

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5436

Dick, Julie Maree

(1952 -)

Nationality Australian

Born 1 January, 1952, Brisbane Queensland Australia

Occupation Barrister, Judge, Lawyer, Senior Counsel, Solicitor

Summary

Justice Julie Dick is a judge of the District Court of Queensland, having been appointed to the bench in 2000. She has also served as an acting Judge of the Supreme Court of Queensland. She served as president of the Queensland Children's Court 2007 – 2011, having been appointed a judge of that court in 2001.

Judge Dick was an articled clerk between 1973 and 1975. She was admitted to the bar in December 1975 and appointed Senior Counsel in November 1997. She had an extensive practice in criminal law, appearing in nearly fifty murder trials and many other high profile criminal matters.

Judge Dick was a member of the Law Reform Commission (Criminal Law Subdivision), a member of the Committee of the Queensland Bar Association and a member of the committee overseeing the 1997 Review of the Criminal Code. She was the inaugural Parliamentary Criminal Justice Commissioner between 1998 and December 2000 when she was appointed a District Court Judge. She was the President of the Children's Court of Queensland from 2007 to 2011, Acting Supreme Court Judge in 2011 and a member of the Higher Courts Benchbook Committee since 2000.

Go to 'Details' below to read an essay written by Helen Moye about Julie Dick for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Julie Dick and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

It was about a quarter to five in the afternoon. People were streaming out of the Brisbane Law Courts complex in George Street. Bridget was heading off to the park with her father, while her mother took the baby, who was due to be breast-fed. This was part of the daily ritual. That day, though, Bridget noticed something interesting in the rush of people going about the business of the law.

“Mum, did you know that boys can be barristers too?”

Yes, she did know. Julie Dick, barrister-at-law, knew that very well. Since being called to the Queensland Bar in 1975, she had been one of that body of legal professionals of whom, even in 2005, only 15.6 per cent are women. This is despite the fact that in recent years women have comprised at least half of the law graduates from Queensland universities.

In 1997, Julie, the then newly appointed Senior Counsel had expressed optimism that the developing institution of women at the Bar would offer encouragement to other women. She was, however, also on record as acknowledging the continuing difficulties experienced by women in being briefed, particularly by larger firms, and particularly in the area of criminal law. Today, with the perspective of over four years on the Bench, her concerns have not abated. “Since I have been a judge, I have seen many, many female prosecutors, in fact sometimes it seems as though they are in the majority, but I still do not see an equal number of women appearing for the defence.” It has been her observation that, for women, hard work and creditable performance are not, in themselves, sufficient to guarantee recognition and further opportunity. A complicating factor has been those female practitioners who, perhaps in response to perceived prejudice, “[do] not really dare to be women lawyers.” In such an environment, it can also be the case that women do not “dare” to recognise or encourage other women. In the end, the career of Judge Julie Dick does not reflect that experience. In the words of Roberta Devereaux, this is a woman and a lawyer “confident and happy in her own skin,” successful on her own terms, and one who has been “a great supporter of other women.”

In her turn, Judge Dick acknowledges the example and support of Barbara Newton, who, as Public Defender, ensured that she was briefed regularly and in high profile matters when she returned to practice in 1989 after a break in which she gave birth to four children.

The break showed no signs of upsetting the rhythm of a career well on track. After marrying in 1984, Julie had given birth to Michael in 1985 and then daughters Jennifer (1986), Christy (1988) and Bridget (1989). Her return to practice saw her appearing in a number of significant trials (usually funded by the then Public Defender’s Office). In 1992, three days’ after the conclusion of a five-week robbery trial, her youngest daughter Kathleen was born. An hour after the caesarean birth, Julie received a phone call from the Legal Aid office, checking her availability for another trial, set down for three weeks time. She accepted the brief.

Her support network at that time consisted of a nanny and her husband, solicitor Terry Mellifont. The nanny stayed until Kathleen commenced primary school, but Terry has remained a constant, ever since Julie started work as his articled clerk in January 1973. Julie acknowledges the enormous contribution he has made to her being able to pursue her career, and to the “wonderful children” and “warm, loving home” they share.

TJ Mellifont and Company was a small, busy general practice, with Terry as sole practitioner. Dealing with a wide range of matters, including industrial, criminal, civil, defamation and family law, it offered Julie exposure to a cross-section of the law, as well as considerable in-court experience, from the Magistrates Court to the Federal Court on circuit from Sydney. She recalls days on which there might be 12 or 13 appearances to coordinate in various courts on the one morning. Increasingly, within this spectrum of activity and high energy, the role of solicitor sitting in the office seemed to lack the allure and excitement of what she saw and experienced in court. She became engrossed in the “complete theatre” of court and litigation practice, the tactics and legal argument, and “loved everything about criminal trials, from the picking of the jury through to the verdict.”

Professionally, this experience inspired her move to the Bar. Personally, it was an eye-opener for a young woman who had spent most of her childhood in a home where “the pantry was full and everyone was happy.” Working in that practice, Julie Dick first realised that not everyone shared her comfortable circumstances; and it was in this period that she realised there was more she could do to help her clients—such as the young single mother, pregnant, with toddler in tow—to lend them money, only to find it being spent immediately on cigarettes.

Julie Maree Dick was born on 21 June 1952 in Brisbane, the third-born (and first daughter) of the nine children of Frank and Norma Dick. When Julie was young, the family moved to the Gold Coast, where Frank, an electrician by trade, expanded into the building industry and flourished in the first wave of development to hit the area. It was a life that offered freedom and security. The only address needed for a taxi-ride from Coolangatta to home was “Frank Dick’s house.” Sundays meant a trip to the beach with Dad, while Mum had some peace and quiet at home. There was sailing, singing around the pianola, and teenage socialising with siblings and their friends. There were two memorable holidays—to South Molle Island and Fiji—and there was school.

Julie’s mother and father had both been educated in Brisbane, at Lourdes Hill College and at St Laurence’s College respectively. Her own education began in 1957 at St Augustine’s Catholic Primary School in Coolangatta. From 1965 to

1968 she attended high school at Star of the Sea in Southport, during which time her scholastic ability became evident. She received academic awards and each year there was happy competition with friend Josephine Morton for dux of the class. She remembers in particular the encouragement of her class teacher from Grades Eight to Ten, Sister Xaviera. High achievement in Junior (Grade Ten) meant inevitable streaming into the sciences for the final school years. However, Science and Maths classes had to be undertaken at the local Brothers college because so few girls enrolled in those subjects. This unconventional arrangement was bypassed in favour of Julie's transfer to St Rita's College in Brisbane, where she completed her secondary schooling as a boarder-a chronically homesick one. It was quickly obvious to her that this was a far bigger pond than the one in which she had swum to date: there was more competition. It was also only one of many ponds-there was a much larger world out there with people from different backgrounds. She was also finding her science-based subjects difficult. Her father encouraged her educational pursuits and aspirations, but their talk of a career in medicine or pharmacy was pragmatic rather than heartfelt; this was a student who craved the humanities. Nonetheless, Julie excelled at St Rita's and became a prefect.

Norma Dick's preference for her daughter would have been hairdressing, "a wonderful profession for a young woman;" however, having won a Commonwealth Scholarship, Julie enrolled in Arts Law at the University of Queensland in 1970. For the next three years she enjoyed the safe and sociable environment of Duchesne College, becoming involved in the college committee, including one year as social secretary.

In second year, Julie decided to pursue law studies exclusively. There was no identifiable prompt for law either as a course of study or a profession, and no family connection to it. The character of Sir Thomas More in the Robert Bolt play *A Man for All Seasons* had mesmerised her in high school: his bravery, his scholarship, his ethics and his commitment to the law. She also remembers reading *Great Trials of the Twentieth Century* as a child, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (many times). It was the court scenes which captured her imagination and, again, the private introduction to lives so different from her own.

Once at university, Jurisprudence provided a first insight into what the law was really all about. However, it was only after commencing as an articled clerk that Julie's practical experience of the law and of those seeking its help enlivened her sense of justice. With that came a growing appreciation of human weakness and miscalculation-rather than evil intent -in some of the matters needing resolution.

As an articled clerk, living alone for the first time and working long hours, Julie started to feel overwhelmed. She felt she needed to tweak her direction, to refocus and re-energise. On the urging of Terry and Tom Quirk, then a junior counsel and later a District Court judge, Julie relinquished university study in favour of the Bar Board examinations, which she successfully completed in 1975. She was admitted as a barrister on 18 December 1975 (and later, in 1992, as a practitioner of the High Court and Federal Court of Australia). In March 1976, she completed her Articles.

It was a bold move, she concedes, going to the Bar so early, and she pays tribute to the friendship, professionalism and high ethical standards of each of her original colleagues in chambers-John Jerrard, Kiernan Dorney and Frank Wilkie-and Basil Martin, her pupil master. Indeed, one of Julie's particular concerns with the profession today is the frequent apparent ignorance (or avoidance) of the basic ethical rules which characterised the behaviour and practices of colleagues such as these.

Notwithstanding the support of her colleagues, Julie suffered "the usual difficulties" -such as developing sufficient self-confidence, engendering the confidence of briefing solicitors and managing a business. Then there were the slightly less usual difficulties-those attached to being a woman at the Bar. With few other women in active practice at the time, there were even fewer with long experience who could serve as role models. There was also discrimination, and Julie notes that, even after establishing an extensive criminal practice, she was "very rarely briefed by firms in crime with private clients. Most of my work came from the Public Defender's Office." Still, her advice today to women coming to the Bar is to cultivate the habits of persistence and hard work and to avoid thinking that "to have a practice like a man, you have to act like a man."

Her personal style reflects a certain self-sufficiency, directness and honesty. Her professional style is characterised by intelligence and wit, "a good forensic mind," commonsense and an ability to empathise with clients and yet maintain an appropriate professional distance. Not surprisingly, as her confidence and experience developed, so did her practice. It also shifted from a general practice to a criminal practice, partly the result perhaps of the amount of work she was undertaking with legally aided clients through regular briefing by the Public Defender and, later, the Legal Aid Office. At a time when other colleagues made the decision that to accept such matters would inhibit their career and their income, her readiness to do so was not entirely self-serving, although the high volume of work in itself did provide a valuable basis for developing her skills and expertise. Julie Dick soon came to believe that it is the responsibility of practitioners and governments to ensure that those who come before the courts, charged by the State, receive the defence to which all are entitled. Significantly, her own workload reflected that commitment to the rights of legal aid clients.

This philosophy of fairness, compassion and contribution is evident in the record of her dealings with clients, colleagues, the broader profession and the community over the years. She served as a member of the Bar Association Committee from 1995 to 1998; a member of the Litigation Reform Commission (Criminal Law Subdivision) until it was disbanded in 1997; and has served as a member of the International Law Reform Commission since being introduced by former High Court Justice Mary Gaudron in 1998. She was the Bar representative on the Criminal Case Management Committee chaired by Justice Margaret White, which resulted in the successful Committals Project. In 1997 she contributed as a member of the Advisory Working Group for the Criminal Code Review which passed into legislation; and she was the government-appointed legal representative on the Podiatrists Board of Queensland from 1995 to 1998.

Since her elevation to the Bench, she has served as a member and convenor of both the District Court Criminal Law and Conference Committees, and as a member of the District Court Strategic Planning and Benchbook Committees. She particularly counts her participation in the Benchbook Committee among her positive achievements. The Benchbook, a manual for guidance in Court proceedings, assists judges in ensuring, for example, that appropriate matters are taken into account in summing up at trial. It is equally relevant (and available) to others, such as legal practitioners and juries, who can be assisted in their understanding of procedures and protocols and, by extension, the execution of their responsibilities. In addition, she has made an active contribution to continuing legal education for both solicitors and barristers, including presenting papers, conducting seminars, and acting as facilitator and judge in moot and advocacy programs for several Queensland university law schools and the Bar Practice Course. She has strong views on the importance of continuing education for all, including judges, and is vocal in her response to criticisms directed at judicial travel to conferences, many of which are held overseas. She stresses the importance of promoting and utilising opportunities to network with peers and colleagues from other jurisdictions as a means of learning from and contributing to the international judicial community and, by extension, the administration of justice. Julie actively endeavours to broaden her knowledge, in order to minimise the risk of developing an insular or insulated perspective. She points out that conferences also provide exposure to broader areas of concern than strictly “black letter law” issues-recent examples being genetics and ethical investments-which are likely at some stage to be directly or indirectly relevant to the range of issues and people coming before the courts.

From her early years, Julie was a practitioner who went the extra mile, for example, when those working with her needed flexible employment arrangements to care for children; or when she managed to appear for a client, having split her lip in an accident en route to court on the North Coast and having had 12 stitches. That memorable day continued with her driving back to Brisbane, calling home for the cutting of her child's birthday cake, and then dropping her instructing solicitor back at the office.

Such stories add a telling dimension to a career which began auspiciously as a barrister with 13 not-guilty verdicts in her first 13 trials and went on to include over 40 murder trials (many of them “leading cases in this jurisdiction”) and other high profile and complex matters across the range of rape, robbery, arson, drug trafficking, fraud, corruption and perjury. In 1980 Julie had received a commission to prosecute on behalf of the Crown and in that capacity had appeared frequently before the District and Supreme Courts. By the mid-1990s her practice had begun to diversify and she was also appearing regularly in the Medical Assessment Tribunal, the Industrial Court of Australia and Administrative Appeals Tribunal, as well as in disciplinary tribunals such as the Queensland Nursing Council and Psychologists Board of Queensland.

In 1998 Julie was approached by the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee (PCJC) to take the newly created role of Parliamentary Criminal Justice Commissioner for Queensland the first such role in Australia. Broadly, the function of the Commissioner was, “Upon request, [to assist] the PCJC to discharge its role in monitoring and reviewing the activities of the CJC [Criminal Justice Commission],” as well as functions in relation to the Queensland Crime Commission and the Queensland Police Service. The concept and practice of civilian oversight of law enforcement authorities was innovative and relatively untried at the time, and the role of Commissioner was an important and powerful one. It was not the time for a token gesture in the direction of political correctness. So it was particularly significant that the first incumbent was a woman, and one whose appointment had the enthusiastic support of a bipartisan committee. This was an appointment based clearly on merit.

At the time, Julie expressed the view that wherever there is great power vested in an organisation, there is a need for commensurate accountability. She saw her role as charged with managing that accountability. Initially, however, she was faced with the practicalities of establishing an office, engaging staff and developing documentation and procedures. She recalls the first three months as being an isolated, lonely time, as she and her sole staff member confronted the challenge of making it all happen. Later, her team consisted of two solicitors/investigators, a document controller and a personal assistant. Meanwhile, she was learning about managing staff, adapting to a working environment which involved strict reporting responsibilities and an unfamiliar administrative framework, and coming to grips with the finer points of administrative law. In her two years in the role, she conducted 27 investigations during a time which was highly politically charged and fraught with controversy.

The Queensland Criminal Justice Commission was still reeling from the investigation into it, known as the Connolly-Ryan Inquiry. Having inherited that inquisitorial responsibility, Commissioner Dick found herself reviewing the extensive records of the Inquiry, as well as interviewing the approximately one hundred and fifty complainants. Her investigations, and the confidentiality requirements attaching to them, were strictly circumscribed by the legislation. This did not prevent complaints (which might have been better directed towards the legislation) assuming the force of projectiles targeting the role of the Commissioner. Most notably, the investigation into alleged leaks from the CJC to the Courier-Mail-and the parties' responses to that investigation contributed to the difficult situation.

The death of both of Julie's parents during the period of her appointment further challenged her resilience. She describes herself as “pretty robust,” but was conscious that she could not always protect others from the consequences of her position. She later learnt that her appointment to the Bench of the District Court of Queensland on 14 December 2000 had brought private tears of relief, as much as of congratulation, from her oldest daughter.

It had started as an attraction to the excitement of criminal law, to “the discipline. . . And the predictability of the Criminal Code,” and the rules of evidence which support it. This fascination continues to underpin Julie's work. “I am there to act within the law,” she says; policy matters are outside the jurisdiction of judges, whose responsibility it is to administer justice. This is not to suggest that the law-or judges- should be static, or ignore the changing world, with its advances in technology

and evolving social imperatives. Judge Dick has been involved in the most recent review of the Queensland Criminal Code; daily, she sees ways in which technology can be deployed in the operations of the court (for example, the pre-recording of evidence by children); and progressively, she sees trends in the types of offences that come before her.

As a judge of the Children's Court since 2001 (and with the perspective and experience that comes from being the mother of teenagers), Julie Dick worries that children are growing up too fast. She believes that the nature of material available on television, music video and film is creating in child viewers a false perception of reality, mortality and accountability: the beaten victim gets up to fight on, or reappears in the sequel; the perpetrator is defiant and proud; but the consequences appear in soft focus, if at all. What she is now seeing is a flow-on effect of that distorted perception, an increase in sexual offences in the Children's Court. The "new problem," she says, is crimes "by kids against kids."

Her experience also suggests that, more broadly, crimes involving street violence and amphetamine addiction are on the increase, and "getting uglier." In the face of these trends, her particular concern is for the education of children, suggesting a front-end program of education and information, since "penalties aren't going to solve the problem." She suggests that such programs might involve not just medical and legal professionals going into schools, but children actually attending court to see the consequences of violence and drug use first-hand.

At the other end of the spectrum are jurors, who have no choice but to confront the horrors which often unfold during the course of a trial. Judge Dick is sensitive to the impact this can have on individuals; she has adopted the practice of forewarning jurors that they can expect to be challenged and affected by what they see and hear, and that no front of bravado is necessary. Counselling has recently become available for jurors at the conclusion of trials.

Judge Dick says that nothing much surprises or unsettles her in the courtroom. Her early training, during which she learnt to approach each matter with special attention to detail, and the years of experience which taught her how to read and manage people, are serving their purpose. She also brings a certain style and attitude to the role, reflected in her wry comment that "there's always fun in the law." Perhaps this refers to the sharp minds and quick wits of those who, daily, need to consider weighty matters with compassion; detachment and efficiency. And perhaps it can also partly be attributed to "the happy and loving family life . . . [which] puts everything into perspective."

Judge Julie Dick does not see a career in law through rose-coloured glasses. She advises young women wanting to combine a legal career and a family to consider the sacrifices that both they, and their families, will need to make. Young men might benefit from that same advice. She keenly anticipates the benefits to society of a judiciary which is representative of the women and men who are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices and who exhibit the necessary merit.

Published resources

Book Section

Julie Dick, Moye, Helen, 2005

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

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