

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5438

Eastman, Kate

(1966 -)

Born 1 January, 1966, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Academic, Barrister, Human rights lawyer, Lawyer, Senior Counsel, Solicitor

Summary

Kate Eastman has practised as a barrister in Sydney since 1998. She practises in the areas of human rights, discrimination, employment and public law. Previously, she worked as a solicitor at Allen Allen & Hemsley and as a senior legal officer at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. She holds a BA/LLB (UNSW), LLM (UCL London), LLM (UTS) and a Diploma of International Human Rights Law (EUI Italy).

Kate Eastman has been actively involved in a number of human rights and international law organisations. She was a co-founder and president of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights. She has taught human rights/civil liberties and international law at the University of Technology (Sydney) and the University of Sydney, as well as a number of international programs.

Go to 'Details' below to read a reflective essay written by Kate Eastman for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

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

I was born in Sydney but lived in London and Canberra as a child. Apart from a brief period when I wanted to be a marine biologist, I wanted to be a lawyer working in human rights law.

I completed my secondary education at Loreto College Normanhurst. During my time at school I developed a passion for human rights. I was profoundly moved by *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and biographies of human rights activists in Chile in the 1970s. I joined Amnesty International. I did my work experience with the late Paul Flannery QC, then a barrister and later a District Court judge.

We had no lawyers in our family. I did not know any lawyers when I started a BA/LLB at UNSW in 1985. I loved law from the start. I still have clear memories of the lecturers and classes on torts, contracts, criminal law, admin law and the like. But when I discovered mooting in my first year at Law School, I secretly harboured a wish to become a barrister. One of my highlights at UNSW was mooting in the Jessup International Law Moot in Canberra and then representing Australia at the international competition in Washington DC.

Immediately after completing the BA/LLB I went to London to study international human rights law and private international law at University College London. What a terrific year. I spent every Thursday in a human rights lecture with Dame Roslyn Higgins QC, later to become the President of the International Court of Justice. I did volunteer work with NGOs such as Article 19. I achieved a LLM with Distinction ranking in the top 1 – 2% of candidates.

My academic interests continued when I returned to Sydney. I undertook another LLM at UTS. I started as a casual lecturer at UTS in 1995 teaching human rights. I have now taught LLB, LLM and JD subjects in the areas of human rights and international law continuously since 1995 at UTS, The University of Sydney and Monash. I have been a Senior Fellow at Monash for a number of years. I have also undertaken human rights teaching programs in Burma in the 1990s – early 2000s and in Afghanistan in 2003.

My non-academic career has followed the traditional path – being a research assistant at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) for the then Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Dame Quentin Bryce AC and the Privacy Commissioner. I did a summer clerkship followed by a graduate position at Allen Allen & Hemsley. I worked at Allens for three years in the corporate and litigation departments. I learnt the art and craft of being a good lawyer. I also had opportunities to undertake pro bono refugee work in Port Hedland and at Kingsford Legal Centre. In 1994, I moved to my dream job (which I thought I might do for life!) as a senior legal officer at HREOC. My three years at HREOC were formative years. I worked with remote Indigenous communities, and saw first-hand the impact of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. One cannot underestimate the value of working with the best human rights lawyers and practitioners. We worked closely with the late Sir Ronald Wilson and hearing commissioners, many of whom went on to senior judicial positions. I did human rights advocacy. The opportunity to be counsel assisting HREOC or appear for the HREOC firmed my resolve to seek a career at the Bar.

I was terrified (and sometimes remain so) with the idea of being a barrister. It is now over 17 years since I joined the NSW Bar. I was appointed Senior Counsel in 2012. I wanted to have a human rights practice at the Bar. I was told ‘there was no such thing’ or it was ‘fringe’. However, I have a practice in the area of, human rights, discrimination, employment and public law. Over the 17 years of practice I have worked with a wide range of clients in many and varied industries. Human rights issues touch on both the public and private sector. Some of the cases have been high profile – *The Tampa*, David Hicks, transgender marriage, same sex marriage, Royal Commissions and headline grabbing workplace sexual harassment and discrimination matters. Pro bono work remains an important part of my practice. I was privileged to receive a Law Foundation Justice Award for my contribution to pro bono work.

The Bar is still one of the male dominated areas of legal practice. This makes it a great challenge but also presents great opportunities for women.

I have also maintained my involvement with NGO work. In 1992, I co-founded Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) with the purpose of making human rights relevant to every day legal practice. I was the only Australian NGO representative accredited to participate in the UN negotiations for the establishment of the International Criminal Court in Rome 1998. I participate in a number of law related bodies working on human rights and gender issues for lawyers.

When I reflect on my 25 years in legal practice and the progress of women, I am struck by the importance of having strong, respected women role models. Trailblazers are important. Some trails are the ‘firsts’ but for many of us, trailblazing occurs in smaller ways. We ensure the trails remain open and we reinforce that all women have a place, not just those exceptional women. For the women following, having access to the trailblazers and discovering that they are human too is important. A kind word of encouragement from a trailblazer can have a profound effect in giving another woman the confidence to follow her path.

Published resources

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>

Author Details

Kate Eastman

Created 12 October 2015

Last modified 21 November 2019