

As my train pulled out from Parramatta station for the last time I clutched a little bag of goodies from the lovely people at the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and a head full of wonderful memories. I gazed out the window as the western suburbs of Sydney rushed past and decided I was incredibly glad I had applied for a place in the Aurora Project.

I love law school. It may not be cool to admit this but the (nearly) five years I have spent studying law at Griffith University have been some of my happiest. When I first came to uni I was unsure where my passion lay, having interests in law, journalism and philosophy. I soon realised that for me, law was the best combination of all these worlds. I found the ideas, debates and questions I was faced with both stimulating and challenging and, most importantly, my newly acquired knowledge was constantly relevant to the world around me. I felt I had found my place and was confident that if I enjoyed my degree this much it logically followed that I would find it easy to find work I also loved.

However, as the years continued and I completed various different types of work experience, spoke to professionals, attended seminars and conferences and discussed with my friends our potential future careers, my confidence began to fade. The more I saw of the legal profession the less sure I became about where I would fit in. My final year began, and with it the necessity to fill in job applications. Suddenly it was incredibly important to find somewhere I would fit and the more important it became, the harder it seemed to be.

Then, I remembered the internship I'd heard about during my last property law course. I vaguely remembered that it involved working with Native Title bodies, something I had always been interested in. So, despite being in my final year, writing a paper for honours, applying for jobs and juggling work and volunteer commitments, I applied for the internship. As my train drew into Central station and I joined the commuters heading home after a long day I reflected on my decision to apply all those months ago and was thankful once again that I had made it.

During my placement with the Aurora Program I worked at the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council (**NSWALC**) which is the peak representative body for

Aboriginal Affairs in New South Wales. NSWALC is a statutory body, constituted by the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW) (**ALRA**) that aims to protect the interests and further the aspirations of Aboriginal people living in NSW. NSWALC does this by working for the return of culturally significant and economically viable land to Aboriginal Land Councils, promoting the cultural, economic and social independence of Aboriginal people and providing a voice for Aboriginal people on issues that affect them.

During my 5 weeks at NSWALC I was given very interesting, challenging and varied tasks to complete. I drafted a lease, loan agreement and licence, wrote advices on the applicability of various legislation to NSWALC, drafted a memo to the Council, and examined and prepared a comprehensive set of materials on amendments to the ALRA that are currently before the NSW Parliament. I was trusted with carrying out real legal work, invited to attend confidential meetings and discussions and given more responsibility than I had ever experienced in a legal environment. I was frequently challenged, yet constantly supported by the other staff and I felt like I was making a genuine contribution to the work of a very important organisation.

I also relished the opportunity to observe the competing demands placed on lawyers in an organisation like NSWALC. Aside from the incredible amount of work done with little resources and money, lawyers at NSWALC are also in a very unique situation. While their position is somewhat akin to an in-house lawyer they have very particular considerations that must be taken into account including balancing their professional duties as lawyers with the needs of the organisation and the 121 Local Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW.

In addition, there are thousands of unresolved land claims in NSW, many that have sat undecided for years. The Legal Services Unit at NSWALC works towards resolving the position of those claimants, in addition to making new claims, ensuring NSWALC's compliance with the ALRA and overseeing any legal issues that arise during the operation of NSWALC. After several frank discussions with the legal staff over my five weeks I realised there was a desperate need for well trained, dedicated and skilled lawyers (like those I worked with) in this area of law.

One of my other favourite memories of my time at NSWALC occurred during NAIDOC week. There were several social events occurring during the week and on the Wednesday NSWALC had a barbeque. There was a very happy, festive air around the place and the celebratory nature of the occasion was lovely. After we ate Counsellor Ah-See addressed the gathered crowd and spoke about the importance of NAIDOC week for the Aboriginal community. He finished speaking and a gorgeous little boy took the microphone and introduced himself as Oliver. He said a few spontaneous words and was roundly applauded by the audience. As Oliver was about to return to his lunch Counsellor Ah-see leaned down and asked the boy what his nationality was. The boy looked out at the crowd, grinned widely and proudly, and announced 'I am Aboriginal.' It was a beautiful moment.

My time at NSWALC was filled with memorable moments like these. I was also lucky enough to sit in on a Council meeting while my supervisor briefed the Council on a legal issue. I felt privileged to be in the room with the Council, which is made up of Aboriginal elders from around the state. However, I also found the experience to be quite personally confronting. It took me awhile to figure out why this was and it was some time later that I realised it was because I had been quite conscious of the colour of my skin during the meeting. Growing up white in Australia I have never had an experience where I have been made aware of the colour of my skin. For the first time in my life, working at NSWALC, I was. This was in no way a negative experience, rather it was the opposite. I realised that in Australia the freedom to never suffer racism and to never even think about the colour of your skin generally belongs to white people. This realisation challenged my own perceptions of the world and made me open my eyes further than I had before.

The internship undoubtedly challenged me professionally - but also personally. I left with improved legal and professional skills, an immense appreciation for the type and amount of work undertaken by the amazing lawyers at NSWALC and a new, enriched perspective on the importance of the fight for land rights - stemming from my own brief experience where I became aware of what it might be like to notice the colour of your skin everyday.

As I flew home to Brisbane I continued my reflections on the previous 5 weeks. Somewhere over Coffs Harbour I realised that, in addition to all I had learnt personally and in a professional sense, I was leaving NSWALC feeling reinvigorated and optimistic about my ability to pursue a career in law where I would be happy and fulfilled. I was suddenly aware that I had found somewhere that I had fit. Even knowing there was one place out there renewed my fading confidence and instilled a fresh desire in me to finish my degree and get out into the workforce to find my place.

Written by Rachael Taylor.