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Aborigines 'must move on from survival thinking to live in victory'

RICK MORTON THE AUSTRALIAN JANUARY 27, 2014 12:00AM

WHILE Australia Day can be a source of deep pain and a reminder of a culture devastated by the arrival of Europeans, it's time indigenous people stop describing themselves as "victims of a racist system", according to a member of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council.

Koori lawyer and businesswoman Josephine Cashman, 35, delivered a speech at the Chapel by the Sea in Sydney's Bondi Beach urging a new way of thinking about the day many indigenous people called Survival Day.

"In indigenous affairs, we talk a lot about disadvantage and survival. I find these words uninspiring. I don't believe they portray the resilience of our people or our people's successes. They certainly don't portray the potential for all Australians to come together."

Ms Cashman told of growing up in a home marred by domestic violence, alcoholism and intergenerational trauma. She ran away from home for good at the age of 14, left school in Year 10 and then put herself through a law and journalism degree while working and raising a son, Joseph, whom she had at the age of 19.

Ms Cashman worked as a prosecutor with the NSW Director of Public Prosecutions before founding Riverview Global Partners, which is working to develop indigenous business in Australia.

"Language is very powerful. Can you imagine telling your own children they are set for failure? We have framed Aboriginal affairs by disappointment," she said.

"We need to open up the Aboriginal community to the language of their potential, to talk about their talents and how they can be used in society."

Ms Cashman said one of the worst by-products of oppression was that those communities tended to turn on themselves through "lateral violence".

"It happens when members of oppressed groups turn on each other, fuelled by the anger they actually feel for their oppressors," she said. "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been terribly damaged by lateral violence."

She said critics of the advisory council, on which she sits with chairman Warren Mundine, were an example of this "lateral abuse". "How can we get on with creating jobs and innovating for indigenous people when there is sniping within our own community," she said. Ms Cashman borrowed a phrase from Tony Abbott and said indigenous people should move past simple survival and start living "in victory".

"Victory is a choice. Let's all make a decision to be victorious and reach that better place," she said.