

'To Know What You Do Not Know is the Best'

Grace Keesing

Funny what Google turns up. While doing a bit of research for this article, I stumbled across a poem by Ted Sheridan. Not a particularly great poem, fairly depressing really. But the first line seemed strangely appropriate – 'It has taken me a long time to learn that I've learned absolutely nothing.'¹

A long time. Four and a half years to be exact. After four and a half years of university, of studying law, of thinking I knew something, I did an Aurora Internship at Windeyer Chambers.

And it took me about four and a half minutes to realise I knew absolutely nothing. Nader. Zilch. That I had no idea how to be a lawyer, how the legal system operates, how Native Title works. Forget what you have read in books, or heard in lectures. There is no substitute for being there.

Day one, I arrived, bright eyed and busy tailed, at the front desk of 6th Floor Windeyer Chambers, Macquarie Street, Sydney. I had no particular expectations of my first day, other than a vague sense that I would be 'eased' into things, that there would be some sort of introduction, maybe a tour, a bit of photocopying perhaps. Not so. The receptionist smiled at me, and ushered me into Tina Jowett's chambers. Tina, the barrister who was my Aurora contact. Tina, who was in the middle of a teleconference mediation with the State of Queensland and a solicitor representing the Murray Islander people. A mediation being conducted by the president of the Native Title Tribunal. And so, without further ado, my education began.

In the course of my internship I worked for three barristers: Tina Jowett, Vance Hughston SC, and John Waters. I was given a huge variety of challenging legal work which required me to draw on my knowledge (such as it was) not only of Native Title, but Administrative Law, Constitutional Law, Tort, Contract, Corporations Law, Civil

¹ Ted Sheridan, 'The More We Learn The Less We Know For Sure' at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-more-we-learn-the-less-we-know-for-sure/>.

Procedure, Statutory Interpretation and Evidence. In my first week I assisted with a connection assessment for a NSW North Coast Native Title Claim by examining and tabulating affidavit evidence, undertook research and drafted an advice for Western Australian Native Title Representative bodies on Limitations Acts, read over briefs and affidavit evidence for a claim in the Torres Strait Islands, and sat in on a few conferences with clients and instructing solicitors. In the following two weeks, I drafted an advice relating to an exploration permit in the Northern Territory, researched for a claim in South Australia, drafted a summary of expert reports, and read about ten lever arch folders of material in preparation for the final week of my Aurora placement.

The final week. Just when I thought I had it, that I was finally getting my head around everything. I flew to Brisbane with John Waters for the closing submissions of the Torres Strait Islands Sea and Submerged Lands Claim in the Federal Court. A claim which has been on foot for nearly four years – Justice Finn, his associate, four parties, eight barristers, at least twenty lawyers, a gallery packed with Torres Strait Islanders, Papua New Guineans, members of the press, members of the public, and me. After three weeks in Windeyer, I had at least some grasp of the legal and factual issues. But there was a whole new world of procedural and evidence rules that I had not even considered. I was able to meet a huge variety of interesting people, including a solicitor who works in Native Title in the Torres Strait, a Murray Islander who was instrumental in instigating the claim, a solicitor at AGS, and a former Aurora Intern, who had worked on collecting evidence for the claim. I found the stories and information these people told me absolutely fascinating, and the more I learned, the more questions I have.

An Aurora Internship is a truly amazing experience, and I would recommend it to anyone. Many years before Ted Sheridan, Lao Tzu said ‘to know that you do not know is the best.’ I learnt so much from my internship, but more importantly, I realised how little I know. And I never touched a photocopier.