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One barrister's battle to increase Indigenous lawyer numbers: Chris Ronalds AO

by **Katie Walsh**

Prominent Sydney barrister Chris Ronalds, SC, was 15 years into her career at the NSW bar when she became concerned.

It was the late 1990s, and there was only one Indigenous barrister in the ranks.

"When you looked at the statistics, there should've been 65," says Ronalds.

"The figures are pretty dismal."

Overall numbers are still small – [estimates put it at roughly 20](#) of the nation's 6000 barristers – but are steadily growing with the help of determined efforts by bar associations and critical supporters like Ronalds.

There are now at least five Indigenous barristers in each of Victoria and NSW, including [Tony McAvoy, SC, who in 2015 became the first to make the senior rank of silk](#). Queensland has the most with at least eight, [including Commonwealth prosecutions specialist Lincoln Crowley](#).

In an effort to accelerate the gains, McAvoy will chair a First Nations Committee set up by the NSW Bar Association in December, aiming to encourage more people to

consider a legal career and acting as an advocate on systemic issues affecting the population. Ronalds is among members.

The new committee is a sign of just how determined the bar is to change its make-up to more accurately reflect the community, complementing other efforts on the diversity front including gender and cultural.

The efforts consolidate and extend those kick-started by Ronalds including, critically, an Indigenous Barristers Trust. Set up in 2001 with the help of the NSW Bar Association, the trust boasts former High Court chief justice Gerard Brennan as its patron and has accumulated [almost half a million dollars](#) to help law students, lawyers and barristers.

"Everything I've done has been with the support of the NSW Bar Association, barristers and judges," says Ronalds.

"Any time I've ever needed anything – resources, people – the majority have always been there."

Law students are sent to the annual National Indigenous Legal Conference (last year, it paid for 18); junior lawyers are sent to advocacy courses and international conferences; and new barristers have access to a range of support. Students or lawyers in strife are also given financial assistance that can mean the difference between staying or dropping out.

"When I discovered a student was sleeping in a library – talk about unsafe, a library that people had 24 hours access to – I nearly had a heart attack," she says.

"One of her friends rang and told me. She was in one of the university colleges the next day.

"That's the sort of thing the trust does; It provides that safety and security when they've hit hard times. If you're homeless, studying becomes a task beyond comprehension, particularly something as word-focused as law," says Ronalds.

In 2008, a mentoring program was added, which has now helped develop around 140 law students.

The mentor relationship can result in work opportunities and it means those who might have no other connection with lawyers have a sounding board. Years down the track, mentors can become referees, playing a crucial role in helping to break through barriers and secure work. Ronalds tries to encourage students to consider areas of law other than criminal, against the persistent stereotype.

"A number have told me they would have dropped out without the mentoring program," says Ronalds.

One event involves students spending a day with a judge; last year, the 24 young Indigenous participants were outnumbered by eager judges.

The barristers helped by Ronalds' program have all been men, but she expects talented young women will come through in the next couple of years. Last year, she moved the admission of four Indigenous female solicitors.

Ronalds knows there is still a large gap to bridge before the point of University, including increasing the retention rate to year 12, but she has focused her efforts to maximise the impact.

"I made a practical decision 20 years ago that if they got themselves to law school, I'd do anything I could to get them through."

Political recognition

On Australia Day, Ronalds received an Order of Australia in the law category for "supporting, mentoring and developing the careers of Indigenous lawyers and law students"; one of 15 given awards in the law category.

Ronalds concedes there is some irony in receiving the honours on Australia Day, as [momentum builds to change the date](#) – something she sees as necessary and "inevitable".

But she says pushing for the adoption of the Uluru Statement of the Heart is a higher priority and her current focus. Rejected by the federal government late last year, the Law Council of Australia expressed its "profound disappointment". Other prominent lawyers vocal in advocating for its adoption [include Gilbert + Tobin managing partner Danny Gilbert](#).

"We, as lawyers, have a role to play in trying to lead the debate and deal with the false statements being made," she says.

"If you actually read it, it's a perfectly sensible proposal to permit First Nations people to contribute to our civil society, which treated them very uncivilly."

A discrimination and employment specialist, Ronalds can trace her career path back to a serendipitous encounter with her mother's boss – Marie Byles, the first female to practise as a solicitor in NSW.

The "terrifying" Byles asked then 14-year-old Ronalds what she wanted to do.

"I said, 'The school career adviser said I'd make a good secretary'. She said, 'Nonsense, you're going to become a lawyer, you're too smart'."

"I would've made a shocking secretary," she laughs.

It was her only connection with the law.

"I had no idea what it even meant to be a lawyer. But she was right."

"My mum was a single mum; Marie would employ women who needed help and train them. She went from an untrained secretary to being a paralegal, in a role you wouldn't get away with these days. But it gave my mum huge opportunities."

The second defining point was becoming involved with a group of Indigenous rights activists at law school, who went on to set up the Aboriginal Legal Service. They tried to form a human barrier around The Empress Hotel in Redfern, where police were known to "round up Aborigines and chuck them into the paddy wagon".

On Australia Day, she raised an Indigenous flag in her front yard as she celebrated her honours.

Judges, lawyers honoured

Others receiving the title of officer of the order (AO) included Family Court judge Victoria Bennett for her work improving the family law system and child protection over the past 30 years, as well as "improving access to justice for Indigenous families". Justice Bennett is an expert on abduction and is part of the International Hague

Network of Judges who resolve cross-border disputes over child custody, protection and safety.

Tasmanian chief justice Alan Blow received an AO for his service to the judiciary and contributions to legal education, professional standards and the community.

Holding Redlich national managing partner Ian Robertson received his honours for services both to the law and the arts – in particular, film and screen production. A stalwart of the firm, having joined almost 30 years ago as a senior associate, Robertson has acted on large media M&As and big court matters including High Court appeals.

Robertson, whose high-profile media work includes acting for Southern Cross Austereo following a disastrous prank call by 2DayFM to a London hospital where the Duchess of Cambridge was a patient in 2012, is yet to celebrate on home soil.

Film Victoria president for the past seven years, Robertson has held other government agency positions in media and broadcasting throughout his career.

Robertson was in Boston, in the US, on receiving the award, where it was "minus 6 Celsius and snowing".

High-profile human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, QC, was also honoured for his work as an "advocate for global civil liberties". London-based Robertson was in Australia late last year for the International Bar Association conference, [where he criticised the colonial-era method of appointing judges and called for a process independent of politics](#).

Former Federal Court judge Richard Edmonds, a renowned tax expert and strident advocate for tax reform who [has lamented a system "infected" by politics and politicians lacking in "intellectual honesty, integrity and courage"](#), was made a member of the Order (AM).

So, too, was Western Bulldogs president and former Slater + Gordon senior partner Peter Gordon, for his "support for Australian rules football, health promotion and youth social welfare, and to the law". Gordon was at the helm for the club's historic premiership win in 2016. Among the most active early class action litigators, [he appears to be renewing efforts in the space through his new firm Gordon Legal](#).

Federal Circuit Court judge Peter Cole and his wife Susan Cole each received a medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for establishing not-for-profit family law conferences in Indonesia and Darwin, from which money raised goes to the community and local profession.

MinterEllison Special Counsel Robert Reed also received an OAM, for his contribution to social welfare programs and to the law. Reed co-ordinates the firm's pro bono referrals and community partnerships.

In the law category, 23 nominations were made. Five of the six women nominated were recognised, alongside 10 men (60 per cent of the 17 nominated).

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