Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5644

Kilroy, Debbie

(1961 -)

Born	19610101, Brisbane Queensland Australia
Occupation	Human rights activist, Lawyer, Manager, Solicitor

Summary

Debbie Kilroy OAM is a former prisoner, qualified social worker and practising lawyer. Debbie spent much of her teens in youth prisons, and several years in adult women's prisons, in Queensland. Since its establishment in the 1990s, she has led Sisters Inside Inc, an organisation that advocates for the human rights of criminalised women in Queensland. She was admitted as a Legal Practitioner in Queensland in 2007 – the first former prisoner to achieve this.

Go to 'Details' below to read an essay written by Suzi Quixley about Debbie Kilroy for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

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

Debbie Kilroy's commitment to being an agent of positive change is reflected throughout her professional career – initially as a Social Worker and Gestalt Therapist; and, since 2007, as a Legal Practitioner. She currently divides her time between being CEO of Sisters Inside and Principal Lawyer at Kilroy & Callaghan Lawyers. Debbie is Australia's leading voice on the human rights of criminalised women, and has actively contributed internationally through a variety of United Nations forums (where Sisters Inside has NGO Consultative Status) and lecture tours of the USA and Canada.

Raised in a solid working class family in Kedron in Brisbane's north, Debbie had a rebellious streak from a young age. As she moved into puberty, she became a handful for her bewildered parents – wagging school, disputing everything, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and disappearing for days at a time. Debbie's life changed when, at age 14, she was imprisoned – not for a criminal offence, but for a four-week psychiatric assessment which, her parent hoped, would identify a 'solution' to her 'uncontrollable behaviour'. She was now under the control of the State. Hence followed a revolving door of imprisonment, progressive criminalisation and brief periods of freedom throughout her teens.

From the outset, Debbie was aware of the deep injustice of her initial incarceration which continued to be reinforced by a litany of abuses within the youth 'justice' system. This fuelled her increasing anger and, ultimately, her engagement with violence and crime.

By age 18, Debbie was a mother herself and deeply entrenched in a violent domestic relationship. But, she did manage to stay outside the adult criminal justice system for several years. During this time, she left this violent relationship and ultimately married Joe Kilroy (to whom she is still married) in 1986. They had a further child together. Her break from the system came to an abrupt halt when Debbie was charged with drug offences and sentenced to 6 years in prison (of which she served 3 years).

During this, her last period of imprisonment, Debbie became determined to improve the situation of women and children with lived prison experience. She began training as a social worker whilst in prison and following her release in 1992 set out to build an organisation to respond to the needs and human rights of criminalised women and affected children – Sisters Inside. The organisation exists to advocate for the human rights of criminalised women and respond to gaps in the services available to these women and their children. Since it was established in the early 1990s, Sisters Inside has grown from a largely voluntary group to a community-based organisation which provides services to many Queensland women and children (both inside and outside prison) each year. During this time, Debbie has completed her legal training and a Graduate Diploma in Forensic Mental Health. She was ultimately admitted as a Legal Practitioner in Queensland in 2007 – the first former prisoner to achieve this.

Debbie's lived experienced drives the outspoken voice of Sisters Inside on issues affecting criminalised families. She is a passionate contributor to public debates and policy development impacting the human rights of criminalised women and affected children and issues of public safety.

She has been a tireless advocate for the rights of disadvantaged women and children on a wide variety of issues including violence, homelessness, racism, mental health, substance abuse, poverty, child protection, sexual assault, systemic failings and imprisonment. She is driven to reduce the criminalisation and imprisonment of women and children; address the serious over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at all levels of the criminal justice system; and mitigate the impact of mothers' imprisonment on their children.

Debbie has also contributed widely to collaborative legal and civil rights activities, including long term service as an Executive Member of the Queensland Council of Civil Liberties (since 2001) and ex-officio Chairperson of the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (since 1997). She has served as a member of the Criminal Law Committee, Law Council of Australia; Criminal Law Committee, Queensland Law Society; Equal Rights Alliance; Australian Women Again Violence Alliance; National Coronial Reform, Federation of Community Legal Centres; and Criminal Justice Network. She has also been appointed to working groups at a state and national level in areas including remand reduction, drug policy, research, Indigenous issues, crime reduction, and homelessness. Debbie has also contributed to international forums, including meetings convened by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to develop draft UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders; sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women; and conferences on crime prevention and criminal justice.

Debbie's achievements have been recognised through a variety of honours and awards, many of which were awarded to a former prisoner for the first time. These include being a shortlisted Queensland nomination for Australian of the Year (2016), Churchill Fellowship (2014), Emergent Woman Lawyer of the Year (2010), Peace Women Award (2010), Australian Human Rights Medal (2004), and Order of Australia Medal (2003). She was also the subject of an ABC Australian Story (2004), biography (2005), Archibald Award entry (2005) and portrait by Ai Wei Wei (2015).

Published resources

Resource
List of resources, Sisters Inside Inc, 2016,
http://www.sistersinside.com.au/resources.htm

List of speeches, Sisters Inside Inc, 2016,
http://www.sistersinside.com.au/speeches.htm

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

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