasis should we place on the good things that have occurred so far, for example the Apology to the Stolen Generations?

The Apology is the beginning. Now the healing has begun. Now we can begin our healing and now we can start to move forward. It's the start of change and change in the mentality of Australians as well.

How can those who don't feel directly affected by Indigenous issues connect to the fight for justice?

I get very concerned when people say 'This doesn't affect me, this doesn't relate to me, this has nothing to do with me'. We have all benefited from the injustices against Indigenous people in this country, so how can you say you're not affected by it?

What sort of sensitivity is required of a non-Indigenous Australian when approaching these issues?

One has to remember there are so many Indigenous people who do not have a lot of trust because of past injustices. Even to talk about issues happening 'over there', you are still talking about someone's life. It's not just an 'issue'; it's not just a story. We have to remember that these people, our people, are sharing our lives when we're discussing these issues.

If there was one specific issue affecting Indigenous Australians that you would like to see targeted, what would that be?

Poverty in Indigenous communities. Where there's poverty there are high unemployment rates, there are low



educational outcomes, the health statistics are off the charts, housing is a massive problem. The key issue is that we should be looking at poverty in many Indigenous communities. If we start to address some of the core issues then they'll start to flow off onto some of the other areas. If you can target one area, those four other areas can benefit.

You don't have to come up with all the answers in order to feel like you're making change.

What do you think our policy-makers should keep in mind?

People in most Aboriginal communities would say they don't want people to come and fix our problems *for us*, we want them to come and work *with us*, and to work on how we can make the change from *inside* our own communities. Aboriginal people need the skills and the support and the

resources to make those changes within their own communities. By targeting one community at a time, soon we'll get to a point where people can see that change is starting to happen.

With what sort of attitude do you need to approach Reconciliation?

To think big all the time. There's nothing wrong with thinking big, but you don't have to come up with all the answers in order to feel like you're making change. You can't walk across the bridge every day. Something as simple as flying the flag and acknowledging country is about showing respect. To people who are thinking 'I need to think big', I would encourage them to start thinking more simply: Let's fly the Aboriginal flag, let's get an Aboriginal person in and listen to their stories, let's build a Reconciliation space within our office and invite staff to contribute to that.

As an Indigenous woman, the fight for justice must be one to which you are very personally connected?

When I look at the statistical outcomes of Indigenous people I look at it as myself. It's a part of my life. Some of the latest statistics show the life expectancy of an Indigenous woman being as low as 69. That means I am almost halfway through my life. Somebody in my family is affected by every one of these statistics. We can get distant from those numbers because they are just numbers. People need to remember that there are people behind those numbers. Putting faces and names behind the statistics makes a big difference. I do not want my daughter to have to face the same statistical outcomes that I face, and as a young mum that concerns me very much.

Finally, what actions can you suggest that would help people to walk the journey to Reconciliation every day?

I would encourage people to sit down

and take some time to think about how you see the state of Australia in relation to the first owners of this land. Then make a list. Ask yourself, 'What are the things currently facing Australia in relation to its Indigenous peoples?' There is an inequality in life expectancy, infant mortality, education, employment, and housing. Try to come up with some of your own answers. Then ask yourself how you would like to see this country in relation to its Indigenous peoples in ten years time. What would I want that to look like?' I would challenge the readers to come up with those two lists. Then ask, 'What do I need to do as an Australian citizen to make that happen?' From that third list you'll get a list of actions. If every person could do that, imagine how different this country could look in another ten years.

As soon as you start to put faces and names behind the statistics it makes a big difference.

Every little step...

Cassandra's suggestion that we should imagine a new Australia, and work towards that vision, can re-energise our journey towards Reconciliation.

We may be tempted to rely on our political representatives to lead the way on Reconciliation, but each one of us has the ability - and the responsibility - to shape the way our country will be in the coming years. We must start with a vision and a goal.

Ten years into the 21st century, we have made small steps towards Reconciliation. The Apology to the Stolen Generations was an important watershed in the journey towards Reconciliation, but while vast differences in the quality of life between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people stand, we cannot

have true Reconciliation or equality.

We cannot make the dramatic statement of walking across the Harbour Bridge every day. But our own steps towards Reconciliation can be like a bridge, spanning the gap that now divides Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Let us hope that, by 2020, that bridge will be complete.

Something to do?

Australia Now: write down how you see Australia in relation to the first custodians of this land. What are the problems? What achievements have occurred to date?

My Actions: based on the outcomes you would like to see occurring in Australia, 2020, what are the actions that you need to take to make that Australia a reality?

Australia 2020: write down how you like to see this country in relation to its Indigenous peoples in ten years time. If you had a magic wand, what would Australia be like in 2020?

Once you have generated a list of your own personal actions, stick them on the fridge or somewhere where you'll be reminded to walk the journey towards Reconciliation.

Remember... keep it simple and every action taken, big or small is important.

For information about immersion programmes conducted through the Edmund Rice Centre please go to the referenced version at www.erc.org.au or email Cassandra at cassg@erc.org.au

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