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Q&A: Leah Cameron – “What I’d love to see is more of our mob practising as lawyers in commercial sectors.”

In our Q&A, Leah Cameron, a Palawa woman and founder and principal solicitor of Marrawah Law, explains how being Indigenous shapes her approach to practising law, and what mainstream law firms can do to encourage more diverse participation in the legal profession.

Marrawah Law was founded in 2013 and now has offices in Cairns, Brisbane, Melbourne and Hobart that handle commercial, government and Indigenous matters. How has it fared during COVID-19?

In the first few months after the COVID outbreak there was a lot of uncertainty for us. We could see our clients beginning to suffer in those first few waves of lockdown, but it took a while to hit the firm. During the quieter periods we turned our minds to helping other Indigenous businesses, rather than just sitting around. Thankfully, we’re now picking up towards the trajectory we were on before the pandemic in terms of business growth, which is fantastic. In recent times, there have been interesting developments around the Juukan Gorge disaster involving Rio Tinto in the Pilbara in Western Australia and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. So we’ve found that people are actively looking for our firm and understanding the value of what we’re doing, so there’s been a big uptick in work.

Black Lives Matter started in the United States. What impact is it having here?

People are realising the injustice that has been occurring for Indigenous people and understanding that everyone has a voice in this issue and can offer support. Wide-ranging changes need to occur and it’s not just an overseas issue; it’s very much in our backyard as well.

How can other firms and lawyers make a difference on this front?

A lot of our colleagues in the legal sector are really supportive of, for example, reconciliation and the promotion of access to justice. In a lot of ways, though, they are scared of doing the wrong thing – they want to help, but they may not know how to. So we have a lot of conversations with other firms on Indigenous issues, advising them to just dip their toe in the water and help here and there. They could develop a Reconciliation Action Plan, or look

to create education and employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Small steps can have a really big impact across the country.

You must get satisfaction from making a difference as a lawyer.

It's far exceeded my wildest imagination. When I started Marrawah Law, I was frustrated at the fact that mob were getting legal advice, but it might not have factored in their background and I felt they weren't being fully heard. That leads to misunderstandings and broken relationships. I could also see that mob were missing out on great opportunities on country as well. So the fact that we are in business and helping break down barriers and assisting people is fantastic. People really value that.

How do you do things differently at Marrawah Law?

I put it this way. Lawyers are good at looking at the black and white on a page and identifying issues and protecting their clients. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Marrawah Law, we're really focused on relationships. That's what we want to see at the end of an engagement; that this is a good footing for a relationship going forward that doesn't need our constant involvement. There's clarity for everyone. That's not just protecting our clients' interests; it's looking at matters more broadly as well. That's a really big point of difference. Also, our lived experience that we bring to the table is important. We have a very different lens and are able to identify different issues that other people might not be aware of – issues that are on the ground in regional and remote areas, for example.

You are clearly passionate about the law. How did you get into the profession?

To be honest, during my upbringing my family were usually on the other side of the law, and I'd seen the discrimination and racism and the targeting of our family and the wider Indigenous community. Growing up in Tasmania, I didn't know what lawyers were. I knew about the police and jails, but it wasn't until early high school that a lady came into my life to help me with my schooling. I really struggled with school at the time. She tutored me and happened to be a solicitor and she opened my eyes to the legal world and the difference that lawyers could make. It sprung from there and I thought 'this is something I could actually do'. There's this old saying that you cannot be what you cannot see, and once my eyes were open I thought 'This is something I'm passionate about. It will be bloody hard work, but it's something I want to be part of'.

What does your experience say about the importance of mentorship?

Apart from my school mentor, I was lucky enough to be the first Aboriginal cadet for the State Government in Tasmania and through that initiative there was lots of mentoring. When I got my law degree and later decided to open my own firm, I was mentored again by the amazing Indigenous lawyer, Terri Janke. I've always valued those relationships and

looked for them because I have gained so much from them. It's something I really encourage people to seek out, and to take on roles as mentors as well.

Your firm's head office is in Cairns. What's it like practising law in regional Australia?

The community is incredibly supportive. Pre-COVID-19, I must admit that it presented challenges – I had to travel a lot to promote our law firm's services. That's one of the positives out of COVID – we're able to market ourselves and display our capabilities to really big companies in the capital cities in each state, whereas before it was a huge burden. That's not just good for us as a regional business; it's good for me as a female practitioner with a young family.

You were recently named the 2020 Indigenous Lawyer of the Year at the Women in Law Awards, and in 2016 you received the gong as the Attorney General's Department Indigenous Legal Practitioner of the Year. That first award in 2016 must have been a thrill.

"Yes. I remember with the Attorney General's award thinking 'Wow, who would have thought this little blackfella from Tassie would be receiving this award?' I was so honoured and it made me reflect on how hard it was to get to that point. It was the result of a big effort from my family. There were a lot of sacrifices and tears. There's a whole tribe of people supporting you, otherwise you just can't do it.

You now have 14 people in your Marrawah Law team and have to manage four offices. What's your biggest challenge?

We're continually looking for staff. There's lots of skilled lawyers out there, but we must recruit people who share our values and our unique way of doing business. Before the pandemic I would have said the biggest challenge was getting people to understand the value of what our firm offers, but that's changed now and the key is finding the right people to help our growing team.

How is your firm's approach different to many others?

In a way we're very much a big family and a lot of the decisions we make are as a team. We focus on our values and we want to make sure everyone is comfortable in the work they do and that they're bringing their whole self to work. That also drills down to the values of the clients we're trying to attract. When someone contacts us to represent them, we ensure they meet our values and ask critical questions. Such as, do you understand what we do? Do you know how we practise and why we practise that way? What's your position on females in top-tier positions in your organisation? What steps are you taking towards reconciliation? All of those sorts of questions. In that way, our staff have buy-in. We also operate differently in that we have a profit-share model for employees. It really does reward everyone for the effort they put in, whether it's the receptionist or a senior solicitor. Everyone is part of the vision for the firm.

Such a model must be a great motivator for employees.

It's definitely a good motivator and it reflects the fact that most of the staff at the firm are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. They often have difficulty accessing finance, so for example if they were to try to buy into a partnership with their circumstances of family and cultural commitments it would add another layer of complexity. I was conscious that we all have enough on our plates without thinking about buying into a business. So the profit-share model works well. We want our team to work really hard, to be passionate about what they do and to value the relationships they have.

As a leader and manager, you must sometimes have to pull rank on a staff member who may be underperforming or who disagrees with your view. How do you handle that?

I find it difficult, but I've always found that my team respects me for the fact that sometimes I have to step in and say, 'Look, this is a position we're taking', or have tough words about issues. However, because the intervention is not unreasonable and it's circumstance driven, they get it. At the end of the day, if you have 14 staff that's 14 families you are trying to support and it has a broader impact in the community, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. That's a huge responsibility, so it's important to be open about that responsibility and to know that it's okay to be vulnerable and to show them that.

The widespread perception is that there are not enough Indigenous people working in the law. What's your view and what can be done to encourage greater participation?

I totally agree that there's not enough of us in the law. A lot of us start studying law, but don't make it through for various reasons. What was crucial for me was my cadetship; it meant I was able to gain practical experience. It keeps you in check and gives you that experience so you know there's light at that end of the dark tunnel of studying. Doing a cadetship also gave me crucial contacts in the industry, too. The other component is that for a lot of our mob we are often pigeonholed into criminal and family law because there's a huge need for it. There's no denying it, but what I'd love to see is more of our mob practising as lawyers in commercial sectors. We have a lot of land-holding entities in this country for our mob and they need advice that is culturally appropriate. So the need is growing and, sadly, the lawyer numbers are not coming through and we're scouring the country trying to find these lawyers.

Could some of the bigger, more mainstream firms help with internships for Indigenous lawyers and students?

That can help. The difficulty that presents itself is if a firm just takes on one intern. It's a really foreign environment for a lot of people. I know as a solicitor who has practised for a number of years now that it's daunting walking into firms at these big skyscrapers. They're clinical and they're not as friendly and approachable as you might otherwise like. I've said to firms, 'Don't just bring in one intern – if you can bring in a number of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander students they can support each other and not feel so isolated in this really foreign environment.'

After working in the Cairns office, you have now moved back to Tasmania to be closer to immediate family. Where does Marrawah Law go from here?

It's definitely about expansion now. That's been part of the reason for moving to Tasmania. A lot of our opportunities are coming out of Melbourne involving large corporations. I need my little children to be close to family so I know they're safe and I can be on the road. We are focusing on expanding our east coast presence and using Tassie a base and having family support there is important. We also want to bolt on additional areas of practice so we can offer our clientele more services. That's where we are heading, but at the core of it we need to make sure that we maintain our values and our way of doing business.

Do you have any other messages for your legal sector colleagues?

I'd encourage firms that have an interest in making a social impact to reach out. We're happy to chat to anyone about it because as a collective I think we can make a huge difference in not just supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but Indigenous business as well.

<http://marrawahlaw.com.au>