

Winner of NZ's 5 day mediation workshop scholarship uses ADR skills to assist clients

Lee Belk is a lawyer and legal educator in the Maori Legal Services team at the Waitemata Community Law Centre. She is passionate about helping people from her community to deal with a range of legal issues, from parking fines to family disputes. She finds her work extremely rewarding, especially when she can see the effects immediately, “it makes a big difference for people to understand their rights and see where they’re going”. Lee also says that her work can be very difficult, especially in emotional situations where there is little to be done from a legal perspective.

Lee completed the LEADR & IAMA five day mediation workshop in Auckland last November, and says it was a very powerful experience, “it really made me think about the kind of lawyer I want to be”. The workshop made her think differently about the way she engages with other lawyers, especially those who are focused on traditional litigation techniques. Since completing the training, Lee has been thinking more about alternative ways of solving problems for her clients.

The Waitemata Community Law Centre already offers a mediation service to their clients, and Lee has been able to observe an experienced senior lawyer in action. She is planning to complete the LEADR & IAMA accreditation assessment in April, and will soon start co-mediating at the centre. She and her colleagues are focused on creating a forum that is more appropriate for Maori and Pacific communities.

Lee isn't one to sit still for long. She is studying a Master of Laws, focusing on indigenous and human rights, with plans to travel to New York in May to complete a semester at Columbia University. She also mentors students through the Auckland law school, and facilitates volunteers at the law centre. If that wasn't enough, Lee is also training for a triathlon!

In the long term, Lee wants to build a solid skill base in law and mediation in order to provide those services in a different context. She remains connected to Northland and the King country, where her parents grew up, and sees that there is a real need in these rural communities for better access to legal assistance.