

New Agenda for Pro Bono: Donnella Mills and Holistic Lawyering at King & Wood Mallesons

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North East Arnhem Land



In August 2021, Donnella Mills was appointed Senior Associate, Pro Bono Project Lead at King & Wood Mallesons (KWM). A proud Torres Strait Islander woman with ancestral and family links to Masig and Nagir, a community leader in a number of interrelated legal, health and cultural fields, and an experienced lawyer in her own right, Donnella has for many years been a provider of and an advocate for access to justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities.

Donnella’s appointment is not only a new chapter in her efforts toward removing systemic barriers in the justice space, but also an important message from KWM to its people, its community partners and the legal profession.

“I think it’s a really clear signal from KWM as to where their thinking is and where they want to be into the future,” said Donnella. “There is a commitment from KWM to embed themselves in this place of driving systems change and improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So, for me, this role is really an example of that commitment that KWM have in building a relationship that is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.”

In the seven years prior to accepting her new role, Donnella was a lawyer with LawRight, a major community legal service in Queensland and a facilitator of pro bono relationships across the state. While at LawRight, Donnella became the project lawyer for the Wuchopperen Health Justice Partnership, an innovative project that proactively connects clients to a broad range of services beyond mere legal advice in recognition of the interconnectedness between legal and health issues.

A leader in the health justice movement, Donnella is currently Chair of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Deputy Chair of Wuchopperen Health Service, and an advisor to government on the National Stigma



& Discrimination Reduction Strategy and the Advisory Group of the National Plan to end family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia.

“I wear many hats,” said Donnella, “because there’s so much work to be done. KWM really recognise the strength of those hats because

we are building a holistic lawyering approach. Holistic lawyering is about respectful engagement. Legal outcomes are one thing, but that respect in letting the client feel that they were heard and that you listened with depth and commitment – that’s a win every day.”

That holistic lawyering approach is informed by the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, a consensus-driven partnership led by the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Coalition of Peaks) with objectives on a broad range of issues from health to criminal justice to cultural protection and self-determination.

“We’re going to ensure that our work is in step with where the new policy agenda is, where the new legal mechanisms are, because as lawyers we have a responsibility in advising on a number of fronts. But most importantly when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it’s advising through the lens of the National Agreement which brings in every level of government, right down to the local level, in partnership with over 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations which make up the Coalition of Peaks.”

Accepting this new role was a complex decision for Donnella, one that had to be weighed against deeply held values and responsibilities to kin and community. “I have been genetically wired to distrust big, non-Indigenous institutions,” said Donnella. “But that for me was a misguided approach because there are champions everywhere. KWM is my new place where



WHS covid shot

I'm finding many new champions. I felt I was betraying my community by moving from my community into this top-tier law firm. But what I've now learned and totally appreciate is that my community goes everywhere with me. It's just about making sure that I continue to champion their work.

"What was really the shift was when my community – particularly my NACCHO family and my Wuchopperen family – absolutely backed this move to KWM. They support it. They see the value in it. KWM also recognise that this is a richness that I bring, my leadership in my various community roles. It's hugely beneficial to the work because I can become the relationship whisperer – the connector that helps to establish trust and to reduce fear and concern. Because I am from community, the way that I can translate between both parties is just richer."

Donnella joins KWM's Community Impact group, working closely with Dan Creasey, Head of Pro Bono and Community Impact, and Chloe Johnco, Senior Associate, Pro Bono. Two months in, Donnella has dived headlong into the work of KWM's Community Impact practice, driving projects and partnerships that move toward the goals of the National Agreement.

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Alongside this work is a broad program of community legal education, building the capacity of key partners to help deliver education in their own communities – not KWM delivering, but KWM delivering with community partners in their own communities.

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A further pillar to Donnella's work is an emphasis on Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) as important but frequently misunderstood instruments of change. "The reconciliation movement is not on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It's on mainstream settings to explore what reconciliation needs to look like for them, for example in having roles that are identified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It's important to not be restricted by what sits in a RAP – and KWM are not restricting themselves by any means. That broadening and reach is so important, their expression to walk beside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"What I'd love to emphasise is this: I dare the profession to recognise the power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the value that we bring. We can count the pro bono hours, but we don't see enough in the pro bono space talking about challenging the transactional nature of lawyering into a place where we are building strong relationships. In the landscape of pro bono, communities thrive off strong relationships."

"We want to shake things up in the corporate space – and pro bono is the place to shake it up." ■



NACCHO Conference



Jack Howard is a writer based in Sydney, NSW. He is a law graduate and paralegal with Arts Law as part of the Artists in the Black service, Australia's only national community legal service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. He is also a valuation and gallery assistant at Annette Larkin Fine Art, Paddington, NSW. In 2021, Jack conducted 40 interviews of King & Wood Mallesons staff and community partners for the anniversary publication, *Inspiring Change: 20 Years of KWM Community Impact*.

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