Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4850

Burton, Pamela Melrose

(1946 -)

Born	19460630, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Author, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Pamela Burton, lawyer and author, was born and brought up in Canberra. Apart from working holidays in London in 1964 and 1970, Pamela has lived her life in the Canberra and the Bungendore district. After studying law at the Australian National University she worked on a range of cases involving environmental and social justice issues and has been involved in various government tribunals and committees. She was one of the first women to establish a legal firm in Canberra, following Mrs Bruna Romano and Margaret Elizabeth Reid. In 2010 Burton's biography of the first woman high court justice, Mary Gaudron, was published.

Pamela Burton was interviewed by Kim Rubenstein for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia catalogue record.

Details

Pamela Melrose Burton was born in Canberra on 30 June 1946, the third and youngest daughter of Cecily Margaret Wear (born Nixon, later Parker) (1916-2007), psychologist and John Wear Burton (1915-2010), Head of the Department of External Affairs (1947-1950).

Along with her older sisters Meredith (1941-) and Clare (1942-1998), Pamela grew up on farms at Tuggeranong and in the old Weetangera district. She attended Telopea Park Primary and High School, initially travelling there and back on dirt roads in old Commer van buses run by the federal government.

The Burton family lived a strong Methodist ethic extending back to the days of John Wesley himself through Pamela's paternal grandfather, Methodist Minister and President of the Methodist Conference (from 1931), Rev. John Wear Burton (1875-1970). Pamela and her sisters were involved in National Methodist Church (now Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest) through their teens, for the ethos and community rather than dogma or religiosity. Family life was imbued with a strong sense of social justice and respect for all people regardless of social status. The farm often buzzed with guests from Canberra's political and academic community with lively political conversation and enjoyment of John Burton's home-brewed beer.

As an Australian National University (ANU) student, Pamela worked summers in Papua New Guinea. As a law student, she assisted on the magistrates' training course. One the course's first students later became prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Michael Somare.

While working in Papua New Guinea Pamela fell in love with geographer Dan Coward (now Huon). They married in Canberra in 1968 and Pamela used the name Coward for the next decade.

Pamela Coward graduated BA (1968), Bachelor of Laws (Hons.) (1970) and Master of Laws (1976) from the Australian National University and commenced practice as an employed solicitor in 1971.

In 1973-74 Pamela acted for the group that, on ecological and aesthetic grounds, challenged the Federal Government's right to construct a telecommunications tower on Black Mountain near central Canberra. The High Court found in favour of the government and construction went ahead however the case made legal history as the first environmental law case of its kind to be launched on a 'class-actions' basis on behalf of the local community. She played a major role in implementing the Cooperative Housing Initiative for quality affordable community housing in Canberra out of which 'Urambi' the first cooperative housing development was born.

Faced with barriers to women becoming partners in legal firms, in 1976 Pamela founded her own firm, Pamela Coward &

Associates. She was keen to provide more accessible legal advice for the vulnerable and financially challenged members of the Canberra community. As a woman, she was unable to borrow money so Pamela and her then husband, Dan Coward, mortgaged their family home to establish the firm. Encouraged and assisted by Dan, she aimed to create a legal practice that was people-focussed. She established a warm, welcoming atmosphere aided by Dan's bright paintings and a policy that there would be no desks or barriers during interviews between client and lawyer. It was important to her that the practice was egalitarian; she shared the care for the joeys she brought into work from her farm with the young woman who was the office 'gopher'.

Two men and a woman joined Pamela in partnership; solicitor Adrienne O'Connor becoming the first female partner engaged as a principal of a Canberra law firm.

Word rapidly spread around Canberra that Pamela Coward & Associates was willing to act for people on legal aid, social security recipients, injured workers, the disadvantaged, victims of discrimination and environmental groups; the firm grew rapidly and taking on a 'no-win no-fee approach, forced test cases in matters such as passive smoking and repetitive strain injuries. The firm developed a large practice in workers' compensation and family law.

In order to be in a position to offer affordable services Pamela computerised her firm to provide the necessary efficiencies; Pamela Coward and Associates became one of Australia's first fully computerised law firms. Her commitment to low-cost conveyancing led to public clashes with other firms before the Canberra legal profession abandoned its minimum fee scales and moved ACT legal firms into a competitive era which benefited clients.

Years later, Pamela met a business studies lecturer from the University of Canberra who told her that they used Pamela Coward & Associates as a case study for a successful alternative business model. Pamela said she was dumbfounded: "I didn't think in business models – I just wanted to bring law to the people, make it more accessible and affordable."

In the late 1970s Pamela Burton and Dan Coward adopted sisters Amanda and Cassandra Rowland, aged 6 and 7, whose parents had died. Pamela and Dan now enjoy three grandchildren.

Pamela's marriage to Dan Coward ended in the early 1980s and she lived with Canberra journalist Alan Ramsey for close to a decade. In 1986 Pamela was diagnosed with advanced secondary breast cancer. Wishing to see Pamela Coward & Associates continue to thrive she worked right through 18 months of radiation and chemotherapy treatment, celebrating the end of treatment with 10 days on a Greek Island with her sister Meredith and niece.

Pamela sold Pamela Coward & Associates in 1990 to practise as a barrister of the ACT Supreme Court. Two significant accidents had followed her cancer treatment which saw her going to the Bar on crutches. As a barrister she specialised in litigation, acting for both plaintiffs and defendants, and some large medical negligence cases on behalf of the ACT Government and its medical professionals.

Pamela's concern for achieving better and fairer outcomes in citizen-government disputes led her to accept part-time appointments to a range of government tribunals and committees. Appointments included the role of Chair of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal in its first ten years of existence from 1976, Senior Member of the Federal Administrative Appeals Tribunal from 1995 and member of the ACT Parole Board from 1991-2001. Since 2006 Pamela has been an ACT Mental Health Official Visitor.

From 2000, Pamela spent five years as legal counsel for the national Australian Medical Association assisting in the resolution of the medical indemnity crisis and rolling out an education program on the new privacy laws for medical practitioners.

From Moree to Mabo: the Mary Gaudron story, Pamela's biography of Australia's first woman High Court Justice Mary Gaudron, was published in 2010 by UWA Publishing. In November 2012 *The Waterlow Killings: A Portrait of a Family Tragedy*, was published. It is the true story of the tragic death of art curator, Nick Waterlow and his daughter Chloe Waterlow. In April 2016 Pamela's novel *A Foreign Affair* was published by Ginninderra Press and in 2022 her account of the lives of her parents, Cecily and John Burton, *Persons of interest* was published by ANU Press.

Published resources

Book
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The battle of Black Mountain: an episode of Canberra's environmental history, Hancock, W. K., 1974

Persons of interest : an intimate account of Cecily and John Burton, Burton, Pamela with Meredith Edwards, 2022

Book Section
The Law and the Citizen, Coward, P., 1976

Resource Section
Pamela Burton,
https://naher.com.au/pamela-burton/

Pamela Burton,
http://uwap.uwa.edu.au/books-and-authors/author/pamela-burton/

Newspaper Article
Burton was a patriotic public servant, not a traitor, Burton, Pamela, 2011

Rev. J.W. Burton. New Methodist President, 1931,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16757568

Blog
Pamela Burton's defence of her father, Barratt, Paul, 2011,
http://aussieobserver.blogspot.com.au/2011/05/pamela-burtons-defence-of-her-father.html

Newsletter
The Power of Sisterhood, Cadzow, Jane, 1989

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Pamela Burton interviewed by Kim Rubenstein in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Pam Burton, lawyer, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

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Digital resources

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