

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5371

Chong, Patti

(1955 -)

Born	19550101, Batu Pahat Johore Malaysia
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Occupation	Businesswoman, Lawyer, Philanthropist, Solicitor
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Summary

Patti Chong is a Perth based legal practitioner with thirty-five years experience in both private and public practice. Born and educated in Batu Pahat, in the state of Johore, Malaysia, she came to Perth in 1973, studied law at the University of Western Australia and graduated in 1979 with a Bachelor of Jurisprudence and a Bachelor of Laws in 1980. She was the only Chinese woman in her class, one of only four women in total. In 2006 she established her own practice, working in a wide variety of areas. She has a commitment to mentoring young lawyers and legal students.

Patti Chong was interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

Patti Chong is a Perth based legal practitioner with thirty-five years experience in both private and public practice. Born and educated in Batu Pahat, in the state of Johore, Malaysia, she came to Perth in 1973, studied law at the University of Western Australia and graduated in 1979 with a Bachelor of Jurisprudence and a Bachelor of Laws in 1980. She was the only Chinese woman in her class, one of only four women in total.

The tenth of eleven children brought up in a traditional Chinese family, Patti was lucky enough to have a mother who encouraged her to get an education; which would be her 'ticket to freedom'. She suspects that her mother, who was married at fourteen, 'would have been a force to be reckoned with if she had received an education'. Patti did not initially migrate to Australia as a student but once she arrived, she took full advantage of the opportunities offered by the free tertiary education system introduced by the Australian Government in the 1970s.

Proving herself a capable student by studying the pre-law in BA in the first instance, she was accepted into the Faculty of Law in 1977 and completed her degree in 1980. Her ethnicity and gender combined to create a sense of isolation through her undergraduate years. The various support systems available for international students that exist now were non-existent in the 1970s, including services that helped students to develop English language skills. Difficulty in comprehending Australian accented English was hard enough, but time helped to improve her ability in this area. Lack of competence in spoken English was not as easily fixed, and held her back. Early in her career, Patti undertook speech therapy to improve her English annunciation, doing what she could to remove that impediment to her career progression.

Despite having no access to the legal networks available to many of her classmates, Patti found an interesting training environment to complete her articles with the Director of Legal Aid. She was admitted to practice in 1981, and left Legal Aid soon afterwards in 1982, joining the Australian Government Solicitor's (AGS) Office in 1983. Regarded at the time by many corporate lawyers as 'the poor cousin' to the big, commercial firms in Perth the AGS offered Patti a wide range of legal experience and, as it turned out, the opportunity to rub shoulders with some of the big names in Perth legal and business circles.

A particular highlight in 1984 was briefing the Honourable Robert French, then a senior barrister, as part of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Inquiry into the granting of a third TV licence for Perth. What was supposed to be six weeks worth of hearings ended up being closer to eighteen months work, bringing her into contact with notable Perth identities such as Alan Bond, Robert Holmes a Court, Martin Bennett and Carmel McLure. 'It was a highlight of my life,' says Patti. 'The big guns were out and here was little Patti Chong'. Working in that environment gave Patti a sense of her own strengths as a lawyer. Never a 'black letter lawyer', she was a good, 'practical, effects person', a lawyer who established great rapport with juries, using the evidence to create a narrative to present to the court. Furthermore, despite Patti's early problems with English expression, she now regards her capacity for communication to be one of her strengths. Her experience with the AGS and then, in 1992, the newly established Western Australian Office of the State Director of Public Prosecutions gave her the ability to work with people across all social contexts. 'I pride myself,' she says, 'that I can speak to a billionaire like Kerry Stokes, to an intellectual giant like Robert French, to the criminals I see in prison...and the refugees and non-English-speaking migrants. Not everyone has that ability.'

While working in the AGS, Patti met her second husband, Ken Bates, with whom she had three children, but not before she had adopted her brother's three children, in accordance with her sister-in-law's dying wish, after a long, protracted legal battle that saw her appearing in the Malaysian High Court while she took on Australian Immigration authorities. In 1992, she joined the newly established office of the WA Director of Public Prosecutions as a Crown Prosecutor, where she gained broad experience across a whole range of criminal offences in the Supreme, District and Children's courts. Whilst working for the AGS, she was also involved in some important non-criminal matters, including handling asbestosis claims against the government, and handling claims for Australian Government statutory authorities, such as Australia Post.

In November 2004, Patti was appointed the inaugural General Counsel to the Corruption and Crime Commission. She held this appointment until December 2005 when she returned to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. In 2006 she decided to set up her own private practice, where she continues to work. A significant feature of her practice is to offer mentoring and internship opportunities to young lawyers and undergraduate students in their penultimate and final years, hoping that the experience will help them build the networks and opportunities that she missed out on as a young lawyer.

In addition to her professional practice and family responsibilities, Patti has been active in a large number of community causes and organisations. She sat on a number of Law Society committees and was, for a number of years, on the Committee of Women Lawyers Western Australia. On their behalf, she organised the collection of pre-loved clothes from women lawyers and staff for donation to the Banksia Pre-release Centre to assist women prisoners prepare themselves for job interviews, attendance in court and release from prison, by having appropriate clothes for such occasions. She has served as a Vice-President of the W.A. Chinese Chamber of Commerce, a member of the Chung Wah Association, a board member of Constable Care, a board member of Celebrate W.A., a board member of W.A. Ballet, and a trustee of the Simon Lee Foundation. In March 2006 Patti became Patron of the Dyslexia-Speld Foundation and in September 2006 a fund-raising Ambassador for the Leukaemia Foundation.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Australasian Legal Information Institute,
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/>

Article

Newsmaker: Patti Chong, 2005,
<http://msc.uwa.edu.au/?f=82744>

Resource Section

About Patti Chong,
<http://www.pattichonglawyer.com/who-is/>

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

Patti Chong interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project

Author Details

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Digital resources



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