

Leon Apostle

by Anthony Cheshire SC

Leon Apostle is a Darug man with a Greek surname. He has ‘an interesting mix’ of relatives scattered across Western Sydney, where he grew up: Apostles, Tangyes, Lockes and Everinghams.

I was raised by my mum and she placed a great deal of importance on education. I have very fond memories of sitting in bed with her, eating lollies and listening to her read to me for hours.

He was not overly academic at school, but loved art and played a lot of tennis and rugby. After school, he enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Western Sydney, majoring in sociology.

During his degree course, Leon attended a summer school lecture at Sydney University on the subject of ‘Indigenous Australia’:

The lecturer was quite an activist and spoke about legal issues that affected First Nations people. He inspired me to want to study law and soon after that I was studying law at the University of New South Wales.

The Nura Gili Centre for Indigenous Programs provides support and information for First Nations potential and existing students at UNSW:

It is a fantastic resource. The tutors were incredible and I still go back and teach at their Indigenous Pre Law Course. They asked me what I wanted to do with my degree and I realised that I couldn’t just keep taking and that I needed to give back. That was why I went into criminal law – to give back and help people who don’t have a voice.

He started work for Legal Aid NSW as a legal support officer whilst still at UNSW and then continued in a graduate solicitor position, before joining Broken Hill Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Service (also known as the Warra Warra Legal Service). There he assisted First Nations people in the region with issues including family law, family and child protection, child removal and victims compensation. He describes that work as “amazing” and “very rewarding”.

Leon then worked for the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT in Redfern and Parramatta before starting out as a sole practitioner:

Going out on my own was probably a bit of madness, but I wanted a challenge rather than the predictability of a 9 to 5

job. I wanted to build something up and give back to the community.

He had an office in the Sydney CBD, but maintained his connections across the State and in particular in the far west.



When he was doing his Practical Legal Training, he was struck by one defence counsel’s opening address in a District Court criminal trial:

She had an incredible ease and manner in front of the jury; and her recollection and grasp of the facts was really impressive. I said to myself: that’s what I am going to do and to that standard.

After building up a healthy practice of Local Court summary matters whilst also instructing in trials, he was ready to take the next step; and so came to the Bar and now appears in jury trials. He has found it a bit of an adjustment to the altered role of being counsel rather than the solicitor, but he is now carving out a successful practice in criminal and family law for a variety of clients across the State:

I am especially passionate about criminal law. I love seeing people’s rights being upheld, especially if they can’t advocate for themselves. I get a buzz from seeing them walk out of court empowered.

When he came to the Bar, Leon was tutored by Tony Evers, Public Defender, and mentored through the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions Indigenous Lawyers mentoring program by the late Jose Crespo, Crown Prosecutor, who sadly died late last year:

I would call him at all hours and he’d often convey the most ingenious lines of

cross-examination. We got on like a house on fire. It was a great loss and I was very sad when Jose passed away.

He is now mentored by Huw Baker SC (through the ODPP program) and Howard Packer (through the Bar Association mentoring program). Chris Ronalds SC has also been a great source of support and encouragement:

She is a person who selflessly gives her time and shows great support to First Nations barristers, students and solicitors.

He continues:

All of these people have been very supportive, approachable and generous with their time. There is a lot of goodwill at the Bar and I will be forever grateful to these and many others who have given me support and encouragement over the years. I think it’s important to acknowledge that these people had no obligation to help me, but chose to do so out of the goodness of their heart.

Their knowledge of the law and trial advocacy is phenomenal and to hear their thoughts on matters is invaluable.

Leon has also been assisted by the Indigenous Barristers’ Trust – The Mum Shirl Fund, which has supported him and helped him get on his feet as a junior barrister.

As for the future:

My hope for the future is to continue to build a strong trial practice. I thoroughly enjoy conducting them and I especially like getting out on circuit to country New South Wales. I’d like to continue to build lasting professional relationships with colleagues who bring the same work ethic as me and who I enjoy being around.

My greatest hope is to see a solid cohort of First Nations persons at the Bar and importantly on the Bench. Diversity on the Bench is important because First Nations people considering a career in the law need to know that they have a voice and that they are entitled to use it. I also hope that at some stage I will be experienced and knowledgeable enough to lend the support to younger First Nations barristers that so many people have given to me.