

Getting a new perspective in the Top End

By Romy Grace

Since leaving school I have been eager to learn about and engage with Aboriginal communities. During the past few years I have taken an interest in government policy affecting Aboriginal communities and have participated in various community engagement and work experience programs throughout Australia. The opportunity to undertake an Aurora internship at the Northern Land Council (NLC) was therefore invaluable as it enabled me to combine my interest in Aboriginal land rights with my paralegal skills in a dynamic and interesting organization.

Prior to arriving in Darwin, I was told to have no expectations, but the internship didn't disappoint – the work was extremely diverse and kept me engaged and busy. During the internship I worked on a land claim, a native title claim, a lease agreement, a tourism development scheme and a mining license agreement.

A highlight of the internship was the opportunity to travel (on tiny planes) to remote communities in the Northern Territory such as Croker Island on the Coburg Peninsula and Yarralin.

Life in Darwin was fantastic and I loved the laid back outdoor culture. I spent my weekends at the Asian food markets, visiting galleries, walking and riding through the national park and at the local yoga school. Living with two local criminal lawyers in a 'troppo' style house was heaps of fun. It took a while to adapt to all the wildlife but two months later, I was happily showering with green tree frogs, watching the food scraps 'decompose' within hours, and falling asleep to the buzz of mosquitoes and other mysterious flying insects.

Working for Aboriginal communities and dealing with the government on land rights issues can be extremely frustrating. Added to this is the complexity of legislation, the remoteness of many clients and the delays in achieving results. Notwithstanding the many challenges, the legal and non-legal staff at the NLC believe



Romy Grace out and about

in what they do, and do their best to satisfy their clients' wishes. The cultural sensitivity and understanding demonstrated by the NLC lawyers when dealing with clients was very impressive. A particular example of this occurred in a remote town, during a 'client interview'. We had flown down in order to get instructions from a client regarding a land claim. The client couldn't read or write in English and was very elderly. The meeting took place under the trees, in the dirt, with feral dogs roaming around, and lots of children eager to sit in. The NLC lawyer worked with the anthropologist in order to get the most accurate instructions from the client and their family.

My experience working at the NLC has definitely altered my legal career aspirations for the better and I hope to return to the Northern Land Council in the near future as a practising lawyer. I would recommend doing an Aurora Internship to all law students interested in learning more about the land/native rights of Aboriginal Australians and the complex legal system in which these rights operate.

Where are they now (?)

After graduating from Monash with an Arts/Law degree Katie joined the Castan Centre as its first Project Officer. In this role Katie worked on a variety of projects including human rights training programs, submissions to parliamentary inquiries and Castan Centre publications, including *Seeking Remedies for Torture Victims: A Handbook on the Individual Complaints Procedures of the UN Treaty Bodies* (OMCT, Geneva), which she authored with Professor Sarah Joseph and Linda Gyorki.

Katie left the Centre to travel, live and study in Spain and returned to Melbourne last year. She is currently completing post-graduate studies at the Victorian College

of the Arts in documentary filmmaking. Her recent short film is a portrait of Vickie Lee Roach, an Indigenous activist who took the Howard Government to the High Court of Australia in 2007 to challenge the constitutionality of legislation which removed the right to vote in federal elections from all sentenced prisoners. Vickie was a prisoner at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre at the time of the case, taking it on with the assistance of an outstanding legal team including Ron Merkel QC and Phil Lynch from the Human Rights Law Resource Centre. The documentary will be screened at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in December this year.

When Katie is not making films she is watching them in her role as Programming Manager for the Human Rights and Arts Film Festival (HRAFF). HRAFF aims to explore, interrogate and reflect on the concept of human rights through art and film, inviting the audience to engage with human rights issues through a variety of mediums and perspectives. The third iteration of the festival will kick off in Melbourne on 30 April 2010 and promises to be an exciting, challenging and inspiring ten days of art and cinema.

For more information on HRAFF please visit www.hraff.org.au