

AIJA Indigenous Youth Justice Conference

Panellist

Day 2 – Session 7: Youth Koori Courts



His Honour Judge Heemi Taumaunu Chief District Court Judge, New Zealand

His Honour Judge Heemi Taumaunu is the Chief District Court Judge and was appointed in September 2019.

Born in Gisborne, he is the first Māori to be appointed Chief District Court Judge and is a fluent te reo Māori speaker. His tribal affiliations are Ngāti Pōrou and its sub-tribe

Ngāti Konohi, and Ngāi Tahu.

He was appointed to the District Court bench in January 2004 and, at a special sitting of the court at Whāngāra Marae in Gisborne for his swearing in, he became the first District Court Judge to swear the oaths of office and allegiance in both English and te reo.

Judge Taumaunu was first assigned to Whāngārei District Court before becoming a resident Judge at Waitakere District Court. From 2014 he was based at the Auckland District Court. His early childhood was spent in Tolaga Bay on the East Coast, before his family moved to the South Island. Judge Taumaunu spent his primary and high school years in Christchurch. On leaving Riccarton High School at 16, he joined the New Zealand Army as a Webb Class Regular Force Cadet and served as a Regular Force soldier for a year and a non-commissioned officer in the Royal New Zealand Signals Corp for a further four years.

He then took up fulltime law studies at Victoria University of Wellington, gaining entry to the law faculty under the first year of a Māori quota system. He graduated with a Bachelor of Laws in 1993, and during his studies was awarded the Quentin Baxter Memorial Scholarship and the Ngā Rangatahi Toa Scholarship. He was the first person from Ngāti Konohi to gain a law degree and to practise as a barrister and solicitor.

After a period as solicitor with the Immigration Service in Wellington, he returned to Gisborne to practise law in 1994. In his 10 years as a barrister, he gained substantial



experience in jury trials, as a Youth Advocate in the Youth Court, and as a lawyer for child and counsel to assist in the Family Court.

Judge Taumaunu is regarded as a pioneer of Ngā Kōti Rangatahi o Aotearoa, the Rangatahi Courts, having developed the first Rangatahi Court in Gisborne in 2008. In 2017 he received the prestigious Veillard-Cybulski Award, an international tribute recognising innovative work with children and families in difficulty, through the Rangatahi Courts initiative. The award judges praised Judge Taumaunu's leadership skills in devising an inclusive system where tamariki Māori learn who they are and where they have come from so they can change behaviour and realise their potential.

As National Liaison Judge for Rangatahi Courts, he has encouraged fellow judges to set up other marae-based youth courts and there are now at least 12 judges who preside at Rangatahi Courts at 15 marae around the country.

Judge Taumaunu has presided at Rangatahi Courts at Orākei in Auckland, Hoani Waititi in Waitakere and Ōtautahi in Christchurch as well as Te Poho-o-Rāwiri in Gisborne. His vision is widely regarded for helping to embed the Rangatahi Courts in the New Zealand criminal justice system, encouraging a wider appreciation for the value of culturally responsive justice.

He has been the tangata whenua representative on the Chief Judge's Advisory Group and has chaired the Kaupapa Māori Advisory Group. In these roles he has been a driving force in encouraging the District Court to embrace tikanga as a way to enhance Māori engagement and confidence in the court.

Judge Taumaunu has also served as a Judge of the Court Martial of New Zealand since 2012. In February 2018, he was appointed Deputy Judge Advocate General and Deputy Chief Judge of the Court Martial of New Zealand.

Married with three adult children, Judge Taumaunu is from a high achieving sporting family. In his spare time he enjoys the outdoors and spending time with family.

