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## The indigenous rights champion

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From humble beginnings growing up in public housing, Professor Megan Davis became the first Australian Indigenous person to be elected to a UN body. She has dedicated her life to improving the rights of indigenous communities globally.

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Not many people would admit to having pictures of the United Nations General Assembly on their wall as teenagers.

But for international lawyer and human rights expert Professor Megan Davis, her youthful obsession grew

into a career devoted to improving the rights of indigenous communities worldwide.

“I was obsessed with the General Assembly,” Davis says.

“I cut out a little picture of Yasser Arafat speaking at the General Assembly and put it on my wall...actually I still have it!”

Her appetite for the law and foreign policy was nourished by her mother, who used her single-parent pension income to buy as many secondhand books as possible for her five children.

When 12-year-old Megan was ill at home one day, her mother brought her a book by former Australian Governor General, Sir John Kerr.

“It was called *Matters for Judgement*. I read that book cover to cover and became fascinated with the double dissolution, constitutional reform and Australian politics,” Davis says.

“The other thing was, Mum had a subscription to American *TIME* magazine which would come every week. We’d all fight over it and read it religiously.”

Her fighting spirit and passion for law has seen her become one of the world’s most respected international law experts.

## From Eagleby to Geneva

After finishing high school, Davis started an arts and law degree at the University of Queensland (UQ). As a Cobble Cobble Aboriginal woman from the Barrungam nation in southwest Queensland, she was particularly passionate about improving indigenous rights.

Alongside studying, she was working for a Native Title advocacy body when she was encouraged to apply for an internship at the United Nations (UN) in Geneva.

“There were thousands of applicants and only four positions,” Davis says.

She won a spot and spent eight months in Geneva absorbing intensive UN human rights training, which proved invaluable for her future UN roles.

After the internship, she returned to Australia to be admitted to the Bar and to complete a Masters and PhD at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra.

At the same time, she was flying between Australia and Geneva for UN projects, including the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

“That was really important because not everybody gets to participate in standard setting at the UN,” Davis says.

“It’s a unique activity and to get that sort of insight into the UN and diplomacy at such a young age was really important.”

## Leading indigenous progress

When the Gilbert +Tobin Centre of Public Law opened at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in 2001, Davis was one of the first legal practitioners hired.

She's now Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at UNSW, where she's been the leading constitutional lawyer working on indigenous constitutional reform since 2011.

It was a momentous year. After being nominated by the Australian Government and elected in a merit-based vote, she became the first Australian Indigenous person to be elected to a UN body.

"It was such an honour," Davis says.

Until 2016, she was the Chair and an expert member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII).

"It's the body set up under the Commissions section of the UN Charter. So our job was to ensure the UN coordinates sufficiently on indigenous matters and we provided advice to the UN General Assembly."

As Rapporteur of a number of UN Expert Group Meetings (EGM) in 2012, she led the work on an Optional Protocol to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the standard she'd earlier helped draft), as well as indigenous youth and combating violence against indigenous women and girls.

"We were the first UN body to conduct a study into Article 22 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – an important article that sets up an obligation for states to protect women and children from violence," Davis explains.

"I was the author of that report and I was very critical of the UN dragging their feet in dealing with issues of violence against indigenous women.

"As a consequence of that, we saw more UN Women projects related to violence."

During her six years in that role, Dr Davis also worked on improving maternal health in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the recognition of indigenous women in constitutional frameworks, and serious human rights violations, including the disappearance of indigenous students in Mexico, among other things.

## **Constitutional reform**

In 2017, Davis was elected by the UN Human Rights Council to the UN's Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As one of just seven independent experts on the body, she's now providing advice directly to the Human Rights Council.

"What I am really passionate about is how states are implementing the Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples," she says.

"In particular I'm really fascinated with trying to adopt alternative strategies to compel or persuade states to do things better and differently."

She's also involved in a vast array of other roles, including Australian constitutional reform.

After being appointed by the Prime Minister to the Referendum Council in 2015, Davis designed a constitutional dialogue process and spent 18 months travelling Australia, listening to the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on constitutional recognition.

The process culminated in Davis delivering the Statement from the Heart on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at Uluru in Central Australia in May 2017.

“Just to be able to deliver that on behalf of all those incredible Aboriginal people who had participated in that process was such a privilege,” Davis says.

From a 12-year-old obsessed with the UN General Assembly to making significant global change in the way indigenous communities worldwide live, Davis has already achieved so much. She admits, however, there is more work to be done.

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