



## Tenants Advice and Advocacy Lifetime Achievement Award – Ruth Simon

For well over a quarter of a century Ruth has dedicated herself to ensuring justice for Aboriginal people through her work, both paid and unpaid. She has initiated or managed a range of initiatives promoting access to education, secure housing, health and employment. Always, Ruth has understood how these issues interrelate and how all must be addressed to create positive outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Her current work with the Tenants Advice and Advocacy Program began in 2000. Her work involves:

- directly managing or auspicating Aboriginal Tenancy Services (TAAS)
- providing management support and advice to all the Koori TAASs
- representing their concerns to government and other decision-makers
- coordinating an annual Koori TAAS conference and
- providing cultural awareness training to the TAAP network.

She is also involved in directly supporting Aboriginal tenants to maintain their tenancies. Ruth says “without proper shelter you can’t go to the next level.”

Ruth’s contribution has been outstanding because she has worked tirelessly for so many years across many areas. Her personal impact has been such that she still receives calls and invitations from community members whose lives were turned around by Ruth’s words of advice and the support she provided when they were at their most vulnerable.

Ruth brings an absolute commitment to ensuring positive outcomes for Indigenous people. She demonstrates this commitment every day – both in work and in her own time.

Ruth is an inspirational adult educator and was instrumental in the development of the Certificate IV in Community Services Advocacy ensuring it was culturally appropriate for Koori staff, many of whom have graduated from the course. She was also a key author of learning materials for the Aboriginal awareness unit of competency. Ruth’s commitment to presenting

cultural awareness training has meant that for many years, several times a year she has presented such training for the TAAP network.

Here are just a few quotes from participant evaluations:

"Truly insightful. The mixture of stories, history, and the law helped to draw out the issues faced by our indigenous community and our role in improving the lifestyle and experiences of our indigenous communities. Loved it!

Wonderful! Challenging. Made me more aware of my reaction and how I can alter my ways of dealing with Indigenous clients.

Was very eye opening. Gave great insight into how a lot of our Aboriginal clients are feeling and how they see things.

Very interesting. Beautifully and patiently presented. Opened up great conversation in the group. Thank you

Awesome, informative, heartbreaking and inspiring. I have undertaken 2 previous Aboriginal cultural awareness training sessions before and still learnt so much!

Emotional and well covered. Helped provide some understanding of Aboriginal experience. "

As part of her current role in the Tenants Advice and Advocacy Program, Ruth advocates for Indigenous tenants who in most cases, are at risk of being evicted from their homes. Her advocacy has a high rate of success, not only in keeping matters out of the hearing room, but also in the retention of clients' tenancies. Without Ruth's successful advocacy and negotiation, many of these already disadvantaged people would now be homeless.

She is able to 'paint a picture' of how the tenants' life situations got them to the position they are in and to negotiate for manageable repayment of any rental arrears. Ruth being Ruth, she continues her support outside the hearing room, providing tenants with contacts and advice about support services which could assist in other areas of the tenants' lives.

Ruth is passionate about Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Services and has taken on, often at personal cost, mentoring TAAP staff and auspicing Koori TAAS services to ensure they remain in Aboriginal management, staffed by Aboriginal workers.

Ruth herself admits that her company subsidises the work she does for TAAP.

Before Ruth's involvement with the Tenants Advice and Advocacy Program and her role representing the rights of Aboriginal tenants as a member of the

board of the Tenants' Union of NSW and of the NSW Rental Bond Board, she was facilitating access to justice, education and employment for Aboriginal people in NSW. A sample of her achievements in this regard includes:

- Working as a volunteer for Kirinari Hostels in the Sutherland Shire, helping young Aboriginal people (who were resident in the hostels because of disadvantage), with their homework and other educational issues.;
- Co-ordinated and facilitated Death in Custody Workshops involving a number of regional panels of experts from various service areas such as Police, Education, Housing etc to receive local feedback from Aboriginal community members. Following these workshops a number of the funded programs and projects made available after the Royal Commission were modified to more appropriately target the communities they were meant to be supporting;
- Co-ordinated the Deaths in Custody Retreat for families who had experienced a death in custody ;
- Undertook crime prevention research targeting young Indigenous people. This led to pilot demonstrating best practice for Police and the Court System in their contact with young Aboriginal people;
- Co-ordinated and facilitated of a 5 day Statewide Aboriginal Youth Gathering for YAPA;
- Co-co-ordinated 2 National Health Conferences This included establishing a lobby group to go forward with the Conferences' recommendations.

This story is not complete as Dtarawarra has been involved in many more programmes but it would take too many pages to capture the work undertaken and the professionalism provided.

Ruth's commitment to ensuring access to just outcomes for Indigenous people means that she always 'goes the extra mile'. With many of the projects she has been involved with, she has made herself available 24/7. She does not distinguish between her time and the community's time – as far as she is concerned, her time is their time. To every project Ruth brings her professionalism, her humanity and humour.

I have personally learnt much from Ruth about advocacy, communication, education and the issues facing Aboriginal people.

Ruth, we pay tribute to your wisdom, friendship, patience and commitment. It is my pleasure to present you with this TAAP lifetime achievement award.

Julie Foreman, Executive Officer, Tenants' Union, 29 October 2014