

Experiencing the Outback and Learning through Experience Shaunna Kelly

Scary spiders, poisonous snakes... these are some of the fears that I choose to face in accepting my placement with Goldfields Land and Sea Council in the Australian Outback; but I made the right choice, and I am truly thankful that I was given such an amazing opportunity. I have never been so far away from home, but I will never again experience such an adventure.

As a Canadian law student in my final semester, I applied and was accepted into the 2008 Intensive Program in Aboriginal Lands, Resources and Governments.¹ The Intensive Program, offered through York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, combines rigorous academic experience with challenging placements in the field of Aboriginal issues and had put me in touch with a similar organization in Australia, the Aurora Project.² The Aurora Project is the collective name for a number of programs that work with Australia's Indigenous communities and organizations. It focuses on professional development in law, anthropology, management and other various disciplines. One of the primary functions of the Project is to provide assistance to Native Title Representative Body lawyers.



The Aurora Project placed me with Goldfields Land and Sea Council³ (GLSC), which is a Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) and acts as the principal voice for Aboriginal Peoples in the Goldfields region in relation to issues such as land, waters, governance, heritage, and social and economic development. Native Title Representative Bodies were created under the Federal *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) to assist Native claimant groups with bringing land claims to the National Native Title Tribunal and/or the Federal Court.

¹ For more information please visit

<http://www.osgoode.yorku.ca/legal_clinics/clinical_programs_aboriginal_intro.html>

² For more information please visit <www.auroraproject.com.au>

³ For more information please visit <<http://www.glc.com.au>>

Managing an effective Native Title Representative Body is demanding at times. There are many widespread social problems afflicting Aboriginal communities, particularly in the outback, and progress is moving at a snail's pace in most cases. Also, the role of the GLSC is often frustrated by inadequate budgets, and facing adversaries who have multiple resources (including not just the federal government, but also some of the biggest mining corporations). With many of the current claims being lodged over a decade ago, the passing of elder claimants within the Goldfields region presents a very pressing concern for most Native Title claims.

NTRBs often consist of three distinct areas of discipline: anthropology, history and legal. There is a high concentration of all three of these areas at GLSC. While at the office in Kalgoorlie, I spent a lot of time with the in-house anthropologist and was able to experience how closely that department is involved with the legal aspects of Native Title claims. Most often this work is inseparable from the legal aspects of the GLSC.

In the position of a legal intern, I was provided with an opportunity to work on various projects. The projects included preparing an inventory of documents required for a discovery order, editing a draft manual, collecting a summary of collected evidence and developing a summary of relevant Canadian law to act as a starting point and comparison for their current claims. I was also given the chance to sit in a negotiation meeting, something that really showed me the operational side of the GLSC. This challenging placement provided me with unbelievable experience; experience that was not only relevant to my legal education, but to my own personal growth as an individual and a professional. My work at Goldfields Land and Sea Council was both rewarding and informative. It was a process of growth and personal understanding.



But there was more then just the work as a legal intern...

Because of the timing of my seven week placement, I was also given the opportunity to share in the National Apology to Aboriginal Peoples, offered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of the federal government on February 13th, 2008. Members of GLSC and the community all gathered at seven o'clock in the morning to hear words that were long overdue. It was an emotional and joyous occasion for all. The Apology was a historic experience that has made an impact on several lives, including my own.

I was very lucky to be placed in both Perth and Kalgoorlie. From experience, I can say that the outback is very different from the coastal cities in Australia, and not because of the geographical location. The outback is a place of beauty and amazement, home to some of the most deadly spiders and snakes in the world and yet none of the most dangerous animals. Unfortunately, the outback still struggles with ideas of equality and acceptance.

I had the unfortunate occasion to experience overt displays of racism while I was in the Goldfields region. There was one particular incident that I experienced where GLSC decided to take action. Letters were written to the local paper demonstrating our disapproval and anger that such overt displays of racism would be tolerated within the community. Apologies were given and accepted and a realization made that racism will not be tolerated. It was a positive outcome and hence, a positive experience, one that demonstrated the depth and importance of the GLSC. It is more then a mandated organization, it is a support group within the Goldfields community, a voice against social injustice and a community of people that are dedicated not only to their jobs, but also to affecting change.

And, together with the fact that I braved the outback during more then one camping trip, I can honestly say that the experience and growth that I have acquired from my placement is something that will stay with me forever.

I would thoroughly recommend both the Osgoode Hall Intensive Program in Aboriginal Lands, Resources and Governments and the Aurora Project. The partnership of these two organizations has provided me with experience that will last a life time.

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