

Cairns student wins John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship

The Law Council of Australia has announced 18-year-old Ms Mikaela French as the winner of the 2016 John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship.

The John Koowarta Scholarship is the only national scholarship dedicated to helping Indigenous students realise their ambitions of becoming lawyers. It was created 22 years ago and honours Aboriginal land rights pioneer John Koowarta, a Winychanam elder from the Archer River region around Cape York.

Law Council of Australia President Stuart Clark AM, who presented the scholarship to Ms French at a dinner event in Sydney, said she had risen above a highly competitive field to be selected for the scholarship.

“Mikaela’s story, at this very early stage, is already one of remarkable clarity of purpose,” Mr Clark said.

“Making the decision early in her secondary school education that she she wanted to make a difference for her people and for her country, she took Legal Studies. Then, of her own initiative, she volunteered at the Cairns Magistrate’s Court during school holidays where she filed cases, sent letters to clients and law firms, and took it upon herself to learn the process and the etiquette of the court.

“Mikaela has said the reason she chose to study a law degree is because Indigenous people are over-represented in the justice system — an issue extremely close to the Law Council’s heart. There is a clear link between the way that Indigenous people have historically been treated by our legal system and the terrible crisis we see in terms of Indigenous incarceration today.

“We got a real sense of this when the Law Council of Australia convened a national symposium into Indigenous imprisonment in November last year. What was laid bare are complex, structural problems that demand nuanced, thoughtful solutions. But it is our responsibility, as members of the Australian legal profession, to wrestle with them, and to do so with focus and energy and integrity.

“It is a welcome ray of hope when we are able to identify a tremendous asset to this cause like Mikaela.”

27 Indigenous students have been assisted toward the completion of their legal studies through the John Koowarta Reconciliation Law Scholarship since 1994. All have developed successful careers across the legal profession with previous winners including 2011 Indigenous Lawyer of the Year Terri Janke, and up-and-coming Queensland barrister, Nathan Jarro.

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