

STEWART O'CONNELL WINS NATIONAL AWARD FOR REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN



Alice Springs lawyer Stewart O'Connell has been awarded the National Award for Outstanding Representation of Indigenous Children in recognition of his commitment to the representation of indigenous young people and children in the Territory.

The award was presented by Green Senator Mr Bob Brown at an award ceremony in Tasmania on 27 October 2000 as part of the fourth National Children's and Youth Law Centre Children's Lawyer of the Year Awards.

The Awards aim to highlight the achievements and commitment of particular lawyers who work with young people. Darwin lawyer Ms Veronica McClintic was the recipient of the award in 1999.

Mr O'Connell has represented children and young people in most of the remote communities in the Territory over the past six years. He is only the second person to have been employed as a lawyer in Aboriginal legal services in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs.

In his acceptance speech Mr O'Connell spoke of the rewards and heartbreak that characterises his line of work.

"The rewards have come from the young people themselves. In the course of my work I have never met an indigenous youth I considered was evil or genuinely bad. The only thing wrong with the kids I came across was the exceptional amount of suffering they had endured. Not only because of their own dire circumstances but also because of the collective situation of their people in this country. Yet in spite of this suffering these kids exude a remarkably strong spirit. Time and time again I have observed and felt this strength of spirit as it shone brightly in great adversity. This has never ceased to inspire me and this is why that work has been rewarding," Mr O'Connell said.

"The heartbreak has resulted from seeing many of these hopeful spirits gradually wither away until they are replaced with anger and despair. Many of my adult clients have reached this point."

The award recognised Mr O'Connell's commitment and dedication to representing young Indigenous children and youth despite the difficult jurisdiction, time and resource constraints and diversity of cultures and languages with which to work.

According to the Director of the National Children's and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC), Mr Louis Schetzer, the award was also given to Mr O'Connell in recognition of his long standing commitment to the campaign to repeal mandatory sentencing.

"That acknowledgement is reflective of the high priority the NCYLC places on the mandatory sentencing issue," said Mr Schetzer.

Mr O'Connell represented Jamie Wurrarama whose case was widely reported when he received 12

months jail for the theft of cordial and biscuits. He was also involved in the coronial inquest into the death of a 15 year old boy who hung himself in the Don Dale Detention Centre in Darwin in February following the imposition of a mandatory period of detention for theft of stationery and texts.

He told guests at the presentation dinner that he believes the Northern Territory government has demonstrated ineptitude in dealing with the problems affecting indigenous youth.

"It is often soul destroying when you think of the positive impact these youth could have on their communities if their spirit was nurtured and focused towards good outcomes. The Territory Government has ignored the plight of these children in favour of looking tough for their voters in the cities and suburbs. But at what eventual cost to our society? Time will tell but if history and common sense are any guide it will cost us greatly," Mr O'Connell said.



Stewart O'Connell accepting his awards at the ceremony held in Tasmania on 27 October 2000.