
Presentation of John Koowarta Scholarship

**Speech given by Catherine Gale, President,
Law Council of Australia**

Sydney, Friday 20 April 2012

-
1. Good evening ladies and gentleman.
 2. I would like to begin this evening's proceedings by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.
 3. Ladies and gentlemen, this evening I have the honour of presenting the 2012 John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship.
 4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal issues are a core part of the Law Council's policy agenda.
 5. As you would be aware, on January 19 the Report by the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians was delivered to Prime Minister Julia Gillard.
 6. This Report is significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and all Australians, and the potential flow-on effects from its recommendations are considerable.
 7. The Law Council supports Constitutional change to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their cultures, history and languages, and to give substantive effect to that recognition through Constitutional change.
 8. We have campaigned for these changes for a long time and will continue to advocate the merits of a referendum on the issue.
 9. Another key priority of the Law Council is to see increased participation in the legal profession by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
 10. In July 2011, the Law Council was pleased to launch its first Reconciliation Action Plan—or RAP.
 11. The Law Council's RAP seeks to provide practical measures to improve Indigenous participation in the legal profession and to promote understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the legal sector.

-
12. The John Koowarta Scholarship is another major initiative the Law Council has established to increase Indigenous representation in the legal profession.
 13. And, it's also the focus of why we're here tonight.
 14. The John Koowarta Scholarship was established by the Law Council of Australia and the Commonwealth Government in 1994.
 15. The Scholarship commemorates John Koowarta, a Winychanam elder from Archer River region around Cape York.
 16. The story of John Koowarta is one that I am sure is known to you all.
 17. John Koowarta was an inspirational man who was a pioneer at the forefront of Aboriginal land rights in Australia during the late 1970s and early 1980s.
 18. Today, he is revered as one of the most important figures in the progression of Native Title rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
 19. John Koowarta continues to inspire Indigenous people across the nation.
 20. Through the John Koowarta Scholarship, the Law Council is aiming to ensure the legacy of this proud man lives on.
 21. The ideals of the John Koowarta Scholarship shine through its recipients and represent the role the legal profession in Australia has to play in working towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
 22. The Law Council is proud of the outstanding success of the John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship, which has assisted numerous indigenous Australians in completing their legal studies, many of whom have gone on to make valuable contributions to their communities, the legal profession and nation.
 23. The John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship is awarded to Australia's best Indigenous law students.

-
24. Including tonight's recipients, it has now helped 22 Indigenous students achieve their goal to study law.
 25. In fact, we're honoured to have with us tonight the Scholarship's first recipient: Terri Janke.
 26. Terri was awarded a scholarship in 1995 which helped her complete her studies at the University of New South Wales and at the New South Wales College of Law.
 27. She commenced practice in 1995 and established her own law firm, Terri Janke and Company in 2000.
 28. She is a proud first recipient of the John Koowarta Law Scholarship, which assisted her financially in meeting college of law fees.
 29. She has commented that winning the Scholarship was a great honour and one that gave her the confidence and inspiration to become a legal professional, and to continue John Koowarta's fight for social justice for Indigenous Australians.
 30. She is now a leading international authority on Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights and has received several awards and accolades in recognition of her achievements including the 2011 NAIDOC Person of the Year.
 31. In between her duties as a lawyer and mother, she is also studying a PhD at the Australian National University, is a board member of Tourism Australia and panel member of the Indigenous Tourism Industry Advisory Panel.
 32. Nathan Jarro was also a John Koowarta scholarship recipient from 1996 to 1999. A graduate of Queensland University of Technology, he is now a Queensland Barrister and owns his own civil practice; as well as holding other important positions in the Indigenous community including as a board member of National Indigenous Television and as former President of the Indigenous Lawyers Association of Queensland.
 33. Nathan said he was "extremely fortunate to have been a beneficiary of the Law Council of Australia's John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship" and is eternally grateful for the

assistance it provided him over the four year period in which he was a recipient.

34. Winning the scholarship enabled him to focus his efforts towards his studies, and also assisted in his ultimate goal to become a barrister in private practice at the Queensland Bar. He is one of just four Indigenous barristers in that state.
35. In receiving the Scholarship he said: "I will always remember the lasting legacy of this noble role model and am thankful to the Law Council for providing me with much needed inspiration."
36. Nathan and Terri are two examples of how this scholarship and the legacy of John Koowarta are assisting Indigenous law students realise their goals and aspirations within the law.
37. It is an important part of the Law Council's policy to see greater representation of Indigenous Australians in the legal profession and we're helping realise this aim through programs like the John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship.
38. The Law Council is committed to promoting these programs and encouraging its constituent bodies to develop or contribute to programs that will address Indigenous under-representation in the legal profession.
39. I would like to take this opportunity to urge law societies and bar associations to contribute to the Koowarta Scholarship trust fund.
40. Your donations will help to build the fund and thereby increase the number of scholarships available for current and aspiring Indigenous legal students.
41. **And so with aspiring Indigenous legal students in mind, it is now my very great honour to present the 2012 John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarships.**
42. Tonight we are here to welcome three new scholarship recipients – Ms Danielle Davis, Mr Peter Dawson and Ms Melinda Mitchell.
43. The first scholarship recipient in 2012 is Ms **Danielle Davis**.

-
44. Danielle is a woman of the Kabi Kabi Tribe from south-east Queensland and is currently studying a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Psychological Science at Griffith University.
 45. Danielle has always had a strong interest in the law. She is currently in her third year of studies and is also working at national legal firm Gadens in Brisbane as an Indigenous Cadet.
 46. In her Scholarship application Danielle said she aspires to help Indigenous people across Australia through pro-bono work and in the area of Native Title.
 47. She is a very intelligent and self-aware young woman who has a firm grasp of the important role a lawyer can play in a healthy, functioning society and is eager to give back to the community through extensive pro-bono work in particular with respect to helping Indigenous people and communities as well as youth and women.
 48. She is cognizant of Indigenous legal policy issues and has expressed a desire to do an exchange program in Canada with an aim of comparing the experiences of Canadian indigenous peoples and how she can relate it to Indigenous policy in Australia for the future.
 49. Danielle is also an outstanding student and currently maintains an excellent academic record.
 50. She is a member of Griffith University's Honours college—a group for elite and high-achieving students. To be accepted to this prestigious group at Griffith University is a feat in itself and is testament to the hard work and intelligence Danielle has consistently demonstrated in her studies.
 51. She is also a mentor to other students through Griffith's peer-mentoring program.
 52. Danielle lists this experience as one of the highlights of her time at university as it has given her the opportunity to pass on much of the valuable knowledge she has learnt to new students.
 53. Danielle, on behalf of the Law Council I wish to congratulate you on this fine achievement and invite you to the podium to receive your scholarship.

54. [Danielle to stage to respond and receive scholarship]

55. Thank you Danielle and again my congratulations.

56. On behalf of the Law Council I would now like to introduce the second recipient of the John Koowarta Scholarship, Mr Peter Dawson.

57. Peter is an outstanding young law student, in his fourth year of a Bachelor of Laws/Arts degree at the University of Notre Dame in Western Australia.

58. Peter is a Wiradjuri man of New South Wales, but has spent most of his life living in Fremantle, Western Australia and has strong links to the Noongar community.

59. He has excelled in university academic and advocacy competitions and has won numerous awards including:

(a) DLA Piper Junior Research Paper Prize (2011);

(b) National Gallery of Australia Summer Scholarship (2007);

(c) Australian Defence Force 'Long Tan' leadership and teamwork award (2007); and

(d) Bronze Award of The Duke of Edinburgh (2006).

60. Away from his university studies, Peter is also a very talented artist.

61. He has exhibited two pieces in the Perspectives exhibition at The Art Gallery of Western Australia and at The Ueno Royal Museum of Tokyo (2008).

62. Peter holds a number of extra-curricular positions and is the driving force behind the establishment of a volunteer/mentor program between The Kimberley Club Garnduwa and The University of Notre Dame.

63. A passionate Indigenous legal issues advocate and outstanding young law student, I congratulate Peter on behalf of the Law Council and invite him to the stage to receive his John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship.

-
64. **[Present award to Peter and invite him to respond.]**
65. Thank you Peter and congratulations.
66. Our third and final recipient tonight is Ms Melinda Mitchell.
67. Melinda is part of the Tharawal people of Campbelltown in Sydney's west. She is an exceptional law student and is currently completing her law degree at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland.
68. Melinda's story is quite inspirational and the time allocated this evening does not pay full credit to the achievements she has made.
69. She is a young mother, and a foster carer of two young Aboriginal children who require special needs attention. Her commitment to the future of her boys is a strong driver of her commitment to excellence in any activity she takes on in life. As a devoted mother she strives to highlight the opportunities available to her children and the importance of hard work in achieving aims and goals.
70. Melinda is a proud member of the Australian Defence Force and intends to put her legal skills to good use within the organisation following her expected graduation in 2013.
71. Melinda aspires to become a Legal Officer in the Australian Army and become involved in policy making and the recruitment and retention of Indigenous soldiers.
72. Melinda is very proud of her family and heritage—she attributes all her successes in life to the guidance and love of her family.
73. As the only member of her family to ever take on university studies, she is hoping to be a role model for her children, her people and other Indigenous law students to show them that no dream is irretrievable.
74. It is my great pleasure to congratulate Melinda, on behalf of the Law Council, on her achievement and I would like to now invite her to the podium to receive her John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship.
75. **[Present award to Melinda and invite her to respond.]**

-
76. Please join me in once again congratulating Melinda, Peter and Danielle.
77. In an outstanding field of candidates for this year's scholarships, these three young students have proven to be worthy recipients of this prestigious scholarship.
78. I'm sure I am not alone in wishing them the best for the future and I look forward to hearing about their progress and success in the coming years.
79. Thank you.

Disclaimer:

This document remains the property of the Law Council of Australia and should not be reproduced without permission. Please contact the Law Council to arrange a copy of this speech.

Vanessa Kleinschmidt

Director, Communications and Stakeholder Relations

m. 0408 014 110

e. vanessa.kleinschmidt@lawcouncil.asn.au