Entry type: Person
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Salthouse, Sue

(1949 - 2020)

Born	19490714, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Died	20200720, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Disability rights activist, Feminist, Human Rights Advocate, Leader, Teacher

Summary

Sue Salthouse worked in the area of social justice from 1996, playing an active role in the systemic advocacy for women with disabilities. In Canberra she ran her own consultancy company that specialised in work in the disability sector and conducted social research, policy analysis and advice in a number of areas beyond disability advocacy, including project development and management, conference facilitation and TAFE teaching. She worked extensively with Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) to develop leadership training projects for women, including women in Aboriginal communities. She worked in a voluntary capacity for Women with Disabilities ACT and Rights International (Australia).

In 2015, Sue was Canberra Citizen of the Year, in recognition of her outstanding commitment and contribution as a disability advocate. In late 2019, Sue was further acknowledged for her enormous contribution to the public good when she was awarded the honour of 2020 ACT Senior Australian of the Year. Sue Salthouse died in a motor vehicle accident in Canberra on 20 July 2020.

Read an interview with Sue Salthouse in the online exhibition Redefining Leadership.

Details

Sue Salthouse described her introduction to the disability sector as ‘arrival by surprise’. She was forty-five when she fell off a horse in the Snowy Mountains, and embarked on her life of ‘new opportunity’ in a wheelchair. The learning curve was steep and physically challenging, but the recently retired ex-president of Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) was adamant when she claimed that ‘psychologically I have had more difficult things to deal with in my life, despite the challenges my accident presented’. *(Interview)*

Born in 1949 in McKinnon, Melbourne, Salthouse had a happy childhood, sharing the love of her parents with one older sister, whom she adored. She attended Kilvington Baptist Girls Grammar, a small private school with a community spirit that she credits with setting her on a humanitarian path. A small school offered her any number of opportunities to take on leadership roles, which she adopted with great relish, although she did experience a crisis of conscience when offered the role of head prefect. Conditional upon the offer was the requirement for her to be confirmed. She agreed to the condition, but not without some reflection on the nature of hypocrisy. Why did the school think she had to be confirmed to perform a leadership role? How much was she prepared to compromise in order to take on a leadership role? Salthouse says it was a pivotal moment in her life and a difficult decision for a teenager to make. To this day, she is not sure that she made the right decision, but she did compromise and became head prefect in 1966.

After completing secondary school, Salthouse enrolled in Agricultural Science at the University of Melbourne in 1967. Inspired by the ‘green revolution’ of the 1960s, she wanted to further her understanding of the environment and at the time, agriculture seemed like the best way of combining her love for science with a passion for environmental issues. After graduating, she worked as a field officer for the (then) Victorian State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, where she mainly did scientific writing. Although she enjoyed this work, what she really wanted was a job that enabled her to travel. So in 1972 she completed a Diploma of Education at La Trobe University. Here, she engaged in political ideas and innovative teaching methods that focused on flexible learning environments and a view of education as an instrument of change.

After a placement at Lorne Higher Elementary School in Victoria, Salthouse moved to Alice Springs High School where, amongst Aboriginal communities she learnt profound lessons about the power of education as an instrument against

discrimination and a path towards self determination. Working with women in these communities, she gained an appreciation of their openness, their wisdom, their respectfulness and their capacity for listening and understanding. She credited this experience with her own emerging conceptualisation of leadership as facilitation. For Salthouse, the hallmark of a good leader was someone who is able to consult and connect in order to solve a problem. It might be a more complex way of achieving outcomes than traditional authoritative models, but she believed it to be the most effective way of proceeding in the sector she knew best, non-government organisations: no one person can possess all the skills required to lead in this area, especially in advocacy organisations, so a good leader recognises the skills in the collective, nurtures them and calls upon them when required. This non-hierarchical 'hub and spoke' model associated with early feminist organisations was something she first gained an appreciation of when working in Alice Springs. As well as learning from Aboriginal communities, she was an early member of the Alice Springs chapter of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL).

After the Alice Springs experience, Salthouse travelled overseas to Kathmandu to trek in the Himalayas. There she met the man she would marry (a widower with children). The family spent another 3 years in Nepal (1978-81) and 3 years in Italy (1985-88), before returning to live in Canberra in Australia. She was not on any confirmed career path and was relatively happy taking the time to look after the family, while her husband pursued his career in aid organisations. When their marriage broke down, she returned to teaching. Despite the barriers to advancement that existed for women teachers in the ACT, in the early 1990s she felt she had a good career ahead of her as a teacher.

In April 1995, Salthouse had her accident. After a lengthy period of rehabilitation, she returned to teaching but found that she had lost confidence in her ability to do the job and felt isolated from other staff members in ways she had not expected. The principal helped her to move towards what she calls 'a graceful retirement'. Around this time she met Carolyn Frohmader from Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) through her wish to become involved in sport for people with disabilities. Frohmader asked if she would like to work for them and the rest, as they say, is history. For most of her life in a wheelchair, Sue Salthouse was involved with WWDA. She was president for a term in 2009 -2012.

Salthouse always had a commitment to social justice issues and her immersion in the world of disability advocacy provided her with new perspectives on how best to work for, and on behalf of, people who feel powerless and discriminated against. Disability is not a medical problem, it is a human rights issue and 'the work of WWDA is grounded in a rights based framework that links gender and disability issues to the full range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights'. *(WWDA Annual report 2009-2010)*. Salthouse was proud of the leading role WWDA took in creating this framework at an international level, a prime example being its work to ensure that a specific article on Women (Article 6) was included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a Treaty ratified by Australia in 2008.

As far as Salthouse was concerned the strength and efficacy of WWDA has always been its people and their commitment to the issues, rather than their egos. This is not to say that individuals are not forthright in stating a case they strongly believe in. 'Leaders must have presence,' she says. 'They can't be too self-effacing' *(Interview).* But they must speak from the group and towards the outcome. Creating a structure where all members of an organisation feel they can contribute to a discussion, where the issue is what is important, not the person who promotes it in public, was the type of leadership Salthouse aimed to provide.

Leadership training for women with disabilities was also important, according to Salthouse. 'It's crucial that WWDA empowers and endorses women with disabilities in leadership roles.' *(WWDA Annual report 2009-2010)* They must 'have a seat at the table', not only because the voices of women with disabilities must be heard but because there is enormous symbolic importance attached to women with disabilities being seen to be leaders. They need to be able to demonstrate to themselves and the able-bodied people around them 'I look like you, only sitting down'. *(Interview).*

Sue Salthouse was posthumously appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2022 for significant service as an advocate for people with disability, and to the prevention of family violence.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Report
Annual Report 2009-2010, Women With Disabilities Australia, 2010,
http://www.wwda.org.au/wwdarepts.htm

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

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Sue Salthouse interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Women and leadership in a century of Australian democracy oral history project [sound recording]

Author Details
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