

Promoting Indigenous Rights through Research: An Aurora Project Legal Internship at the Indigenous Law Centre

By Simone King, Summer 2011

I decided to apply for an Aurora internship after seeing an advertisement for the Aurora Native Title Internship Program in my law school careers office at the University of Melbourne. I was a first year Juris Doctor student at the time, and I was interested in gaining some knowledge, experience and practical skills in an area I considered to be a very important one – the legal issues and rights of the Indigenous peoples of our country.

After going through the application process and being accepted into the program, I completed a six-week internship at the Indigenous Law Centre (ILC) at the University of NSW (UNSW). My time at the ILC was a great experience and a small part of my life that I will always remember fondly.

The Aurora Project

The Aurora Project is the collective name for a number of programs and initiatives that are carried out in collaboration with Indigenous communities and organisations throughout Australia. The aim of the program is to facilitate the prosperity of Indigenous communities and organisations through capacity building and professional development.

The project was developed in 2005, following the launch of a report by Richard Potok, with the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University, titled *Report Into the Professional Development Needs of Native Title Representative Body Lawyers*. This report highlighted two critical problems faced by Native Title Representative Bodies (NTRBs): difficulties in recruiting NTRB lawyers and difficulties in retaining those lawyers. To address these problems, the report made a range of recommendations, including initiatives to promote careers in the NTRB system. Organising internships in Indigenous organisations in the areas of law, anthropology and some social sciences is one of the ways in which Aurora implements these recommendations. The program places students and graduates in NTRBs, NTSPs and around 50 other organisations dealing with policy development, social justice, human rights and Indigenous affairs.

The Indigenous Law Centre (ILC)

The ILC is a research centre based at UNSW Faculty of Law. The centre is the oldest and the only Indigenous-specific legal centre in Australia. The ILC was initially established in 1981 to assist Aboriginal Legal Services and Aboriginal Land Councils, who were heavily engaged in frontline legal representation, by providing academic legal research and law

reform advocacy. For many years, the ILC has produced two esteemed and widely read publications: the *Indigenous Law Bulletin* and the *Australian Indigenous Law Review*. The current Director of the ILC is Megan Davis, who is an Associate Professor at UNSW and an Acting Commissioner of the NSW Land and Environment Court. Megan is also an expert member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples and a member of the Federal Government's expert panel on the Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians

The central objective of the ILC is to promote and advance Indigenous rights and social justice in Australia and in the international arena. The centre aims to fulfil this goal through conducting a range of innovative, multi-disciplinary research projects on Indigenous legal issues and by providing valuable legal resources for advocates, policy makers, researchers and the wider public. The ILC's core areas of research include Indigenous peoples and public law, Indigenous peoples and international law and Indigenous women and Australian democracy.

My Experience

My internship experience at the ILC was a fantastic one. During my time at the ILC, I worked on a research project exploring the sentencing of Indigenous offenders, helped conduct an interview with Linda Burney MP, co-wrote an article on that interview and compiled other pieces for the *Indigenous Law Bulletin*. These tasks were both interesting and rewarding, and allowed me to engage with some important issues in the areas of Indigenous law and politics.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my placement was having the chance to meet and talk regularly with the staff at the ILC, who all have considerable knowledge and experience in a multitude of areas of Indigenous affairs and great passion for Indigenous rights. Their reflections and insights helped me to navigate the territory of some very complicated issues in Indigenous affairs, including the principles for the sentencing of Indigenous offenders and the delicate balance between acknowledging Indigenous customary law whilst providing protection for the community and upholding the human rights of the individuals within it. Staff members and volunteers at the ILC also provided me with a range of articles and DVDs on Indigenous issues to enhance my learning experience and to broaden my perspective. The support that I received during my internship, both from the staff at the ILC and from the Aurora placement team, was exemplary. Both organisations made me feel cared for and part of a team. I would like to give a special thanks to my internship coordinator at the ILC, Janette Murdoch, whose friendship, humour and guidance I greatly appreciated and who continuously went out of her way to make my internship experience as rich, varied and enjoyable as possible.

I would highly recommend the Aurora internship program to anyone who has an interest and a passion for Indigenous affairs. If you are specifically interested in engaging in research in Indigenous legal issues, the ILC is an excellent place to do an internship. As an ILC intern, you are highly likely to have an engaging and enriching experience, as I did. Applications for the upcoming winter 2011 round of Aurora internships will be open on-line via the Aurora website from 7 March through 1 April 2011. For more information, go to <http://www.auroraproject.com.au/Internships.htm>