Entry type: Person
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Parker, Judith Ann

(1941 - 2021)

Born	19410107, Geelong Victoria Australia
Died	20210410, Brisbane Queensland Australia
Occupation	Counsellor, Educator, Human Rights Advocate, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Judith Parker was an activist for human rights over a period of 50 years, with a special interest in the rights of women and children. She was particularly active in the National Councils of Women, at state, national and international levels, and was only the second Western Australian to hold the national presidency (2000-2003). She was responsible for winning the right to hold the International Council of Women triennial conference in Australia (in Perth) in 2003, the first time Australia had hosted this event. Judith Parker was also very active in the United Nations Association of Australia. In 2004, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia and, in 2009, she was invested as a Dame Commander in the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem Knights Hospitaller, honouring her for her services to women and human rights.

Details

Judith Parker was born in in 1941 in Geelong, Victoria, the youngest of 8 daughters of Amelia and Thomas Sinclair. Her parents were both English-born and raised in Australia. Thomas Sinclair managed a series of building companies, and the family followed the building boom. Parker attended primary schools in Mornington, Victoria, and Telopea Park, ACT, followed by a secondary education at the Canberra Church of England Girls Grammar School, from 1953 to 1957. She remembers as formative experiences the training in logical thinking she received at the Grammar School, and the conversations she overheard between neighbours like Heinz Arndt and Manning Clark.

In 1958, Parker won a scholarship to study at the Melbourne Kindergarten Training College. She supported herself by working night shifts in the Down’s Syndrome ward of the Kew Mental Hospital. She witnessed the transformation in that institution achieved by the reformer, Dr Eric Cunningham Dax, who did away with constraints like straitjackets for patients. From this experience, Parker took away an enduring interest in disability, especially as it affects children. The thesis component of her degree was a study of the effects of parental alcoholism upon small children.

On graduating, Judith Parker worked in a Canberra pre-school, the beginning of 32 years in the ACT education system. When a supervisor refused to endorse her decision to enrol a blind student, she took the issue to the school parents and the press, and eventually won her case. A growing interest in dyslexia led her to take a post-graduate course in special education at The University of Canberra, and later a second post-graduate degree in community counselling. She put these skills to use during her last four years in Canberra by running a special pre-school for elective mutes – children who could not or would not speak. In addition, Parker ran a private counselling service assisting children through grief and loss.

Judith’s marriage in 1962 to George Parker, an officer in the Customs Department, and the births of a son and a daughter, did not check her commitment to community engagement. Across this period, she held executive office in the National Council of Women of ACT, the Canberra Preschool Society, the Canberra Mothercraft Society, the ACT Teachers’ Federation, SPELD ACT (the Dyslexia and Specific Learning Difficulties Association), NALAG ACT (the National Association for Loss and Grief), the ACT Women’s Health Centre, and Anglican Women ACT. As president of Anglican Women, she initiated a series of forums about women’s rights within the church, generating much debate.

Parker made an enduring mark in all of these associations, none more so than the National Council of Women. She attended her first meeting of NCWACT in 1961 as a proxy delegate for the Children’s Book Council, and was ‘blown away’ by the ‘thinking’ women she met, like Alexandra Hasluck and Dame Pattie Menzies. She joined as an associate member, later acting as delegate for the Preschool Society, the Mothercraft Society, SPELD ACT and Anglican Women. She was quickly taken onto the executive and filled a number of roles, including as NCWACT spokesperson to Senate committees. She was also a NCWACT delegate to the

UN Decade for Women Conference in Canberra, and to the ICW Conference in India.

In 1994, George Parker retired, and the family moved to Waikiki in Western Australia. Judith Parker joined the National Council of Women of Western Australia as an associate member, became the state convenor on child and family, and took various positions on the executive including three years as vice-president. Most unusually, she did not hold a state presidency before standing for national president; her term as president of NCWA WA would occur a few years later, in 2005-2007.

When Judith Parker nominated for the national presidency in 1999, the competition was unusually fierce, with three candidates standing for the position; Parker's victory came despite being the youngest of the candidates and by reputation the most radical. She held the presidency of NCWA from 2000 to 2003. She listed amongst the achievements of her presidency the formation in 2002 of the Australian Women's Coalition, one of three coalitions representing Australian women to government; NCWA, having been funded to provide National Secretariat services, was the designated agency for its establishment. Parker also took pride in the establishment of the NCWA Young Women's Consultative Group and, above all, the organisation of the Triennial General Assembly of the International Council of Women in Perth in 2003. To bring the ICW assembly to Australia seemed an impossible dream; the ICW president told Parker that 'the women from Europe are not going to fly to Australia'. Parker made the dream possible by winning a Western Australian award that financed the preparation of the proposal to hold the assembly, by a passionate presentation of the proposal at the 2000 ICW general assembly in Helsinki, and, finally, by persuading the WA Lotteries Commission to make a very large grant towards the running of the assembly. The conference was a great success, confirming Australia's high profile within the International Council of Women.

During the 2003 General Assembly, Judith Parker was elected to the executive of ICW, with the portfolio of managing ICW projects worldwide. Over the next six years she ran 34 projects around the world to better the lives of women and girls. These included building water tanks in villages along the Kokoda Trail in Papua-New Guinea; setting up computer classes for women in Macedonia; establishing a women's collective in Kenya to buy cows and sell their produce; starting a sewing centre in India for widows forced to become prostitutes; again in India supplying artificial limbs for people damaged by war and leprosy; and in South Africa two projects: one working with girl prostitutes whose parents had died of AIDS, the other teaching women to turn recycled materials into hats and bags and brooches for the tourist trade.

In 2005, Parker was an ICW delegate to the 'Beijing+10' conference in New York – the special meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which reviewed the achievements, and more particularly the failures, in the implementation of the Platform for Action set by the Beijing Conference 10 years before. On her return to Perth, Parker accepted the position of convenor of the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations Association of Australia. In 2008, she took on the role of state president of UNAA (WA Division) and, in 2009, she was elected vice-president of the national body. She was active in pressuring successive governments to further the cause of human rights in Australia, in particular to sign the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*.

Parker continued her commitment to local community organisations, taking leading positions in the Rockingham Historical Society, the Rockingham Family History Society, the WA Genealogy Society, the Rockingham Women's Health Centre, and the vestry of St Brendan's Anglican Church, Warnbro. She was also a member of the Telstra Consumer Consultative Committee, representing women's interests, and patron of the Partners of Veterans Association (WA). In 2009, she was the chairperson of the committee Honouring Creative Women in Western Australia.

Judith Parker was the author of several books and numerous articles dealing with the issues of grief and loss, child development and the value of play. In 2004, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia, 'for service to the community through the National Council of Women of Australia and a range of other organisations that benefit women and children'. In the same year, she was awarded the City of Perth Active Citizens Premier's Award. In 2009 she was invested as a Dame in the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Knights Hospitallers, honouring her for her services to women and human rights. In 2012, she was a recipient of the United Nations Australia Peace Award.

On her return from the 'Beijing +10' Conference, Parker told the NCWA that: 'despite these developments all over the world, there continues a reality that women's fundamental human rights are denied. They lack basic education and training; many are unaware of their human rights; and to others rights are unattainable. The challenge is to implement the agreed goals, strategies and commitments made by governments, including the Australian government. To achieve this, non-government organizations, governments and the U.N. must work together'.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

A Peoples Movement for the United Nations, United Nations Association of Australia, Western Australian Branch, 2009, http://www.unaa-wa.org.au/newsletter/1.03/newsletter.htm

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

Newsletter
NCWA Quarterly Bulletin, National Council of Women of Australia, 1999

Winfo, Office for Women's Policy, Western Australia, 2005

Resource Section
A National Osteoporosis Prevention and Management Strategy, Casper, Dr Gabrielle, 2002, http://afmw.org.au/projects/40-a-national-osteoporosis-prevention-and-management-strategy

Archival resources

State Library of Western Australia
National Council of Women of Western Australia records, 1911-2001

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
NCWA Papers 1984 - 2006

Private Hands (These records may not be readily available)
Interview with Judith Parker

Author Details
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Digital resources



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