TRANSCRIPT:

[Intro music]

[David speaks over intro music] I think what sustains you really is the absolute joy and love for the work that you do. And what stems from that is first of all the respect you are given, but also the respect you give back

[Jaynaya] Welcome to White Noise, the podcast of the Indigenous Law and Justice Hub.

This podcast was recorded at the MLS Digital Studio on Wurundjeri Country in Naarm. We offer our deepest respects to elders past and present, and emerging leaders and all Indigenous people listening on this continent and around the world. We encourage you to take a moment to reflect on whose Country you are listening on and learning from today.

I'm Jaynaya Dwyer, the lucky convener of this podcast. I'm a non-Indigenous woman who has the pleasure of learning alongside you at the Indigenous Law and Justice Hub through these conversations and many others.

Today we have the pleasure of listening to an absolute masterclass on what it is to be an ethical and impactful lawyer in Australia today, joined by Judge David Woodroffe – who is better known in legal circles as Woody. Judge Woodroffe shares his insights from a long career working alongside Aboriginal people as the Principal Legal Officer of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, prior to his appointment as a judge of the Northern Territory Local Court.

You rarely hear people working in the criminal legal system, or legal system more generally describe it as a joy, as Woody does. In putting this episode together I was thinking about how important it is to hear lawyers, and criminal lawyers in particular reflecting regularly about the joy of representing and the privilege. I hope that this conversation will help you connect with your purpose for working for justice.

[Intro music]

[Jaynaya] Hello and welcome to the White Noise podcast, the podcast of the Indigenous Law and Justice Hub at Melbourne Law School.

I am Jaynaya Dwyer, and I'm joined today by Judge David Woodroffe - local court judge sworn in in July last year - a historic moment as David is the first Aboriginal person to become a judge in the Northern Territory, as a Mudburra and Jingili man. Welcome David, we're so excited to be joined by you today.

[David] Well, thank you Jaynaya and thank you for that very warm welcome.

So, as always, our first question on this podcast- please tell us who you are, what your mob is and what are the values that drive your work?

[David] Well thank you for that question because that really is the, I think, the most important question there is about who you are. But it's like with everyone, who you are is who your family is, and where you are from and your connections to family and country.

So, my journey is, as with other people, begins with family history and particularly with my grandmother's removal as a member of the stolen generation from a place called Newcastle Waters, and that was on her traditional country and around a place called Elliott. That's sort of between Alice Springs and Darwin. She was removed to a place called Kahlin Compound, which was in the 1920s in Darwin.

[Jaynaya] Okay, a long way away.

[David] A very long way away.

And then, particularly for her, when Darwin was being bombed in 1942, she was evacuated on the back of trucks, she was pregnant with my dad. My dad was born in a place called Birdum, which is just south of Katherine, and he was in the mission from the beginning of his life. So, the relevance of that and how that's shaped them and shaped me is really, you know, the main reason why I went into the law. The importance of the stolen generation, as it was my dad and family, and how they grew up in their friends and that close connection that they all had together. But also, for me to go into the law because that was my thing - I didn't want this ever to happen again and didn't want to ever happen to sort of my family etc. So, I've always been passionate about it.

I remember always being passionate at University and I remember in a class of 100 odd law students and there was a great thing - it was kind of like a career's day, with people saying "What do you want to do? What do you want to be?". I just wanted to work for Aboriginal people. I've had the fortune and blessing of having a career to have done that over many many years, throughout the NT and into other states including working in the Kimberly and Kalgoorlie and finding the great connections between Aboriginal people from NT and other states in other places.

[Jaynaya] Yeah.

You talked about those family motivations to become a lawyer – what were your impressions on what lawyers did before becoming a lawyer? I always find this interesting because mine was way off.

[David] Well you know it's hard to think back, I mean it was that sort of thing, I think all Aboriginal people want, and still want 100% is we're constantly striving for justice and fundamental sort of things like equality, human rights, decency and respect, so being a lawyer was, sort of, seeing that. But I suppose, was there any frame of reference? No. There was no one that, you know, who was a lawyer, no relations. I didn't grow up like other mob's sort of like, you know, dad a lawyer, families a lawyer and come from the family firm. I mean, I always remember that the uni at Darwin was very nice because it was actually on where Kahlin Compound was.

[Jaynaya] Wow!

[David] So it's actually a formal Darwin hospital, which was then the old mission site, so it had quite significance to be there.

[Jaynaya] Yeah!

[David] I always kind of remember, I always think back even now, for many Aboriginal law students sort of thing but I remember back then it was like you are going to lectures and there'd be all these kids that would be rockin up in their dads gold BMW and just like all Aboriginal mob feeling shame and sitting down at the back row..

[Jaynaya] And you were there with our own Dr Eddie Cubillo, I believe!

[David] That's correct!

So, you know, it's that being different, having that different perspective. I think the other thing that really grows out of that is seeking out your own mob – not necessarily at the exclusion of everyone else and not participating fully. But I think, but I think sort of going through that same sort of experiences with other Aboriginal law students and undergraduates – they really do become and have become your lifelong friendships and you take that same journey through your university and take that same journey through your legal career.

So, you know, I gotta say these names because we were all together- so Eddie Cubillo, Nick Espie, Shahleena Musk- these are people who, you may not think about it now, who will will be in supporting you through your career, your journey. Not just in the months, but in the years and even into the decades so for everyone to know that.

So, make friends, your friends are the best support because I think there is that true understanding of what you're going through. The true understanding about how the law is confronting, how the law and many of its structures and systems are negative in the way that it's all, it's blind in respect of the issues that Aboriginal people face. So, dealing with that and providing the support about, even in that first thing you are doing in that introductory things around *terra nullius* and all these sort of things.

And, how those very first sort of concepts are very confrontational to Aboriginal people, and are distressing and upsetting. But having supportive others, being passionate to understand and to learn, but also to challenge and have your own perspective.

[Jaynaya] And you've now been working on, almost 30 years, is in the legal system specializing in criminal defence work. You've been the Principal Legal Officer of North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, people know this as NAAJA, and you're now a judge. What's kept you working in the criminal legal system? And what change have you seen in the system and the Northern Territory over this time?

[David]

I think what sustains you, and it sustains you, whether you're Aboriginal Legal Advocate or you are an advocate, really is the absolute joy and love for the work that you do. And that joy and love from the work, comes from connecting with Aboriginal people and having the greatest opportunity of working for Aboriginal people being in communities, having and receiving the absolute 100% generosity of Aboriginal people to teach, educate, show and kindness. And what stems from that is that is to respect that It's given. But most importantly is the respect that you must give back and give back to Aboriginal people in the way that you engage with a person, how you engage with a family, a community. And that generosity and kindness is really what sustains you and it sustains you through hard time, sad times, difficult times, stressful times. And if you see that joy and respect in others, really is, that's what sort of reciprocates you -reciprocating it back. The consistency is that kindness, generosity, respect of Aboriginal people in communities, the privilege of going to communities and the beauty of not just the land, but the opportunities to learn. So that's been a consistent over many, many years and I don't think that could ever change because that is an Aboriginal way of doing things.

I mean, there are legal things that have changed over the many decades. In the very early days, we're not talking many, many years ago, in the early 2000s, there was no interpreter services available for the 50-odd languages that are spoken by Aboriginal people in courts in the Northern Territory. So, seeing the creation of the most skilled experts of Aboriginal language speakers and their participation, and the most important thing which is informing, but more so, more importantly, the empowering of Aboriginal people to, not be part of the justice system, to participate, to have opportunities, to be allowed to have the conscious ability to make informed decisions. And for me, that has been the greatest thing that's happened over many decades, which is Aboriginal language speakers.

Aboriginal language speakers are so integral to the justice system in all areas of law. But most importantly, for being a legal advocate, is ensuring that a person understands in their own language and is able to make that informed decision into understanding fundamental questions about understanding what's occurring, participating and then making a decision. Because ultimately, the language speaker is the most important central person in the Court.

[Jaynaya] You've worked at the Aboriginal Legal Service and been involved for a long time now and they have a really proud history. Could you describe the work of NAAJA and why you wanted to work there? [David] The most important thing about NAAJA and its sister organizations in other states is again is its history. NAAJA was set up in the early 1970s by three Aboriginal families, by Aboriginal women, recognizing the situation that existed before. And what existed before is that Aboriginal people had no legal representation. They will go from the police cells to the courts and to jail or whatever but there was no legal representation. And its history and its involvement come from the community. For me, that's always been the mainstay because it's an Aboriginal organisation created by Aboriginal people, and is necessary for Aboriginal people. It's unique organisation because it is has an understanding and a learning. But also understanding that there are two systems of law that operate in the Northern Territory; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. And recognizing that people live in this other world. And it's the interactions with the Balanda law – the white law that says Aboriginal people about how the legal system works, how courts function, how policing and incarceration all happens.

So NAAJA and Aboriginal Legal Aid and Services, and I should also say Aboriginal Women's Legal Services are so critical because of the history, the uniqueness of the work, and the knowledge that happens. But also importantly, I think fundamentally it's about the respect that people in both of those services to community. It's a community driven organisation, its respective communities. It's about making sure that it's not just the legal matter, it's about helping the person, its about supporting the person through the processes, its about education. It's about supports- looking at the vulnerabilities of people, the multidimensional sort of issues that Aboriginal people face. It's just not a legal problem.

[Jaynaya] More wholistic, hey!

[David] It's housing issues, it's health issues, it's justice issues. Each of them are competing on the person's needs and it's about actually looking about how to provide those supports in each of those sort of areas. But also, fundamentally it's about empowerment. What comes from that?

It means making time. It means being present in people, engaging with people, traveling hundreds and hundreds of kilometres to go to communities to be there, and being available. And also taking the time. Things such as ensuring that the use of interpreters for language speakers. Ensuring that you are doing things that are culturally appropriate in a way that you're engaged with people, how you engage in not just in communities, but also how you do that in court. And the way that you can be respectful in a court setting , as well as, in a community setting as well.

[Jaynaya] And I think, you know, Aboriginal Legal Services have really been doing that for a long time. I think other legal services are probably catching up now around that more wholistic, person-centred support.

[David] At the heart of these organization, it's really, it's aboriginal people and it's aboriginal staff who not just lawyers, but secretaries, field officers – who are virtually right now are doing custody notification services, are doing shift work who are working 24h/7 days a week. And it's because they're passionate and caring about not just for their family, but they're our own community. And it's that love and affection and care of Aboriginal staff is what has seen the continuation of these organizations over 50 years.

[Jaynaya] It's running on a lot of determination and hard-work.

[David] Yeah, exactly.

[Jaynaya] Could I ask you, so of our listeners might not have heard about custody notification, what that is?

[David] Custody notification is a key recommendation that came out of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. By recognising the vulnerabilities that Aboriginal people face whilst in police custody but in other forms of custody in relation to other places where there's places have confinement.

In a number of jurisdictions, this new service has come in and really, it is focused upon ensuring the health and safety and welfare of an Aboriginal person or child whilst they are in custody. This does mean access, communication, health and safety, checks, and communications. But I think most importantly, again, this is something that is led by Aboriginal staff. It's led by Aboriginal people in their communication or breaking through communication barriers. Equally, it's that understanding of the person and the trauma that a person can encounter whilst they're in custody. But ensuring that people are safe, connected to a person, whether by telephone, but also connected to family outside of that custody environment that someone is okay. But also, as I understand in the Northern Territory, it's also that ensuring when a person comes out of custody, its about referrals to support services that help people get into housing, or if there's health issues or getting someone to say back to community. So it shows again that it's Aboriginal perspectives that need to support others.

[Jaynaya] Yeah, so really it's one of the many things ALS is doing going beyond direct legal support. To most people, including me, that idea of representing someone in court is really scary! Public speaking, let alone that extraordinarily high stakes: How would you describe your approach to advocacy and how is this matured over time?

[David] It continues to be the greatest privilege in the world to act and represent an Aboriginal person. What really does come from that is ensuring the respect to the person, it really does mean putting in the time and effort, but particularly around engaging with the person. It means engaging in a way that you are respectful and the best description I've ever heard, was from an old field officer, who was talking about how a good advocate is someone who speaks from the heart and not the hip pocket. So if you're genuine, kind, caring, but most importantly, you're willing to listen and you're willing to listen from the person in obtaining instructions, obtaining their story, and ensuring that , what I call, a person's authentic voice is part of your legal representation. You are there to help someone to make those informed decisions, to perhaps, speak on their behalf, but it's not your voice that is speaking. Instead, you are speaking your instructions, through their voice and their knowledge, their perspective, their worldview.

There's a real necessity, I think, to be ethical advocate but ethical advocate on behalf of Aboriginal people, which is understanding the history that Aboriginal people have encountered, not just in systems of laws, but in daily life, - historically, in the past and presently and on an ongoing basis. So having that grounding in that understanding, being respectful, having the voice or the person, understanding the complexity of a person's situation when there's many competing demands on the person. Not just health issues, justice issues, housing issues, or the myriad of things that precious that people have and magnifying that 100 times whilst someone is in custody.

But most importantly, I think is being genuine, giving time and that connection to a person. There are ways that I always think that a lawyer or a person, or a caseworker or support worker is that you are striving for justice for this person. And you in the actions and the choices and the things that you do, you can make justice or you can make a better outcome or a more informed decision outcome, or an outcome that is less traumatic. You've got the conscious ability to do that.

[Jaynaya] What was your learning journey over time as an advocate? How did you change your approach to live out those value?

[David] Well, I think there are aspects that are lived experiences. I think there are also so much that you learn from it. As I said, I've talked about the generosity of Aboriginal people and that's the generosity of other Aboriginal advocates. That's lovely.

Aboriginal field offices have been working for many, many years before I started and, you know, Aunty Kate. You know, these most powerful women who are fantastic. It is that constant learning. I think what you learn is never assume that you know everything. And I think that your journey of knowledge and understanding what you know at two years, five years, 10 years, 20 years, etc. is so much more. But I think it is a continuous learning experience.

And that's what I think is so important, is the learning.

But equally, it's the mentoring, because then you can start sharing what you know or learning or at the very least sort of showing people the ways that you can do things very differently. But I think it's everyone's individual journey, but you can show ways of examples of doing things.

[Jaynaya] That leads nicely into my next question, which is about new lawyers, as a manager, NAAJA, you would've seen a lot of lawyers coming from down south, perhaps from this law school, arriving quite new to the environment and cultures of the Territory.

Imagining your back, introducing those lawyers to the Territory and its legal system. How would you sum up some of the key distinctive aspects of the criminal legal system in the Territory as opposed to other jurisdictions. And what new lawyers in this environment need to be thinking about as an effective advocate.

[David] Thank you for that because definitely have done for hundreds and hundreds of inductions about this very topic.

Generally, what I do is speak about, is probably the key things that are spoken so far about, which is the absolute importance of language and the use of interpreters. The importance of ensuring that a person is able to be informed and understand, participate, and make those decisions, so language is so important. Besides language is really about that continuation of communication.

There are also issues with Sign Language in disabilities. So, when we think of the concept or the existence of sign language, there is AUSLAN, which is the universal Australian Sign Language. When we think about sign languages in Aboriginal communities, there's over 500 around the nation, and they can even be to the level of a particular community, a particular family. So, there's so much more that you can learn and understand and do things differently.

So that's probably two immediate sort of things around communication.

The next issue we obviously then would be around niches I've spoken to about respect and being genuine in the work and the work that you do.

But what makes a really good advocate is really, I think there are three key things that make a good advocate. I see it as really is. It's a triangle!

[Jaynaya] Triangle of gold!

[David] There's a triangle of three key limbs. There's legal skill and proficiency. There's being culturally appropriate on the second. And sadly, it's being trauma informed.

Now, you can have skills in one area of those sort of things, or even into two areas. So, if you're trauma-informed and a proficient lawyer, but if you're making if you're not culturally proficient in your skills and culturally aware. Well, you don't want that to be a negative experience for Aboriginal person going through the system.

Or if you're legally proficient and culturally aware that there's a traumatizing and sort of process. So you really have to be sort of looking at all of these key aspects of the way that you represent a person and being an advocate.

So, it is crucial and critical to be trauma-informed, it is critical and crucial to be culturally appropriate, and obviously, as a lawyer, to be skilled as a legal advocate - you need to bring all of those skills.

But as I say, it's continuing journey of learning, it's a continuing journey of being. I don't think anyone can ever be proficient - I think it's that continuation to learn, to follow through with those issues and particularly in all aspects away that you advocate for a person. Whether that's in bringing it to bear in your client engagement, your instructions, the way you represent a person in court, how you deal with them post-sentencing. Importantly, the way that you debrief and do communicate with your client and family after that. So, it's that whole continuum of doing that, but also really really sort of focusing on that.

So, as I say, that comes through observation, it comes from life experience, it comes through listening and learning. These are sort of skills that come just by observing other people observed, observe those good advocates, observe and talk with your Aboriginal colleagues. Learn, as I learned, from great field officers and other people who already work in the justice sector and things of that nature. So these are the things I think really make a great advocate.

[Jaynaya] The other really distinctive aspect of NAAJA's service delivery is that you're covering a huge geographic area in many remote settings. Could you tell people who are sitting here from Melbourne about remote service delivery, how it plays out in some of the dynamics and the way the justice system works in those settings.

[David] That's the most, I think, fundamental and uniqueness of whether that's in the Northern Territory working, whether that's in places such as in Western Australia, with vast geographic distances, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia etc.

I mean, if you think about sometimes traveling to a remote court or what is called in the Northern Territory; a bush court. These are journey's and sometimes there are 800 km, 1,100 km, a day is travel, etc. So, there's these vast, geographic distances. There's things, things around also around seasonal things: wet season, dry season, the floods, as we all know has experienced just recently in the Northern Territory, the roads are impossible.

But most importantly, it's so important to be having that outreach and being in community. Because it's so important to be on the ground, so important to be there, to be available. Not just this sort of fly in, fly out sort of justice, but the time to be there. And I think also it's really important is that sort of adjusting to community life. So being present, being available, but being available when it's possible that a person can do that. That is the joy of, I think, Aboriginal legal aids and places such as NAAJA. It's the great, great experiences going to all the different communities. Each community is different. Each interaction, each occasion, each month is different.

What I have seen in many, many lawyers, their experiences of coming together, traveling 5 hours in a car, traveling in a light aircraft, *laughs* going to a community sort of thing. That's what people really remember. These are bonding experiences that people have.

I'm talking to many lawyers now here in Melbourne, still reminisce and thinking about those great things and that's what changed for those people. It's not just, I don't think it's that sort of thing about the common experience of dealing with stress and hardware and difficulties and remoteness and flies or whatever sort of thing. But it's, but it's that common experience and joy and being in an Aboriginal community.

99% of young lawyers who work in the Northern Territory are from down south. So, in many of these instances, this is the first time they've that met an Aboriginal person, it's the first occasion they've been to an Aboriginal community. So it's such a rich enriching thing. And these, these will be their experiences they'll remember for the most of their life. So that's incredibly important.

What I keep stressing is the generosity of Aboriginal people in communities . Whether footy oval, the basketball court or playing, or there's the community disco happening, or there's the sports day. I always stress: we have to be part of the community. That means, be there and do the court, but equally take the time to be in the community, go and watch the footy. Go to the best ever, you know when there's the discos or community bands, the cultural days and sports days. So I really hope people immerse themselves about.

What I think this does is that it becomes this wellspring that many young advocates will come along and this will be the experiences that they treasure. But it's so important that to get an understanding of Aboriginal people, and that's not a real understanding, it's a true understanding.

[Jaynaya] That doesn't happen in the courtroom.

[David] It doesn't happen in a courtroom. It doesn't happen on social media. It doesn't happen in the news. But they will have their own experiences and their own. It's more, you just wish more and more people in the justice system could see them. And that's why it's the best job in the world. It's the best if a job in the world to be a lawyer or support worker or a field officer, to be a lawyer in a remote Aboriginal community. [Jaynaya] You are the first Aboriginal person to become a judge in the Northern Territory. Recently appointed sworn in, in the middle of last year, what is the steepest learning curve stepping into this role?

[David] What I've realized is that your life journey has reached, everything that you've done, learned and experience, all comes to this focal point to engage and undertake this new role.

I think it's all the things that I've learned in working for Aboriginal people and with Aboriginal people has given me the skills to now embark on this new position in this new role. What I loved about it; it's helped me to change from being a defence lawyer to think differently, I loved that about thinking differently. I still loved the issues around communicating and connecting, but now I have the privilege of communicating and connecting with all persons that can be for all people who engage with the system.

So, I think it's the realization of what you've learned as a lawyer and what you've learned on behalf of Aboriginal people has given me the strength and the skills to engage with all people.

[Jaynaya] What are some of the really tangible ways that Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives can be incorporated into the courtroom?

[David] There are many, many aspects and I think it's now an opportunity. I think really it's one of firstly of being able to listen and hear and think and engage.

From my perspective and understanding, there are things that we need to be thinking about. The importance of Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal worldviews, and to me, it's many things, such as the importance of country and country within the justice system and the legal system.

Perhaps, it may be best illustrated by an example to demonstrate what I'm talking about. We think about many things. We think about young children, and we think about adolescents. We think about the stress of adolescence and the uncertainty that many young adolescents go through. And when you're talking and then expanding that around social disadvantage and problems that young people encounter when coming in contact with the justice system. The most nurturing, supportive and certainty in all Aboriginal people's lives, but also for young children is that connection to country. That is the absolute certainty that a person has.

So how do we think about country then in a legal perspective? And how can we think about country in a court perspective and in a justice perspective. Are there ways that we can start thinking about going back to country? That people are going back to country rather than house numbers, or lot numbers this or all these sorts of different sort of constructs. The nurture and support that country gives someone - I see this great sort of things that is not just rehabilitative around country. I think there's things that are nurturing and there are ways that

as the pathway out of incarceration is getting people back into community, getting people on country, healing, giving families the supports to be on country. They're the things that I would love to see more happening.

[Jaynaya] Thank you so much Woody, you make these really concept things feel so clear.

Practicing law in the settler legal system in the Northern Territory, like many other parts of Australia, in both encountering the practice of Aboriginal Law and spirituality, For people who aren't familiar, can you please share some examples of the ways that this multiplicity of legal systems and belief systems influence criminal practice.

[David] As I've sort of, sort of alluded to a little bit earlier, as a practitioner in the Northern Territory and in other states, about that intersection between two different worlds. And that's two different worlds of culture, language, laws, and also spirituality. And it's very important that when engaging with a person is understanding that being receptive for the reception of that information, where it's volunteered, obviously.

It's also understanding the differences that people have. Respecting around the spirituality and religiosity that people have, and around the importance of land, culture and dreaming. And also, how that can be so important and critical in the way that a person is represented. Equally, I think that's important to do that because you're engaging with a person, connecting with the person on a different level between client and lawyer or advocate. Or it is saying that you are more than just this snapshot on this particular day, this offense or this issue , you are more than just this little issue. You are this person or this person who is going to country. You are dispersed in his speech language. You have this person with a spiritual being. And this is your life and these other things. And they are equally relevant than just a legal matter. And to appreciate that, to understand that, to engage with that is so important. And it's also such the richness of the work that you do- those privileges and those insights that you're able to receive.

[Jaynaya] And finally, what advice would you have for young lawyers about maintaining their happiness, hope and their determination?

[David] I hope that this podcast has sort of shown a little bit of a thrill and the love of this type of work. And I can honestly say from the first time, the very last day (the very last day was very sad) it's such a uniqueness is such a pleasure to do this work: to meet Aboriginal people, to engage with Aboriginal people, to travel to the most beautiful parts of the country. But seeing people through the strength and the resilience, in sometimes, can be the worst of occasions. And sharing in seeing and experiencing through friends, through the sharing of knowledge from community, through the sharing of respect, by you, and showing them respect to others is really what has made sort of like a lifelong commitment.

I think everyone I encourage whether that's even the Territory. But I think it's the most unique legal job in this country. And if that's something that you're passionate about, making a real meaningful change for justice. If you want to make a meaningful change to how things are for Aboriginal people that is all within you. And that's within every single person. With every single person who does this. And every single person who's trauma-informed, culturally proficient and can make a meaningful difference for that individual, or that family, or that community, is how the justice system can transform to be a place of safety and healing for Aboriginal people throughout our country.

[Jaynaya] Woody, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to learn from you today.

[David] Oh, thank you. No it's been absolutely lovely.

[Jaynaya] That is all from Woody and I today. Thank you for listening to White Noise. More information is in the show notes on our website. We would love to hear your feedback on this episode. Thank you for listening.

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