



From Oxford to Outreach...

One lawyer's journey to work in the area of human rights in the Northern Territory

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Driving down a bumpy dirt track, looking out to the majestic scenery in every direction as far as the eye can see. I've never seen so many different types of green and ochre. It's stinking hot outside and I'm grateful for the air-conditioned 4-wheel drive I'm in. This experience, such a typical scene for many in the Territory, is not the typical lifestyle that some people would have expected for an Oxford University graduate. Working as the Outreach Solicitor for the Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission involves lots of travel on these long, hot, difficult roads.

It was on one such trip that I recently reflected on how far away my Outreach work takes me from

the fancy Harry Potter style dining halls of Oxford University, where I graduated with a Master of Studies in International Human Rights Law in 2012. These reflections and this opportunity reinforce my feeling of determination and commitment to putting my high level studies about human rights into practice in places where they are most needed – here in the Northern Territory.

My inspiration has always been to help make a positive difference in the lives of people in need. I was able to have an amazing experience living in a developing country as an exchange student before I started university. It was during that experience that I was really confronted by shocking levels of poverty, injustice and inequality. Building on this experience, I decided to study social science and to develop skills and understanding of social problems and how to resolve them.

Through my studies at university,

I learnt more about complex and varied injustices in Australia, and became more determined to gain experience as a lawyer in Australia with an understanding of issues in our own country, before attempting to try and contribute to create change in issues of injustice at the global level.

While studying I developed an intense fascination with the law as a complex system impacting on every aspect of our lives. Laws can be created and changed to shape the world we live in, and we as lawyers can use our knowledge and understanding of the law to assist others through advice and representation. As I went through the motions of studying law, I did everything I could to enrich my understanding of how to use the law in different ways through internships, volunteering, and as many electives in social justice and human rights subjects that I could find. The ideas of social justice and human rights provided me with the

Above: The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, where graduation ceremonies are held.

Left: Seranie Gamble outside the Sheldonian Theatre for graduation



The famous spires of Oxford

vehicle for driving my inspiration to make a positive difference as a member of the legal profession.

I quickly developed a special interest in issues affecting Aboriginal people as an obvious choice for striving to create much needed positive change in Australia. My first job practicing as a lawyer was in a small firm in Sydney that specialised in Aboriginal Land Rights and Native Title. Always on the lookout for challenges and experiences, after two years in private practice I responded to a call from Indigenous Community Volunteers to be placed in a remote Aboriginal community in Western Australia for two months to assist the local Aboriginal Corporation write its policy and procedures manual. It was around the same time I was successful in applying for a position in the Human Rights Unit at the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALSWA), which

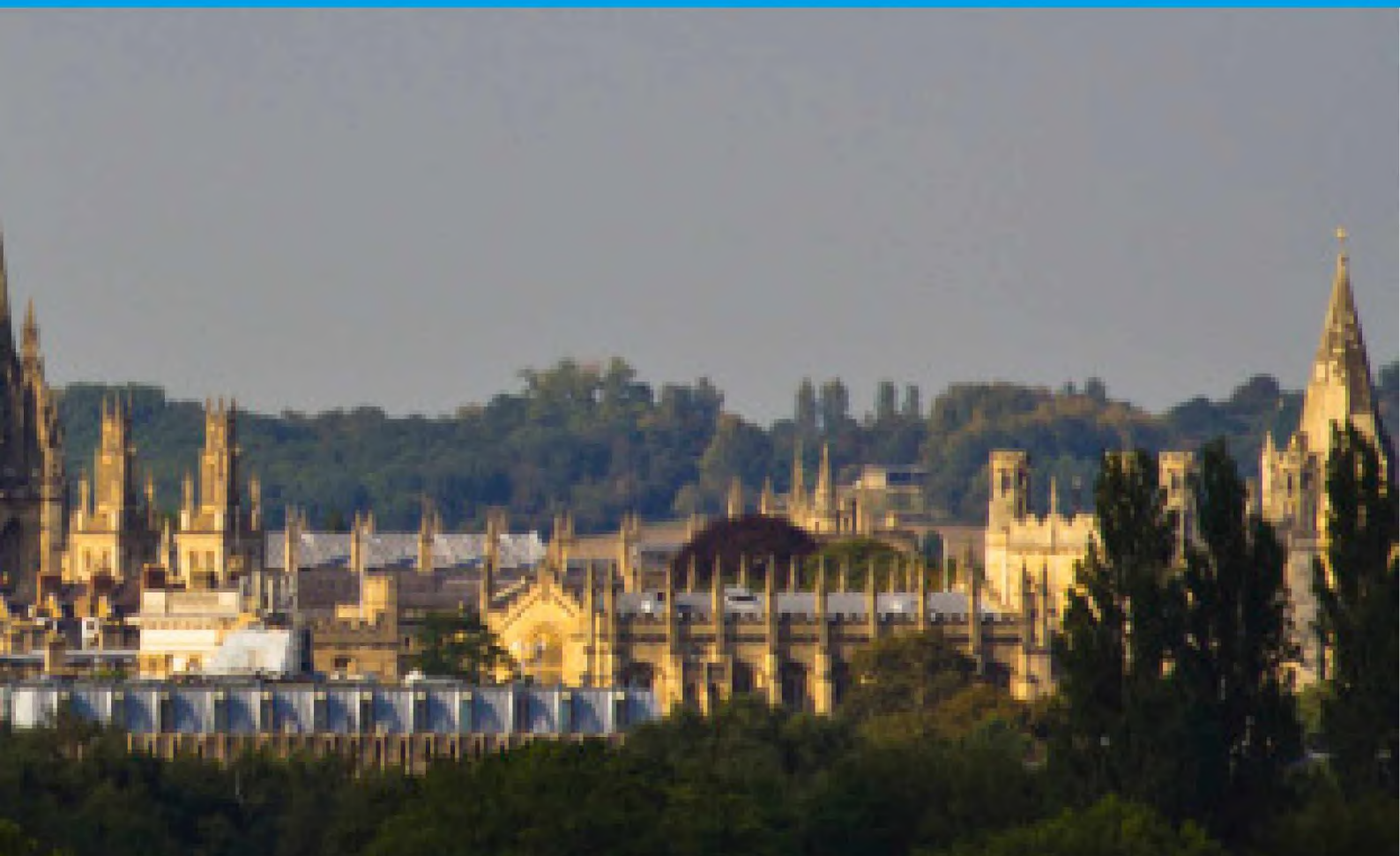
I commenced after completing the volunteer placement.

Experiencing life in a remote community helped me better understand the multifaceted issues facing Aboriginal people. I grew increasingly determined to work in this area to do more to effect real change in Australia. The more experience I thought I was getting in working with and learning about Aboriginal people, the more there was to learn and try to understand just how massively complex it all is. It was 2008, the year that Kevin Rudd made the historic Apology to victims of the Stolen Generation, and announced a national consultation for a Human Rights Act. I was thriving in my work at ALSWA but typically, wanted to do more. I thought I could develop my understanding about human rights law as a guiding framework striving for justice, peace and equality in Australia and around the world, and was fascinated

by international developments in relation to Indigenous peoples worldwide.

I came across the part-time Master of Studies in International Human Rights Law at Oxford University¹ and thought I'd take a chance in applying. The opportunity to study at such a prestigious institution as Oxford was of course one of the main appeals. Also the part-time nature of the course meant that I would only have to be absent from ALSWA for six weeks each year, for two years, allowing me to continue working in an area and with people I loved. I was fully supported by staff at ALSWA to pursue this goal, and couldn't believe my luck when I was selected as one of 30 students worldwide to commence in 2009.

The course involved studying online through discussion groups, research, submitting essays, a research dissertation and travelling to Oxford for intensive



periods of study and exams. It's hard to pick my favourite subjects from Oxford. The first part of the course was an introductory unit on the Fundamentals of International Human Rights Law. This included everything from the philosophy of human rights, different human rights mechanisms, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, terrorism and human rights, and comparative analysis of different types of rights and their meaning and application around the world. I then studied subjects such as:

- regional human rights systems looking at the European Court of Human Rights, Inter-American system, African Charter of Human Rights and emerging systems in South East Asia and the Middle East;
- the implementation and development of economic, social and cultural rights, including their nature, scope, and in the context of different groups and emerging issues such as transnational accountability, poverty and climate change;
- populations at risk: equality, discrimination and cultural identities, which explored the inadequacies of universal human rights protection to ensure equality and whether 'identity-based' standards of protection have advanced the realisation of non-discrimination and equality; and
- transitional justice as the set of measures that can be implemented to redress the legacies of massive human rights abuse by giving force to human rights norms that were systematically violated, including criminal prosecutions, truth telling, reparations and institutional

reform.

The best part of Oxford was the opportunity to mix with other dedicated human rights advocates from around the world working in exciting roles with the United Nations (UN), international NGOs, the military and international law firms with human rights practices. The professors were amazing and also from around the world, including various UN Special Rapporteurs and Human Rights Treaty Committee expert members.

In my final year of the course I was lucky enough to have Professor Patrick Thornberry as my dissertation supervisor. Professor Thornberry is a leading expert on minority rights and at the time was the chair of the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). I was given great guidance for my dissertation about



Seranie outside New College, Oxford, where she stayed during the residential component

of Indigenous Peoples, Special Rapporteur, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I also got the opportunity to teach in human rights at Curtin then Murdoch Universities, and established the WA Young Lawyers Human Rights and Social Justice working group.

In amongst this busy and exciting professional life, my personal life was changing too. Spending time with many troubled families whilst living away from my own family fostered in me a great desire to be close to and cherish my own family. After completing my studies in 2011, I made a difficult decision with my partner (who I of course met at ALSWA) to leave ALSWA and move to the Top End to be closer to his and some of my own family.

After a short stint working at the Domestic Violence Legal Service, I jumped at the opportunity to work as the Outreach Solicitor with the Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission in 2012. The NTLAC Outreach project was originally funded in late 2007 through the

the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Association of South East Asian States (ASEAN) from Professor Thornberry, and simultaneously gained valuable insight into the CERD process whilst the Australian Government was being reviewed for its performance of its obligations under CERD. I helped prepare some key information and lobbied Professor Thornberry about the situation of discrimination against Indigenous peoples and the justice system in Australia, and was thrilled to see many of the issues we discussed appear in the committee's concluding observations about Australia.

Australia's involvement in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) procedure and the various developments relating to Indigenous peoples such as the UN Declaration on the Rights

I continued to very actively pursue my interest in human rights in Australia through my studies and at ALSWA. I was simultaneously studying and working directly in the development and application of international human rights law through the Human Rights Consultation then Human Rights Framework, treaty reporting,



Seranie with the President of Kellogg College



policy, years of neglect, lack of understanding and any real will to achieve positive change.

Life in the Top End never allows for a dull moment, which suits me well. Whether it's travelling to a remote community to do Outreach work, planning a human rights activity, or writing a human rights submission in my role as Co-Convenor of the NT branch of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights², or being immersed in family life, I'm certainly enjoying my current journey and the exciting challenges and adventures it continually presents. ●

Endnotes

1. For more information about the course see <http://humanrightslaw.conted.ox.ac.uk/MStIHRL/>
2. For more information about ALHR see <http://www.alhr.asn.au/>

Northern Territory Emergency Response, and continues now under Stronger Futures to provide legal information, education, advice and minor assistance to Aboriginal people in remote communities. After so much work advocating for improved development and implementation of human rights law and policy at a high level, it is a wonderful contrast to be on the ground delivering a range of legal services to provide better access to justice for Aboriginal people in remote communities. The complex legal needs of these clients and the many conditions and issues they face on a daily basis are overwhelming. I continue to be inspired and motivated by the resilience of many Aboriginal people, despite ongoing paternalistic government

