

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

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L'Estrange, Noela

Occupation Academic, Chief Executive Officer, Director, Lawyer, Manager, Public Education Advocate, Solicitor

Summary

Noela L'Estrange was awarded a Bachelor of Arts with a major in English Literature from Monash University, and continued her studies at The University of Queensland obtaining her LLB. She then studied for a Masters of Business Administration focusing on Professional Services and Quality Assurance.

Professionally, L'Estrange decided to take an alternative approach within the legal services industry. Instead of joining a firm and taking the mainstream route, Noela decided to use her Law Degree within the Corporate and Governance sector specializing in managerial roles and dealing with strategic planning, marketing, client development and human resources.

L'Estrange is a highly experienced Director in both public and private sectors, specializing in governance and leadership, corporate, learning and development. She is a member of the AuSAE, ALPMA, ACC, AIM, AICD, ACLA, FCAQ, Queensland Law Society, and was a founding member of the Women's Lawyers Association of Queensland (WLAQ). She was a foundation Chair of the Women in Management group at the Australian Institute of Management in Brisbane, and one of the first women to be made a Fellow of the AIM.

In 2009, she was appointed as CEO of the Queensland Law Society, the first female to hold the position. She retired from that position in June 2015, but remains an active member of the Society. She also remains active in WLAQ, which honoured her with an Honorary Membership in early 2015.

Go to 'Details' below to read a reflective essay written by Noela L'Estrange for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Noela L'Estrange and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

I grew up in the burgeoning eastern suburbs of Melbourne in the late fifties and early sixties, after we moved there from Brisbane at the start of 1956. I did well at school, which I enjoyed, though the classes were very full. My grade 2 photo has 92 children in it. I'm sure that some would have been absent on the photo day. There was no assistance (or time to assess) anyone who might have had learning difficulties, and I always felt sorry for those who were at the bottom of the class, when, as a general exercise at the start of each term, everyone in the class was called out in order of academic merit to stand on the platform at the front of the class. It seemed to me, even as a child, that it was unfair to single out people who did not achieve well academically. Together with my parents' continual encouragement to gain a good education, my love of learning for a purpose in life remains a constant.

When I was in secondary school, I rather liked the idea of becoming a micro-biologist. But as biology was the only science subject offered, entering the general sciences was a dim prospect. I was always involved in debating, which people thought was an indication of a legal bent. In my final year of school, my parents asked the parish priest if there was someone we could talk to about law as a profession, as we had no connection with the profession. We duly attended at the home of the recommended worthy parishioner, who harrumphed gently and said dismissively "Girls ought not do law – they are not suited to it". There was probably no greater spur for a young woman who had been taught by nuns – and informed by family – that it was an obligation to make the most of one's talents! Then I had to win a place in university, which I did for Arts at the very new Monash University in 1968. My scholarship was for Arts, but after submission, they agreed that if I did well in first year, then they would support me changing to a combined Arts/Law degree.

I loved university, and had a Soldiers' Children Education Scholarship which paid my fees, purchased all compulsory textbooks and paid a very small allowance fortnightly. This was luxury in comparison to many of my fellow students who had to work part-time to support themselves. The down-side was that the scholarship was only available because my father was a Totally and Permanently Invalid pensioner, arising from war injuries. My mother and my 3 siblings and I were well used to spending weekends visiting my father when he was regularly hospitalised at the (then) Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. Dad unfortunately died a fortnight after my 18th birthday, and just before my first year results came out, leaving Mum widowed at 44 with 4 children. But Dad would have been very pleased, as I did do well – sufficiently to be invited to do English Honours, which I accepted, and the combined Arts/Law degree.

I was active in the Monash Association of Debaters (MAD), regularly participating in lunchtime debates and becoming President in third year. Starting the combined degree, I loved the very new law School. Wonderful surroundings, state of the art (then) facilities and great, young, enthusiastic teachers – as well as some notable "elders" like Professor Enid Campbell. I completed a BA with Honours in English. Mum had decided to move back to Queensland, where all our extended family lived. So I reluctantly left Monash and came to complete my law degree at University of Queensland. What a cultural shock that was for me. It had little of the multi-cultural life of Monash, it was housed in a noble but internally unattractive building, and the staff-student ratio was much larger than what I was used to. I joined the Law Students Association, and began to talk about what other law schools were doing, and how courses were structured – with more tutorials, and less emphasis on lectures as the sole method of teaching. This did not make me the most popular student with the staff. But gradually things did change.

Males dominated in the law school, both as students and on the staff. In most classes there were 2 or 3 females. This male attitude applied to the social scene, where, once on the committee of the UQLS, I strenuously objected to the funding of the annual Beer and Prawn (and strippers) event. This was a shock as it was a standard event, and no one had ever before objected. There were no strippers that year – or I think again.

I later became the first female president of the UQLS. There were also no female toilets anywhere near the Law School. The closest ones were in the French Department, at the other end of the building. Petitions and requests were made, and eventually, it was agreed that the male toilets on the ground level could become female toilets. There was much ceremony with the changing of the gold-lettered, silky oak panel on the door from "Men" to "Ladies". Once we were granted entry, nothing inside had been altered, with a long row of urinals remaining along one wall. However, above them, there was a neat sign: "Ladies, please do not use". That was regarded as a challenge by some. One small step...

At the end of my third year, I suddenly realised that I was supposed to be applying for articles of clerkship so that I could be admitted. I knew no one in the profession. Most students had some connections. I got the student advice about which firms simply did not interview females at all; and which were the firms which asked about your school; and which did not employ Catholics (or Protestants). One of my friends had been offered a place in a very good firm, but had decided to take a tutorship, as he was married with a young family, and couldn't survive on clerk's salary. He suggested that I should contact them, as they would now have a vacancy. This I did, and was interviewed by a delightful commercial partner. I received an offer, which I accepted. There is a lot about my career which is serendipitous – and this was certainly one of those moments.

The firm was Cannan & Peterson, and long-standing and highly successful firm, and one of the large firms in Brisbane at the time. I undertook 2 years of articles with them, and learned an enormous amount. I made friends – clerks, partners and support staff – who remain so today. I started work the week after the 1974 Brisbane floods. The office was on the 17th and 18th floors. The lifts weren't working, as the basement had flooded. Nor was there any air conditioning – in January in Brisbane. I took my lunch to work, and whenever you had to go to court or to the registries, you made very sure you had everything you needed. No mobile phones for the call back to the office. The clerks were very fit by the end of the three or four weeks it took to get the lifts working.

When I finished articles, I took a position with the then Public Curator (now Public Trustee) in the will-making section. I had one

subject to complete my degree – Conveyancing and Drafting. I enjoyed the work, which involved taking instructions from the public for their wills and drafting the wills for execution. There were no other women in the legal area. I learned a lot from the very experienced lawyers, and I gradually convinced most of them that I could be trusted with drafting work. I could draft all sort of clauses automatically – which was very useful when I sat the drafting exam at the end of the year. I finished way ahead of time, and got a distinction. I was expecting our first child, which was of some consternation to the front office staff, who would insist on bringing the clients into the office, rather than me escorting them from the waiting lounge. Some of the clients were similarly concerned, including one who asked, as I stood to welcome him – “Are you all right to do this?” There were so many possible responses – but I simply assured him that I was.

In 1976, there was no maternity leave. In Queensland, there was not even any discrimination legislation, so I had to resign my position. There was no such thing as part-time practice, except if you were in your own firm, and I was in no financial position – or experienced enough – to do that. So I was left with a new baby and no job. Then I heard that the new Law School at the (then) Queensland Institute of Technology was seeking part-time tutors. I applied, and the week prior to the interview, I had 4 wisdom teeth removed. I thought that I scrubbed up fairly well, though my face was still a little swollen. It was only afterwards that one of the interviewers said “You looked so awful. We felt sorry for you”. He hastened to add that I had got the job on merit.

It was in that initial interview that some of the attitudes of the profession came to bear. The interview panel was two of the foundation staff members, and a very senior solicitor. All proceeded well, until the solicitor asked “I see you have a child. Do you really need to work? Have you made appropriate arrangements?” All sorts of responses shot through my head, but I really needed a job. Resisting the temptation to say that I had organised fresh water and a running leash, I stated that I able to do the work, and had relevant qualifications. The two academics had looked appalled when the question was posed, so I realised that my response wouldn't have a major influence in the assessment. But the fact that it was asked – and was clearly something that that practitioner would normally ask at an interview – was a sign that the profession had a way to go in dealing with women and family responsibilities.

So I began my legal teaching career with part-time tutoring in the evenings, when my teacher husband could look after our daughter. I enjoyed the work – and the interaction. The evening classes were part-time students, as QIT (now QUT) offered the first part-time law degree in Queensland. So my students were public servants, police, teachers, and five year articulated clerks all of whom worked full-time. They were interested, challenging and wanting to work in the law. Many of them, certainly from the first few years, when the intakes were smaller, became – and remain – friends. There was quite a close relationship between the staff and students which diminished over time as intakes and staff numbers grew. There were sessions at the pub, and cricket matches on back lawns.

Over the years, my teaching loads increased, and I began to take on lecturing as well as tutoring. I had two more daughters – one timed for the mid-semester break, and the other not quite so, resulting in a semester off. It was only many years afterwards that one of my students said “We saw you teaching and working when you were pregnant, and thought yes, see – it can be done”. Over the 11 years I was in the law school, I lectured and tutored in Introduction to Law, Land Law, Torts, and Succession. I wrote articles for the Law Society Journal and for the ALJR.

During this time, I was also highly involved in the establishment of the Women Lawyers Association of Queensland, and was a foundation member in 1978, later becoming Social Secretary, Vice-President and President. There was a lot to do to address some of the attitudinal issues in the profession. Much of it related to the fact that women in the profession were still regarded as something of an exception. When the Queensland Law Society negotiated a disability insurance cover for practitioners, we took a close look at it, and discovered that there was a penalty premium for women. We approached the Society to explain the basis, having done some research ourselves on the actuarial information. The Society's initial response was that they hadn't “noticed” the penalty. When pressed for action, they did take it up with the insurers, who had to admit that there was no actuarial basis for the penalty, and revised the policy to remove it. If WLAQ hadn't read the policy and taken action, women practitioners would have paid more for no reason other than they were women. There was also a notable brouhaha when the Society one year published its Symposium program, which included a sponge making session for the “accompanying persons”. It was time to accept that women were an increasing part of the profession, and ought not be treated as oddities.

In 1988, I wrote the cover story for Proctor, the Law Society journal, analysing the numbers of practitioners and asking why so few women were making it to partner level in firms. I received a furious phone call from the then President of the Society, demanding to know where I had got the figures from. I assured him that the Society had provided me with the data, and that I had simply done the calculations which were not undertaken or published then by the Society. Whilst he was still unhappy, he couldn't dispute the numbers.

I also worked as an honorary solicitor, and board member for an increasing number of voluntary and community organisations, putting my legal knowledge to work where it helped. At one stage, I could put together a constitution for a kindergarten in my sleep. I worked for a number of years on the board of the Foster Parents Association as they dealt with difficulties in child protection and the police.

In 1998, my old firm advertised for someone to design and conduct their internal professional development and recruitment. I successfully applied, and was appointed the first Human Resources Lawyer in Queensland, and I think at that time, in Australasia. I was responsible for designing and implementing the recruitment and in-house professional development for clerks, lawyers and partners, including designing and facilitating national strategy meetings and retreats – or as I preferred to call them, “advances”. Whilst with the firm, I became increasingly involved and interested in law firm management, particularly in managing legal services and risk.

The Managing Partner asked if I would look at how the firm could gain Quality Assurance certification, which was then a requirement for appointment to Queensland Government legal panels. And so I learned everything I could about QA, and worked with the CFO to design and implement QA in a law firm. In 1993, the firm (now Norton Rose Fulbright) became the first law firm to achieve external QA certification. During this time, I also undertook part-time, a Master of Administration, as I was managing more than practising, and my thesis was on measuring service quality in a professional firm.

At that time, there were very few legal practice managers, there were no law firm marketers, and few HR managers – and none of them were qualified lawyers. I was able to bring to those diverse disciplines my knowledge and understanding of the law, how lawyers were trained and thought, how the legal system worked, and how the disciplines of management and legal practice – in particular client relationship management and practice risk management were at the heart of what was needed for the challenges of the new century ahead. I had a level of acceptance at partner level in firms as a lawyer speaking about management issues. I could provide support with personal professional experience about the issues of law firm management “from the inside”.

I was a foundation member of Australian Law Practice Managers Association in Queensland and of the Queensland Association of Law Firm Marketers. I was an active participant in Continuing Legal Education Association of Australasia. I led writing about legal practice management and seminars for the QLS. But my professional training was always the touchstone for what would be practical.

I saw a market opportunity, and started my own consultancy firm, and spent the next 6 years working with professional service firms all over Australia and New Zealand to implement QA, develop and deliver professional development, undertake strategic planning, and implement practice risk management. I became involved in the AIM, as my work was increasingly law firm management rather than legal practice.

I also became involved in the National Council of Women of Australia in Queensland, when the then President invited me to assist in the policy submissions for the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act in 1991-2. I then became a member of Queensland Committee, and then National Vice-President. In 1994, I was invited to become a member of the Australian Council for Women, a consultative body established by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as part of the preparations for the UN Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995. Not only did I assist with conducting consultation sessions for women all over Australia – from Burnie to Darwin – but I was also fortunate to then be nominated as the NCWA delegate to the not-for-profit section of conference in Beijing, as well as attending some of the Conference Plenary sessions – an experience I will always treasure.

In 2009, I was recruited to a Senior Executive national business development role at the Australian Government Solicitor (AGS) in Canberra, as part of moving the organisation from the public service into a fully competitive national law firm. At the time AGS was one of the largest law firms in Australia, with an office in every capital city and more than 700 lawyers. All work (apart from a limited area of cabinet and security work) became fully competitive through tender. I was responsible for developing and implementing innovative approaches to client service management, including a national client service management model that was so successful that it became part of the requirements in many Departments' legal panel tender processes. I applied my marketing and knowledge management skills to support AGS in being a highly successful participant of the national legal market. I designed, developed and implemented a national practice standard for applied practice risk management.

Whilst in Canberra, I was one of the initiators in establishing the ACT chapter of Australian Corporate Lawyers Association (ACLA). I served as vice-president of ACLA for 5 years, during which time the chapter grew from an initial membership of 25 to over 450, becoming the third largest chapter in Australia. I was also a National Director for ACLA. ACLA in the ACT was dominated, unsurprisingly, by public sector lawyers, and it was at my instigation that ACLA (now ACC) extended their awards to include one for public sector lawyers. That continues to this day.

I also became a Director of the AICD, the first woman to be appointed in the ACT. I was already a Fellow of the AICD, which I had achieved in 1993, when I was a Director of Powerlink Queensland. I was initially appointed because AICD wanted a lawyer – but they also got someone who was keenly interested in the (then) emerging area of corporate governance and director training. I remained on that Council until 2009. My legal training and experience was recognised as important in ensuring the development of appropriate Director training on the legal aspects of directorship; in ensuring that the challenges of being a director of a government owned corporation or business enterprise were included in the curriculum. My understanding of practical ethics contributed to the development of the conflicts area of director training.

I was a foundation Chair of the Women in Management group at the Australian Institute of Management in Brisbane, and I was one of the first women to be made a Fellow of the AIM – though at the time, I did joke that perhaps they should instigate “Sheilas of the Institute” as becoming a fellow had never been a high priority for me as a female.

My major achievement for AIM was to instigate the Women in Management Great Debates, the first of which was held in Brisbane in 1997. This event is now the largest AIM event, attracting annual attendances of over 2000 in the Brisbane Convention Centre in the week of International Women's Day. When I moved to Canberra, I took the Debate idea south, with similarly spectacular success – it became the largest event in the ACT, with more than 1200 attendees. In 2015, the event was also held in Melbourne and Sydney. In Canberra, I was also responsible for establishing the first AIM mentoring program for women in management.

Throughout my work with other professional organisations, I became well known as a lawyer who was vitally interested in

management, in progressing women through corporate ranks and in tackling the challenges of managing professionals and professional cultures. I was regularly called on for comment or to write about successful approaches to managing professional staff and firms.

In 2009, I was appointed as CEO of the Queensland Law Society, the first female to hold that position. As the peak professional body for solicitors, it was warming to return to where I really started my professional career. I was constantly impressed by the amount of pro bono work that lawyers undertook. Not just the high profile and important representation in court, but the daily contributions made to help individuals and communities across the state. One of my major achievements was to implement a measure for the hours of pro bono which practitioners undertook annually. The number was enormous, and represented millions of dollars of value. We used that information with Government and with the press to push for recognition of the extent and financial value of that contribution by lawyers across the State.

Over the six years I was CEO, we worked closely with the WLAQ to ensure that the Society was offering services to women in the profession. We established the Flexibility Working Group, which regularly publishes personal stories of how flexible approaches can work in the profession. Increasingly, the importance of wellbeing in the profession was raised as a critical issue, and I was pleased to be able to instigate the Society's support mechanisms to assist practitioners, with free sessions, the extension of the LawCare program and the establishment of the Resilience Working Group as well as being the first Law Society to become a signatory to the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation Guidelines for wellbeing.

Through just over 40 years in my professional career, I have seen enormous changes. Most are for the better. The growth of women in the legal profession to almost 50% (from 15.5% in 1988) poses current and future challenges to ensure that this significant feminisation brings positive and creative results for clients, firms and for the individual members of the profession.

I retired as CEO in June 2015, but I remain an active member of the Society, and of WLAQ, which honoured me with an Honorary Membership in early 2015. I have had a most enjoyable and very rewarding professional life, though one at a slight tangent from the usual profession life in practice. The chief lessons I have learned are that no learning is ever lost; to take up opportunities, even if they are not necessarily mainstream; to maintain a strong sense of humour and to practice the key touchstones of professional courtesy and strong ethics in everything you do. As a personal benefit, I treasure my many valuable, lifelong friendships, and have always been proud to be a lawyer. I hope to keep contributing whilst I have something useful to offer.

Published resources

Edited Book

A Woman's Place: 100 Years of Queensland Women Lawyers, Purdon, Susan and Rahemtula, Aladin, 2005

Site Exhibition

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

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