

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

INTERNATIONAL FUNDERS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

TOFINO, VANCOUVER ISLAND

15-17 MAY 2010

To Ken Wilson, the Chair of IFIP, and to everyone present here tonight.

I pay my deepest respects to the Elders, community leaders and members of the Tia-o-aui-aht First Nations, past and present, from the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Territory. It gives me great pleasure to be on your land, to be welcomed by you, and to be given the privilege of being part of your ceremonies.

I pay my respects to all Elders and members of indigenous communities from all around the world who are here tonight.

I am delighted and honoured to be here to accept this award. We were so excited when we heard the news! Thank you to IFIP for finding us and choosing to look into our work.

I come with the greetings and best wishes of all members of the Myer family, and from the Directors and Trustees, who all extend their delight and respectful appreciation for the acknowledgement that this award provides.

I represent two organisations that together constitute Myer family philanthropy. They are:

- The Sidney Myer Fund established in 1934 on the death of Sidney Myer. He was the original family benefactor and businessman, whose own life reflected an immense generosity of spirit. He left ten percent of his wealth for charitable causes, and this endowment today provides the capital base for our distributions.

- The Myer Foundation, which was established in 1959 by Sidney's two sons, Baillieu and the late Kenneth Myer, who wanted a giving vehicle for that would respond to the contemporary issues of their time. Over many years, members of the family have contributed to this fund to establish the corpus. There are also many individual private funds that Myer family members have established for their personal giving. The giving tradition is now in the fourth generation of the family.

I believe that we are not in this business together by accident. We are here, doing what we do, because common threads join us. One of those threads comes from who we are as individuals – our experiences, our values and our beliefs. These are the things that we bring to our work, just by being who we are. We share common values including a love of humanity, respect for all indigenous cultures, and a belief in the goodness of people.

Our common-ness and connectedness also come from how we imagine the future to be. We believe that change is needed, and that change is possible. All of us have visions of a future that improves the lives of people, communities, the environment, and the lands on which we live.

How can we conceive of the future? To me, the future equals the past, plus imagination. If we are here for a better future, we can create it by bringing into the equation the past that informs us and structures us, and join that with huge measures of imagination that will shape how things will change for the future.

As I prepared to travel to this meeting, I thought about an experience in my life that has been very important in shaping my understanding and thinking. It showed my ignorance about indigenous culture, and the narrowness of my world view.

It was in the mid 1990s, and I was working in the north of Western Australia, in the Pilbara, just below the Kimberley's, a land bordered by the sea on the western side and the desert on the east.

I was the District Manager and my job was to oversee the state government's family and children's services for a region that spanned 68,000 square kilometres. This area was lived in by aboriginal communities and mining people.

I was selecting a new staff officer in Tom Price, a long four-wheel-drive distance away, and I asked Robyn, an aboriginal staff member from Roebourne, another town in the Pilbara, to travel with me and be part of the selection team. As we travelled, I asked Robyn if she had been to Tom Price before. She looked at me, waited a few seconds, and then shook her head.

"No", she said. "It's not normally done. We don't come to this land. It is not my land, and I don't travel on it. If I travel on it without permission, things will happen to me."

Robyn told me that her Elders from her land had given her permission to travel, and that this had taken two weeks of ceremony, talking, and singing. They had sung the path clear for her, so that she would not suffer ill-health or possibly death.

This had a profound effect on me. From this, I learned of the danger and distortion that comes from seeing the world through one's own lense. I learned about the thoughtlessness that accompanies ignorance. I learned that land and time have innumerable different dimensions beyond my experience of them, and that aboriginal people's connectedness to the heart and spirit of the land is life itself. I also learned about dignity and the graceful patience of people who have suffered betrayal.

So what meaning does this experience have now? How does it help to make a better future?

The past is made up of experiences that affect us and continue to form, and inform us: the mistakes; the insights that come from reflection and history's distance; from commitments to work in the community; and from a greater understanding about our world. A view of the past must be accompanied by an openness to accept that there are many perspectives on the world, and by a willingness to suspend our own narrow world view.

Coming back to my view that the future is the past, plus imagination, where does imagination fit in? I believe that it is the space that philanthropy occupies.

Philanthropy imagines new approaches. It dreams of change, and creates different paths to those of the present. It steps back from the mundane busy-ness of everyday events and sees that something can be done differently and better. It shines a light on our prejudices current and past, and is an instrument for changing the way that people think about something.

It would be a mistake to believe that philanthropy does this on its own. The dreaming, planning and imagining is **supported** by philanthropy, but philanthropy does not own this space.

Philanthropy provides the mechanism and the resources. It creates the space where risks can be taken and where, sometimes, the unimaginable is imagined. The space is filled with people who have ideas and visions, who are skilled in their areas of expertise, and who take great leaps of faith in imagining how they will change their world.

I have been very fortunate to step into an organisation that has a long history of creating the space for new imaginings, and for supporting change in areas long before they were popular, or indeed safe. The following quote from the first Annual Report of The Myer Foundation is revealing. The then President Kenneth Myer said that

“The modern Foundation is in no sense an alms giver. While assistance may be given for some projects falling within the accepted meaning of the word “charity”, it is important that emphasis be placed on the role which can be played in supporting new ideas. In providing the means for scientific and social experiment, The Myer Foundation can lead in fields where more orthodox support is hampered by narrower conditions.”

This was written in 1961, reflecting an approach to philanthropy that was imaginative and ground breaking. Since the 1960's, The Myer Foundation has played a leading philanthropic role in funding Aboriginal issues. In what remains as one of its most significant achievements, the Foundation commissioned research into what has been called the "Aborigines in Australian Society" Project. Completed primarily by Charles Rowley, this work produced three volumes of writing under the overall title of "*Aboriginal Practice and Policy*" comprising:

1. "The Destruction of Aboriginal Society"
2. "Outcasts in White Australia", and
3. "The Remote Aborigines"

This work has been described as "... the foundation stone for contemporary reflection on Aboriginal history and policy"¹, as "...one of the perception changing books of the decade", and has been credited with introducing the "black arm band" view of Aboriginal history².

Some of the projects that have drawn attention in relation to this IFIP award arose from a new model for Myer philanthropy that was introduced in 2005. We wanted to target our giving to issues where we felt we could make important changes. Its background lay in a long history of philanthropic leadership. And its foundations were re-inforced by two Boards prepared to take risks, by having significant financial and influencing resources, by an orientation that welcomed challenges and opportunities, and by a family that has practised strategic and imaginative philanthropy over many years.

Over the last three years or so The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund have together made about 95 grants to indigenous causes.

¹ *Australia: A Readers' Guide Online*, National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne and quoted in Liffman, M, 2004 "A Tradition of Giving: Seventy Five Years of Myer Family Philanthropy", Melbourne University Press, p212,

² Horne, Donald, 2000, "Into the Open: Memoirs 1959-1999, Harper Collins, Sydney, p167, quoted in Liffman, M, op.cit

I would like to briefly describe three of our large projects. One is called “*People on Country, Healthy Landscapes and Indigenous Economic Futures*”. It was initiated by the Australian National University and its Centre for Aboriginal Employment Policy Research (CAEPR). CAEPR is undertaking a 5 year applied research project focusing on Aboriginal land and sea management in the tropical savannah of Top End and Gulf Country of the Northern Territory, and we have committed to support them for five years.

People on Country aims to transfer skills to land and sea management groups to address two major issues: improving Indigenous well-being, and delivering better natural resource management on Aboriginal land and sea country. Working in partnership with traditional owners and their land and sea management groups, the research aims to strengthen Caring for Country projects by:

- Building partnerships, sharing skills, and developing capacity especially in governance.
- Assisting with evidence-based research.
- Using this to better inform government policy on cultural and natural resource management on Aboriginal land and sea country
- Helping Aboriginal land and sea managers make their voices heard in national debates such as climate change, water, sea country, fire management, wildlife use and cultural and natural resource management.

Another significant grant of five years is to establish the “*Stronger, Smarter Realities*” Project, run by Dr Chris Sarra through the Queensland University of Technology. This groundbreaking work is creating systematic changes in schools and communities by arming educators with the belief and skills to change the learning outcomes of Indigenous children. The philosophy of the approach is the promotion of a strong and positive pride in what it means to be Aboriginal.

Over three-years, the project has engaged principals, teachers, indigenous people, Indigenous communities and leaders from 240 schools with a high Indigenous student population, and supported them to transform their schools.

The third project is the “*Clontarf Foundation Football Academies*”. The Foundation establishes indigenous football academies alongside mainstream schools and through these, provides a motivational hook for young boys to come to school. One of the outstanding features of the program is the network of relationships between the staff, the young men, and their families. These relationships support the young men to stay engaged, keep focused, reflect on their achievements and develop self esteem. The results in terms of highest ever records of school enrolments, attendance, and retention across school terms and school years speak for the success of this program in engaging young people, many of whom have been out of the school system for a long time.

We supported each of these because we trusted the leadership and integrity of the people behind them. This is one of the biggest things that we have learned in our philanthropy – that we get behind people with visions, strong wills, strong leadership, sensitivity, respect, and personal integrity. It is people like this who turn imagining into reality.

Philanthropy’s role and gift is to trust people, and to commit to the process of imagining. We all contribute to the future, through our pasts, and through our imaginings.

I would like to conclude with comments made by Joy Wandin-Murphy, Senior Aboriginal Elder from the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, Melbourne, Australia. Aunty Joy is a strong, soft, thoughtful and open-hearted woman. She gives the ceremonial welcoming to her country, on behalf of her people, at times when people gather on her land and when dignitaries come there. She made these comments on accepting her award of the Order of Australia.

"I don't know that there will ever be a situation where we are all at peace with one another," she said. "But if we continue to talk and try to understand each other then hopefully the world will be a better place for us all to live."

Thank you for honouring us with this award. It is accepted with deep appreciation.