

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5649

Bennett, Joan

(1942 - 2024)

Born 19420826, Home Hill Queensland Australia

Died 20240927, Brisbane Queensland Australia

Occupation Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Joan Bennett was a trailblazing solicitor who established the first law firm in Brisbane in which one of the founding partners was female. She established several successful law firms and was prominent in the Council of the Queensland Law Society.

Details

Trailblazing solicitor Joan Bennett was born on 26 August 1942 in Home Hill, near Townsville. She had a close relationship with her father, Charles Beames, with whom she shared a brief professional association. Despite the set-back of rheumatic fever, Joan was both socially and academically outstanding at school. She was a prefect who won several scholarship awards and numerous prizes for languages. The general expectation was that Joan would marry and have children. Consequently, she did not feel pre-destined for a career in the law, despite her father and cousin being prominent lawyers. She enrolled in an Arts degree in 1961 at the University College of Townsville (later to become James Cook University). In her first year of university, Joan attended the North Queensland Law Association annual dinner with her father where she met Beryl Donkin, a trailblazer who became a generous mentor to Joan. After her first year, Joan transferred to the University's Brisbane campus to study law.

Joan delayed her degree between 1964 and 1966, when she married medical practitioner Geoffrey Bennett and had two children. In 1966 she commenced Articles of Clerkship with her father in his practice. Joan's father sadly passed away in a car accident in 1967. Joan's mother suffered a breakdown following her husband's death and moved in with Joan and the young boys. After failing subjects, Joan made the difficult decision to leave her children in her mother's care and move to Brisbane to complete her degree. She was strongly supported by Kerry Copley – a fellow student who went on to become a Queen's Counsel.

As a woman, Joan was discriminated against at university. On occasion Joan, along with trailblazer Quentin Bryce were removed from cases that were "too sensitive" for a woman. Yet when Joan was admitted as a solicitor on 16 December 1969, she was admitted along with several other women including Elizabeth Nosworthy and Elizabeth Gill.

Joan tried to seek employment with Crown Law in Brisbane, but was denied amidst comments that women were not welcome in the firm. As a result, Joan decided that her only option was to set up her own practice. In 1970 she went into partnership with a colleague from university, establishing the first law firm in Brisbane in which one of the founding partners was female. The same year as Joan established her practice, her son was diagnosed with leukaemia. He tragically died the following year.

Joan's firm was successful but the partnership came to an end and Joan went into partnership with a former clerk and was joined by other partners in Bennett and Associates. Her firm quickly became one of the largest suburban practices in Brisbane. In 1984, Joan left the firm and established a practice in Mt Gravatt where she practised alone from 1992. Joan's sister, Anne was a great of support to her throughout the practices, working as Joan's bookkeeper since 1972.

Joan was a foundation member of the Women Lawyers Association of Queensland in 1978 and remained a member since that time, serving as social secretary in 1987-88, and in other capacities on the executive committee for a number of years. Joan was also an inaugural member of the Zonta Club, an organisation that advances the status of professional women. As women's issues officer in 1978-79, Joan helped to organise and run the first major women's forum in Brisbane.

In addition, Joan was a member of the Legal Practitioners' Admissions Board, a director for the Queensland Law Foundation and a member of the LawAsia Conference 2005. Her commitment to continuing legal education saw her chair and participate in the Queensland Law Society Symposium Committee over a number of years. In 1998, with the encouragement of existing Council member and friend Patricia Conroy, Joan nominated for and was elected as one of few women on the Council of the Queensland Law Society and was Vice-President of the Queensland Law Society's Southern District Law Association.

Published resources

Book Section

Joan Bennett, Moye, Helen, 2005

Site Exhibition

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

Author Details

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