

First up

Q&A

Today there are more avenues to advance your big ideas. However, access to opportunities is not enough – you need access to expertise. Someone who sits beside you, to work with you in partnership.
– Shelley Reys, partner, KPMG

Interview by:
Clara Pirani

Photograph by:
Hollie Adams

The daughter of an Aboriginal man and a white woman of Scottish descent, Shelley Reys seemed destined to play a role uniting Australians from diverse backgrounds. The 49-year-old is CEO of Arrilla, a consultancy that helps corporations and government agencies work with indigenous Australians. Since forming the business 23 years ago, Reys has developed an enviable reputation. She was the inaugural co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, vice chairman of the National Australia Day Council, and chairman of the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence. Last year, KPMG took a 49 per cent stake in Reys' indigenous training business and she became the firm's first indigenous partner.

What was your childhood like?

My ancestral lands are the Atherton Tablelands in the far north of Queensland but I grew up in Melbourne, surrounded by horses. My father was a jockey – the only Aboriginal jockey to win the Melbourne Cup – and we spent most weekends on our property in country Victoria. We'd pick wild mushrooms the size of dinner plates for our makeshift barbecue, and with the Yarra River running through the farm, we'd ride our ponies as they gracefully paddled through the water. It was an idyllic childhood but you only really appreciate these things when you're older.

Did you enjoy school?

I took every opportunity to avoid school. I had lovely friends, but at the same time I was intensely shy and much preferred the company of the television and my dog, Sunny. I've often wondered what my life would have been like if I'd loved school, what shape it might have taken had I been able to fall on my academic prowess instead of my street smarts.

What was your first job?

When my father won a big race, kids at school would offer me pocket money in exchange for his autograph. I never really understood why (I thought everyone's dad rode a horse) but I accepted the terms regardless! My mother thinks that's when my entrepreneurial mindset was formed. When my father retired from racing and breeding racehorses, the family owned a small grocery store in the suburbs of Melbourne. I'd finish school and then get started on the checkout or packing shelves in exchange for pocket money. I did a terrible job, but I think my parents wanted to teach me the value of work and responsibility.

What was Arrilla like in the early years? Did you have much support?

My cousin, Darren Auyeung, had been running Arrilla and asked me to join him. We were a great team, however it wasn't long before we found out he was terminally ill and we had to wind down our work. When he passed, I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue

the business without him. Eventually, with family counsel and soul-searching, I gave it a go. I started with a zero bank balance and one client. That was 23 years ago and I still feel grateful to that one client.

What's been your greatest career challenge?

When you choose to specialise in changing Australia's attitudes and actions where they relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, you're bound to be challenged. In my experience Australia continues to feel uncomfortable with its indigenous heritage, peoples and culture, but

for every exasperating experience there's generosity and goodwill in spades.

What is the biggest mistake large companies make when engaging with indigenous Australians?

I prefer to call them lessons as opposed to mistakes. There was a time when closing the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians was almost exclusively in the hands of government. These days all sectors are involved. The challenge for companies is to move their mindset from it being a

philanthropic contribution to it being a sound business decision (which is important if it's going to remain as a line item on the budget). It makes good business sense regardless of your sector or core business activities. Sound work practices and behaviours help you to manage risk, and meet staff and shareholder expectations. It enhances your brand and reputation, decreases unconscious bias and increases the capacity to develop great leaders, and it enables you to stay competitive and relevant. It simply makes good sense.

Who are your clients?

Some of my clients are Qantas, Lendlease, Mirvac, Microsoft, Herbert Smith Freehills, IAG, Stockland and Bupa. And government, of course. I've worked with five prime ministers, three governors-general and countless ministers.

What's the greatest obstacle for indigenous Australian entrepreneurs?

The introduction of an indigenous business incubator really excites me because I would have loved something like that when I started. Today there are more avenues to advance your big ideas. However, access to opportunities is not enough – you need access to expertise. Someone who sits beside you, to work with you in partnership. We should never do things to indigenous people, but do things *with* them.

You were the inaugural co-chair of Reconciliation Australia. How would you rate the success of reconciliation in Australia?

If the scorecard was based on a handful of the fundamentals – rights, respect, racism, health, housing, law, justice, employment or education – you'd determine that we have a lot of work to do. Yet through my work in helping Australian workers to become culturally competent, I've met thousands of people who have an interest in creating change in spades. They simply need the confidence to do so – usually gained by increasing their skills in order to have more informed discussions and make more informed decisions. I'll know that we've arrived at a reconciled nation when I no longer have a job. And that's my goal.

What's on your career wish-list for the future? What would you still like to achieve?

My vision is to create a culturally competent Australia, one workplace at a time. I envisage a nation where every staff member, in every organisation, knows how to employ, retain, engage and work with indigenous Australians, procure from indigenous businesses, and work on indigenous projects with greater skill and confidence. In terms of closing the life opportunity gap between us, many countries have been attempting to do this for their own indigenous peoples for a comparatively longer period of time. I'd like to work with them to understand global best practice, consider what might have an Australian application, and deliver the best and most viable concepts to our own nation. Why reinvent the wheel? **D**

