

Weave

Interview with Peggy Dwyer, Chair of Weave Youth and Community Services

By Belinda Baker

*I can change the world, with my own two hands
Make it a better place, with my own two hands
Make it a kinder place, with my own two hands
With my own... With my own two hands*

*I can make peace on earth, with my own two hands
I can clean up the earth, with my own two hands
I can reach out to you, with my own two hands*

LYRICS, WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS, BY BEN HARPER

In popular media, barristers are often portrayed as being focussed entirely on pursuing material gain, both for themselves and their 'undeserving' clients.

However, the reality is that every day in courts across New South Wales, there are barristers who, often for little material reward, speak for the disadvantaged, hold the government and powerful corporations to account, and generally ensure that litigants (whether 'deserving' or not) are able to have their matters heard with fairness and justice.

In addition, there are many barristers in New South Wales who are using their legal skills and expertise, or the flexibility they have in self-employment, to benefit and support local and international communities. There are barristers who are Chairs, CEOs and board members of a range of charities and not-for-profit organisations, there are barristers who regularly travel overseas to volunteer with international organisations working to achieve justice and to alleviate poverty throughout the world, who serve on boards for the arts, who provide their time free of charge to assist with grassroots sports organisations, and who regularly volunteer their time to serve their local communities, for example, as surf lifesavers and as firefighters. Many of these barristers perform these roles quietly, with little recognition, and often with little assistance. To echo the lyrics of Ben Harper, they are making the world a brighter, safer place, with their 'own two hands'.

The purpose of this series is to shine some light on these barristers, and, importantly, the charities and organisations that they serve.

**Can you please tell me about Weave?
What are some of the needs that
Weave was created to meet?**

Weave has been around for about 43 years. It initially started because a group of local Redfern parents and grandparents were concerned about the safety of their children on the streets after school and at night, and they pushed for a youth service. In response to that, funding was obtained for one youth worker, and from those humble beginnings, Weave has grown into a community organisation servicing Redfern, Waterloo, Woolloomoolloo, Maroubra and surrounds.

Weave is a holistic service. We don't tell people that we can meet one need, but that they'll have to see four other agencies for the rest. Weave is responsive to what an individual and the community needs. This ranges from practical support, housing referral, after school and holiday programs, counselling, mental health, drug and alcohol, education, and employment. Different programs have started up because Weave works in a collaborative and responsive way with the community.

**What are some of those programs
that Weave now provides?**

There are about 12 different programs now provided by Weave. Some of those are:

Kool Kids Club: Kool Kids is early intervention and prevention for kids aged 7 – 13 years. Weave picks the kids up after school and drops them home at around 6pm. The program provides recreational activities and mentoring, including connection to culture, physical strength and resilience, through after school and holiday programs.

Kool Kids operates on a 'No School No Program' basis. When we first started the program about 15% of the kids were going to school. Now it's nearly 100% attendance. 95% of our Kool kids are Aboriginal children and they are inspiring young people who will be leaders in their community.

Driving Change: This is a program for all ages, helping young people and adults get their learners and P plates. So many criminal justice issues are related to driving and too many indigenous people are jailed for driving offences. As Mick Gooda, co-chair of Just Reinvest NSW said, a licence "is not just a licence to drive; it's a licence to live." Weave pays for a number of lessons with a qualified driver; then we have wonderful volunteers who sign up to be driving supervisors to help young people get the 120 hours they need on their logbook. 1713 hours have been spent by our volunteers supervising people driving so far and we have 166 current participants.

Creating Futures Justice Program: This is another example of a program that was developed in response to urgent community

Peggy, centre, with CEO, Siobhan Bryson and Programs Manager, Mardi Dyles, outside the Waterloo headquarters



need. We found that people were coming to Weave in their prison green tracksuits with nowhere to go and saying “What’s an Opal Card?” or “I need to connect with my kids”. The program is designed to empower Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on their release from prison, so that they can reconnect with the community and create a positive future. Practical examples the staff help with are cultural health and wellbeing, getting identification, opening bank accounts and accessing specialist services, including health, court and housing. 91% of the participants in this program are Aboriginal. This program has been formally evaluated by the University of New South Wales. The study found that while the average rate of re-offending for that cohort (Aboriginal males between 18 and 30 years old) was 55.7%, on Weave’s program, only 4.11% of offenders re-offended.

How did you first start working with Weave?

When I was a young solicitor with the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), I appeared at the Bidura Children’s Court. Weave (then called South Sydney Youth Services) was a tiny service with about four youth workers. They would always come to court to support kids, pick them up and structure programs in a way that seemed much more sustainable and holistic than Juvenile Justice. The youth workers would provide a plan for some practical help

for the child and their family. They involved the whole family. They would always go the extra mile. I thought the staff were fantastic, and so did the kids.

I joined the Board for a short time while I was working for the Redfern ALS and I then left when I went to work for the ALS in Darwin. When I came back to Sydney in 2010, I sought Weave out and said “I’m finding it hard to be back in a big city. I want to do something meaningful. Is there any way I can help?” At that stage, I was planning on helping with the tutoring program, but I was asked to join the Board again and in 2017, I had the privilege to be appointed Chair.

What are some of the personal benefits that you find in your work with Weave?

For me, it’s been a great antidote to the kind of work that we do as criminal lawyers. To be able to see what happens if you actually reinvest money away from the criminal justice system and into support to help people stay out of the criminal justice system fills my cup back up.



Most recidivist offenders have been the victim of severe trauma in their lives and they end up in the criminal justice system as a result. Weave acts like a functional family, and like a good family, it doesn’t walk away if you make a mistake. There are always second, third, fourth and fifth chances if you need them, and Weave is always here to help clients and their whole family get back on track.

One of the reasons Weave is so nourishing for me is that it gives me a great sense of hope. Weave has helped four generations of families and in the 18 years I have known the service, I can see positive intergenerational change. We have young men in our Weave community who used to be ALS clients 20 years ago, who now have licences, are great dads and are in full time work because of the support they received as children. Without Weave, they might not have had that chance.



Is it hard to balance your commitment to Weave with your work as a barrister?

It is time consuming, but all of us prioritise different things at the Bar. I feel that I am participating in a community that is being empowered – getting help to help itself. I also gain access to extraordinary expertise – particularly around trauma-informed support and cultural issues.

The Board meets about 10 times per year, and I also go down to the Woolloomooloo Headquarters when I can. I write Board reports and spend time applying for grants, arranging fundraising and helping with organisational issues like recruitment. I would spend about half a day on the weekend, most weekends with Weave and other times during the week.

But it doesn't feel like work. If you were windsurfing every Saturday afternoon, it would take effort but it wouldn't feel like work. It's a passion.

Weave staff often deal with hard stuff, but the place is joyful. There are lots of belly laughs with staff and clients. These are my people.

How has COVID-19 affected Weave?

COVID-19 has been a challenge. We stopped doing services like prison visits, and just got on with providing essential services, often delivered door to door. We received some great donations from companies like Woolworths and Chemist Warehouse, which we delivered to our clients. We got about 40 computers from the Kings School, which we delivered to some of our families, so that children could access their homework, and then we arranged for tutoring online. We also got creative and delivered a whole range of packs to keep kids engaged, like hula hoops and hopscotch and programs to get kids outside during that time.

There was a huge demand for counselling services and a three-fold increase in demand for our domestic violence service. This was very stressful, particularly with no significant funding increase. In fact, Kool Kids lost its government funding

this year, which is devastating. One of our top priorities is filling that gap. The whole program costs about \$450,000 per year, so it's incredibly cost efficient. We can't let that go now after all that those children have achieved.

What are some ways that NSW barristers can support the work of Weave?

We are always crying out for more volunteers on our tutor program and our Drive for Change Program. These programs are designed to provide the relevant service, but also to provide a mentoring relationship. Both programs involve training and an ongoing commitment.

Also, barristers can come along to Weave events, like Weave's annual fundraiser, or Mad Pride, the community event we have in October, where members of the community with experience of mental health issues speak about their journeys and showcase their skills in areas like dance and art.

The Weave website has ways in which you can support Weave financially (for example, by sponsoring a child, or a program: <https://www.weave.org.au>). You can see exactly where your money goes and can choose to contribute to particular programs if there is something you feel particularly passionate about.

What general advice would you give barristers who would like to serve an organisation like Weave?

I think you do your research first so that you know that it's an organisation that your values will align with and where you



can be of practical assistance. We are all so stretched. If you are going to give your time, you want to know that its meaningful and will make a difference.

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

All the barristers I know work very hard and it's often emotionally demanding. I think we can get caught up in it being a tough gig. But when I step away from that and I look at what the people at Weave do – dealing with very vulnerable people often in crisis, going the extra mile, long hours, very modest pay – I am full of admiration for the expertise and dedication of those team members. I think it's good for us to get our heads out of our own workspaces and see what other people in the community contribute and how we can value add to that.

It also helps Weave staff to have external people come with passion and energy. And in turn you can soak up the passion and energy of the organisation and the clients. So its win-win or at least give-give. Among the tough stuff, there is great humour and love in this brilliant little community. **BN**

<https://www.weave.org.au>