

Carrying the family torch

Teela Reid joined NSW Legal Aid, her first job as a solicitor, in March. Previously, she was tipstaff to Justice Lucy McCallum of the Supreme Court of NSW. Before that she was a high school sports teacher. **JULIE MCCROSSIN** met a young woman whose identity and ambition have been nurtured by two strong and supportive networks: her extended Aboriginal family and the NSW legal community.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON MCCORMACK

Teela Reid was born in Dubbo and grew up in Gilgandra, a small town about six hours drive north-west of Sydney.

“My mum raised me essentially as a single parent, although my dad was in my life,” she says between mouthfuls during a quick lunch before she returns to court.

“I look back and I feel I had a great childhood. I didn’t grow up with any major issues. But my world was very narrow. I didn’t really know what was outside the community.”

Reid’s father is NSW Aboriginal Land Council chairman Roy Ah-See, a Wiradjuri man born and raised on Nanima Mission, near Wellington. Recently, Reid and her father were active in the work of the Referendum Council, which was set up to advise the Commonwealth Government on steps towards recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution. Reid spoke at the Sydney forum, one of several that took place across the country.

“This is where both of our worlds have come together, in my knowledge of the law and his of the land, and sharing what we know with our mob. That was a really, really great feeling,” she says with a broad grin. “We are both passionate about our people, self-determination and the capacity to have control over our destinies.”

Reid credits her mother, Amanda Reid, with building her resilience and nurturing her self-belief. Her mother had type 1 diabetes, which was only diagnosed later in life, and she was ill for much of Reid’s childhood.

“A lot of my adolescence and early adulthood I remember mum was in and out of hospital. When I was in Year 7, she was on life support for 41 days

with a blood infection. It was really traumatising. We weren’t sure if she was going to live. My sister and I got shipped off to be with our grandparents and our aunts. I remember having really unstable school experiences.”

Because of her mother’s ill health, Reid spent her secondary school years moving between Gilgandra High and Narromine High, also in the Central West. While her education was disrupted, she loved sport – especially touch football and basketball – playing in many teams and making friends in several communities.

“The three biggest things I got from sport that I now carry into law are my discipline to learn, my competitive nature and networking skills. You need all of these attributes in sport and law.”

Reid credits her mum for making her sporting life possible.

“My mum, despite being a single mum, would spend her whole income sending me away every weekend. I went everywhere, from Dubbo to Sydney and even to the United States. I think she saw something special in sport as well. She loved cheering me on from the sidelines.”

Reid realised she could not make a professional career out of sport, but she wanted to use her interest, so she completed an undergraduate degree and became a high school PE teacher.

“Sport was my stepping stone into tertiary education,” she says. She studied in Canada for a year, and on graduation got a permanent job at a high school on the Central Coast. While teaching, the federal government selected her to be Australia’s female Indigenous Youth Delegate to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This trip changed her life.

“Going to the United Nations in 2010 was pivotal for me. I was exposed to some fantastic Aboriginal advocates

from around the world,” she says. She also met Professor Megan Davis, professor of law at UNSW, who was a member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples.

In 2015, Davis was appointed chairwoman of the forum.

“I remember she sat me down in New York at the United Nations and said, ‘You have some amazing potential. If you want to pursue this type of impact for our people, at either an international or domestic level, think about doing a law degree’.

“At that time, she was the first lawyer I had ever met. She was a law professor. I didn’t even know what a lawyer was in high school. But I was really interested in being a voice for our people,” Reid recalls with the quiet confidence and determined manner that she displays throughout our conversation.

Davis encouraged Reid to write a 10-year plan, detailing where she would like to be along the way.

“I’m seven years into that plan. I had a plan to become a lawyer within 10 years and I did it,” she says, smiling.

At times, Reid found law school to be aggressively competitive and intellectually challenging. Sometimes, she suffered self-doubt. Other times, she felt like an imposter. As always, her family was loving and supportive, but none of them could provide legal insights. Unlike many of her peers, none of her immediate relatives were lawyers. She also had to deal with several deaths in her family, including that of her beloved mother.

Yet throughout her studies, she drew on the support of a range of people in the legal community. Initially, she had reservations about “the artificial relationship of mentoring”, but she has benefited from the sustained encouragement of mentors. ▶▶▶



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Clockwise from top left: Keen runner Teela Reid competing in one of five marathons during her law degree; Reid's father NSW Aboriginal Land Council chairman Roy Ah-See; with her mother, Amanda, at her graduation at University of Newcastle in 2010; enjoying basketball; with her grandmother, Stella May, when she was awarded a Postgraduate Juris Doctor at UNSW Law last year.



“I went to UNSW Law, which is a fantastically supportive law school. I was introduced to the Indigenous Barristers’ Trust and Chris Ronalds, SC, who is a courageous supporter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law students,” Reid says.

The trust’s The Mum Shirl Fund supports Aboriginal law students, graduates and barristers, and has a mentoring program. Reid credits the trust with helping her through a period in law school when she wasn’t sure whether she could finish.

“I signed up for the mentoring program and I got matched with a barrister, Sophia Beckett, who is now a public defender.

“It was Sophia’s initiative to make a plan for continual catch-ups that made me feel I had a connection to the legal community. She supported me through law and gave me the reassurance I could do it. I think that is where networking really kicked off for me.”

Through her connections with Ronalds and the Trust, Reid spent a day with the judges of the Supreme Court, where she met Justice Peter Hamill and Justice McCallum. Beckett

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TEELA REID

had encouraged her, helping her overcome her fear of missing a day’s lectures and her doubts about her ability to talk to judges about the law.

“I really had my self-doubt about going and sitting with a judge for a day,” she remembers, laughing. “It was extremely intimidating. It’s a foreign world on the other side of the bench, very different to the world I grew up in.”

After the day, she applied to become tipstaff to Justice Lucy McCallum and got the job.

“My time in the Supreme Court with Justice Lucy McCallum was a pivotal experience in my legal career. I really hope that the legal profession continues to open its doors, its hearts and its legal minds to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students because the more we are exposed to these opportunities, the better the law is going to be interpreted and applied as we develop more Aboriginal advocates.

“I have a great, ongoing mentoring relationship with Justice McCallum, and it’s reassuring to see what it takes to be at the top: the discipline, the dedication, the rigour and

the legal intellect. From the outside, it seems hard, but it’s possible.”

While Reid was studying law at UNSW, she played a key role, with her fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law students, in establishing the inaugural UNSW Law Mooting Competition of Australia’s First Peoples in 2014.

The grand final of the 2016 First Peoples’ Moot was held, for the first time, in the Banco Court of the Supreme Court, with Justice Elizabeth Fullerton presiding. Indigenous students from a number of universities participated, and the problem question focused on intellectual property law. In 2017, the grand final was held at the Barangaroo offices of Gilbert + Tobin, with Justice Julie Ward presiding, and the topic was drawn from succession law. In previous years, grand finals in criminal law have been held at Corrs Chambers Westgarth, presided over by Judge Dina Yehia, SC and UNSW Law .

Reid is thrilled with the success of the First Peoples’ Moot. It was initially designed to provide a safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to develop their skills and apply the law on topics relevant to their lives.

“It is really about, not only showcasing the students’ knowledge and perspective of the law, but building broad connections with the legal profession, not just through criminal law, but through top-tier corporate law firms.

“That’s what is amazing about the moot. It has become a vehicle for students to shine in various aspects of law and not just be confined by society’s expectations that because you are a blackfella, you’re going to do criminal law.”

Reid is particularly keen for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to develop their advocacy skills. She is considering going to the bar and is trying to get as much experience as she can.

“I think we are naturally great storytellers. There has been a lot of law graduates who have come and gone in policy, but there hasn’t been many role models in advocacy.

“In NSW, we have no Aboriginal females at the bar currently that I am aware of. However, we have Tony McAvoy, SC, who has become the first Indigenous silk in Australia, and a few other male junior barristers.

“It is important that Aboriginal law students have options outside of society’s confined expectations, and advocacy gives us an opportunity to shape the law.”

Reid’s inner confidence is underpinned by coming from a long line of fighters for justice. Her gravity and sense of responsibility are more than you’d expect from such a young woman.

“I have really great stories from my grandfather on my mother’s side and his blood line, where they were shipped off to missions.”

Her grandmother Elsie May (Reid is called “Teela May”, after her) fought to have a police officer dismissed from his job because of mistreatment of Aboriginal people.

“What I learnt from these stories was resilience. That is what drives me every day, knowing that I come from a bloodline of fierce advocates. My grandfather Trevor Reid was very active in NSW land rights. I remember when he passed away, which was the same year as my mother in 2011, after I came back from New York. He said to me, literally on his death bed, ‘I want you to fight. Don’t give up.’” **LSJ**