

Relationships, Respect, Opportunities

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The Aurora Project – Legal Internship Article

Reconciliation Australia (RA)

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The title to this article is the back bone to the work that Reconciliation Australia (RA) does in advocating for equal life chances for Indigenous Australians. I thought that it was only fitting to be the title for my article as I gained all of these things during my experience at RA and much, much more.

I was half way through the fourth year of my degree when I applied for the internship with the Aurora Native Title Internship Program and had recognised it as a good opportunity that would show prospective employers my diversity and abilities. However I got a lot more than I bargained for.

Not only was it a good experience but it was a journey; one of professional and personal discoveries. I learned so much from the experience; about myself and my abilities but also about the different opportunities available to me when I completed my degree, not to mention the dynamics of working life. I met some amazing people both as work colleagues, through professional meetings and social networking.

As I am writing this article I am finding it difficult to express the experience so that the people reading it can get a full understanding of how life changing it was. This in itself is descriptive; quite simply the experience is indescribable and invaluable. However, for the purpose of this article I will do my best to describe my experience.

I stepped off the plane to a raining, cold and dull Canberra Sunday. I thought that my experience would probably be much like the weather doing the usual mundane tasks that no body else wanted to do; photocopying, making coffees, answering phones, doing the lunch run and being a personal assistant to everyone within the organisation. However, what was in store for me was so far removed from my idea of what the internship involved that on the first day I was quite overwhelmed.

The first day I was given a run down of the organisation and a quick introduction to all the staff before rushing off to a book launch by Australian National University (ANU) and Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) called ‘Contested Governance’ where I met Mr. Tom Calma who is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and the Race Discrimination Commissioner for the Australian Human Rights Commission. I also got to experience first hand a welcome to country, which was a welcome from the original owners of the land the launch was held on. I then went to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for the launch of their Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which is a program initiated by Reconciliation

Australia to encourage more employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians to provide them with better health services in order to close the 17 year life expectancy gap.

I was assigned to the RAP (Reconciliation Action Plan) team and was given a number of research projects to do. I was astonished by the amount of freedom I was given when completing my research tasks, how I was not treated like an intern at all, but a fully fledged member of the team contributing equally to the team's initiatives. I was asked to report on what I had been doing over that past week and my opinions on what the team should do about certain issues that arose during team meetings. My first research project involved locating the incentives available to employers wishing to recruit and retain Indigenous staff. This project was endorsed by Barbara Livesey (CEO of RA), as an excellent summary and was used to incite organisations being approached to create RAPs, which is phenomenal – who would have thought that the work I was doing was actually contributing to the work being done by RA and was considered to be of such a high standard. I was gob smacked. In total I completed eight research projects with varying degrees of commitment and research needed. I was held accountable and responsible for the work I was doing and it felt good to be trusted and considered competent enough to do these tasks.

My time at RA made me realize the important work that is being done behind the scenes that most people don't know about; to help create better life chances for Indigenous Australians particularly children. Before coming to Canberra I knew that Indigenous people were disadvantaged and was frustrated at the notion that very little was being done about it. I have always been cautious about divulging my Indigenous heritage to others because of the way that they will react, or the way they will treat me in the future. This was never difficult for me as my skin is pale and I look more British like my grandfather than Indigenous like my Grandmother. In spite of this, I have realized that if these people treat me differently because of my heritage then that is their problem not mine. I'm not going to be cautious about being who I am anymore; the world needs to change not me. Which, is why I enjoyed working at RA so much, I could see that progress was being made, no matter its size, it was still progress. Companies and large corporate entities were taking the initiative and deciding that not only is recruiting Indigenous staff a smart business move, it is the right thing to do by all involved.

While there wasn't much I did in the way of lawyering, the skills I had learned while studying law were definitely put to good use, and I was able to transfer them to the work that I was doing at RA.

I am extremely grateful for the experience and it will stay with me forever. I think that the Aurora Native Title Internship Program is an excellent opportunity for students. Having completed the internship before finishing my degree I am now better able to apply myself and have a better understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses this not only makes me a better person but also contributes to making me a better lawyer and employee.