

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5725

Oliver, Sue

Occupation Academic, Barrister, Judge, Lawyer, Magistrate, Solicitor

Summary

A graduate of the University of Adelaide, Her Honour Judge Sue Oliver was admitted as a solicitor and barrister of the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1978 and then promptly moved with her (then) husband to Darwin, where she has lived ever since. She was appointed to the Northern Territory Magistrates Court (now called the Northern Territory Local Court) in 2006, after having practised law in a variety of public and private sectors contexts. As managing magistrate of the Northern Territory Youth Justice Court in the Northern Territory, she has a particular interest in and has published widely on matters relating to the complex issues surrounding the management of young offenders.

Since arriving in the N.T., Oliver has also contributed her time and energy to a variety of community and national organisations. These include the Family Planning Association, the YWCA, the International Legal Services Advisory Council, Commissioner for the NT Legal Aid Commission, committee member NT Law Society and Board Member of the Australian Women Lawyers. She is presently a member of the Country Women's Association in Katherine.

Sue Oliver was interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

Sue Oliver was the first person in her family to go to university, a beneficiary of the free tertiary education system introduced by the Whitlam Labor Government elected in 1972. Nineteen years old and working her way up northern Australia at the time of the election, the prospect of free tertiary education was enough to bring her back to Adelaide, complete her Higher School Certificate, and qualify for university entrance. She originally thought about studying medicine, but realised she didn't have the maths/science competence to get the mark required. She settled on law, and has never looked back. 'The best thing about being a lawyer, is the intellectual challenge of the law,' she says. 'The best thing about having a legal career ... is having the opportunity to meet people you wouldn't otherwise have met and to better understand their lives.'

After completing her degree at the University of Adelaide in 1978, Oliver completed a Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice as an alternative to doing articles. Not having any connections in the Adelaide legal families, she had no connection to the networks necessary to getting a position in a good firm. She never felt disadvantaged by taking this route – if anything she was glad to be moving in less conservative circles. Having once been asked by some students conducting a survey whether her background was 'Upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class,' Oliver responded with out-rage and indignation, 'Anybody ever heard of working class?' She was glad for the more progressive opportunities that the graduate diploma offered.

Despite being admitted as a solicitor and barrister to the Supreme Court of South Australia, Oliver did not begin her career there. Her then husband was offered a job in the Northern Territory and the opportunity to move into a jurisdiction that was rebuilding and developing was too good to refuse. She began her professional legal career in 1979 as a legal adviser to the Territory Government before moving to the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. From there, she moved into further government work, including in the Office of the Deputy Crown Solicitor, the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and the office of the Australian Government Solicitor, before embarking on a career in academia.

Oliver is a former legal academic with a Master of Laws from the College of William and Mary in Virginia, U.S.A. (1994). In 1998, after many years in teaching and administration in the Faculty of Business at the Northern Territory Institute on Technology, she was appointed the first Dean of the Faculty of Law, Business and Arts at what was then the newly restructured Northern Territory University. Subsequently she was Director of Legal Policy and Acting Executive Director of Legal Services in the Territory's Department of Justice immediately prior to her appointment to the Bench in 2006. As an academic, her teaching areas included contract, employment law and defamation. As Director of Legal Policy she developed the Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation and the reform of the Criminal Code, including the reform of mandatory life sentencing.

In recent years, Oliver has been managing magistrate of the Northern Territory Youth Justice Court in the Northern Territory. In this capacity she has been working with a variety of services towards building a better framework to enable the court and services like the Department of Children and Families and the Youth Justice Division of Corrections to communicate with each other and manage cases better. Information on young people in the system has been 'siloes' for years – 'nobody's talking but everybody's got information' – and she has been working on systems that share that information between services while protecting the rights and privacy of the young person. According to some youth justice advocates familiar with the Northern Territory, Oliver's efforts with the Katherine youth court have been successful. Words like 'holistic and 'user-friendly' have been used to describe the system. According to some advocates, 'It's less punitive' with 'less onerous bail conditions', than past, and some present, court systems have been.

In March 2007, Oliver was one of five women who presided over Darwin courts for the first time, the largest female jurist contingent ever to sit in one place in the Northern Territory, a noteworthy occasion indeed. Justice Sally Thomas, Chief Magistrate Jenny Blokland, Acting Magistrate Tanya Fong Lim and Magistrates Melanie Little and Sue Oliver were referred to as the "five sisters in law" in a report in the Northern Territory News and the journal of the Northern Territory Law Society. As well as acknowledging the experience and expertise the group of five possessed, the article noted that between them, there were eleven children, with Oliver mother to four of them. Maintaining work/life balance has involved constant juggling and even though opportunities for women to work in the legal profession have improved markedly over her time, Oliver can't see anyway around the juggling. 'I think the same challenges will always be there,' she says. 'You want an intellectual life for yourself. You want a career for yourself but you want to balance that against bringing up your children, giving them the things that they want and seeing them, you know, blossom into life. I can't see that ever changes.' With support, however, the juggling act is manageable.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Sue Oliver interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

Created 30 May 2016

Last modified 1 November 2016

Digital resources

Title: Her Honour Judge Sue Oliver

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023