Entry type: Person
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Yarran-Mark, Gningala

(1965 -)

Born	19650101, Perth Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Aboriginal rights activist, Lawyer, Manager, Solicitor

Summary

Gningala Yarran-Mark has a law degree from the University of Western Australia and has established a successful career working in Western Australian resources companies working in management positions. In 2016 she holds the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-ordinator at UGL Limited, having also worked for Jacobs, Sinclair Knight Merz and BHP in similar roles. She earlier worked as Associate to Justice French at the Federal Court, the first Aboriginal law graduate in Western Australia to attain such a position, and as a Public Prosecutor for the Western Australian Department of Public Prosecutions.

Go to ‘Details’ below to read a reflective essay written by Gningala Yarran-Mark for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Gningala Yarran-Mark and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

I often get asked about role models and how important they are to the journeys we make.

The greatest role models in my early life consisted of a mother and father who strived to make the most of their circumstances and built the family home on strong values such as hard work, ethics, discipline, commitment and determination. My mother would often quote simple life messages that I live by, one of those quotes, “Education is the golden key that unlocks many doors”, was a motivator for the attainment of higher education.

My father had the most significant influence in my decision to become a legal practitioner. Before the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service as we know it today my father, David Yarran and his cousin-brother Ivan Yarran were the very first Aboriginal court officers for the Aboriginal Legal Service in Perth, Western Australia. My father was quick witted and highly intelligent, in fact my mother would often refer to his stunning intellect. Sadly my father did not get the chance to go to University. My father grew up in an era where Aboriginal children were barely allowed a primary school education let alone advancement to a University qualification, in fact the primary school Principal needed to provide written permission in order that an Aboriginal young person gain entry to high school.

My father’s advocacy functions started in my early years on the Mt Magnet Reserve in the 1960’s, he was often called upon by the local police to act as mediatory between the police and many of the Aboriginal persons coming into contact with the criminal justice system to ensure our community where given an opportunity to be heard and for the police to extract information that was not forthcoming in many instances because of the mistrust of the police compounded by language barriers.

Our household would be “shattered” by the untimely death of my father’s dad who unfortunately died in police lock-up after having been removed from the streets for vagrancy, despite the fact that he had a fixed address and resided with my mother and father. My grandfather’s death fuelled my father’s determination that no other family should have to suffer the indignity of the loss of a family member in “questionable” circumstances. My father was a part of a delegation to the steps of old parliament house in Canberra to fight for the rights of Aboriginal Australians to have adequate legal representation at a time of heightened hostilities toward Aboriginal people who were forced to live on the periphery of society.

I grew up witness to endless phone calls in the middle of the night from distressed Aboriginal persons in lock-up concerned for their physical well-being and a steady stream of peoples seeking advice and information from my father once the Aboriginal Legal Service was established. I remember through all of this my father maintained a brutal regime to ensure others were represented, educated, comforted and consoled. I recall as a 10yr old girl I declared that as my father was the very first Aboriginal court officer I would go on and become the first lawyer in the family. Reflecting back I can recall responding to my grade 5 teacher when quizzed on what I was going to be when I grow up, I emphatically answered that I was going to be a lawyer.

My household had undergone some considerable changes as a young child, my mother and father divorced, my father was deceased at age 42, mother deceased at age 49. As a result of the volatility of the household I did not go to University as originally planned, I left home early as a result of a falling out with my mother. I was married at age 19 and a mother of 5 children at age 26. Finally at the tender age of 31 I was ready for the rigours of University after having worked in a number of areas including health, education, employment and training both in government and Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

I was accepted to the Aboriginal Pre-Law program in the summer of 1996. In that same year I bumped into my grade 5 Teacher who asked me whether I was a lawyer yet and I was able to state that I was embarking on my journey, sadly neither my mother or my father were alive to see me take this enormous leap of faith. I made it through the Pre-Law program and was offered a place at the University of Western Australia, I was ecstatic.

There is really no description for the enormity of the task of completing a University degree, particularly with a household full of children. Whilst I was an exceptional student at school, particularly in English, thanks to my mother and her passion for reading. I recount the story to my children about how my mother had me reading “Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee” as a 13 year old, not because I had to, but because she had described the horrors of a history I wanted to better understand as it was similar to the atrocities committed on my ancestors.

My learning journey was one hell of a ride. In my first year I failed dismally, only able to successfully complete one compulsory unit. From that day on I vowed and declared that I would apply the same commitment, dedication and attention to detail that I applied to all of the other challenges that I had faced prior to commencement. If anyone ever states that they achieved single handedly I would suggest that they may in fact be embellishing the facts, in my experience no one ever makes it on their own. Coming from a large extended Aboriginal family I had many hands to make my learning journey that much more bearable. I had brothers that would extend themselves financially to support my household, sister-cousins that would step in as ‘mothers’ to my children and wonderful friends that encouraged me and were gracious enough with their time to spare me a listening ear. One friend in particularly I referred to as ‘my wise one’, who coaxed me, consoled me, counselled me and cheered for me when I finally finished.

Finishing was not without its ups and downs. My ups included the following;

2000 Gloria Brennan Scholarship recipient
2000- 2002 Vincent Fairfax Fellowship – inclusive of a research project in Fiji and attendance to an ASEAN Conference in Bangkok, Thailand
2001 Aboriginal Student of the Year – UWA Aboriginal Student Corporation
2001 University funding to attend the World Anti-Racism Conference in Durban, South Africa
2004 Aboriginal Scholar of the Year Award for NAIDOC Perth

Some of the more trying times included the commencement of divorce proceedings in 2000 and the subsequent sale of the family home meant I found myself homeless as a single mother with 5 children to care for. Fortunately for me my extended family came to my aid and I was housed for a time whilst I completed my studies in order to secure full time employment and re-entry into the labour market.

Upon my 2002 graduation I was successful at obtaining a post as an Associate to Justice Robert French at the Federal Court, the first time an Aboriginal law graduate in Western Australia had ever attained such a position. It was particularly refreshing to receive a message from Justice French when he was appointed Chief Judge to the High Court of Australia that history had been made in that moment I was appointed. After completion of a 12 month term at the Federal Court I made application to do Articles at the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and was successful. It was the first time that an Aboriginal law graduate had successfully applied to complete articles with the Director of Public Prosecutions in Western Australia. I was admitted in 2004 and completed my restricted practice whilst at the Director of Public Prosecutions in Western Australia and was the first Aboriginal State Prosecutor in Western Australia.

Upon graduation I was aware of the need to give back to my Aboriginal community and I did this by being a Mentor with the Law Society of Western Australia. Another of my mother's pearls of wisdom was a quote that stated, "once you have reached your goal it is incumbent on you to give back to others who may follow". My parents had grown up in a world where our Aboriginality meant 'exclusion' and my mother was of the view that for those of our community that were resilient enough to climb to the top of their chosen profession we needed to provide support and encouragement for others to aspire to great things. My mother lived by her philosophies and I am still reminded today of how many people's lives she transformed by being a positive, outspoken, resilient remarkable women.

I exited the legal fraternity in 2007 to embark on a new journey into the world of mining and business. My learning journey is not yet complete I will graduate with Master in Business Leadership in 2016 with the view to attain a PhD shortly thereafter. My passion for learning has inspired my 5 children to go on and complete University education. Of my 5 children I have the twins in the performing arts, one a graduate of WAAPA (WA Academy of Performing Arts) the other a final year student at NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art), my eldest daughter is a Sports and Exercise Scientist who is going on to do Medicine in 2016, my second youngest daughter will finalise her Political Science and History Arts degree in 2016 and my youngest daughter will finalise her Environmental and Sustainability degree from Murdoch University in 2016.

I continue to give back to the community by involving myself in committees and reference groups across such areas as Law and Justice, Health, Native title and business development. Legal training and experience as a legal practitioner gives you a greater understanding of technical frameworks that then allows you to create opportunities for training others across a range of disciplines. I work with a number of student support services and donate my time talking to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about the importance of education and the importance of making a difference in your family and your community, raising the awareness about how to positively impact your own life and that of others.

I will continue to seek out new adventures and new experiences to add to my arsenal before I exit this life. Part of my new pathway is in the presence of an amazingly supportive and inspiring husband who challenges me to challenge myself and my community. I look forward to the next part of my journey as a newly married women with a powerhouse for a husband and an empty nest now that my children have all left home.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016, http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers

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