



Women's courage inspires Townsville lawyer's fight against domestic violence

ABC North Qld Nathalie Fernbach

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PHOTO: North Queensland Women's Legal Service supervising solicitor Sharell O'Brien. (ABC North Queensland: Nathalie Fernbach)

Townsville lawyer Sharell O'Brien says it is the courage of the women she helps that inspires her fight against domestic violence.

Ms O'Brien is the supervising solicitor at the North Queensland Women's Legal Service (NQWLS) which assists women from Sarina to Cape York with free legal advice and referrals.

"It takes a lot for people to seek help, and them coming to us and seeking that assistance shows a lot of courage," Ms O'Brien said.

"Women are losing their lives, children are losing their lives from something that is preventable ... so that is why I am passionate about it," she said.

Since joining the service three years ago Ms O'Brien has introduced several online tools to assist women in more remote parts of the state get the legal advice they need.

She said her Ask Nola website and the distribution of laptops equipped with Skype to remote outreach locations have been very effective.

"Being able to use technology to get out to the rural, regional, remote areas and provide legal advice ... helps women who wouldn't necessarily have found that information anywhere else," Ms O'Brien said.

MAP: Townsville 4810

So far today police in Australia would have dealt with on average
503 domestic violence matters

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PHOTO: The Ask Nola website and Skype sessions have enabled the legal service to offer assistance to women in remote parts of the state. (ABC North Queensland: Nathalie Fernbach)

Australia's domestic violence epidemic

The NQWLS provides more than 6,000 legal services each year and has seen a 60 per cent increase in demand in the last year.

Ms O'Brien said Australia was experiencing an "epidemic" of domestic violence at the moment and Cairns and Townsville are two of Queensland's domestic violence hotspots.

Ms O'Brien said the Australian culture of ignoring domestic violence or thinking it is none of your business had to change.

"Teaching the younger generation about healthy relationships is important and teaching everyone what is domestic violence and that help is out there is really important," she said.

Ms O'Brien said her work could be very confronting, but it was satisfying to be able to help women and children in need.

"Every day we see someone that is experiencing domestic and family violence and we are able to give them legal help or referral information ... and that allows us to make their lives a little easier, their children's lives a little easier," Ms O'Brien said.

"Each day you do have little wins."



PHOTO: Sharell O'Brien hopes her recent award nomination keeps the issue of domestic violence in the spotlight. (ABC North Queensland: Nathalie Fernbach)

Award nomination gives voice to issue

Ms O'Brien was recently nominated for the 2017 Queensland Young Australian of the Year award.

While she didn't win the award, Ms O'Brien hopes interest in the awards may keep domestic violence and the services available in the spotlight.

"It can show the community that you can actually try and make a difference and that trying to raise awareness around domestic and family violence is important," she said.

Where to go for help

If you are experiencing family and domestic violence or would like further information:

- Call 1800 RESPECT
- Go online humanservices.gov.au/enough
- Contact the NQWLS on 47772 5400
- Or contact the Women's Centre, Townsville on 4775 7555.

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