

Aurora Internship at PIAC
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In far north Queensland, native title feels like a local, knowable part of life. Years ago, Eddie Koiki Mabo was a gardener at James Cook University (JCU). He spent many hours in the Townville campus library obtaining the knowledge that would allow him to dispute the Crown's claim to his land in the Torres Strait.¹ In May 2008, with great celebration and respect, the library was formally named after Eddie Koiki Mabo.

I am a graduate law student at James Cook University in Cairns and completed a four week internship at the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC). PIAC is an independent, non-profit legal and policy centre based in Sydney.² So, my internship led me from the periphery to the centre. I imagined myself moving in the opposite direction to many Aurora interns who, studying in large metropolitan universities, ventured to rural or remote Australia.

In the past, as a registered nurse, I have provided primary health care services to Aboriginal people in remote Queensland and on The Block in Redfern, Sydney. This experience made an important contribution to my understanding of 'social justice'. Nowadays, I am involved in JCU's empowerment research program, which works in partnership with Indigenous communities. All of this culminated in me applying for an Aurora internship.

My internship was in PIAC's Indigenous Justice Program and I was supervised by PIAC's Principal Solicitor. PIAC's Indigenous Justice Program was initiated in 2001 with the aim of:

- strengthening PIAC's links with Indigenous organisations,
- identifying public interest issues which impact on Indigenous people and communities and
- conducting public interest advocacy, litigation and policy work on behalf of Indigenous clients.

The Indigenous Justice Program is currently focusing on stolen wages, stolen generations, police and custody issues and race discrimination.

My placement dates overlapped by a week with the outgoing Aurora intern, Daniel Tomasetti. This was helpful as it allowed us to have a hand-over meeting and for me to ask Daniel lots of questions. Daniel had done a superb job, so I had a hard act to follow!

¹ For more on this story see <[www.http://cms.jcu.edu.au/news/current/JCUPRD_031129](http://cms.jcu.edu.au/news/current/JCUPRD_031129)>

² <http://www.piac.asn.au/>

On the first day of my placement we were invited to lunch with law firm Allens Arthur Robinson. Allens Arthur Robinson has assisted PIAC's Indigenous Justice Program by funding PIAC's Indigenous Justice Program Solicitor position since 2001.³ The lunch was a farewell to one of PIAC's lawyers, who was leaving to undertake post graduate study overseas. We had delicious lunch and the view of Sydney Harbour, beyond the heads and into the ocean, was spectacular. It was a great way to be introduced to a number of solicitors who have been working with PIAC. In the afternoon I took minutes for the Stolen Wages Network meeting. My first day left me with a sense of the mutual respect and partnership between PIAC and several of Sydney's high profile law firms.

Over the next four chilly (I was told it was the coldest August in Sydney for forty years!) weeks I undertook legal research related to the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme. This scheme was formally established in 2005 and since that time PIAC has been assisting individual claimants to access the scheme. PIAC works with the Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH) to ensure claimants get free legal assistance through the Stolen Wages Referral Scheme. The research I undertook will assist in identifying how PIAC can best advocate for these clients.

I gained much from my internship. I developed a deeper understanding of a number of areas of civil law. I have no doubt that I will draw upon this knowledge when I commence practice as a solicitor. I also felt that in a small way, I contributed to the progression of PIAC's agenda of justice for its Indigenous clients.

For more information on the Aurora Native Title Internship Program, see www.auroraproject.com.au

³ <http://www.piac.asn.au/>