



Inaugural Fellow Paul Briggs Luncheon 2009

Speech by Carly Sheldon

ACKNOWLEDGE TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THIS COUNTRY WHERE WE MEET TODAY - THE PEOPLE AND ELDERS, PAST AND PRESENT OF THE BOONWURRUNG AND THE KULIN NATIONS.

I ALSO ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER ELDERS HERE TODAY, INCLUDING MY OWN, WHO REPRESENT THEIR OWN PEOPLE AND PLACES.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MYSELF TODAY AND THE INFLUENCE THAT PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND STRENGTH, HAS HAD ON MY LIFE.

I'M 26 YEARS OLD, AND I'M A PROUD ABORIGINAL WOMAN. BUT IT HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN EASY FOR ME TO SAY THAT OR EVEN TO BELIEVE IT.

I THINK THAT FOR MANY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, YOUNG AND OLD, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHERE YOU BELONG WITHIN AUSTRALIA.

I MEAN...NO ONE HAS EVER SAID TO ME: "YOU'RE ONLY A LITTLE BIT AUSTRALIAN" OR ASKED, "WHAT PERCENTAGE OR PART OF ME IS AUSTRALIAN." BUT THEY DO WHEN I SAY I'M ABORIGINAL.

WHEN YOU'RE CONSTANTLY COMPARED TO MISGUIDED, HISTORICAL PERCEPTIONS OR OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES IT CAN BE HURTFUL AND IT AFFECTS YOUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

I DIDN'T FEEL THAT I COULD BE PROUD OF MY ABORIGINALITY, WHICH MEANT I COULDN'T BE PROUD OF MY WHOLE IDENTITY.

SOMETIMES I WOULD BE REALLY PROUD, AND OTHER DAYS I WOULD FEEL LIKE AN IMPOSTER. SOMETIMES I WOULD EVEN BELIEVE THE NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES MYSELF. YOU KNOW... I DON'T LOOK ABORIGINAL. I DON'T LIVE IN A REMOTE COMMUNITY.



FOR A WHILE I GAVE UP. I COULDN'T BE BOTHERED DEALING WITH THE DISCRIMINATION – WHY SHOULD I? – IT WOULD MAKE ME SO ANGRY – WHEN SOMEONE WOULD QUESTION WHO WAS BECAUSE I DIDN'T FIT THEIR NOTION OF WHO I SHOULD BE.

I ACTUALLY TOLD SOMEONE I WAS ITALIAN ONCE. IT WAS EASIER THAN SAYING I WAS ABORIGINAL. I KNEW THEY WOULDN'T QUESTION ME OR CALL ME A LIAR.

THEY DIDN'T ASK "WHICH PART OF ME WAS ITALIAN" OR SAY "YEAH BUT YOUR NOT A REAL ITALIAN." THEY JUST ACCEPTED IT. NO QUESTIONS. JUST: OH ISN'T THAT NICE.

IT IMPACTED ON ME GREATLY. IT WAS SUCH A STRUGGLE TO DEAL WITH OTHER PEOPLES PERCEPTIONS AND DISCRIMINATION, WHILE I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT MY OWN. FEELING CULTURALLY SAFE, TO BE ABLE TO EXPRESS YOUR IDENTITY AND BE PROUD, IS FUNDAMENTAL TO OUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

MY MUM'S FRIEND ASKED HER ONCE, IF HER DAD WAS ABORIGINAL. MUM HAD NEVER CONSIDERED THIS BEFORE – SHE DIDN'T KNOW BECAUSE IT WASN'T SOMETHING THE FAMILY EVER SPOKE ABOUT. MUM WAS SEVENTEEN.

AUNTY KAYE TRACED OUR FAMILY HISTORY. WE ARE DIRECT DECEDENTS OF ARTHUR AND BETSY MULLINS. WE ARE WEMBA WEMBA PEOPLE. I TAKE A LOT OF STRENGTH FROM KNOWING THAT.

MY POP, REMEMBERS MY GREAT GRANDMOTHER AND HER SISTERS, SPEAKING LANGUAGE. WEMBA WEMBA LANGUAGE. TODAY THOUGH, HE ONLY REMEMBERS A FEW WORDS OF IT. IT MAKES ME SAD. I WISH I COULD SPEAK IT WITH HIM – AND MY MUM.

I THINK THAT'S WHY I LOVE WELCOME TO COUNTRY - I'M NOT SURE IF I CAN QUITE EXPLAIN IT... BUT, ACKNOWLEDGING PLACE AND PEOPLE. THE TRADITION AND THE LANGUAGE. I LOVE HEARING THE TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE...

AS MY POP GETS OLDER HE SEEMS MORE OPEN TO TALKING ABOUT IT. HE TELLS US ABOUT THE DAYS WHEN HE LIVED ON THE BANKS OF THE EDWARDS RIVER - WHAT THEY CALLED THE FLATS. I THINK IT'S BECAUSE HE SEES THE PRIDE AND

STRENGTH IN HIS LITTLE SISTER, AND BECAUSE US KIDS ARE PROUD TO IDENTIFY WITH IT NOW. HE IS PROUD OF US AND THIS HELPS HIM.

POP SAYS HE REMEMBERS HIS MUM, MY GREAT GRANDMOTHER, TELLING PEOPLE THEY WERE MAURI BECAUSE IT WAS EASIER TO GET ALONG THAT WAY. I UNDERSTAND HER. IT WAS EASIER – SAFER.

WHEN I WAS 18 OR 19 I SPENT A WEEK WORKING WITH PAUL.

I BASICALLY SHADOWED HIM AND ANSWERED HIS PHONE – IT RANG SO MANY TIMES – AND IT WAS SUCH A BREADTH OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE. GOVERNMENT PEOPLE, CORPORATE PEOPLE, FRIENDS AND FAMILY. I GOT TO SIT IN ON A COAG MEETING, AND WE TRAVELED DOWN TO MELBOURNE A NUMBER OF TIMES. WE HAD LOTS OF CONVERSATIONS AND I LISTEND.

I SAW FIRST HAND WHAT HE WAS WORKING TOWARDS. HIS DRIVE FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY, MUTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS, STRONG FAMILIES AND STRONG PERSONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND ALL AUSTRALIANS.

WHEN YOU WALK INTO RUMBALARA FOOTBALL NETBALL CLUB, OR THE KOORI RESOURCE CENTRE UP IN SHEPPARTON, YOU FEEL IT. AND YOU FEEL A STRONG SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING.

THAT AND SPENDING TIME WITH AUNTY KAYE AND TALKING ABOUT IT WITH MY BROTHER AND SISTERS, MY PARENTS, REALLY HELPED ME FIND MY OWN PLACE.

MY FAMILY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF MY LIFE AND OF WHO I AM – MY IDENTITY. MY ABORIGINALITY IS A PART OF THAT IDENTITY.

IT'S THROUGH THE LEADERSHIP OF UNCLE PAUL AND OTHERS LIKE PAUL, THAT I HAVE FOUND THE COURAGE AND STRENGTH TO PROUDLY IDENTIFY WITH THIS.

AS A YOUNG PERSON, AN ABORIGINAL PERSON, I ASPIRE TOWARDS PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND VISION - AND OTHERS LIKE PAUL - MANY OF WHO ARE IN THIS ROOM. PAUL IS AN INSPIRATION TO ME. HIS COMMITMENT TO CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE FOR HIS FAMILY, EXTENDED FAMILY AND COMMUNITY. FOR AUSTRALIA. IT'S SOMETHING I ASPIRE TO.