

Entry type: Organisation

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Aboriginal Legal Service

(1970 -)

Born 1 October, 1970

Summary

The Aboriginal Legal Service has its origins in police harassment of Aborigines living in the Sydney suburb of Redfern in the late 1960s. Reacting against what was perceived as a deliberate campaign of victimisation and intimidation, a group of young activists including Paul Coe, Isobel Coe, Gary Williams, Gary Foley and Tony Coorey began a surveillance operation against the local police force. By systematically documenting police behaviour towards the local Aboriginal community, the group gathered enough evidence to persuade Hal Wootten, then Dean of Law at the University of New South Wales, to assist them in setting up the Aboriginal Legal Service of New South Wales. The ALS was formally established in October 1970.

The New South Wales ALS served as an example for indigenous Australians in other States and Territories. The South Australian Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement was established in November 1971. In Victoria, activists from the Aborigines' Advancement League helped to establish the Victorian Legal Service in June 1972 with assistance from law academics at Monash University. This replaced the ad hoc representation that the Aborigines' Advancement League had often arranged for local Aboriginal people appearing before court. Queensland and Western Australia also established voluntary services in 1972, and there was an Aboriginal Legal Service in every State and Territory by 1974.

Although these legal services have worked closely with sympathetic professionals of non-Aboriginal descent, they were founded upon the principle of Indigenous self-determination and continue to uphold this principle as part of a continuing resistance to dispossession.

Published resources

Resource Section

Aboriginal Legal Service, Taffe, Susan,

http://www.nma.gov.au/indigenous/organisations/pagination/aboriginal_legal_service

A Short History of the ALS,

<http://www.alsnswact.org.au/pages/history>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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