

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4923

Christopherson, Leonie Therese

(1939 -)

Born 4 November, 1939, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Advertising practitioner, Author, Community activist, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Leonie Christopherson gave up a promising career in advertising to marry into the army. She turned her talent for communication to the service of political and community organisations: the Liberal Party of Australia, and the National Council of Women. She served as president of National Council of Women of Australia from 2003 to 2006 at a time of great change for the association, and her consensual style of leadership provided a secure basis for it to move forward. In 2006, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia, and, in 2013 she was invested as a Dame of Honour in the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem Knights Hospitaller, honouring her for her services to the community.

Details

Leonie Christopherson is the second daughter of Frank Pryke and his wife Millicent (née Winchester), born on 4 November 1939 in Sydney. Her father's employment with Mobil Oil meant frequent relocation for the family, and Leonie attended 5 different Anglican schools in 3 states. At 16 years of age, she left school to work in advertising, reaching management level by the age of 18. At 20 she 'married into the army'.

Christopherson believes that 'there is no finer training for public office than having been an army wife'. She married Geoffrey John Christopherson on 18 April 1960, and they have 3 sons. Geoff Christopherson's army service has taken the family to 20 different locations in 5 different countries. Leonie worked when that was convenient, in promotion and advertising, and educational administration. She also moved into community service, acting as honorary secretary to the Army Wives Association in Queensland and initiating a range of support activities.

In the middle 1970s, the family settled in Victoria, and Christopherson completed a BA in Language and Literature at Swinburne University. She was a founding member of the Boroondara Writers' Group. She took an interest in local community affairs, becoming chairman of the Ashburton Community Centre. She also became active in the Women's Sections of the Liberal Party (Victoria), working as a campaign manager in local government elections and serving as vice-chairman of the Central Council of the Women's Sections.

In 1993, Christopherson's success in the backrooms of the Liberal Party inspired Gracia Baylor, then president of the National Council of Women of Victoria, to invite Leonie to join her executive as honorary secretary. When Baylor became president of the National Council of Women of Australia in 1997, Christopherson was appointed to the Board to take charge of communications, redesigning publicity material and editing the NCWA's *Quarterly Bulletin* and other publications. In 2000, the International Council of Women invited her to become editor-in-chief of the *ICW Quarterly Newsletter*, which she published in three languages, printing and distributing it from Australia. She is currently (2013) the ICW advisor for arts and letters.

Leonie Christopherson served as national president of NCWA 2003-2006. At the beginning of her term, the association faced a major funding challenge with the establishment by the Howard government of 4 coalitions representing Australian women to government, and the cessation of direct government funding to women's organisations except for specific projects. The challenge was met by rigorous economies, by sharing projects and funding with one of the new groupings, the Australian Women's Coalition (which NCWA had helped form), and by seeking projects with alternate funding sources. Two of these projects produced booklets that proved to have strong and lasting community impact. *Breathtaking Women: Asthma Awareness and You* was produced by NCWA and the Asthma Foundation of Victoria, and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging and the Asthma Foundation of Western Australia. Funds were also found to produce versions in Greek and Italian. *What Now in Contraceptives?* was published under the imprimatur of NCWA, and financed by commercial interests; it proved a valuable guide for young women to the kinds of contraception available to them.

Christopherson's philosophy of leadership is to 'always lead from behind', valuing the workers 'for the gold they are'. She believes that the most valuable achievement of her period of office was a qualitative change in relations between the national executive and state NCWs: the end of an atmosphere of 'Us and Them'.

Christopherson's army connections have led her into unusual roles for a member of the NCWA. She has worked through the Defence Reserves Support Council, Victoria, to encourage the enrolment of women in the Army Reserves-'not in the crush/kill/destroy capacity but as peacekeepers'. And she has served on the Firearms Appeals Committee, Victoria, the tribunal that hears appeals from people who have lost their gun licences.

Christopherson's publications include as author *What's Politics, Nan?*, a book for children, *Forceful Females*, a play in one act celebrating the centenary of Victorian women's suffrage, and *Teresa Angelica: Nurse Winchester*, a biography of her grandmother. She has also contributed as author to anthologies, *That Once We Lived*, *This Bit Is for Me*, and *The Fabric of Life*, and has edited 2 anthologies, *From a Camel to the Moon*, produced by NCWA for the International Year of the Older Person, and *Valuing Volunteers*, produced for the UN Year of the Volunteer. She has also edited the NCWV's and the AWC's monthly newsletters.

In 2006, Leonie Christopherson was made a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the development of national policies relating to issues and concerns of women, particularly through the National Council of Women of Australia, and to promoting the equal status of all in the community.

In the same year, Christopherson was chosen as one of NCWV's 'celebrated women achievers'. On this occasion, Gracia Baylor described her as 'a wonderfully warm, enthusiastic person who has a great sense of fun and who can handle anybody or any situation, whatever the circumstances may be'. In 2013 she was invested as a Dame of Honour in the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem Knights Hospitaller, honouring her for her services to the community.

Leonie was quoted at a NCWA conference as saying: 'we're here to save the world on issues relating to women and their families. We only have two and a half days to do it, but as women that will not be a problem'.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Stirrers with Style! Presidents of the National Council of Women of Australia and its predecessors, National Council of Women of Australia, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ncwa>

Edited Book

Who's Who of Australian Women, Pearce, Suzannah, 2006

Journal Article

Women Achievers, 1999

Resource

Leonie's C. V., 2008,
<http://christopherson.50webs.com/bio.html>

Notre Dame Medical School Welcomes Women's Council President, The University of Notre Dame Australia,
http://www.nd.edu.au/news/media-releases/2006/20060524_womenscouncil.shtml

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Records of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1924-1990 \[manuscript\]](#)

[NCWA Papers 1984 - 2006](#)

Private Hands (These regards may not be readily available)

[So Proud to be Australian](#)

State Library of Victoria

[National Council of Women of Victoria](#)

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Digital resources



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