

Little Voices

It's good to be with you all tonight. On your land, Dharug land, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the elders here, so many old friends, strong young ones too and the memories of such wonderful Old People who have gone. We all walk in the footsteps of those who stayed on this long road to equality with so much patience and persistence in the *Struggle* for justice. I believe that it's how we approach the *Struggle* that determines what kind of human being we really are. We get one shot at life and so we must use every breath. All the stories we've been hearing tonight are moving and heartfelt because it's through these stories we hear the little voices...of the children who need us... not just to wait for this nation to have a change of heart... but for us to do something and take the right action.

I have loved your community for many years because young and old here have come up with so many clever ideas to support those who need care. I remember when Aunty Jenny Ebsworth and other determined people in your community gathered in the grounds of the Mt Druitt swimming pool in 2014 and I think for the first time in Australia I saw young mothers with children explaining what ice addiction or alcohol had done to harm their infants. It was powerful messaging. You have always taken action. And so, I smiled when I heard about the plan for this year's Western Sydney Barefoot Fashion Show to raise funds for the diagnosis of young children at Murray-Toola Damana, because four decades ago, back in the 1980s, I brought my Sixty Minutes cameras to Redfern, to cover another fashion show that also helped bring about real change.

Coming home from many years overseas as a foreign correspondent I felt confronted that here at home there were no Aboriginal people in television commercials back then. It was as if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were invisible. There were no Australian black faces on the cover of our most famous fashion magazines either. So, one night in Redfern with a big mob like this, we filmed young Aboriginal men and women strutting their stuff on a fashion catwalk. I asked Chadwick's Model Agency and the then-biggest name in Australian advertising, John Singleton, to tell me truthfully why none of these young people could not shine on their own in a television commercial. John Singleton said, "Well they are not exactly the Arnott's Biscuit family, are they?" Yeah, that's what he said! But John Singleton, a whitefeller who had travelled with Charles Perkins on the Freedom Rides back in 1965, rose to the occasion and cast the very first Aboriginal person in a television commercial. Soon photographers began to cover the beauty of the people of this land who had long been invisible. Vogue Magazine put Elaine George on the cover in 1993. Then Chadwick's Model agency began to sign up Australia's own original home-grown faces, with your own beautiful look and style. We might sometimes feel overwhelmed by the ugly problems in the world today but just have a glance at this month's cover of VOGUE AUSTRALIA magazine and it'll make you smile too. Because on the cover are not one but three young Aboriginal women.

The truth is that Aboriginal people yourselves have done far more to tell your most important stories. I think of the Resistance voices from the first killing in the 1780s. The voices of the Struggle were magnificent in the 1930s. The activists in the streets in the 1960s. We are losing them just now as you know (Paul Coe). But there are also the writers, filmmakers, artists, actors, musicians, dancers & most importantly the active community leaders who have taken your stories around the world. Your voices and your actions do bring the change. In any society all cultural change is slow to achieve. So we must be patient and persistent, that's what I was told by the Old People who have gone.

I think Australia is very slowly beginning to appreciate our many shades of beauty, the creative talents, the strengths of family and community life, and the resilience that has seen the Aboriginal knowledge system thrive for 65 thousand years or longer than anyone truly knows. Yet how many Australians know that the biggest enclave of Aboriginal people in the nation is right around here from Emmerton and Mt Druitt to Campbelltown? There's clearly still a burning need to tell your important story through a night like this because the lives of Aboriginal people in Western Sydney, and especially the needs of your children, are not understood by most Australians. I believe this is part of a very old pattern. The ignorance is in our history. The reluctance or sheer apathy, the unwillingness to listen, learn & take the necessary action, has gone on way too long.

In my view, the Children of the Sunrise have never been afforded their entitlement, the human right to wellbeing. When my mother was a little girl growing up in the Hunter Valley she played with Aboriginal children from the settlement at Redbournberry outside Singleton. Old sheets of corrugated iron on the roofs, timber torn from packing crates, everyone there was dirt poor. My mother had lost her mum when she was 4 years old and so it was her father she asked, why her young friends were not allowed to go with her when she walked barefoot to the single teacher school a few miles across the paddocks. 'That's just the way it is, they don't allow Aboriginal kids to go to school,' her father explained. 'Well, it's wrong,' mum said and much later when she raised my brothers and me, she made sure that her three boys understood the full weight of that story. I passed the lesson on to my boy and girl.

You see, Aboriginal children were still banned from attending many Australian schools even when I started work as a reporter in the 1960s. My dad had played Rugby League with Aboriginal fellers and we knew many were trying to find lost family members. Australia had stopped classing Aboriginal people as flora and fauna but everyone seemed to forget that you were human beings, as Gubbas tore your children away from families. As a journalist on Sixty Minutes, I travelled with men and women trying to find families they had been stolen from years before. Some were lucky. Some were rejected, the damage was done and it drove some to their graves. Everyone here knows that this cruel practice, the worst policy ever inflicted on Aboriginal people, continues today. Perhaps it is for different reasons but child removal is happening at an even faster rate.

The breakup of families and the shattering of communal life as the foundation of cultural strength falls into the centuries old historical pattern of relentless assimilation. One way or the other, the nation state, the *Great White Protector*, decides what is best for you, even as the number of children feeling anxious, alienated and losing hope, just keeps growing year after year. Like you, I am sick of annual recitations of the statistics of failure. We all know that the pain is right here. As we have heard tonight the cross-generational trauma is very much linked to the disproportionate levels of undiagnosed disability. This rich country has never truly eliminated what my daughter Claire once termed, our *Fourth World poverty*, the poverty not of a *Third World* developing nation but the shameful poverty that persists alongside the great wealth flowing to others from your land.

This is a very old pattern. Instead of closing the space between people, establishing genuine trust between black and white Australians, we see hopes raised time after time and then quickly followed- up with political treachery. Trust, then treachery! That is the pattern. Think of the 1967 Referendum. Most of the country, over 90 percent of voters, voted 'YES' for Aborigines' as the placards said that year. But that great opportunity was squandered. Counting Aboriginal people in the census and letting the Commonwealth government make laws for you did not bring about *Treaty, Truth, Recognition of Sovereignty*, let alone *Reparations* as part of a *Just Settlement*. The rejection of the *Voice Referendum* falls into that deep entrenched disavowal of responsibility for what has happened in the past. This is wrong. Every time a promise or an apology is made, or even a hand is held out in friendship, the poison of politics and outright racism betrays any good intentions.

Look at the record. It took Australia two centuries to recognize Aboriginal ownership of the land but as fast as the politicians could they unpicked the *Wik* and *Mabo* High Court judgements and appealed against the Native Title settlements. The First People got the crumbs but never the true wealth from your land and waters. Aboriginal people had for too long been treated like lowly servants and then this country quibbled for decades over the shameful *Stolen Wages*. Just this week another television program, *Four Corners*, was still trying to highlight the truth of how these stolen wages are not flowing fairly to the last of those old exploited people. Most of the compensation payments are being swallowed up by lawyers and wealthy people who invested in these class action suits. How cynical is that?

This pattern of 'trust and treachery' that I am describing tells me that we can't wait when it comes to the wellbeing of very young children. As that brilliant Aboriginal writer, Kevin Gilbert, wrote in one of his most important book titles back in 1973, '*Because a White Man'll Never Do It.*' The way too slow progress noted each year by the federal government in its Close the Gaps report, with just five of those nineteen stated goals on target, never really addresses the most essential facet for wellbeing.

There is overwhelming evidence that for every child anywhere in the world the essential condition for wellbeing is having a strong and positive social environment. It's what we call Cultural security. This is the child's key to knowing who they are and how each one is valued as an important young human being. This is our task as parents, families, communities and indeed the whole society. We need to ensure that these children are safe, secure in their understanding of who they are and knowing that they are loved.

I can tell you that the very young Aboriginal people many of us here have visited in jails and juvenile detention centres over many years are almost always feeling somewhat lost. They feel abandoned by society and sometimes with no clear connection to the magnificent strength and resilience of their Aboriginal culture. Sometimes they don't even know their story as that was erased from their upbringing. As you know, you can assess a hundred Aboriginal kids like that in any detention centre and you find a third to more than half have some mental damage caused by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and most have other undiagnosed conditions. Staring right at us, we should be able to see some steps to remedy the ongoing over-incarceration of young Aboriginal people.

As well as raising the age of criminal responsibility rather than shamefully lowering it as in the Northern Territory, we should give judges more leeway and legal guidance to recognise disability. We must ensure that at a much earlier age children are assessed for complex neurological challenges. If we don't understand the individual nature of a child then how can we understand why they might struggle in their emotional state of wild confusion? Some I have spoken with have little sense of right or wrong. They are angry when others are happy and at play. Yet we might drag those children before judges who then say, well I am just carrying out the sentences, the politicians have made laws. Instead of judging children as young as ten in Australia we need to understand their conditions as early as possible. We need to find the ways to appreciate their individual nature. That is surely the best way to ensure that the appropriate care can be provided to help families manage. I know that for some families here tonight caring for children with complex conditions is exhausting, at times overwhelming. We are all here to stand with you. We are here to do something.

I have travelled with the First People's Disability Network and heard the stories of the needs of the children in many communities. As a patron for almost forty years of the Merry Makers group for mainly Downs Syndrome children and some kids with other complex conditions, I have developed the greatest respect for families and indeed communities that come together for the love of these children. I want to say to Melanie Marne, who invited us here tonight, that Kim and I are full of love and admiration for you, for all mothers and fathers here, and for this very special big, beautiful mob. I hope you still consider this old Parramatta boy part of your extended family.

Transcript of Jeff McMullen's address at Colebee Centre, August 8th 2025, a fundraiser for assessment of pre-school children at Murray Toola Damona, Cala Street, Mt Druitt.