

The Aurora Project

Monash Students get first hand experience in Native Title work

By Philippa Ross and Jenna Donsky

As a distinguished barrister and human rights advocate, Ron Castan, after whom the Castan Centre is named, was a staunch promoter of Indigenous issues and Aboriginal land rights. The Castan Centre has upheld his legacy of commitment most recently through its work with the Aurora Project.

The Aurora Project consists of a number of programs in Australia's Indigenous communities and organisations. The principal focuses of the Aurora Project are training staff of the seventeen independent Native Title Representative Bodies (NTRBs) across Australia, providing student internships in the organisations, and helping them to improve their services and resources.

The project was established in 2005 following the launch of the *Report into the Professional Development Needs of Native Title Representative Body Lawyers*, written by current Aurora Project Director Richard Potok, with Melissa Castan and former Monash students Monique Sweetland and Edwina Howell, which highlighted a need for greater support for NTRB lawyers. In response to this report, the Aurora Project, in association with the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Rio Tinto, has been working to improve important issues identified by the report.

The establishment of a student placement program has led to the assignment of law, anthropology and social sciences students at Australia's NTRBs, and other Indigenous organisations around Australia. The Castan Centre and the Monash University Law School have supported this internship program since its inception by offering student placements in both winter and summer. The internship program fosters two main outcomes: the provision of important support to under-resourced NTRB staff and the exposure of students to Native Title work and career opportunities in Indigenous affairs.

The internship placements last for four

Aurora intern Jay Tilley reflects on his experience with Reconciliation Australia

"The reputation of Canberra is not a generous one, but having spent a month there on an internship with Reconciliation Australia, I will forever defend it against the slander that is often catapulted at our nation's capital. My new attitude is due entirely to the fond memories I have of my internship through the Aurora Project.

I began my internship by examining the work Reconciliation Australia had been doing on Indigenous governance with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University and on the second day of my internship, the Federal Government announced the Intervention in the Northern Territory. From this point on, the office was running hot with decisive action motivated by a familiar fury this NGO has known since its inception.

This ominous policy shift came at a time when, for me, Canberra was the place to be. I found myself sitting in on numerous press conferences and witnessed the convergence of Indigenous lobby groups from all around the country and the strategies they used to get their messages out to the Australian people.

When the dust started to settle, the remainder of my time was spent on a section of the reconcile.org.au website collecting popular myths Australians hold about Indigenous peoples and writing and researching the truths that are unfortunately largely unknown by our nation's majority.

Having only one semester of law school completed, being placed in a policy internship was perfect for where I was at the time. The Aurora Project matched my skills and interests to the perfect organisation. I look forward to future internships through the project as I continue with my law degree, which, no doubt, I will also re-tell with emphatic fondness."

to six weeks during which students are involved in legal and policy-related work including the preparation of case and legislation summaries, the collection of evidence from Indigenous claimants and the attendance at directions hearings. Successful students also commit to post-placement obligations which include giving an address to their student body to raise awareness of the program and writing a report about their internship.

The support of the Castan Centre, Monash University and over 30 other universities Australia-wide has been exceptional. Over 250 students from 26 Australian and 4 international universities have undertaken placements at NTRBs and other organisations involved in Native Title work.

As a result of their placements, many legal internship alumni have found employment at NTRBs, including three Monash students.

In conjunction with the student placement program, the Aurora Project also offers longer term contract locum placements to law students and qualified solicitors in the field.

Another core function of the Aurora Project is to provide NTRB staff and Native Title Service Providers with programs as well as resources to support new staff and enable established staff to extend their knowledge and skills in relation to Native Title work. Some of these resources include a NTRB staff handbook, a model staff performance evaluation, alternative dispute resolution training as well as an induction manual and training sessions specifically designed for new employees.

The Castan Centre will continue to support the Aurora Project and in particular the student placement program which provides a valuable contribution to Native Title work in Australia.

The next round of applications for internships will occur in September. Please see www.auroraproject.com.au for information.