

# The Bilata Legal Pathways Program

**James Parfitt and  
John Rawnsley**

Pathways for greater participation of  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people  
in the legal profession

The Bilata Legal Pathways Program aims to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people practicing law in the Northern Territory (the Law Society Northern Territory *Balance* publication 2/15 reports this number as 10 of 533 practitioners, approximately 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 in the NT.

Bilata (pronounced, Bee-la-ta) is the Larrakia word for a wooden spear-throwing device, also commonly known as a woomera. The Bilata was traditionally used to guide a spear along a pathway and assists with direction, speed and accuracy. It is used for many purposes and is sometimes more revered and more valued than a spear.

The program works with a Reference group comprising:

- Former Chief Justice Trevor Riley (co-chair)
- North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency CEO, Priscilla Collins (co-chair)
- Chief Justice Michael Grant QC
- Chief Judge Dr. John Lowndes
- Law Society Northern Territory Acting CEO, Kellie Grainger
- Charles Darwin University, Prof Ned Aughterson
- Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Sally Sievers
- Barrister, Mr John Lawrence SC

- Department of Correctional Services, Ms Amanda Nobbs

In March 2016 the program called for participants from three sets of participant groups: high school / college students, university students and other adults interested in studying law. A total of thirty applications were received including fifteen applications from schools, nine applications from Charles Darwin University (CDU) law students and six other adult applications. By working with these groups the program engages the community in a holistic way to help identify and provide potential lawyers with tailored supports, exposure to different areas of law, networking and mentoring, access to guest speakers and other connections to strengthen their pathways.

On 20 May 2016 the first program day for the Bilata Legal Pathways Program was held. Broad feedback from participants and observers including responses to an evaluation form indicates the program day was very successful. This success serves as a foundation to developing a sustainable and impactful program.

The program day started at the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) conference room, with a Welcome to Country by Community Legal Educator James Parfitt. Mr Parfitt spoke about his pride to see all the people involved and from different sections of the community, and how law and education serves as tools for people to effect change.

NAAJA's CEO Priscilla Collins as co-chair of the Reference group launched the program day and spoke about the importance of involving ATSI people in the delivery of services because 'we know the issues'. The audience heard about the broad support from leadership across the profession and judiciary and her pride in seeing the younger generation aspiring to step up to learn about the

law and put it into practice. Lawyer John Rawnsley talked about the principles underpinning the program and how each participant will develop their own understanding and reflection of the principles. These principles can serve as one of a number of frameworks to consider the interactions of the program.

The principles are:

1. Knowledge is shared
2. Encourage expectations, no shame in failing
3. Pushing boundaries, being culturally safe
4. Fostering connections

Participants were then allocated into groups based on some fun-based activities and were given the task of mapping all the law-related offices when walking to the Supreme Court. At the Supreme Court the group heard from a number of up-and-coming lawyers about their pathways and work roles.

Mr Lachlan Peattie, currently working for the Solicitor for the Northern Territory in the Aboriginal Lands Team of the Commercial Division, spoke about his experiences growing up and attending school and university in the southern states and when he first thought seriously about being a lawyer (he wanted to impress his then girlfriend's father who asked him what he wants to do with his life). At university in Canberra he applied himself and in his thesis compared Australian and Canadian approaches to issues of Indigenous imprisonment. He submitted an application to be an Associate with Justice Southwood and was successful. He gave some practical advice about applying to be an Associate, what the role entails and how it has helped him to develop his skills and build his knowledge. Mr Peattie spoke about his current role in commercial matters with a focus on native title and some of the interesting legal points canvassed in the work. When asked by an audience member about why he first chose law, he said he has thought about when he is an old man looking back and seeing what he has contributed to in his life and he would

like to contribute to an area he is passionate about and that is meaningful.

Mr Maker Mayek, currently working with Da Silva Hebron, spoke about his earlier experiences growing up in South Sudan during significant conflict and war. He showed participants a picture of a hut which was similar to the one he was born in. Mr Mayek's father, who worked as a high school Principal, passed away during the conflict. After his mother passed away, Mr Maker's aunty asked him and his family whether they would join them at the Kenyan refugee camp. Mr Mayek read as many books as he could whilst living at the camp. Reading books enabled him to learn and build his skills and knowledge as the school at the camp offered only limited opportunities and resources. After about four years he was accepted into Australia and lived at Newcastle with his family. Adapting to a new school and country was a challenge however Mr Maker applied himself and following school was accepted into the University of New England to study a Bachelor of Arts/Law later transferring to the University of Canberra where he completed his studies. He went on to complete a Masters of Law at the University of NSW and a Masters of Diplomacy and Trade at Monash University. Mr Maker currently works in litigation at Da Silva Hebron. His key message for the group was that if 'I could do it, anyone can'.

Ms Natasha O'Connell gave an account of her experience growing up in Darwin as an Aboriginal woman and studying with a recent admission to legal practice. She has a large number of nephews and nieces and extended family and has supported them in different ways. With this role at times she has had to maintain her focus on studies and hold it as a priority, particularly around deadlines for assessments. Following school, Ms O'Connell's family impressed upon her to do 'something worthwhile', and that she has the 'capabilities' to succeed. Her older brother had been a lawyer for many years and had developed a network of people and supports Ms O'Connell could draw upon to help with her pathway. In her current role with Aboriginal Peak Organisations she advocates policy issues in relation to housing, health and other related issues and on behalf of the main Aboriginal organisations in the NT. Ms O'Connell encouraged participants, if they pursue law,

# The Bilata Legal Pathways Program

to look for opportunities for support including cadetships and other supports which have assisted her. Ms O'Connell is an example of what can be achieved with focus and determination and as a young lawyer is on the path to building a career and as a role model for her family and younger generations.

Director of Northern Territory Legal Aid Ms Susan Cox QC spoke about her experiences studying law at a time when female law students were often discouraged from pursuing their studies. Following her studies she worked in Papua New Guinea and in New York before returning to Australia and working at the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. When asked how she received acknowledgement as a Queens Counsel (QC), Ms Cox QC spoke about the 'hard work' and dedication to achieve this recognition.

Principal Legal Officer for NAAJA Mr Jonathon Hunyor spoke about the history of NAAJA including the amalgamation of a number of services to cover a significant area. He spoke of the broad range of work done by NAAJA and the special nature of the role played by an Aboriginal Legal Service as an Aboriginal-run organisation that speaks with authority and for the community about law and justice issues.

The group then held lunch at Liberty Square outside the Supreme Court. Following lunch participants in small groups were tasked with talking to a more senior person including guest speakers and Ms Amanda Knobbs from

the Reference group about what brought them to the program day and their future aspirations. This enabled each participant to reflect on their experiences that day and to provide some context in terms of their own future ambitions. Evaluation forms completed by participants and observers showed very positive feedback about each part of the program day and an appreciation for the opportunities made available.

The Bilata Legal Pathways Program started as a conversation between a NAAJA and a CDU staff member about setting up a mentoring arrangement to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law students at university. Significant work has gone into developing a program that can be robust and sustainable and draws upon the various supports and leadership across the community and legal profession and judiciary.

We would like to thank the following team for putting together the program day: Natasha O'Connell, Angie Torr, Caitlin Burke (and for designing the interim logo), Sam Dutailis and support staff from schools, the Supreme Court for allowing us to access their court rooms and a special thank you to the wonderful guest speakers for sharing their insights and experiences.

