



Violet Co Legal and Consulting: Creating Change Through Legal Practice Based on Dignity, Responsibility and Reciprocity

By Karen Iles

Violet Co Legal and Consulting is now in its 5th year of operation. In 2022 I was awarded the inaugural Pro Bono Service Award by the NSW Law Society. Our nomination was for the work my team and I do to support, and walk alongside, sexual assault victims/survivors in their fights to access justice.

I wanted my business to focus on creating change with and for women and First Nations people as it reflects two parts of my identity; a woman of Aboriginal descent.

The Violet Co team as a whole spends approximately 50% of our time working fee-free, on a pro bono basis, on legal matters and social justice advocacy.

We are a signatory to the National Pro Bono Target, a certified Indigenous business (Supply Nation) and certified Social Enterprise (Social Traders).

We want to be an example of a privately owned practice that can deliver an extraordinary amount of legal services on a pro bono basis, while at the same time keeping ourselves afloat and not relying on government or philanthropic funding. We don't want to compete with the underfunded Community Legal Sector for funding. We want to show a different way.

What made me set up Violet Co Legal & Consulting? Radical ideas, soul searching and a "disaster" year.

I left the "Corporate" sector and set up Violet Co Legal & Consulting at the end of 2018. It was a huge step.

Personally, 2018 was a difficult year for me.

I left my job leading Pro Bono and Responsible Business at a commercial law firm.

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At the time, I was trying to hold my s**t together in a demanding senior role and I was dealing with what has been described by The Guardian Australia as "Unspeakable Trauma" ([article 4](#) October 2022) caused by my interactions with our justice system. You can read more about it on the campaign website www.MakePoliceInvestigate.Org.

In 2018 I felt isolated in the profession. I didn't trust my colleagues in the profession to treat me in the same way if I disclosed the personal injustice I was experiencing as a sexual assault victim trying to take on the justice system. I felt it would be "career suicide".

As a woman in the legal profession (and corporate sector) my experiences of sexual harassment were commonplace - they compounded the trauma I was already juggling.

As an Aboriginal woman who may not "look" the way people expect an Aboriginal woman to look, my identity was routinely brushed over, ignored or challenged. Overhearing casual racism was a weekly occurrence.

My self-esteem crashed through the floor.

Spurred on by the words of Angela Davis "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time" rattling around in my head, and fresh from being in London for the 100-year anniversary of the Suffragette Movement, I set up my very own legal and consulting practice, Violet Co, with the vow to do this my way; "proper way", radical way.

We fund our own pro bono matters from our fee-paying for-purpose work.

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We don't have targets or limits on the amount of pro bono matters we take on. Yes. No limits. We try our best to help everyone who reaches out to us - even if that means a warm referral to someone else who can help. We just try to “make it happen” without burning ourselves out. We run cases that many would not touch - it's about the principle and running with matters and issues that can potentially change the system.

A large focus of our fee-free practice is for Aboriginal women who have experienced racism, sexual harassment or sexual assault at work. Driven by my own experiences of the justice system as a victim of sexual assault - we act pro bono for women who need help accessing justice.

They are the cases that can't get pro-bono help easily.* This is why I think pro bono lawyering is important. Accessing justice should be within everyone's reach. Put simply - we are a long way from that.



Sitting on the banks of Dyarubbin (now known as the Hawkesbury river). My ancestral Country.

Dignity, responsibility and reciprocity.

Cases that have changed our legal system and society are often the cases where clients are represented fee-free. They are represented pro bono out of principle and respect that these clients should not have to pay for legal representation, should not have to pay for a system that is not built for them, or that they cannot afford to access. If we turn away from these clients, these issues, we turn away from our responsibility in our privileged positions to make the justice system, and our society, fairer.

People in our society who have experienced injustice should not have to “beg” for legal assistance. The concept of even being a “pro bono client”, a “charity case”, strips away dignity. It should be our responsibility as lawyers to identify and respond to injustice.

In Aboriginal cultures responsibility and reciprocity are central - it's what we try to embody in our pro bono work.

It's not about “saving” clients. It's not about the number of hours. It's about recognising the different skills and capacity we have as lawyers and working as equals with people who have different skills, capacity and have experienced injustice, to create change through the legal system. A balanced and respectful reciprocal relationship.

* Often Community Legal Centres, private firms undertaking pro bono allocations and Trade Unions have common challenges; they are underfunded or under resourced to take on matters, are conflicted out, do not have the expertise or cultural competency, do not operate in a trauma-informed way, feel the cases are “political hot potatoes” or “don't practice in that area” (particularly in relation to police accountability and sexual assault law). ■



Karen Iles is the Founder and Principal Solicitor of Violet Co Legal & Consulting; a certified Indigenous business and social enterprise. Prior to establishing Violet Co, Karen held roles specialising in Corporate Social Responsibility, in-house practice and management consulting for Coffey International Development, Colin Biggers & Paisley Lawyers, Tata Consultancy Services and KPMG Australia. Before

‘going corporate’ Karen spent 10 years working on human rights issues for organisations such as Amnesty International and trade unions.

Karen is a Nationally Accredited Mediator and Non-Executive Director (Graduate and member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors). Her appointments include; Independent member Australian Catholic Safeguarding, NSW Law Society

Committees and a number of not-for-profit sector Boards including the National Justice Project. Karen has completed the Grad Cert Applied Law (Dispute Resolution), Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice, Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Arts (Women's Studies). In 2022 Karen was awarded the inaugural Law Society of NSW Pro Bono Service Award.

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