

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE0150

Benny, Susan (Grace)

(1872 - 1944)

Born 4 October, 1872, Adelaide South Australia Australia

Died 5 November, 1944, North Adelaide South Australia Australia

Occupation Politician

Summary

In 1919, Susan Benny was elected a member of South Australia's Brighton Council, thus becoming Australia's first woman politician. She held her seat for two elections and left local government after failing to become mayor in 1922.

Details

Born: 4 October 1872. Died: 5 November 1944.

After her mother died, Benny went to a girl's boarding school at McLaren Vale, then returned home and taught her younger sisters. She married, solicitor Benjamin Benny in 1896, and they had three daughters and two sons.

During World War I, Benny was honorary secretary of the Seacliff Cheer-up Society and was a member of the local progress association and spinning and croquet clubs.

Before becoming the local government member for Seacliff in 1919, she was a member of the Liberal Union Sturt District committee and president of the Brighton Women's Branch of the Liberal Union.

Suzanne Edgar and Helen Jones in their biography of Benny in *200 Australian Women : A Redress Anthology* state that while with the local council, "Benny claimed credit for several improvements at Brighton: the opening of a cliff to enable free access to the beach; the installation of electric lights; and the allotment of reserves as a children's playground and public garden. She successfully supported the abolition of segregated sea-bathing, so that families could swim together." (p. 93)

Also she attended night meeting, which legislators had commonly believed women incapable of doing. In 1921, she became a justice of the peace and heard state children's, police and women's cases.

In 1926, her husband resigned from the Australian Senate, to which he had been elected in 1919, due to ill-health. He was later convicted of embezzlement, sentenced to three years hard labour and declared insolvent. Relying on inherited money to support her family, Benny moved into her husband's city offices and operated the "Elite Employment Agency," during the depression.

She separated from her husband, who died in 1935 and remarried in 1940.

The Brighton Council named a crescent and a community centre for women's groups after her.

Published resources

Resource

Australia's First Female Politician, Local Government Association of South Australia, <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/education/benny.htm>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Edited Book

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988

Resource Section

Benny, Susan Grace (1872-1944), Edgar, Suzanne, 2006, <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070272b.htm>

Author Details

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Created 17 October 2001

Last modified 7 May 2019