

Search on for next simple gesture

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SHELLEY REYS's father was the first Aboriginal jockey to win the Melbourne Cup. He did it on Gala Supreme in 1973 after a horrible two years in which he had suffered a broken shoulder, two pelvis fractures, a broken cheek bone and an ankle, earning him the nickname Autumn Leaves. At 41 he begged his wife, Noeline, for "one more crack" and he won the thing. Frank Reys was a tough man.

At 40 Shelley Reys is tough too; a self-made business consultant with a CV as intimidating as her mind is sharp, she is the first indigenous woman to be deputy chairman of the Australia Day Council, and a director of Reconciliation Australia and the Fred Hollows Foundation. Nevertheless, Ms Reys is crying.

"I get choked up just thinking about it. It happened so many years ago and still ... they were all ages; politicians, businesspeople, schoolteachers, nurses, ambulance drivers, six-month-old babies to 85-year-old elders, it was just beautiful."

From her perch as a reconciliation campaigner, the other beautiful thing about 2000's Harbour Bridge walk, when about 250,000 turned out for the cause, was that it was such a simple idea, so easily embraced.

"There's something about indigenous issues that makes people think, 'I don't want to say that or I can't say that or I'm afraid of sounding racist'. People walk on eggshells, therefore they don't do anything. [The year] 2000 would be a highlight because it was people doing something."

But Shelley Reys's generation of reconciliation campaigners is now asking the question, 'What next?' What is the next bridge walk idea; the simple gesture that could be to black and white relations what the two-minute shower was to the water shortage?

This week 41 Australians aged about 40 years old met in Bowral for the inaugural One Future Forum, to nut out the next generation's strategy for effecting real change on reconciliation and indigenous disadvantage.

They talked about the possibilities of new media such as the video website YouTube, which could be harnessed to bypass mainstream media and tell indigenous people's stories directly to an audience, said Kelvin Kong, 32, Australia's first indigenous surgeon.

They determined to campaign for mainstream dramas such as *McLeod's Daughters* to cast indigenous people as heroes, not merely token Aborigines, and for reality TV shows to select Aboriginal contestants.

"I think people have applied [for *Big Brother*], but maybe they're not casting for them," Dr Kong said.

And two weeks ago Reconciliation Australia launched its first online, TV, radio and

print campaign. Called "Too big a story", it is the next generation of reconciliation promotion, designed by the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi to bring the movement into the 21st century by harnessing the powers of celebrity and the internet. There are signs a new generation of supporters is out there, says Brett Solomon of the activist organisation GetUp.org.au, which has pioneered the use of the internet as a campaign tool.

In three weeks 38,000 people signed a GetUp online petition to close the 17-year life expectancy gap between black and white Australia, Mr Solomon said. In comparison, GetUp's highly publicised "Bring David Hicks home" campaign took a year to garner 50,000 signatures.

Oxfam Australia has a parallel petition running with 45,000 names on it so far.

"I think it shows there is a movement of Australians who are not satisfied with the progress of the last four years ... it's not a boutique issue," Mr Solomon said.

Shelley Reys says: "All Australians have a role to play; they can all make a difference. It's just a matter of turning that goodwill that they may have into something tangible."

She, of all people, is acutely aware of the need to close the gap between indigenous people and mainstream Australia.

Of her father Frank, the *Herald* wrote after the Melbourne Cup in 1973: "His parents came from the Philippines to farm corn and have 14 children."

But they didn't, of course.

"I'd hate to think that it was because he suppressed his Aboriginality that he was the success that he was and that gave me the platform from which to jump. But I dare say there could be an element of truth in it," she said.

She has never hidden hers.

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