

# Bilata Legal Pathways Program 2017 ... The year that was.

## Mark Munnich

Program Officer, Law & Justice Projects  
North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

The Bilata Legal Pathways Program aims to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people within the legal profession in the NT. Law Society NT's *Balance* publication 2/2015 reported that of the 533 practitioners, only 10 identified as ATSI which approximately equates to under 2 per cent. Qualifications in law also opens up a wide range of career pathways outside of legal practice and with more ATSI people gaining qualifications in law there will be increased benefits for our communities.

2017 was a big year for the program with several significant events. A highlight of the year was when Australia's first Aboriginal Silk, Tony McAvoy SC, officially launched the program. Other events included the Inaugural Mentoring Workshop, a Law Day Dash with six participating



schools, the Bilata Road Show down the Stuart Highway, the second Cudgarees and Canapés event and program activities in December.

We want to thank our law firm partners in 2017 for supporting the program:





*Stephanie Monck*

- North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency,
- Maurice Blackburn Lawyers,
- Bowden McCormack Lawyers + Advisors,
- Clayton Utz,
- Halfpennys Lawyers,
- The Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission,
- Ward Keller; and
- Hunt & Hunt Lawyers.

## Inaugural Mentoring Workshop: 29 April 2017

The Bilata Legal Pathways Program started as an idea to put in place a mentoring program between senior members of the legal profession and ATSI students studying law at Charles Darwin University (CDU). The program expanded beyond this initial idea to provide a holistic program focusing on young ATSI students in high school, university law students and other adults interested in studying law. The mentoring component commenced from April 2017 where mentors and mentees gathered on a Saturday morning to 'workshop' what makes a good mentor relationship in a context specific to the NT. The mentor component will continue to be improved with new mentoring possibilities.



*Leanne Liddle*

## Law Day Dash: 26 May 2017

The Bilata Legal Pathways Program hosted the Law Day Dash where youth participants from high schools and colleges across the greater Darwin area had the opportunity to visit partnering law firms, hear from interesting guest speakers and take part in fun activities.

A big thank you to Clayton Utz, Maurice Blackburn Lawyers, Bowden McCormack Lawyers + Advisors, Ward Keller, the Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission and Halfpennys Lawyers for having us.



*Justice Blokland*





## Bilata Road Show: 5–12 November 2017

A group of Aboriginal lawyers and law students embarked on the Bilata Road Show. The route was from Darwin through to Alice Springs and then back to Darwin. The aim was to inspire and encourage people in regional areas, particularly high school students, who may have an interest in pursuing law. This was the first road show of its kind.

The visits in Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs were to:

- connect Aboriginal youth and mature aged students with role models and stories from Aboriginal lawyers and law students about their experiences and pathways to studying law;
- provide information about the program and encourage applications from ATSI high school students, university students and other adult participants interested in studying law; and to
- connect participants with opportunities and supports to assist their aspirations to study law.

In each town we held an evening event where we encouraged Aboriginal youth or adults who may be interested in studying law to attend and talk about the program. This was also an opportunity to encourage Indigenous people from remote and regional areas in the towns we visited to apply for sponsorship to attend the program days and the official launch of the program.

Thank you to the Law Society Public Purposes Trust for sponsoring the event.





## Cudgarees Canapés event: 23 November 2017

The Cudgarees and Canapés event aims to encourage and inspire ATSI women to undertake careers in law by connecting motivational guest speakers with attendees and the legal profession. This year we were very fortunate to have Her Honour Justice Jenny Blokland and Leanne Liddle from the Aboriginal Justice Unit of the Department of Attorney-General and Justice speak at the event. The event was emceed by Stephanie Monck. Thank you to the sponsors: Northern Territory Government Office of Women's Policy, Bowden McCormack Lawyers + Advisors, Halfpennys Lawyers and Maurice Blackburn Lawyers.

## Program days and official launch: 14 & 15 December 2017

Applicants who applied for sponsorship from Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs attended program activities in Darwin and the official launch. The program days included a range of activities where participants heard from guest speakers including Aboriginal lawyers and received an introduction to CDU's Law School pre-law program.

The official launch of the program was held at the Supreme Court on 14 December 2017 and Australia's first Aboriginal person appointed as Senior Counsel, Mr Tony McAvoy SC, officially launched the program.

"The Bilata program, this program which helps the spear fly fast and true, is an acknowledgement that the present state of affairs is unacceptable and that the legal

profession must transform itself. It will happen, of that I am confident." (...)

"The Bilata program also importantly focuses on the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law students to have two-way education. By this it is meant that the students are encouraged to continue their education in their own law as well as learning the imported British legal system. I cannot stress how important this aspect of the program is.

I say this because I have an unerring belief that our future self-determination will be experienced through the negotiation and performance of treaties. As lawyers, if we are to be of real value to our communities [and] to our first nations, we must be proficient in both legal systems." (...)

"To the students ... If I can impart just three lessons ... [the first lesson is to] concentrate on the task at hand. Do not worry too much about promotion or recognition, if you concentrate on the doing the best you can at each step those things will follow." (...)

"The second lesson is to work in the area of law you are passionate about." (...)

"The third lesson is do not be ashamed to ask for help and make the most of your mentors." (...)

We also thank The Honourable Chief Justice Michael Grant QC and North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency CEO Priscilla Atkins for speaking at the event. Sponsorship for applicants to attend to Darwin from regional areas was made possible with support from the Law Society Public Purposes Trust.

We want to thank the sponsors of this event: Marsh Insurance through the Law Society NT, Ashurst, who also support the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency; and law firm partners including Bowden McCormack Lawyers + Advisors, Clayton Utz and Halfpennys Lawyers.

