

Interview with Rachael Martin at the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre

For the past ten years Rachael has been the principal solicitor at the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre, which specialises in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault on behalf of Aboriginal women and children.

Upon graduating from law school she got a job at a boutique law firm which specialised in Building and Construction law. Rachael acknowledges that she acquired good skills in her twelve months working there. She began looking for alternative employment in a variety of places including Community Legal Centres and Aboriginal Legal Services. She was offered a position at the Dubbo Community Legal Centre as the women's outreach solicitor. She remained in this position for twelve months and thoroughly enjoyed the work. When she heard that the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre was being established she jumped at the opportunity to seek a position there. During her studies Rachael had interacted with many Aboriginal women. This was the catalyst for her budding interest in working with the Aboriginal community. During this period it also became apparent to her that this was an area of great need.

Rachael was immediately struck by the differences between working at Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre and her experience in Dubbo. At Wirringa Baiya she was the sole solicitor, which was a huge challenge given her limited level of experience at the time. Today however, the centre is staffed by volunteer law students and one part-time solicitor. One of the key challenges is that the Centre provides a state-wide service with a severely constrained budget. In order to provide state-wide services, provisions have to be made for cross-country travel where required, as well as a toll free contact number. The staff at Wirringa Baiya have focussed on community at a time to make their work more effective.

Rachael believes that courts are a particularly intimidating environment for Aboriginal people for historical reasons. Typically, the average Indigenous person's experience with the legal system is overwhelmingly negative. Rachael suggests that in order to combat this institutional insensitivity more services, which specifically support the victims of violence, need to be established. Although Rachael is able to provide her clients with accurate and competent legal advice, many of them have various other issues in their lives, which are left unaddressed. This array of concerns is particularly evident in the case of someone who has been the victim of violence. This has a significant impact on their choices and their decision whether or not to progress the case further.

What keeps Rachael going are the women and children she meets who exhibit such great resilience and strength in the face of devastating life experiences and often a long history of severe abuse. When a client turns to her and says, "Thank you for standing by me, for believing in me, and for supporting me. I have never had anything and now I have something", Rachael feels the work she does is worthwhile, and it is this type of validation she finds extremely gratifying.