

I'm not really the retiring type

In his last week at the Centre we asked our former CEO, John Corker, to reflect on his career, the development of pro bono, and what's next on the horizon.

"the only way to be a true lawyer is to live with the pro bono ethos as part of everyday professional life"

Tell us about your career before joining the Australian Pro Bono Centre.

In short I would call it a diverse and rewarding legal career where I started some 40 years ago as a Judges Associate in the County Court of Victoria, became a busy barrister doing mainly criminal work and was then seduced by the unique magic of Alice Springs where I spent the next eight years working for Aboriginal Legal Aid and then being the lawyer for the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) during the historic time when we won the Imparja Television licence and established CAAMA Productions. Life after Alice found me in Sydney working as a lawyer at the Australian Broadcasting Authority where I ultimately became General Counsel for the Authority. This allowed me to be centrally involved in a few exciting inquiries towards the end of my time there: the Cash for Comment inquiry, another into the foreign control of Network Ten by the Canadians and another into whether the Packer family controlled Fairfax. I then went from there to Clayton Utz as a Senior Associate for three years and then became Executive Director of this Centre.

What made you apply for the position of CEO of the Australian Pro Bono Centre in 2004 or as it was known then the National Pro Bono Resource Centre?

I did some career counselling which caused me to discover that the position was a close match for what I liked doing – strategic thinking in the public interest in a small team. And I was encouraged to do so by people I respected.

What major changes in pro bono practice have you witnessed during your tenure as CEO?

Firstly, it has grown! It's been rewarding to see a slow but steady growth in the acceptance by the profession of undertaking pro bono as an important professional value, as part of being a lawyer and as part of running a law firm (but it still has a way to go). Secondly in the practice itself, it's been wonderful to see an increased diversity in the types of work being done and clients being serviced, and the development of more nuanced, complex and innovative approaches to how best-use the limited pro bono capacity of lawyers.



*John Corker,
Former Australian
Pro Bono Centre
CEO*

In what ways do you think pro bono will continue to develop in the coming years?

To develop, pro bono has to meet the current challenges of the legal profession that are considerable. The ascendancy of economics, competition and technology will always present challenges for the altruism, idealism and the service ideal of the legal profession but as an optimist, I am confident that passionate and skilful lawyers will continue to emerge who appreciate that the only way to be a true lawyer is to live with the pro bono ethos as part of everyday professional life. They will lead the development of pro bono in coming years.

What do you have planned after you leave the Centre?

If the weather was better I would be on the beach every day but I'm not really the 'retiring type' so already my life seems fully occupied with projects that involve the law, the environment, music, film, and my own well-being. It's great having a voluntary practising certificate!

What advice do you have for junior lawyers starting their careers?

If you really want to practice as a lawyer, spend time working with the most highly skilled lawyers you can. Develop and hone your legal skills first and foremost, and then opportunities will emerge, and it will become easier to develop a career that feels right for you.

For those junior lawyers who choose to use their legal skills and training in other fields, always remember that you have been trained as a professional and that involves a central component of ethics and altruism which if properly respected will allow you to add great value and integrity in many contexts. ■