

# Teela Reid

by Chris Ronalds SC

Teela Reid was admitted as a solicitor in December 2016 and started work with NSW Legal Aid in March 2017. As a proud Wiradjuri and Wailwan woman from Gilgandra, Teela initially trained and worked as a PE teacher. Her transition to the NSW legal profession began after she was selected as an Indigenous youth female delegate to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, where she met Professor Megan Davis from UNSW who encouraged her to study law as a mechanism for developing as an advocate for her people.

During her second year at UNSW, Teela found it challenging to keep up motivation for her legal studies due to the intensity and competitiveness whilst dealing with loss and grief in her own family. Through the recommendation of a friend, she joined the mentoring program run by the NSW Bar Association as part of their Reconciliation Action Plan. She was linked with Sophia Beckett, a criminal lawyer then at Forbes Chambers and now a Public Defender.



Sophia Beckett (Public Defender), Justice Lucy McCallum (NSW Supreme Court),  
Teela Reid (Legal Aid NSW) Chris Ronalds AO SC

Teela recalls:

I remember first going to Forbes Chambers, my first time ever in Chambers and not even knowing my way around and literally I remember the elevator opening and Soph welcoming me with the biggest smile ever and I just knew from that moment that it was all going to be fine. We went for a coffee and had regular catch ups from that point. She was very persistent we meet and I felt she never gave up on me, despite my own self-doubt. She took me under her wing and now I feel part of her family which provides a sense of security in a big city where I have no immediate family. Most importantly our mentoring relationship was based on mutual respect, not tokenism, and for that reason it was a turning point in boosting my confidence and self-esteem as I navigated my way through law school and into the legal profession.

Sophia comments:

I was delighted to be asked to participate in the mentoring program and was paired with Teela Reid who was in the final years of her law degree at UNSW.

After a few scheduled meetings, we quickly moved from a mentoring relationship to a friendship. In no time, our respective families in Sydney and Gilgandra were intertwined. The program assists students by providing more than just guidance, but also a sense of security and support: a person that can talk through the obstacles and problems along the way; understand that feeling that the legal profession

can appear daunting and foreign; and encourage engagement. Despite these feelings, Teela nonetheless showed a willingness to accept the opportunities that the mentoring program offered. She is now better connected within the profession than I am, but she humours me by still pretending she needs me.

Teela participated in the initial “Share a Judge’s Day” in August 2014 where Indigenous law students were paired with a NSW Supreme Court Judge for the day to see firsthand what goes on behind the scenes and in the Court room. Teela described the day as being “a really pivotal point and a great experience”. Through this program, she met Justice Lucy McCallum and in 2016 worked as her tipstaff.

Teela described her year working in the Courts as:

My time as a tipstaff exposed me to a variety of areas of law that would have taken years of practice to acquire. Experiencing jury trials, appeals and

the defamation list provided insight into different advocacy styles that have been invaluable to developing my own skills.

Justice McCallum comments:

Teela is one of the strongest people I know. She has experienced grief and discrimination and instead of knocking her back it has filled her with courage and determination. I learned a great deal about my own fears from watching her conquer hers.

In September 2015, the Indigenous Barristers’ Trust made an inaugural award at the UNSW Indigenous Students Awards to Teela, then “a final year Aboriginal law student, for her efforts in increasing advocacy by designing and implementing the UNSW Law Mooting Competition for Australia’s First Peoples in 2014 and 2015” with an award of \$500.

In June 2017, Teela was selected to attend the Emerging Leaders Program at Harvard University. The Indigenous Barristers’ Trust provided some financial assistance to enable Teela to attend the Program in the USA in June 2017. The Trust also covered the costs associated with her admission.

Teela is currently a solicitor at Legal Aid NSW and is considering a career at the NSW Bar and says:

Without the mentoring program and opportunities provided by the NSW Bar Association and particularly the Indigenous Barristers’ Trust, my time navigating law school and entering the legal profession would have been significantly harder. It’s not just the financial assistance - it’s the connections made amongst law students, graduates and people in the profession such as judges, barristers and solicitors that are breaking down barriers. Young Aboriginal lawyers are now starting to believe that going to the Bar is possible – it is a realistic option. And rightly so, if we believe the benefits of justice should be available to all, the Bar should reflect the diversity within our community and not only be accessible to those from privileged backgrounds.