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Owens, Rosemary

Occupation Academic, Lawyer, Volunteer

Summary

Emerita Professor Rosemary Owens AO was formerly Dame Roma Mitchell Chair of Law (2008-2015) and served as Dean of Law (2007 – 2011) at the University of Adelaide. She was appointed as an Officer in the Order of Australia in January 2014 for her distinguished service to the law, as an academic and administrator, to international and national labour organizations, and to women. Professor Owens is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law.

Acknowledged internationally as a leader in her field, Professor Owens has held many significant appointments during her academic career. In 2010 she was appointed to the International Labour Organisation's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), which comprises 20 leading experts from around the world appointed on the basis of their independence and integrity as well as knowledge of their discipline.

Go to 'Details' below to read a reflective essay written by Rosemary Owens for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Rosemary Owens and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

From an early age I knew I would go to university. Looking back now I realize how remarkable that was, as none of my forebears had ever had that privilege. However, my parents, Peter Edward Landers and Patricia Marjorie Irwin believed in the value of a good education and encouraged me from the outset to follow my dreams. After I completed my secondary schooling at Marymount College, SA, I enrolled at the University of Adelaide in a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English and History, and later taking Honours in the latter, and then a Diploma of Education. At that point in time I was destined to become a secondary school teacher. However, after the birth of my three children, and a stint working in a voluntary capacity for Amnesty International, I felt at a crossroads in terms of a return to paid work. With the strong encouragement of my husband, Lewis William Owens, I returned to University to study law. So in conventional terms, I came to law somewhat 'late' in life.

To paraphrase the Beatles' song – 'a career is what happens when you're busy making other plans'. During my student days at Law School I harboured thoughts of going to the bar. With the Angas Parsons Prize for the most meritorious Honours student and a cluster of other academic awards, I thought with hard work I might make a success of it. But the nearer I came to the completion of my LLB studies the more I also realised what a tough choice it would be with three still young children. As luck would have it, a tutorship in law was advertised at The University of Adelaide just after I had completed my LLB. Knowing it offered more flexibility for managing work and family responsibilities, I was overjoyed to be the successful applicant. When I took up the position I thought it might be a short term option before I embarked on my real passion to go to the bar when the children were a little older. Nearly three decades later I retired from my academic position at Adelaide Law School – with the enormous satisfaction of having a career which has been more fulfilling than anything I could ever have planned or even imagined.

A career as a legal academic provided me with a wide array of opportunities. First, amongst them were the teaching and research which are the mainstay of an academic's working life. I always loved teaching – and the chance to engage with some of the brightest young minds has been a great privilege. I taught a wide variety of subjects during my career, but two of the constants were those in the public law area, especially constitutional law, and those dealing with the law regulating work. It was in the latter area that I came to focus my research. One of the greatest privileges of the academic life is the capacity to determine your own research agenda. I was especially interested in law's impact on the working lives of women – the way in which it constructed and structured those lives, and the things that were both visible and invisible to it. Most particularly I was interested in the potential of law to deliver decent work and the impact that has on whole communities. The effects of globalisation, which has wrought enormous transformations in the world, not least the world of work, during the three decades I spent as an academic, meant my research inevitably became also focused on the role and potential of international labour law. Because I never thought of law as something that existed simply in books, in the judgments of courts or on the statute books, but as something that was integral to the lives of people in a community, I also benefitted enormously from the opportunity being an academic gave me to engage with organisations, such as the Working Women's Centre, which exposed me to the operation of the law which often does not make it into the books.

While I never had any particular ambition to take on a senior administrative role at the University, I was deeply honoured to be appointed to the role of Dean of Law at Adelaide Law School at the beginning of 2007. In that role I came to appreciate to a much greater depth the colleagues with whom I worked both in the Law School and also the wider university. The Deanship also provided the opportunity to think more strategically about the role of legal education and the place of the Law School in the University and the wider community. As Dean I served on a number of committees that were comprised predominantly of members of the legal profession – judges, barristers and solicitors – giving me the opportunity to work with new and different groups and to witness first-hand their professionalism and generosity to the Law School and to legal education. During the period as Dean I also travelled widely, not only throughout Australia, but also internationally to other countries, such as Malaysia from where many of our international students came, and to Shanghai, China, as part of the Australian legal delegation to the 2010 Expo. However, administration had never been my passion in life, and the job of Dean is certainly the most difficult one I have ever undertaken.

So at the end of my term as Dean in 2011, I was relieved to be able to step down and back into the role of an ordinary law academic. I continued in that role with the further honour of appointment to a named chair in law, the inaugural Dame Roma Mitchell Chair in Law which I held from 2008 until my retirement in 2015. This award was particularly cherished by me because, of all Australian women in the law, Dame Roma is surely the 'first among equals'. I did not know her personally, but I heard her speak on many occasions. She was always wise. I remember her once saying something to the following effect: 'don't assume there were no disappointments in my career. Everyone has disappointments. The important thing is what you do in overcoming them.' Little wonder that Dame Roma has provided inspiration not only to me, but also to many generations of women in law at The University of Adelaide and beyond.

In 2015 the University of Adelaide bestowed on me the title of Emerita Professor, with attendant benefits such as an office and access to the library and technology services of the University, meaning that the decision to retire from my full-time academic position would not be a leaving of the law and so tinged with no sadness. I continue to conduct research – working with a range of wonderful colleagues both in Australia and around the world.

Furthermore, I continue my work as a member of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), a position to which I was first appointed in 2010

by the ILO's Governing Body. The CEACR is part of the ILO's regular supervisory system, and comprises 20 eminent jurists, judges and academics, from around the world – an extraordinary group of people and I am most humbled by the great honour that has been bestowed upon me in being appointed to work with them. The values and ideals that are at the heart of the ILO continue to be as relevant now as they were when the ILO was first established nearly 100 years ago.

Looking back over my life in the law, I am reminded that (as in the rest of life) there is much that is determined by luck and timing. In my career in the law, I was very lucky and my timing was fortuitous. When I returned to University to study law in 1981 there were no fees and tertiary education was 'free'. Given my family's financial circumstances at the time, I am not sure I would have ever gone back to study if there had been an additional cost burden in the form of fees to do so. When I began my academic career my main interest was constitutional law, but early on a colleague who taught labour law took leave from the University and the responsibility for the subject was transferred to me. It wouldn't then have been my first choice, but it was not long before the place of work in people's lives made me realise its importance and interest – and the move into this area of the law was also the happiest and most rewarding developments in my career.

My life in the law has only been possible because of the encouragement and support of others. First amongst these are my family. As well as support for my education, my parents also instilled in me the importance of hard work ('if a thing's worth doing', my mother would say, 'it's worth doing well') and, more importantly, a passion for social justice and a sense of responsibility to do all in one's power to achieve it. My husband and all my children have encouraged and supported me throughout my career – all of them pulled their weight in the family showing an understanding that all of us, regardless of gender, have a right to have a fulfilling and rewarding career and a responsibility to do work in the home.

In the workplace I have had the support of many – both men and women in my own university and beyond. However, it is true to say that the friendship and support from other women who were themselves also forging impressive careers in the law made things much easier for me. At Adelaide Law School I was fortunate to be in the company of many other strong feminists. Of those who preceded me, the hardships and setbacks they endured made life easier for me and my contemporaries. During my years at Adelaide Law School, extraordinary women, such as Marcia Neave and Hilary Charlesworth, held professorial and leadership positions providing both example and leadership. In the early 1990s a large group of us at Adelaide Law School formed a feminist legal theory reading group. All of us were passionate about achieving equality for women, and the support the members of the group provided in both intellectual and other ways was a significant factor in enabling me to flourish as an academic. Links with other women academics with whom I collaborated, both in Australia and internationally, further encouraged and supported my career. The impressive work of women practitioners in the legal profession, such Justice Robyn Layton and Justice Margaret Nyland, provided further inspiration. Without them all I could never have lived such a wonderful career in the law.

For this reason I see my appointment an Officer in the Order of Australia in January 2014 for 'distinguished service to the law, particularly to legal education as an academic and administrator, to national and international employment and labour organisations, and to women' as a tribute to my family and to all those with whom I have worked and whose support has enriched my life in the law. I am deeply grateful to them all.

Published resources

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

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