



# Sunday on the bridge

by Jennie Della

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As I waited with my son at Mortdale Railway Station at 7am on Sunday morning I wondered where all the people were. I had expected the platform to be crowded, not deserted. But at each successive station, the numbers gradually grew and by the time we changed trains at Town Hall, there was no doubt what was in the minds and hearts of we commuters. On arrival at North Sydney Station, we all walked slowly up the crowded staircase: young children, young adults, parents with prams, baby-boomers, older people. The day held such promise and we all wanted to be part of it: the Reconciliation Walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The morning was charged with emotions: there was so much positive energy, so much joy and anticipation. But there was also sadness – for indigenous people who were not walking that day because public health did not exist in their communities when they grew up; because they did not reach school age or see their fathers live to be 40. Western culture has robbed many indigenous people of their self-esteem, thrown many others into prison, and taken many others away from their families and their land.

I wanted to remember and record this day: the emotions, the colours and the people. I wanted my son to realise he was witnessing a powerful solidarity among the Australian people. I was taking photographs to record this historic event and I asked one Aboriginal woman to allow me take her photograph. She was holding an image and I asked her to tell me about the woman in her photograph. She told me, fighting back her tears, that it was a picture of her mother – part of the stolen generation. This woman was walking for herself and for her mother and, no doubt, for many others. I, too, was walking for others: family and friends who could not be there.

There were many more indigenous people who were feeling the hurts of the past: they walked for others and they walked in silence. And then there were those who chanted: people – both black and white – were calling for an apology and a treaty and they wanted them now! Above us in the sky, a plane was writing that most elusive word ‘Sorry’. The banners showed that people had come from long distances to take part in this empowering journey. And the people kept on walking: this was community – a vibrant community that grew with each step.

As someone said to my sister “You’ll never look at the Bridge in the same way again.” For my sister living in North Sydney, she will be reminded daily of her walk as she crosses the Bridge to work.

For me in Canberra, the Sydney Harbour Bridge is a more distant icon but it has always been a striking symbol of Australia. On 28 May 2000 it became much more: the Bridge was given to the people. It became a meeting place for white and black, where the Aboriginal flag was in constant procession across it and waved proudly above it.

For the cynical, Sunday’s walk across the Bridge will be seen simply as a feel-good exercise that will achieve nothing and soon be forgotten. For me and for many others it was community education at its most powerful.

What did I learn? I learned that ‘sorry’ is a word many non-indigenous Australians are prepared to carry across a bridge on a banner and are prepared to say. I learned that the Aboriginal flag took on a strong sense of identity on that Sunday. But most importantly, I learned that reconciliation is a joyous process and one that can unite us if we are open to it.