

ROBERT WILLIAM BELLEAR**1944–2005**

With the passing of Bob Bellear, the University of New South Wales Law School lost a uniquely distinguished graduate, of whom it is justly proud. Bob was the first Indigenous judge in Australia, having been appointed to the New South Wales District Court in 1996.

Bob's ancestry combined two severely disadvantaged groups, Australian Aboriginals and the Pacific Islanders brought to Australia in the course of the infamous Kanaka trade. He overcame tremendous handicaps to enter the Law School in 1974, graduate in 1978 and gain admission to the Bar in 1979.

In happier circumstances Bob may well have chosen a career other than law. He was moved to embrace it not for its material rewards, nor for love of the subtleties of legal reasoning, nor for the charms of adversarial litigation. These things were not calculated to attract a person who was unpretentious and generous by nature, direct and spontaneous in thought and action, and compassionate and conciliatory by disposition. Famously, he decided to do law as a result of observing the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people by police, seeing law as an avenue for redressing the balance. True to this intent, his subsequent career progressed from counsel for Indigenous and other disadvantaged defendants, to counsel assisting the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, to Public Defender and finally to judge in the court that dealt with the great bulk of criminal work above the level of magistrate.

Having chosen law as a career, he pursued it with integrity, commitment, dignity, courtesy and humanity. Injustice, dishonesty, cruelty or hypocrisy could move him to anger, but not make him bitter, vengeful or unfair. His path-breaking career and his imposing presence meant that he was constantly held up as an example to inspire young Aboriginals, a difficult role that he accepted with grace and no hint of pomposity. Indeed he loved working with young people, both outside and inside the multi-racial family that he and his wife Kaye generously and lovingly gathered round them.

Outside the law, Bob lived life richly and to the full. He loved sport and the outdoors, particularly the sea, and his passion for its products formed part of his love of good food. Above all he loved people, and his great capacity for friendship was never better demonstrated than after his terminal illness was diagnosed, and he gathered family and friends about him to courageously make the most of his remaining months.

From its inception, the UNSW Law School has been deeply committed to the cause of justice for Indigenous people, which it has pursued through promoting the availability of proper legal services, through the recruitment and

encouragement of Indigenous law students, and through research and teaching in the fields of law impacting on Indigenous people. Even before it took its first students, the Faculty had been in the forefront of establishing the first Aboriginal Legal Service in Australia, and had persuaded the University to adopt the first program of special admission of Aboriginals to an Australian University. The first intake of law students in 1971 included two Aboriginals. The first Aboriginal graduate, Pat O'Shane, became the first Indigenous magistrate and the second, Bob Bellear, became the first Indigenous judge.

His untimely death is an occasion for sorrow and mourning, but also for satisfaction that Bob made so much of the opportunities the Law School was able to offer.

Hal Wootten
Foundation Dean 1969–73.