

RAISING THE BAR

As one of only two practising indigenous female barristers in Queensland, Avelina Tarrago aims to set a precedent for more to follow

LEANNE EDMISTONE

When Avelina Tarrago was five, a teacher lined her up next to two indigenous classmates and explained her lighter skin meant she was half-caste, while the other children's darker skin revealed they were full-blooded Aborigines.

"My reaction was to say to that person, I'm not half of anything. I don't have a dotted line down the middle of my face. That's my earliest memory of having to stand up for myself."

Three decades on Tarrago laughs good-naturedly at the memory, sitting in her riverside office high above Brisbane's bustling CBD, but that steely strength still glints behind her soft voice and warm smile.

Identity and advocacy have proven to be vital threads in her life's tapestry. As the only child of Spanish father Ramon and Wangkamadla mother Isabel, Tarrago was raised to be strong, respectful, independent, and to embrace her cultural heritage.

"Identity was such a strong thing that my parents taught, to be proud of who I am. Even in the 1980s, it was unusual to have bi-racial families and they wanted to prepare me for that. They were like, you are you."

"You have two cultures that are very beautiful and strong, and you choose how you want to identify," she says. "I was always like, I'm not half of anything."

Similarly, Tarrago, 35, always had a strong sense of right and wrong, and wasn't afraid to – "respectfully" – make her opinion known. A career in advocacy is a natural fit.

Today, she is one of only two female indigenous barristers practising in Queensland – only the third in the state's history – and president of the Indigenous Lawyers Association of Queensland (ILAQ).

A third integral thread becomes evident. "Elders are placed in very high regard in our community, so leadership is something I've been taught from a very, very young age."



FAMILY LORE: Barrister Avelina Tarrago graduating from her law degree, with her mother Isabel Tarrago.
Main picture: Mark Cranitch

CULTURAL ROOTS

Growing up on acreage in rural Jimboomba, south of Brisbane, Tarrago had many strong role models in her extended family and community – but none more so than her parents. Ramon was just 21 when he fled civil war-ravaged Spain for Sydney, where the electrician and technician met his future wife, Isabel Hansen, at the telecommunications company where they worked.

Hansen was raised on Glenormiston Station, 130km from Boulia in central-west Queensland where her father Jack "Snapshot" Hansen was head stockman and mother Annie "Topsy" Hansen worked in the homestead and raised their four children. The family left the station when Isabel, the youngest, was about 16, settling in Mount Isa. Isabel left school in grade 10, working various jobs before finding herself in Sydney. She and Ramon were married in the Hurstville Reg-

istry Office and moved to Brisbane in the late 1970s. A year after Tarrago was born, Isabel enrolled at the University of Queensland to complete a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in anthropology. A long career in the public service culminated in her current position as cultural heritage director for the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.

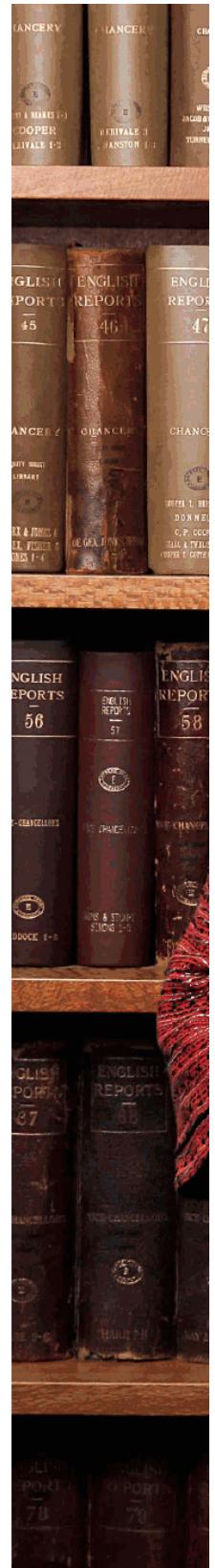
"I was always with my parents – Mum was really involved with my school, a very active parent, and Dad was always the adventure. I was a real tomboy. I was always in trees or running around the property; if I was indoors, it was in the shed with Dad," says Tarrago, who went to West End State School and Brisbane State High.

While her mother, aunts and grandparents shared their Aboriginal heritage and regularly took her back to Wangkamadla country, near Boulia in the central west, she was not really introduced to her Spanish heritage until she was 13. Ramon took his daughter on a three-month trip to meet his extended family, see his home town of Samper de Calanda in the country's north-east and immerse in the country's food, culture and history.

"It was amazing. Probably my favourite part was visiting the small village where he grew up. We spent a week there and I've never forgotten it. I go back as much as I can."

That first trip is a precious memory for Tarrago. Her eyes brighten with tears as she tells of losing her father, aged 56, barely two years later to an aggressive brain tumour. The delicate Catalan teddy bear bracelet and her parents' wedding rings on her left hand – she and husband Sinisa Mutavdzic, 36, have been married a year – keep him close. She and Mutavdzic share their Hamilton home with his 11-year-old daughter, from his first marriage.

Tarrago speaks Spanish as well as traditional languages Yaowada, Anderkerinbinah and Wangka yu guru, counts seafood paella and Mount Isa's famous cabbage stew with rice as her signature dishes, and is extremely close to





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ADVOCATES FOR CHANGE



Australia's first Aboriginal/Torres Strait Island law graduate was Mununjali-Wakka Wakka man and Wallaby player, Mullenjaiwakka (formerly known as Lloyd McDermott) in 1972. The University of Queensland graduate and Queensland Greats Award recipient - who died in April 2019, aged 79, was also the country's first Aboriginal barrister.



In 2018, Judge Nathan Jarro was sworn in as Queensland's first Indigenous judge.



In 2018, Lincoln Crowley QC was the first Indigenous lawyer appointed a Queen's Counsel in Queensland, and only the second Indigenous silk in Australia.

BARRISTERS

Avelina Tarrago and Melia Benn are the only two Indigenous women practising at the Queensland Bar. Eight Indigenous male barristers are practising in Queensland. There are an estimated 20 Indigenous barristers practising nationally.

SOLICITORS

As at October 2016, 66 or

0.6%

of Queensland's 10,992 solicitors (51.2% male, 48.8% female) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.



SOMEONE TO BELIEVE IN

Cairns barrister Melia Benn is a big believer in the adage, "You can't be what you can't see". That's why she spent an hour speaking to Doornadge State School students during a recent work visit to the remote north-western Queensland town.

Benn - one of only two women among Queensland's 10 indigenous barristers - took her wig, which belonged to the State's first indigenous Judge Nathan Jarro before he gifted it to her, for show'n'tell.

"They'd never met an Aboriginal barrister so they couldn't imagine it," says Benn, 31. "I spoke to them about how, if they keep coming to school, they could set an example for their cousins and their family, that they could help their people - because there's just so many ways we can help, not just with Native Title, not just with crime."

Benn is a Mamu and Gungandji woman. Her paternal great-grandmother Tottie Joinbee, originally from the Cardwell-Ingham area, and paternal great-grandfather John (Jack) Joinbee, of Buddabadoo, met and married at the Yarrabah mission before moving to Cairns, 60km to the north-west where Benn grew up. After school, she worked for three years in retail while looking after younger brother Marc, now 22, a youth worker, and sister Chrissie, 28, a childcare worker, while mum Fiona studied nursing by day and worked nights.

Benn started an Arts degree at James Cook University, aged 20, switching to a law degree after one semester. She worked in property law before becoming a senior lawyer with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and later joining the Office of the State Coroner.

With the support of the Mullenjaiwakka Trust - named in honour of Australia's first indigenous barrister Mullenjaiwakka (formerly known as Lloyd McDermott) - Benn completed the six-week intensive course and was called to the Queensland Bar on October 10, 2018. She moved to private practice, establishing chambers in Cairns and Brisbane, in January this year. ■

both sides of her family. She last visited Spain in 2014 but rings or messages her cousins weekly, and goes back to Mount Isa and Wangkamadla country at least once a year. Tarrago recently joined the board of conservation non-profit Bush Heritage, which owns Cravens Peak and Ethabuka reserves in the area, working to preserve cultural heritage. She is also a member of the Wangkamadla Aboriginal Corporation and the Queensland Great Artesian Basin Advisory Council.

"That's definitely been the hardest point in my life, losing (Dad) and my mum having to be so strong. From his passing I knew I had to be strong going through that journey (of embracing culture) myself, and that's the lesson I've learnt from that - to help with my stepdaughter, who is Aboriginal and my husband (her father) is Serbian, to make sure she's strong in both her cultures."

CAREER COMMUNITY

The lifelong community connections built by mum Isabel, 67, and the role models she brought into her daughter's life - like Bidjara and Birri-Gubba Juru author, historian and activist Jackie Huggins AM - is the example Tarrago follows through her work in the ILAQ. She wants other young people to benefit from the support, role models and networks which have helped her.

"Mum is a formidable person and a quiet achiever, who is always building foundations in the background for other people. She's very well respected in the community and a lot of my work ethic comes from her," says Tarrago, now serving a second term as ILAQ president as well as on other state and national legal committees.

Cousin Nathan Jarro - the Ghangulu and Bidjara lawyer last year named Queensland's first indigenous judge - inspired her to channel her natural advocacy into a Bachelor of Laws at the Queensland University of Technology and, in 2007, sponsored her admission to the Supreme Court of Brisbane as a solicitor. A cadet-

ship with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in her first year of study led to a career of more than 10 years there, including secondments to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) and other departments. She later joined the Office of the Health Ombudsman and the Office of the State Coroner. Tarrago was called to the Queensland Bar in 2017 and entered private practice earlier this year, joining North Quarter Lane Chambers, working across corporate, criminal and coronial law, as well as coronial investigations.

"The very first (female indigenous) barrister, at the private bar, in Queensland was Ruth Link (who now works for Ernst & Young). Torres Strait Islander woman Susan Hamilton worked for Legal Aid and Community Legal Centres, but unfortunately she passed away. So there's not really been many women to pave the way for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people coming through (law) - which is not to say we don't get great support from our men, because there are 10 (indigenous barristers) all up. There's certain barriers and inequalities Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face that make it a lot more difficult in the profession - (lack of) support mechanisms, financial, employment opportunities and not having connections in the profession," she says.

"One of the objectives is to build a legal community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and lawyers, to progress those students through their careers and have those mentoring relationships, but also to assist the profession to be more culturally inclusive." She enjoys the support of fellow indigenous female barrister Melia Benn (see sidebar). "I think most Aboriginal people are born advocates, so it's not unusual that I've come into law, because we've always had to fight for our rights, unfortunately. There's just different ways to advocate for things and my way is to bring people into the process, rather than putting people off." ■

CULTURAL MIX:

(Clockwise from left) Avelina Tarrago with husband Sinisa Mutavdzic; her grandparents Annie "Topsy" Hansen and Jack "Snapshot" Hansen in Mount Isa in the early 1970s; with her mother Isabel and father Ramon Tarrago at the 1997 NAIDOC Ball in Brisbane.

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