

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1934

Cham, Elizabeth

(1948 -)

Born 25 December, 1948, Germany

Occupation Director, Philanthropist, Researcher

Summary

Elizabeth Cham worked with Philanthropy Australia for ten years, officially retiring as National Director in 2006. She was a Fellow at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies in Melbourne where she researched the early history of philanthropy in Australia.

In 2017, Cham completed a PhD undertaken at the University of Technology in Sydney (UTS) on Australian grant-making philanthropic foundations that are administered by trustee companies. Dr Cham is an Associate Fellow of the UTS Business School.

Cham was active in the establishment of the National Roundtable of Non-Profit Organisations, an independent, non-partisan group representing more than 20,000 NFP organisations across Australia, to facilitate consideration of regulatory, taxation and sustainable financing issues and coordinate engagement with the Australian community and public policy processes.

Details

Born in a displaced persons camp in Germany on Christmas Day, 1948, Elizabeth Cham was the daughter of Polish prisoners of war. Her parents, Jozef and Aniela, were shipped to Germany following the 1939 invasion of Poland. While working on a German farm, her father was sent to the infamous Buchenwald as punishment for listening to BBC radio. He remained there for five years. Finally, in September 1950, the family were able to migrate to Australia. Initially dispatched to Bonegilla in Victoria's north-eastern region, the Cham family moved to Ballarat where Jozef was posted at the White Swan Reservoir for two years, as a condition of entry to Australia. Eventually the family built a home at Ballarat where Jozef took on work at the paper mills.

Elizabeth was educated at Loreto College. Later, a temporary position at the University of Melbourne's Department of the History and Philosophy of Science encouraged Elizabeth to consider taking on academic studies herself. Her colleagues were supportive, and she enrolled in a political science degree. It would be the first of several tertiary qualifications.

On graduation, Elizabeth quickly found work as personal assistant to the Prime Minister's principal private secretary. She worked for Gough Whitlam until 1977, well after his dismissal. Imbued now with a thorough understanding of the machinations of government, her next post was research assistant to Professor Manning Clark. She began studying for a Masters degree in the late 1980s, supporting herself in part with paid work for the Felton Bequest and the Buckland Foundation – prominent benevolent trusts still in operation today. By 1996, she had been offered the position of National Director for Philanthropy Australia (established by the Potter and Myer Foundations in 1975). A poorly resourced secretariat at the time, the organisation has grown at the astonishing rate of 17 per cent per annum and now serves as the national membership body for grant-making foundations and trusts.

Elizabeth's contribution to philanthropy and the non-profit sector cannot be underestimated. Since her inception as Director, she has worked to raise the public profile of philanthropy and its contribution to Australian lives, and to change a persistent cultural attitude which dismisses philanthropy as self-aggrandisement or a tax dodge for the very wealthy. More tangible change she has brought about by way of the tax law, which until the time of her appointment was a disincentive to large-scale giving. By initiating meetings with the Prime Minister, Elizabeth sowed the seeds for the creation of the Prime Minister's Business Community Partnership. Support from this roundtable led to the creation of new laws around the establishment of foundations which saw an estimated extra \$1 billion dollars in philanthropy by 2011.

Elizabeth Cham married in 1987. She is the parent of three children and mother of one, and lives in Melbourne.

Published resources

Thesis

In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Site Exhibition

In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html>

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

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