WA-based Alliance member Bonita Mason won a 1977 Walkley Award for Best Magazine Feature. She recounts how she did it and what it’s like to win Australia’s top journalism prize.

It’s surreal: the time arrives in the Walkley Awards ceremony when they get to your category. The world immediately around you drops away as huge images of yourself look down on you from two screens in front of 500 well-dressed people. You’re one of three finalists. The compere talks about you and your story. What she’s saying is loud enough, but you’ve gone into a kind of bubble and you hardly hear anything.

It’s surreal: Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments — in report after report — claim to have implemented the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, while more and more people are jailed or die in custody.

In 1997, I received a Walkley Award (Best Magazine Feature) and the George Munster Award for Freelance Journalism for "The girl in Cell 4". The story, published in HQ, was one of policy failure, institutional indifference and bureaucratic incompetence serious enough to take someone’s life. It traces the last week in the life of a 30-year-old Aboriginal woman, Janet Beetson, who died in a Sydney prison in 1994.

That year, a record number of Aboriginal people died in Australian prisons, higher than in any year examined by the Royal Commission. In Janet Beetson’s case, 16 Commission recommendations were breached. The following year, even more people died in Australian jails.

Janet Beetson was admitted to Mulawa women’s prison with a well-documented heart condition; symptoms that were assumed to be drug withdrawal; a 20cm chest scar from open heart surgery; and a record as long as your arm. Everything that anyone needed to know about her poor health was on her prison file.

I came across this story while working on another, on media reporting of deaths in custody for Reportage magazine, with Wendy Bacon at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism. It began as an assignment for an investigative journalism course at the University of Technology, Sydney. After the course finished, I kept working on the story, waiting months for coronial inquest transcripts and working with the family.

It took 18 months (on and off) to complete. There were many reasons for this but the most important was the need to take my time with the family. First, they had to decide to trust me. Both they and their lawyers had to be convinced.

I worked with Janet’s then 15-year-old son, Shawn (he was 12 when she died), and her mother and father-in-law, Dawn and Billy Delaney. It was hard on them to re-live what happened to Janet. They trusted me with their vulnerabilities (Shawn was having problems, Billy was terminally ill and Dawn had just been fitted with a pacemaker) and with Janet’s story. We cried together and shared information and documents — they had a compensation case to prepare. The story was a collaboration. It could not have been written any other way.

Any notions of myself as an objective journalist, maintaining a "professional" distance from my sources and approaching the topic with clinical impartiality — as suggested by the textbooks — had no place. I was on their side. In fact, as I was writing this story I became something like one of the family.

None of this means I compromised on ethics, honesty, fairness, accuracy or professionalism but I was subjective and aware of it.

As the story was written, I showed the family the drafts. They knew how I was writing it and how they were being represented. This was an important part of our collaboration. The family was not completely happy with everything in the published article but they accepted it because they wanted Janet’s story to be told and overall it did her justice. This was important. As Dawn Delaney said at the time: “I don’t want Janet’s death to be in vain because I don’t want it to happen to anybody else.”

I received the George Munster award in Sydney on 2 December 1997. Dawn Delaney was there and shared it with me. Shawn was busy that night: he was doing better. Billy Delaney wasn’t well and couldn’t make the journey from Sydney’s outer western suburbs.

The next night I was in Melbourne for the Walkleys: it’s announced. I get to the stage, accept the award, leave and head back into the crowd. I’m lost and have no idea where my seat is. I look down into the eyes of a very old woman who looks into mine and says emphatically “good girl”. I thank her and announce that I’m lost. A few generous souls point to where I need to go and I find my way back.

Nine years on, the numbers of people in prison continue to rise. Aboriginal people continue to be over-represented in those numbers, and in the numbers of people who die in custody. They are typically poorer, sicker and younger than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Underlying issues identified by the 1991 Royal Commission are yet to be addressed. Let’s hope we find our way soon.

Bonita Mason after winning her Walkley Award for Best Magazine Feature in Melbourne in 1997. (L-R) Federal Treasurer Peter Costello, Bonita Mason and two Walkley identities.