

The Callover

Guest | Michael Murray

Host | Georgia Athanasellis



Georgia Athanasellis:

Welcome to this episode of The Call Over.

Welcome to Country

I'm Georgia Athanasellis, and today I'm speaking with Michael Murray, a supervising solicitor with Townsville Community Law, an academic and lecturer at James Cook University, and the winner of the QLS Young Lawyer Award for 2020.

He offers some great advice about what young lawyers can do to best prepare for, and make it as young lawyers. In particular, we talk about the benefits of engaging in pro-bono work for each individual, but also the wider community.

Michael, thank you so much for joining me.

Michael Murray:

Thank you so much. It's fantastic to speak to you today and to be on the podcast.

Georgia:

Now, this episode is all about the things that law students and young lawyers can do to prepare themselves for their life in the law. For some of us, it's really not that clear in the early stages. So, I'd like to take a step back.

Michael:

Yep

Georgia:

What did your pathway into the law look like, and when did you actually know you wanted, and that you liked being a lawyer?

Michael:

Well, I mean, my pathway into the law, I think, wasn't particularly unique or different to what I expect many law students went through, and many young lawyers have been through, to find themselves practicing law. I came from a fairly typical family and in a small, very small regional town.

Like other law students, I had given a lot of thought about what I was going to do when I went...well when I was applying for universities. I hadn't done any work experience in law firms or anything like that while I was at high school. My...the most sort of meaty experience I had in law was, like many other students, was doing legal studies at high school.

I applied to law school, and I straight out of high school...and attended James Cook University. I was not the best student, particularly in my first year at university. I did one semester, I think I failed two subjects. I didn't go to any lectures, I didn't go to any tutorials, so that might be the best bit of advice I have for any young lawyers listening is, if you've decided to do law, certainly, you need to buy into that university experience, because it's something I didn't do initially and I suffered for it.

But when I did do it, it was just a fantastic experience, and I still look back on those three, three years, or four years I think it was, as really just some of the best years of my life. I've made lifelong friends in law from university. We can probably chat about it later, but it certainly inspired me to get involved in the sort of work that I'm doing today, the pro bono work, as well as other things like lecturing and tutoring, which would never have occurred to me had I not really bought into that experience. So that's how I found my way to law, I suppose.

Georgia:

Yeah. And it certainly sounds like despite taking perhaps an unusual or a varied path, you did find your place in the law at the Townsville Community Law. So can you tell me a little bit about what you do there?

Michael:

So I'm the supervising lawyer at Townsville Community Law. So we're a community legal centre. We're part of the network of Community Legal Centres Australia and we're accredited by them, and the work we do, or that I do here is incredibly varied, which is one of the things that attracted me to work in a Community Legal Centre. Prior to that, I was working in a private practice and it was a fantastic firm with fantastic mentors, and I had a great experience there. But I sort of fairly quickly realized it wasn't for me. I was getting a bit bored with the work that I was doing. It wasn't...It was important work, but for me it wasn't particularly challenging and it wasn't different enough, which is why I eventually applied for a job at Townsville Community Law. I had volunteered here at university through clinical programs as well. And I actually only applied for a...temporary part time position it was, because I was also, like many young lawyers, just having a few doubts about my place in the profession as well.

And even at that point, two or three years past graduating, post admission experience, I was still having some of those feelings of – is legal practice for me? I've been very fortunate here to work with some fantastic people. But importantly, that the work that we do here is just so varied. It's so different to any other area of law. We do a lot of human rights work.

My practice is mostly civil, and for the past few years it's been focusing on the Queensland Coronial Legal Service. So acting for...generally bereaved family members, going through coronial investigations and appearing for them at the inquest as well, which is...sort of combines my interest of science and anatomy as well.

And it's an incredibly interesting area of law, and I think if you'd asked me when I was working in private practice, I probably wouldn't have known what an inquest was, but now it's just it's an area that I'm incredibly passionate about and it's very interesting work.

Georgia:

A lot of young lawyers take whatever, whatever job they want or get when they first finish law school. Or perhaps it's the job that everyone tells you want. What advice would you give to young lawyers who get their first job out of law school but don't enjoy it or don't...or aren't stimulated, I guess, by the area of practice that they're in?

Michael:

I think my biggest advice would be not to give up and not to quit or...don't like the term quit, but not to leave the profession entirely because of that experience.

I think it's a very common experience for young lawyers...because of a whole range of reasons, I put it down to TV, and what people think practicing law is, that they are expecting some sort of experience when they go into a firm, and that experience that they're actually getting, which is the reality of legal practice, might not live up to what they thought it was and they might realize it's not stimulating for them. I know when I...I pre-date sort of the 'Suits' era the 'Harvey Specter' era, my era was the 'Boston Legal', 'Denny Crane' era...I'm not sure if you've seen that show, but it is worth a watch. And I had a very, probably nonsense idea in my head about what legal practice was when I took my first job, and then I walk in and I get handed 20 conveyancing contracts and I have to write 20 of the same letters to 20 different clients or something like that. So by the end of my first week there, I was sort of thinking, "Oh my, oh my god, is this what legal practice is?"

The benefit of a law degree is that it's so diverse and it can open up so many doors and so many opportunities to any of those students or law graduates who may be thinking, "Well, this isn't for me" or "I'm not enjoying this sort of work". I think they need to think very seriously and do a bit of research about what their degree can do for them. Did they want to work in human rights law? Do they want to work in policy or law reform? Do they want to work for advocacy groups? Do they want to advocate for children? Do they want to advocate for Aboriginal Torres-Strait Islander clients?

There's just so much you can do for it, So I think the first step for those people having those feelings is trying to figure out what you want to do, or what you're passionate about, actually. So even maybe a step back from that.

Georgia:

If I can take you back again, though, to your first day of work, maybe not yours in particular, but any lawyer who's starting their first day of work at a new job, or maybe their first job ever in the legal profession. Do you have any tips for young lawyers, to help with the challenges that arise in their first week, month, first year of practice?

Michael:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the biggest tip I could give is to find other young lawyers, and speak to other young lawyers about their experience as well. We use that opportunity to debrief with your colleagues about your experiences.

Probably another thing, a bit of advice I could give is make sure you try and find strong mentors, and form a relationship with your mentors in those firms. It can be quite intimidating as a junior lawyer when you started the first job, I think even it probably took me two days to work up the courage to knock on one of the partner's doors, to ask them a question that I'd rehearsed 50 times in my head over the past few days. And I knew that it was probably going to be an incredibly simple answer as well. But once I sort of got through those barriers and got to know these people a bit better, it was very clear that on the most part, and I acknowledge that some people do have bad experiences with senior lawyers or mentors in firms, but on the most part, my experience has been in the profession that particularly the 'old guard', if you will, or all those partners of firms or principal lawyers, they're so willing to give you their knowledge and their skills and to assist you be a better lawyer.

It's really just about trying to form a relationship with them and getting past some of the insecurities that you might have in yourself.

Georgia:

I think those relationships with coworkers also benefit you as a young lawyer when you make your first mistake, and everyone does, but it can be a terrifying thing when you've discovered it for the first

time. How do you think young lawyers should approach making...when they've made their first mistake? How do you approach it?

Michael:

Well, as you said, everyone makes mistakes, and I have had a few interactions with people before, junior lawyers, whether the type of person that they think that they never make a mistake. And that's probably the most dangerous mindset you can have starting out in legal practice, having that confidence and saying "I'm never going to make a mistake", because it will inevitably happen because you're new at a job. What I would encourage people to do, is obviously be as diligent as you can with your work, but you will inevitably make a mistake at some time.

The big things with mistakes in law, or at least my experience, is 99.99% of them can be very easily fixed, if it's brought to the attention of someone relatively quickly. So the advice I would give, certainly you might be quite scared if you've made a mistake, you might be a bit scared about what someone's reaction might be to that, you sort of just have to get over that. Talk to your...your supervisor, or talk to your colleagues as soon as possible.

Don't let it procrastinate and sit because it gets harder and harder to fix the longer it goes on. And as I said in my experience, and I've certainly had lawyers here made mistakes or errors because it inevitably happens. I've made some myself as well. But it's really just about having that open channel of communication with your supervisors. It's about not being scared of their reaction and just talking to them about it.

Georgia:

That's great advice, I think, for all young lawyers out there. Once you if you know you've made a mistake, raise it with someone who can help you fix it.

Michael:

Yeah, yeah. And the great thing about it is when you made one mistake, you won't make it again.

Georgia:

No, no. I'd like to talk now a little bit about the Clinical Legal Studies course that you teach at JCU. I understand you were enrolled in it before you ended up teaching it. What was the experience like as a student participating in that subject?

Michael:

Terrifying! But it was the best experience I had at university. So I enrolled in the subject, so it's run through James Cook University, as you said, it's called Clinical Legal Studies. Most universities have a similar program, it might not be called Clinical Legal Studies, but some sort of clinical program where universities partner with, generally, Community Legal Centres and they send students into that Centre to do client work. To see clients, to give clients advice, to write letters, to draft court documents, all under the supervision of a solicitor. So how I found my or my first experience with that subject, I actually didn't know what it was when I enrolled in it, I will honestly say that, and I hope no one from maybe my work or the university is listening right now, but I wasn't really aware of what it was. I didn't have a good read of the subject guide to see what it was.

I enrolled in it because I had two more subjects left to do. I wanted to finish my degree six months early so I could get out and start working. And that was one of the subjects that sort of fell in the perfect time for me to do so I enrolled in it. We did two days of intensive lectures or three days, I think it was, of intensive lectures at the centre I'm at now, which was delivered at the time by our Principal Lawyer and the Director of the Service who...she has since left to direct another service, and we're

taught...I just like to say to students when I teach them, it's really just a crash course in lawyering. It's about dispelling a lot of the myths of legal practice.

It's about giving students the skills...the practical skills to go into legal practice, in three days, which isn't...which isn't an easy task, but it's really about getting away from books, teaching students about how they interact with clients. And I'm talking about the very basic things like how do you greet a client? Do you shake their hand? You wouldn't nowadays. But when I did it handshaking was all the rage. It's about just, you know, how do you start an interview? You ask an open question. How do you phrase that? How do you dig a bit deeper and funnel that information down and get all the details you need? How do you end an interview? How do you get a client to leave your office if they're a bit of a chatter?

Those sorts of very simple things. And really, by the end of the semester, you actually develop a sort of confidence that I don't think other students have, if they haven't done those programs. You develop some confidence and you do develop some very essential skills in client interaction, and dealing with clients and drafting and those sorts of things, which will greatly assist you in your career, whatever you decide to do, those skills are universal and it will help you. So for me, it was a phenomenal experience, the clinical program. I had had just a great experience there, and I'm quite honored and thankful to be able to teach it now and to supervise students and to try and give them the sort of experience that I had as well

Georgia:

That is a formal sort of university arranged volunteering opportunity, I guess, but there's lots of other, less formal volunteering opportunities that university students or even just young lawyers can get involved in. Can you tell me a little bit about what those both at your service, but probably more broadly across the CLCs?

Michael:

Unfortunately, COVID has had to scale back some volunteering things, but I understand most centres are bringing everyone back on board now as our centre is as well.

So, Community Legal Centres, and I said earlier, the work that these centres do is just phenomenal and it's incredibly interesting, you never have a boring day. You're dealing with the weird and wonderful things in law that you just don't see in private practice. And these centres do have programs for university students. For example, our centre, we have admin roles, if people want to come in for a few hours a week and do a bit of admin work, which is a great skill to develop to assist with your filing and you can...you can read all the files as you are filing them away and those sorts of things, which is quite interesting.

We have more, sort of legal placements, where you do some work with a lawyer, might be interviewing clients, or drafting notes or documents and things like that. And then we have PLT placements for students that want to do their placement requirement for their PLT provider with us as well. And then we also have lawyers volunteering with us as well, who work at private firms and come back and volunteer with us. And it's really, it's just it's a fantastic experience for students to get involved in, because much like the clinical program, you will inevitably develop skills that you wouldn't else have, when you go out and start hunting for jobs. You'll meet members of the profession, you'll meet lawyers, you'll meet barristers who are coming in to volunteer and particularly in a place like Townsville, where it's a very close knit legal community.

A big part of being successful in your career is integrating with that community as well as you can. So I would definitely encourage students or even new lawyers or whatever, just to reach out to your local Legal Centre if there's one nearby, and to see if there's anything that you can assist with in terms of volunteering. It's a very fulfilling experience as well. And if there's not a centre nearby, a lot of the centres do remote volunteering nowadays as well. So it's just about making that approach.

Georgia:

And you learn so much like you say about the soft skills, also about the area of law, and just about also the people who really need the Community Legal Centres and why they're so valuable.

I want to talk a little bit about that. Pro-bono work is obviously great for the young lawyers who get to experience all these things. But who else benefits from young lawyers and law students getting involved at these community legal centres?

Michael:

Well, I mean, our clients benefit from it greatly. Your local community benefits from it greatly. I've done some research work with a colleague, she's at UQ now managing their clinical program and their pro-bono programs there, but we've done a bit of work, at least with our graduates and our volunteers, to sort of track where... what are these people doing nowadays, what did they get out of that experience? And it was a research paper that we presented at a few different conferences, I think it was actually two or three different research papers that we ended up doing, but it really showed that it's not just the students, the lawyers that benefit from this, it's the wider community because generally those students that come and volunteer with us or those lawyers that volunteer with us, they'll start when they're able to, taking some pro-bono work in the private firm when they can, they'll come back and volunteer at legal centres after they've graduated. I think, probably about 80% of our volunteer lawyers either volunteered with us at uni or did the clinical program, so it really instills that sense of social justice in people.

So they basically keep coming back for more, which is great. The big benefactor of all the volunteers is obviously the broader community who benefit from it greatly. I think we did calculate a few years ago, the pro bono contribution of our lawyers and our students based of sort of typical hourly rates for law firms or paralegals and things like that, and it was over the past 15 years or so, and it was millions and millions and millions of dollars in volunteer hours that these people had done, and it's a great benefit to the community.

Georgia:

And the last thing I thought we'd touch upon in terms of how young lawyers can get involved in their local communities and their local profession, is the existence of District Law Associations. For those who don't know: what is a District Law Association, and what do they actually do?

Michael:

A District Law Association, so there's a number across Queensland, I don't actually recall how many there are, but they're an association generally tied to a particular geographical region and they are accredited of sorts by the Law Society and we have a very close relationship with the Law Society.

But they're really there to look after our members, and to advocate for our members when we need to. And it's a bit more than that as well, it's just about increasing collegiality within the local regions and within the profession. It's about bringing lawyers together. It's about providing professional development to our members.

So, for example, the Townsville District Law Association, I sit as the President presently on that Association, we provide events for our members, we provide CPD events for our members, if there are issues impacting our members, which there have been, particularly, and just one example is media coverage of youth crime in Townsville, which the media just loves and loves and loves to report on, and occasionally some of our members might get caught up in that reporting. And then, of course, members of the public when they see that online jump on the bandwagon as well.

So it's about looking after our members and reaching out to them if there's issues that need to be raised and really doing anything that we can to assist them, and to assist their professional development. I, probably like many people, and I'm sure some people listening had no idea what a District Law Association was when I got admitted as a lawyer. I had no involvement in it for about three years. I wasn't even a member because I didn't know it existed.

When I moved back to Townsville, I, it was actually my principal lawyer, he said...there was a meeting coming up an annual general meeting, and he sort of said, "Oh, why don't you go down and put a nomination to get on the board? Because we haven't really been engaged with them for a long time." And that was eight years ago, and I'm still on the board now.

And I sort of rocked up at this meeting, and again, I was a bit terrified because I was sort of new...new in town and a very junior lawyer. And I put in my nomination, I was half expecting someone to object to it on the grounds of "Who is this person who walks in and nominates now?"

But the particular group at that time on the board were just so incredibly welcoming. And it's not just senior practitioners who sit on those boards, its junior practitioners as well. And I would certainly encourage anyone who is within a geographical location of a District Law Association, which is all the lawyers in Queensland, to get involved in your association, to join the board. If you think that young lawyers don't have anything to give to that sort of organization, and all that sort of board, that's just not true, because half...and almost half of the profession think is, would be categorized as a young lawyer or those with practicing certificates nowadays. I think, read recently might be 40% cent or 45% or something like that. So that's really...you're a massive part of the profession, so it's incredibly important that your views are heard and you're going to...you're going to know things about being a young lawyer that other people have just not experienced or have long since forgotten.

An example is one of our board members who is a young lawyer, he sort of recognized a gap up here that we didn't have any events for young lawyers, to catch up on or exclusively for young lawyers to catch up and hang out. So we've started putting on events each quarter, which is just an informal catch up at a...bar here where we just invite young lawyers to come along and have a drink or coffee or whatever and have a chat to people. And we have...we invite sort of special guests sometimes who might come just to talk to people, and we also invite senior members of the profession to come so that they can come and meet the new lawyers in Townsville.

And the feedback we've got from that is just unreal. People really enjoy it, it's one of our most popular sort of reoccurring events. So the bottom line, I think, is absolutely get involved in those associations. They are so much fun to be a part of, and that's so rewarding as well.

It's a bit of work because obviously it's a volunteer position, but you'll get to meet so many people. You'll get to meet all the figures at the Law Society, you'll get to meet the judiciary. It's just...it opens up so many doors. And when I joined it eight years ago, I had no idea what it was, really. And now I'm sitting as the president of that board, I've been the president of another one in Queensland, which incorporates the wider sort of North Queensland region, not just Townsville.

And it's also connected me quite closely with the Law Society and being on some committees and doing some work with the Law Society to sort of improve access to justice in a whole range of different things. So it's been an unreal experience being a part of those boards, so I would absolutely encourage people to do that.

And also, have a think about what other boards are out there that aren't district law boards that you might want to get involved in, too. If you're passionate about, you know, providing quality services to victims of domestic violence, you could consider going on a board of a local neighborhood centre or local women's centre, or even a Community Legal Centre because they all have boards as well.

So it's really it sort of ties back to what I started talking about, which is if you're passionate about something, just grab it with two hands and give it a go, and I think that's really...the opportunities for lawyers involved in those boards is out there. So I encourage people to do it.

Georgia:

Yes, what I'm hearing through all of our all the topics we've canvased today is get involved it, it will enrich your time in the profession and in no small way. So I think that's a perfect place to end our discussion today.

Thank you so much for your time. I've thoroughly enjoyed this conversation.

Michael:

That's great. Thank you very much and well done to the Future Leaders Committee for organizing the podcast because I think it's a fantastic initiative as well.

So I hope it's very successful and I hope everyone listening enjoyed it, or got a few bits and pieces out of it. Thank you.

Georgia:

Thanks, Michael. Bye.