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# THE ILB INTERVIEWS

## TEELA REID

by Ruby Langton-Batty



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**Teela Reid is a proud Wiradjuri and Wailwan woman who grew up in Gilgandra, western NSW. She currently works as a solicitor at Legal Aid in the criminal law division. *ILB* editor, Ruby Langton-Batty interviews her about life after law school, and her involvement in the Referendum Council's First Nations Dialogues held in Sydney recently.**

**What was your previous career before starting the JD and what made you decide to study law at UNSW?**

I was a high school Health & PE teacher. I really loved teaching; being a positive influence to the kids was a rewarding experience. I decided to change from teaching to law after I was selected to go to New York as Australia's female Indigenous Youth delegate to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2010.

**While you were at UNSW you co-founded the First People's Moot. After only two years it's had a huge impact on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at UNSW as well as the faculty, and is growing each year. Why did you decide**

**to start the moot? How did you go about it, and what were some of your challenges?**

I really wanted to bring our mobs' issues to the forefront and let other students (and staff) know we are here not just because of our disadvantaged backgrounds, but because we are an asset to the legal profession and the law school generally.

It was certainly a collegiate effort by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law students to establish the moot. Initially, I simply mentioned the idea to a number of peer students but in the end it grew a life of its own and was established due to the commitment of so many individuals—it was a team effort.

**What have you done since graduating, and what are you doing now?**

Since graduating from UNSW Law I've done a few things. I began as a paralegal-cadet at Gilbert + Tobin lawyers and was at G+T throughout my degree. My corporate experience at the firm helped develop my legal research and writing skills. I went from that role to work as tipstaff to Justice Lucy McCallum of the NSW Supreme Court for one year; the role essentially involves assisting the judge in preparing for court including trials, hearings and duty lists. I really did not think I was cut-out to work for a judge at all and it was a steep learning kerb. I am very grateful for the opportunity and would recommend it to any graduate. Currently, I am working at Legal Aid NSW in the criminal law division.

**How did studying law change your perspective and approach to advocating for social justice issues?**

Studying law, particularly at UNSW Law, gave me a great foundation in understanding the legal and political systems. Having the knowledge of how the system works gave me more confidence in advocating for our people. I already had the life of experience growing up in my community with close family ties, so upon entering law school I had a real understanding of the issues affecting our people. Studying law simply gave me a better insight into the system and how I can better navigate it to empower my mob.

**You were closely involved in one of the Referendum Council's First Nations Regional Dialogues held in Sydney. This is a historical opportunity for the community to participate in a unique democratic process, a large part of which involves legal education.**

**Do you think the opportunity to learn more about the**

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**constitutional reform debate, including the legal technicalities, is an important part of the dialogue process?**

I can't speak on behalf of others and what they may or may not get from the process. But I think it is important, whether or not you agree with constitutional reform or treaty, that we are all informed before we make decisions that could have long-term repercussions. So far, I think the mob are well-across the legal technicalities as we have been advocating for these issues for many years. I feel the challenge with involving community comes back to the process as some people may think it is rushed or a narrow agenda.

**Do you feel confident that the process will lead to a positive outcome?**

I do believe that this process is an important step moving forward. Whether or not we go to a referendum or push for a treaty (or both) it is crucial we have these discussions because there is certainly a lot of unfinished business. The difficulty with the current situation is there is no clear model or commitment from government about what Australians are expected to vote on. And, we will not give up our fight for a treaty or treaties.

**What do you see the future holding for you in terms of your career?**

I really don't know what my future career holds. I've never had a set path which has made my career choices much more flexible. For instance, I never thought I would work for a judge and I did. The beauty of having a law degree means you can keep your options open and test your skills in various areas either in advocacy, policy or corporate spaces. As long as I am fighting for my people and paving a way for the next generation, I know I will be happy in whatever type of career that takes.

**Completing a law degree is a massive accomplishment—what techniques did you develop, and who did you rely on during your time at UNSW to get through?**

Law school helped me develop a range of skills particularly my capacity to critically think and challenge laws as opposed to simply accepting the law as it is. I think I became much more organised and my work ethic went to a whole new level. I got a huge amount of academic and moral support from Nura Gili the indigenous unit at UNSW and would have not survived without the love and support of family.

**Do you have any advice for our young mob who are aspiring lawyers?**

If you are an aspiring lawyer, go for it! I once asked a prominent Judge what are the top three tips to carve a successful career in law. His Honour said, always:

1. be prepared;
2. be brave; and
3. be yourself.

I was given this advice as a law student and I now live by it as a lawyer.

*ILB editor, Ruby Langton-Batty, is a proud Yiman descendant (QLD), who was born in Alice Springs and has lived all over Australia, spending most of her childhood in Melbourne. She is currently undertaking the JD at UNSW.*

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Kamaha Djordon King  
Feature in *Vogue Magazine* as part of the Cult 'Chairity' Project

