

## AN INTERVIEW

### WITH JUNE KENNY

by April Long



As one of the first Indigenous Managing Directors of a major Western Australian law firm, June Kenny discusses her experiences as an Aboriginal woman entering University as a mature age student and pursuing a legal career. Her interview highlights the importance of family and educational opportunities for Indigenous people.

#### *Can you tell me a little bit about your background?*

I am a Nygina woman. My country is between Derby and Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberleys of Western Australia. My mum's family is mostly located in Broome and Derby. They are the LeLievre and AhChee families.

I grew up in the suburbs of Perth. While my mum's parents were alive, they lived in the Kimberleys on various stations. As a child I used to visit them. Once I started to go to school, it was mostly in the Christmas holidays that I would visit. By that stage, my grandfather had passed away and my nana was living by herself. My nana passed away when I was 10. I would then sporadically stay with my uncles and aunts in Derby for Christmas school holidays until I was about 13 years old. From the age of about 14

the regular visits to the Kimberleys stopped. As with most teenagers, I thought there were more exciting things to be done in the city. It was also at about this time that my parents separated.

#### *Did you have aspirations to become a lawyer from the outset?*

By the time I finished High School I wanted to be a school teacher and in fact I was accepted to go to Mt Lawley Teachers College. At that stage, I couldn't afford to go any further with my education. So I deferred for one year with the idea that I would go back to study after I had earned some money, but I did not end up going back to study teaching.

I did not ever want to be a lawyer whilst at school. I went to the local high school where most of the kids left after year 10 and there was not a lot of encouragement to finish high school, let alone to go to university. It was just the way it was in that day and age and in the socio economic group I grew up in. After high school, I initially worked in Perth as a shop assistant in a department store, then moved on to waitressing working in a bar, before working as an assistant manager at a Pizza Hut restaurant.

I moved from Perth to Adelaide, and then to Melbourne. I was working in a law firm, and seeing what the lawyers were doing, I thought that I could probably do the work they did. But it was really just a dream and not something I thought about as a serious possibility. After about three years in Melbourne, I was very lucky to be given the opportunity to live overseas. I lived in Taiwan for three and half years, then in Thailand for two and a half years. During this time, I began to think more about the possibility of doing a law degree.

#### *Was there anyone who was a big influence in your life?*

My mum was a driving force and encouraged me to follow my dream. Mum was a great example, as she had gone to university at the age of 40. The year before I started my law degree, I visited my mum in Fitzroy Crossing, where she had been working for two years with local families and children. It was my first visit back to the Kimberleys in about 20 years. The welcome I received was amazing. Everyone knew who I was and the kids in particular were not shy about approaching me, introducing themselves and telling me where I fitted into the extended family.

It was during my visit to Fitzroy Crossing that mum really encouraged me to pursue law. She told me about a 5 week pre-law program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to gain entrance into the Bachelor of Laws program. It was jointly run by the University of Western Australia and Murdoch University. The program provided an alternative avenue of entry for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who wanted to study law. I was worried about going to university as a mature age student and being older than all of the students, who were either school-leavers or in their early twenties. I was also worried that I would not be able to write the assignments because I hadn't studied for so long. However, Mum encouraged me and told me not to worry; she told me that I would find my place and do well.

*Can you tell us a little but more about your journey of study?*

I wanted to cover all bases so I sat the mature-age entrance exams; these are not limited to Indigenous students, but are open to everyone. Through these exams, I secured a place to study in either a Bachelor of Commerce or a Bachelor of Economics. I did not actually start either, as I completed pre-law and went directly into law. I only ever considered starting an economics or commerce degree so that I could transfer into a law degree.

I completed the pre-law program which was a full-time, intensive study program lasting five weeks. This course is now called *Koora Kudidj* at Murdoch University. Students who passed with the requisite marks were offered a position in a Bachelor of Law at either Murdoch University or the University of Western Australia.

*Koora Kudidj* provided me with instant friends at university, as most of us were mature age students who had not studied in a very long time. There was one student who was 18-years-old and from the Northern Territory. I found myself keeping an eye on her and acting as a big sister to her. When we found the going tough in particular subjects, we all supported one another. *Koora Kudidj* was like a trial run, the subjects taught were the same as first year law, so it gave us a taste of what doing a law degree was like.

Having successfully completed the *Koora Kudidj* program, I enrolled to study law at Murdoch University in 1996 – it was the first time I had studied in 17 years! Murdoch University has a dedicated area, *Kulbardi*, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can meet. Starting a degree as a mature age student is daunting, but completing the *Koora Kudidj* program and having a supportive place where I could meet with other Indigenous students made the process so much easier.

While I was studying, I tutored other Indigenous law students. I won the Commercial Law prize and was awarded the John Koowarta Scholarship. The Scholarship is in memory of John Koowarta who successfully challenged the Queensland Government's decision to prevent the Aboriginal Land Fund from acquiring a crown lease on a pastoral property as discriminatory under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth).

*Where did study take you?*

I finished my degree in 1999 and graduated in 2000 with Honours. I was really worried about finding a placement to complete my Articles because I was a mature-aged student, a woman and Aboriginal. I need not have worried because soon after I was offered Articles at the law firm Dwyer Durack.

*Can you tell us a bit about your career progression?*

I started at Dwyer Durack in February 2000 and, aside from a one-year stint at a national law firm between 2002-03, I have been there ever since. In July 2004, I was made a Senior Associate and in July 2005, was promoted to partner. In July 2006, I became a Director when the law firm incorporated into a company, Dwyers Legal Pty Ltd trading as Dwyer Durack.

I was appointed Managing Director of Dwyer Durack on 1 July 2010. I am the first female Managing Director or Managing Partner in Dwyer Durack's 96 year history. I am probably the first female, Indigenous, Managing Director of any major law firm in Western Australia. I am enjoying my role as a director at Dwyer Durack, as it gives me the opportunity to have a voice on what direction the company takes and who we employ. I enjoy running a business just as much as I enjoy being a lawyer.

I head up the General Litigation, Commercial and Employment Law department practicing in all aspects of commercial law, employment law, trust law, property law, defamation and some intellectual property. I am also the Convenor of the recently established Law Society of Western Australia's Aboriginal Lawyers Committee, a member of Women's Lawyers Western Australia and a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

*Any words of wisdom?*

I definitely encourage anyone who is contemplating further study to do so. Education is a powerful tool and we should all take full advantage of the pathways which are available for us. Education opens up a lot of opportunities in life. For me, going back to study law as a mature age student was the best thing I ever did.