

# In Conversation with Tamara Sims:

## Head of Pro Bono and Responsible Business, Colin Biggers & Paisley



Colin Biggers & Paisley team  
outside the QLD Supreme  
Court at the Queensland Law  
Right Walk 2021

We asked Tamara to describe her career as a pro bono lawyer, the pro bono practice at Colin Biggers & Paisley, and how the pandemic and recent natural disasters have impacted on her work.

### **My career history as a pro bono lawyer**

I have always had a keen interest in access to justice and how the legal system can assist and promote the rights of vulnerable communities. I started out volunteering as a (young) law student at Redfern Legal Centre (RLC) and to this day maintain a strong relationship with RLC as a board member. Volunteering at RLC definitely piqued my interest in advocating for vulnerable people to ensure their legal rights were protected. This focus has continued throughout my career where I have worked in community legal centres advocating and representing marginalised communities and individuals, to working at an international NGO and at Gilbert + Tobin in the pro bono team, and now at Colin Biggers & Paisley as Head of Pro Bono and Responsible Business.

I have had the privilege and honour to represent some amazing clients, to advocate for legislative

change and to meet some of the most colourful and resilient people through my work. Some of the matters I have worked on have been extremely legally complex and at times socially controversial. From advocating for the rights of refugees held in on shore and off shore detention, to successfully securing the release of a young Indigenous client with an intellectual disability from unlawful detention by issuing a writ of habeas corpus. To advocating for the many clients I have met on legal outreach programs over the years and who I have had the privilege to represent and advocate on behalf of.

### **The focus of Colin Biggers & Paisley's pro bono work**

The Colin Biggers & Paisley Foundation (the Foundation) was launched in 2015. Prior to the establishment of the Foundation, our lawyers had for many years undertaken pro bono work and volunteering for communities in need, however, this work was being done in an ad-hoc way. We decided to invest in a coordinated and focused approach that had strategic focus areas where we could make the most difference. There were also clear benefits to the practice and our people if we focused our resources and expertise in strategically assisting women, children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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people and communities. We want to ensure that our legal practice interacts with our clients, our people and our community in a leading, responsible, inclusive and sustainable way. Our approach to responsible business, therefore, looks inwards to our people and our operations, as well as outwards, to our clients and our community. The Foundation operates within the respect / promote / protect model. This means that we as a practice first respect human rights principles and integrate them into the business we conduct. Second, we promote the same human rights principles through our advocacy and charitable contributions. Finally, we protect, through the incredible pro bono work we do and the community volunteering opportunities we offer.

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We take a whole-of-client view to each community partnership. This is what the Foundation is about: turning our minds to the challenges our community partners have, the resources and passions that our practice has, taking a broad and generous view and matching these together.

We strive to take a client centric view of how we can support a not-for-profit organisation or charity. We have a conversation with them to try and gain an understanding of the organisation, its priorities and challenges and think about how we can help. Often it is pro bono legal support - but we try to bring our whole self, and the whole practice, to these conversations. We think about the skills and resources we have as a practice and how we can join the dots.

Key to the success of the Foundation is the people in the practice who have embraced the Foundation and its goals wholeheartedly, and also the relationships we’ve created with our community partners. Another

key to success is to create a strategy with a clearly defined focus, recognise effort and have accountability for the quality of the delivery of service. We take pride in the fact that our pro bono services are delivered with the same level of excellence that we serve all our clients.

Feedback from our lawyers is incredibly positive. We are a busy commercial legal practice but our lawyers are also committed to making a tangible difference to the lives of the people they meet through our pro bono program as well as the broader community. Time and time again we hear from lawyers about how helping people through the provision of pro bono legal advice is rewarding on a personal and professional level.



*L-R Patrick Cavanagh, Tamara Sims, Kirsty McCall at the Queensland Law Right Walk 2021*

All our lawyers are supported and encouraged to participate and we have several initiatives for them to take part in which is one of the reasons why we're above the National Pro Bono Target at hours per lawyer. Additionally, all our people are entitled to 2 volunteering days leave per year.

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### **How the COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters have impacted on our work**

Whilst the justice gap is at risk of widening as the effects of COVID-19 continue to impact on communities in Australia and around the globe our people swiftly modified their work and approach to ensure the Foundation is able to continue to assist individuals and communities in need. The focus has now shifted from 'temporary measures' to 'the new normal' and our people have shown a remarkable capacity to adapt under both conditions.

The shift to remote-working has significantly expedited the use of technology in our work and the modes of service delivery to meet the need in the community. Whilst there are some considerable challenges associated with purely remote services, on the whole, 'the new normal' represents some exciting opportunities.

One of the major benefits of remote working is the opportunities it has created for more of our lawyers to provide their expertise

on pro bono matters and volunteer and assist vulnerable communities. The introduction of telephone advice rosters has allowed our lawyers to support organisations they were previously geographically barred from assisting and the use of technology has led to the Foundation fostering new collaborations with our community partners across Australia. We have seen our people face the challenges with professionalism and compassion, and opportunities have been leveraged to ensure that our community partners and our people can meet the needs of vulnerable people and organisations representing these communities.

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The pandemic has taught us a lot about the resilience and commitment of our people to keep pro bono and volunteering service delivery going, even in the most challenging of circumstances. ■



*Tamara Sims joined Colin Biggers & Paisley in 2019 and she is the Head of Pro Bono and Responsible Business at Colin Biggers & Paisley. Tamara is admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and the High Court of Australia. She is currently a Director at the Redfern Legal Centre. In addition*

*to her Bachelor of Laws, Tamara holds a Bachelor of Arts. She has extensive experience in human rights law, and a particular passion for access to justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Tamara has experience across multiple industries including corporate, not-for-profit and government. Her contributions have impacted organisations, social institutions, employees and individuals for significant transformation. Tamara's primary areas of practice include refugee law, victims compensation, domestic violence, housing rights and credit & debt matters. Tamara has substantial experience in running large scale public interest and human rights litigation. She is a trusted advisor to many charities, non-profits and CLCs in Australia. Tamara leads the practice's work on Pro Bono and Responsible Business through the Colin Biggers & Paisley Foundation. The Foundation focuses on protecting and enhancing the rights of women and children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and promoting responsible business practices. This includes involving all lawyers in the practice in pro bono legal services, examining ways the practice can make a positive impact on our communities through the firm's core business, volunteering, in-kind support and charitable contributions.*

### **AREA OF EXPERTISE**

- Pro bono legal services
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights
- Women and children's rights
- Human rights
- Inclusion and diversity
- Not-for-profit organisations
- Responsible business operations

[BACK TO COVER](#)