



# Honours for those who put others before self

## Working towards justice for all

**INDIGENOUS JUSTICE**  
 By **ALEX SINNOTT**

A FAIR go for indigenous people involved in the justice system has been the driving force for Wayne Bell over the past two decades.

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) client service officer has been recognised for his outstanding work assisting the region's indigenous community with the Order of Australia Medal (OAM).

Mr Bell told *The Standard* he has seen a transformation of the legal system's approach towards indigenous Australians during his 18 years with VALS thanks to a changing perspective within courts, Victoria Police and the south-west aboriginal community itself.

"There's still a long road ahead," the 56-year-old said.

"What a lot of people don't realise is that a young Aboriginal bloke is 17 to 18 times more likely to come into contact with the justice system than a non-Aboriginal, so we can work towards reducing (those statistics) but there's no easy answers."

Mr Bell first worked at the Gorae and Dartmoor sawmills as a young man before gaining a



Wayne Bell: it's all about a fair go.

carpentry apprenticeship in the early 1980s. He entered the field of legal advocacy with his brother Mick, later taking over the role full-time after his sibling was appointed as ATSI councillor for the Tumbukka region.

The Heywood man's role with VALS includes liaising with courts, police and corrections as well as organising solicitors and running an expert eye over all the paperwork involved.

"Courts and the legal field can be pretty complex for a 17 or 18-year-old that's ended up in court," Mr Bell said.

"VALS and the Indigenous Issues Unit have really improved

things since I started working in this area nearly 20 years ago.

"I remember one instance when an old Aboriginal bloke fronted up to the magistrate with a packed suitcase because he thought there was no hope, that he'd just end up being thrown in jail.

"Now things are a lot less daunting, there's more emphasis on giving everyone a fair go."

Along with his VALS role, Mr Bell has been Palawarra Aboriginal Community Justice Panel chairman and the founder of the region's Koori Cultural Training group. He is also a 'Right Break' program facilitator for Victoria Police and was one of the founding members of the South West Indigenous Cricket Association.

"My initial reaction was to refuse (to accept the OAM) because I'm being paid to do a job," Mr Bell said.

"I suppose the other reason was that I didn't want to accept something that was tied to the misfortune of Aboriginal people but I was convinced by a fair few people that the award might help to promote the work VALS do. I just see myself as a cog in a very big wheel."

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