

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0223

Bielski, Joan

(1923 - 2012)

Born 27 November, 1923, Narrabri New South Wales Australia

Died 17 August, 2012, Wollstonecraft New South Wales

Occupation Activist, Teacher

Summary

Joan Bielski was a long time activist for equality for women in employment, education and public life. A founding member of the Council for Civil Liberties, she was also a foundation member of Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) in 1972 and continued her active involvement throughout her life.

In 1988 she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to women and girls education. In 2004 she was awarded the Order of Australia for her services to women in politics and public life.

Joan Bielski was a long time supporter of the National Foundation for Australian Women.

Details

Born in Narrabri, New South Wales (NSW), in 1923, Joan Margaret Ward was the daughter of a banker (Francis Ward) and a banker turned housewife (Doris (nee Bull)). The family later moved to Armidale and Joan attended St Patrick's Convent Armidale, then St Mary's Convent, Gunnedah, where she completed her intermediate certificate.

After leaving school without gaining her leaving certificate, she worked in a newsprint factory and in clerical jobs until she joined the RAAF at 18, where she served as a telegraphist in communications from 1942 to 1945. Assisted by the ex-servicemen rehabilitation scheme after the war, she completed her matriculation at Sydney Technical College. She then moved on to tertiary study in 1947. She graduated BA. Dip.Ed. New England University College, University of Sydney in 1951.

Joan became an advocate in migrant welfare and joined the Immigration Reform Group in the 1950s. Her voluntary work for migrants consisted of providing translation, information and support services. In 1953, she married Jerzy (George) Stefan Bielski, a socialist immigrant from Poland and survivor of Auschwitz Concentration Camp. They supported each other in all their political and social activities.

Joan was a foundation member of Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 and reforms for women in relation to child care, employment, poverty, divorce law, inheritance taxes and education. She was also a founding member of Women In Education, a lobby of women educators lobbying for equal opportunity for girls and women in education in the years 1974-1990 approx.

Joan was a teacher (1951-1974) and Research Officer, *Royal Commission on Human Relationships* (1975-76) and Officer in Charge, Social Development Unit, NSW Ministry of Education 1977-84. The latter's role was to advise the then NSW Government, the universities, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, schools and community organisations on discrimination and sexism issues in education at all levels, multicultural education and anti-discrimination legislation as it applied to education and employment in education..

Joan worked to inform the education sector about the extant research in the social sciences that pointed to the need for reform and the means of reform in the education of girls, especially in Mathematics, Science, Home Science and Technical Education. She was instrumental in having the NSW system rethink its presentation of Maths and science to girls and to have the TAFE system restructure and broaden the scope of studies such as Secretarial Studies, apprenticeship training for girls and to have TAFE introduce re-entry education and training programs for adult women. The latter programs continue to this day.

Joan was the author of numerous conference and position papers on various aspects of women and girls education, such as career

education, apprenticeships, the effect of technology change, women and educational management, equality in early childhood education of boys and girls. She was instrumental in having the Government of the day schedule the NSW universities under the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act some years before the Sex Discrimination Act was passed to cover all universities.

Many of her initiatives provided stimulus and/or models for national action in the area of women and girls education. Her expertise in the area of discrimination, equal opportunity and affirmative action in education was sought after by the Western Australian (WA) Government, private educational institutions in various states and by universities. She was a member of the Councils of both University of New England (UNE) and Macquarie University for many years in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Her book, *Women Engineers*, is an account of 20 practicing Australian women engineers' motivation, education, training and their working experience and an analysis of the implication of these for educators and employers.

After retirement from paid employment Joan devoted her energies to promoting women's welfare and, as founding member and Honorary Secretary, of Women Into Politics. Since 1992, she has worked with women to explore the issues which limit women's participation in politics and to increase the numbers of women in our parliaments and in Australian public life.

As well as organising various conferences, seminars, consultations and fund raising Annual dinners, Joan contributed to conferences, delivering numerous papers on issues relevant to discrimination against women in politics and equal political representation.

Recent speaking engagements include:

The Women's Constitutional Convention, January 1998. Topic: What women should expect from a Bill of Rights.

The National Party's Women's Council, September 2002, on the rationale for equal representation and outlining necessary political party reforms.

The Organisation of Hellenic & Hellenic-Cypriot Women of Australia, National Conference, January, 2001. Topic: Australian women's movement as part of a world movement, its history of gaining the vote, lobbying and activism and the move to equal representation.

Australian Federation of University Women Hunter Conference, 15 September 2001. Topic: The Women's Charter for Political Reform.

Australian Local Government Women's Association Australia. National Conference, Canberra, 20th October 2001. Topic: The Women's Charter for Political Reform

Bielski had returned from a forum on women and ageing organised by the Older Women's Network and was writing a missive on a local development when she collapsed with a massive stroke. She passed away on August 17, 2012. According to friend and fellow traveller in WEL and the NSW Women and Education Group, Jozefa Sobski, 'Her wit and good humour, her infectious and rousing laughter, her generosity with friends, her alertness to injustice, her energetic pursuit of political indolence and indifference to inequality or unfairness, will be remembered by all who knew her.'

Published resources

Resource Section

Australian Women's Honour Roll B, CAPOW,
<http://www.capow.org.au/Honourroll/honourroll-b.htm>

Law, Kerwin, Hollie and Rubenstein, Kim, 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0624b.htm>

Book

Coming to the Party?, Bielski, Joan, 1994

Women Engineers, Bielski, Joan, 1988

A Women's Charter for Political Reform 2001. A charter for political equality for women and for good government for all Australian citizens, Bielski, Joan, 2001

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Article

Women's advocate smashed educational barriers, Sobski, Jozefa, 2012,
<http://www.smh.com.au/national/obituaries/womens-advocate-smashed-educational-barriers-20120912-25sfx.html#ixzz26IXJyVf>

Site Exhibition

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection

[Women's Redress Press - book files, 1976-1996, including correspondence, contracts, readers' reports, reviews and photographs](#)

State Library of New South Wales

[Judith Steanes - interview with Joan Bielski of the Women's Electoral Lobby, 2000](#)

[Joan Bielski papers, 1968-2004](#)

Author Details

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