I was fortunate enough to spend five weeks over July and August volunteering at the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) in Darwin as part of the Aurora Native Title Internship Program. NAAJA is the largest legal aid service in the Northern Territory, providing assistance for Indigenous Australians in both civil and criminal matters. NAAJA also plays an active role in Indigenous policy formation and community legal education, and it was in their Law and Justice Projects section that I spent my internship.

The statistics on Indigenous over-representation within Australia’s justice system are simply shocking, and it is the criminal and civil sections of NAAJA that work at the frontline. However, the true scale and complexity of Indigenous disadvantage in the Northern Territory is only really made evident in the broad research and advocacy work of the Law and Justice Projects section. During my internship, I was involved in a number of interesting matters, including summarising recent research reports and relating them to NAAJA’s work, facilitating community legal education sessions, drafting media releases, compiling statistics, helping with submissions and attending meetings (such as with Australia’s Race Commissioner). A true highlight was joining the team on a community visit to the Tiwi Islands, where over the course of a few days we met and worked with important stakeholders in the community, including the police, elders, women’s safe house, Aboriginal Interpreter Service and community welfare. This exposure at both a theoretical and practical level to different aspects of Indigenous disadvantage fostered a deeper understanding of the difficulties facing many Indigenous communities, as well as the economic, social and legal obstacles to reform.

Most surprisingly, I gained a greater appreciation for the meaning of justice - a term so frequently mentioned in law school, but so poorly understood. And while I frequently found my own views on society and the law challenged, at times frustratingly so, my understanding of the law is all the stronger for it.

Darwin is a wonderful place to spend your internship, especially during the ‘dry’ [winter] months. The weather during July and August is simply perfect and Darwin comes alive with a variety of public holidays, shows and festivals (making the nickname ‘Dazzle-town’ quite appropriate). Darwin is also only a short drive from some of the most spectacular scenery in Australia, and thus you’ll easily find yourself spending weekends at Litchfield or Kakadu National Parks and Katherine Gorge.

I cannot recommend an Aurora internship at NAAJA highly enough, as my placement exceeded all expectations. In addition to the stimulating and varied work, NAAJA is also a fantastic work environment. Everyone is friendly and NAAJA generally takes a number of interns, which means they are both used to accommodating interns plus there will always be some other Darwin-newbie to explore the town with. NAAJA also organised some very interesting cross-cultural training sessions while I was there. Most importantly, I was continually impressed that the lawyers at NAAJA took an interest in the interns, taking the time to discuss policies and issues with us, and even seeking our opinions. At the end of the day, you really feel like you are contributing to the work that NAAJA does.

By way of conclusion, it is huge testament to NAAJA (and Aurora) that a number of their interns return for a second internship, or even take up employment at NAAJA. The Territory really is ‘your oyster’ at NAAJA, and all I can say is APPLY NOW for the most intense and rewarding legal learning experience of your degree!  Aurora runs summer and winter placements, so visit <http://www.auroraproject.com.au/> for more information. Applications re open in March and August each year.