Reconcili[what?]

Kate McFarlane, March 2007

When asked, “What is reconciliation?” many people scratch their heads and try to pinpoint a tangible way to describe it. I too joined the majority of the population in not understanding what it was, or how I could contribute towards reconciliation.

In early 2007, I participated in the Aurora Legal Internship Program. I was placed with Reconciliation Australia (RA), an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in Canberra, for a six week period. RA is the peak national organisation building and promoting ‘reconciliation’ across the nation.

On receiving notice of where I would be placed, I made a concerted effort to try and discover what ‘reconciliation’ actually was and how I could contribute. RA uses the example of closing the 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as a measurement of reconciliation. Although reconciliation is much more encompassing than simply changing the life expectancy rates of Indigenous Australians, it a visible goal for Australians to work towards.

Reconciliation can be achieved through our actions and thoughts. Ultimately, it concerns an attitudinal change that is required as a nation. Reconciliation is about:

a. Recognising the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as the First Australians, to express their cultures and participate on an equal footing in all aspects of Australian life;

b. Achieving respectful and productive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in all spheres of life; and

c. Being able as a society, through the way our institutions and communities operate, to acknowledge, value and allow for difference.
While these points offered me a great starting position, I still wanted to demystify reconciliation. I began my journey in searching for practical ways that I could contribute.

At RA I was greeted by a warm and highly skilled team of people who welcomed and supported me throughout my placement. I undertook a number of legal research and drafting tasks, which aided the process of educating the wider Australian community, building relationships of change, and supporting Indigenous communities and organisations. As part of the education programme, I was fortunate enough to 'go behind the scenes' up at Parliament House and attend meetings with Members of Parliament. It was extremely interesting to see the varied reactions and understandings of reconciliation.

The list of exciting activities, which I undertook in order to promote reconciliation, extended to attending the launch of a report up at Parliament House, and sitting in on a meeting with an ambassador to talk about reconciliation efforts in his own nation. While engaging in the education projects, it became apparent to me that many people stumble over the issue of ‘what can I do?’, and below are three simple ideas:

a. Educate yourself on the situation of Indigenous Australians;
b. Talk to people about reconciliation; and,
c. Ask your employer or learning institution about what they are doing to help bridge the gap.

So reconciliation is not that hard after all. It comes down to making a concerted effort to break old habits and change attitudes.

The Aurora project team contributed to the success of my internship experience; providing a pre-departure briefing, appropriate pre-placement reading material and offering me a fitting level of support. I now walk away with a wealth of wonderful experiences and new knowledge. It was a satisfying experience to use my legal skills at such a grass roots and worthwhile level. I have made wonderful new friends from all over the country and will always remember the rewarding time I spent at RA. Now I am comfortable to go off and continue contributing to the reconciliation process in my own way.
This year marks the 40th Anniversary of the 1967 referendum, which is often referred to as the first stage of the reconciliation movement. The 1967 referendum saw more than 90% of eligible Australians vote to make two changes to the Australian Constitution. These changes enabled the Commonwealth Government to:

1. Make laws for all of the Australian people by amending s51 of the Constitution, (previously people of 'the Aboriginal race in any State' were excluded); and,

2. Take account of Aboriginal people in determining the population of Australia by repealing s127 of the Constitution (formerly, Indigenous people had been haphazardly included in the census but not counted for the purposes of Commonwealth funding grants to the states or territories. From 1967, Indigenous people were counted in the census and included in base figures for Commonwealth funding granted to the states and territories on a per capita basis).

I invite you to contribute towards reconciliation and participate in the commemoration activities happening in your area on Sunday 27 May 2007. In closing, I note that these thoughts are my own and not that of Reconciliation Australia or the Aurora Project.

If you would like any further information on reconciliation and the commemoration activities, please see: http://www.reconciliation.org.au If you are interested in the Aurora Project please see: http://www.auroraproject.com.au/node/73