Entry type: Person
Entry ID: PR00196

Forde, Mary Marguerite Leneen

(1935 -)

Born	19350512, Ottawa Ontario Canada
Occupation	Commissioner, Governor, Lawyer, Solicitor, University Chancellor

Summary

Mary Marguerite Leneen Forde was admitted as a solicitor in Queensland in 1970, one of only six women in her graduating class. After a distinguished legal career, she was appointed Governor of Queensland a position she held from 1992 until 1997. When she was appointed, she was only the second woman to hold the position of governor of an Australian state and the first to take on the role in Queensland. In 1998 Forde was appointed to Chair the Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions. Her report was handed down in May 1999.

Go to ‘Details’ below to read an essay written by Leneen Forde for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Leneen Forde in May 2015 for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project, and is reproduced with permission.

The Honourable Ms Leneen Forde AC was born Mary Marguerite Leneen Kavanagh in Ottawa, Canada in 1935. She attended St Joseph’s Girls Primary School and Lisgar Collegiate, Ottawa, and received a Diploma of Medical Technology from Ottawa General Hospital in 1953.

Moving to Brisbane in Queensland, Australia, in 1954, she secured work as a haematologist at the then General Hospital. In 1955, she married Gerry Forde whose father was the Australian High Commissioner to Canada (and previously Prime Minister of Australia for a week). Her husband ran a successful legal practice but after battling cancer for over a year, he passed away on Christmas Eve in 1966.

Following her husband’s death, Ms Forde commenced full-time studies for a degree in Law at the University of Queensland, graduating with a Bachelor of Law in 1970. This achievement was particularly notable not least because Ms Forde was at that time widowed with five children but also because she was one of only six women in her graduating class of 170 students.

Admitted as a solicitor in 1970, Ms Forde was later employed by Brisbane-based law firm Cannan & Petersen to undertake estate work. Given her own experiences, she brought great empathy to the position. And because she was a widow, she was a role model for female clients, most of whom were not used to making decisions about their lives. She became a partner in the firm in 1974.

As a solicitor with 22 years of practice in Queensland, Ms Forde demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the continuing development and promotion of her profession. She was a Senior Counsellor and member of the Solicitors’ Disciplinary Tribunal of the Queensland Law Society; a Committee member of the International Bar Association, Estate Division; and served as Chair of the Queensland Supreme Court Probate Rules Review Committee. She was also Chair of the Social Security Tribunal, and was the first Convenor of the Queensland Women’s Consultative Committee.

In 1973, Ms Forde became the founding President of the Queensland Women Lawyers Association where she was instrumental in advancing and promoting women within the legal profession and combating gender discrimination in this occupational group. The Association and its members also supported Justice for Juveniles, the establishment of the Youth Advocacy Centre, changes to inheritance laws for defacto partners, and supported women victims of domestic violence.

In 1971, Ms Forde became a member of Zonta, a world-wide organization of executives and professionals working to support and advance the status of women through service and advocacy. In 1990, she was elected as Zonta’s International President – the first Australian woman to hold this position – and presided over a board comprising members from Belgium,

Switzerland, India, the USA, New Zealand and Hong Kong. Her leadership style was to discover what each member had best to offer and to encourage it.

Following a distinguished legal career, Ms Forde was appointed the 22nd Governor of Queensland in 1992 – the first ever woman to be appointed to this role in Queensland, and the second only in any Australian State. During her five years as Governor, Ms Forde travelled the State extensively to meet ordinary Queenslanders, realising that she could use her role as an important conduit between communities and the Government. She was renowned for her tremendous capacity to communicate with people from all walks of life.

In 1998, Ms Forde was appointed Chair of the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions. She described this appointment as one of the most significant contributions that she has made to public life. The Forde Inquiry heard evidence from over three hundred people who had been abused in orphanages and detention centres across the state. Having gained the trust of those who came forward to tell their stories, Ms Forde was profoundly affected by what she heard. She was pleased that having to confront the terrible things that happened to them as children had enabled some of them to move forward with their lives.

The forty-two recommendations of the final report set out the ground rules for major changes in legislation, policy and practice in child protection. The community was well-served by the appointment of Ms Forde, who brought to the inquiry not only an astute legal mind but also her notable humanity and compassion. In response to the report, the Queensland Government established the Forde Foundation to assist persons who had been a ward of the state or had been a child resident at a Queensland institution.

In June 2000, Ms Forde was elected as the fourth Chancellor of Griffith University. She was the first female Chancellor of the University and the University's longest serving Chancellor having served for fifteen years. In this role she provided outstanding leadership and guidance to the governing body of the University and to management in developing the University's strategic direction and ensuring good governance. In addition to chairing the Griffith Council, she served on a range of key University committees, officiated at numerous graduation ceremonies in Australia and overseas, and was a wonderful ambassador for the University at a long list of international, national, and local events. Ms Forde also contributed to developing and enhancing the University's relationships with industry and with government, and forged strong links with local communities and organisations.

Active in Australian and Queensland community life, Ms Forde has served as the Chair of the Forde Foundation Advisory Board, President of Scouts Australia, Chair of the National Defence Reserve Support Council, and as a member of the Queensland Ballet Board. She has also served as Patron of 'Rosies', the Karuna Hospice Service, the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame (Alice Springs), the Alzheimer's Association of Australia (Darling Downs and South West Inc) and the Foundation for Survivors of Domestic Violence.

The diversity of her interests and community involvement, together with her boundless energy, are also apparent in the list of her other accomplishments. Significant appointments have included Chair of the Board of the Office of Economic Development for the City of Brisbane, Director of the Queensland Small Business Corporation, Director of the Queensland Institute of Medical Research Trust, and a member of the Brisbane Institute, the Institute of Modern Art and the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties. She was also made an Honorary Ambassador, City of Brisbane and Office of Economic Development.

All these organisations have benefited from Ms Forde's support and expertise, and they have also benefited from her impeccable reputation – for honesty, for integrity and for her unshakeable commitment to social justice, equity and fairness, particularly for women and for the disadvantaged in the community.

Ms Forde's significant service to the community has been extensively recognised. In 1991 she was named Queenslander of the Year; in 1993 she was awarded a Companion of the Order of Australia 'in recognition of service to the law, to improving the status of women and to economic and business development'; she was a recipient of a Centenary Medal in 2003; and in 2007 she was the recipient of a Queensland Greats award.

Ms Forde holds the honorary degree of "Doctor of the University" from Griffith University, the Australian Catholic University, the University of the Sunshine Coast, and the Queensland University of Technology. She has also been awarded a "Doctor of Letters" by the University of Queensland.

Born Leneen Kavanagh in Ottawa, Canada, Leneen worked as a medical laboratory technician in Ontario and studied part-time for a Bachelor of Arts before moving to Australia in 1954. In 1955, she married Francis Gerard Forde, the son of the Right Honorable Francis Michael Forde, former Prime Minister of Australia and High Commissioner to Canada. Forde worked in the Haematology Department of Royal Brisbane Hospital for two years prior to full-time legal study following her husband's death in 1966.

She graduated a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Queensland in 1970 and from 1971 was employed as a solicitor at Cannan and Peterson. In 1973, Leneen became the founding President of the Queensland Women Lawyers' Association. In 1974, she was made a partner at Cannan and Peterson and that same year, represented Queensland in the Australian Women Lawyers' Association.

In 1992, Leneen Forde was appointed Governor of Queensland, a position she held until 1997.

In 1998, she was appointed Chair of the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, a position she held for one year.

She has been involved with the following groups and organisations:

Chair Defence Reserves Support Council 2002-06
Forde Foundation Advisory Board. 2000-07
Board Member Starlight Foundation since 2008
All Hallows School Council (Queensland) since 2008
Member Board Governor's Queensland Community Foundation since 2008
President Scouts Australia 1997-2003
Vice-President Scouts Australia since 2003
Board Member Queensland Ballet since 2000
Chair Queensland Government Forde Foundation 2000-06,
Brisbane
College Theology Board 1999-2000
St Leo's College Board 1998-2000
Brisbane City Council Arts and Environment Trust 1999-2000
Commissioner Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions 1998-99
Patron Forde Foundation since 2007
Chaired Queensland Supreme Court Probate Rules Review Committee 1988-1990
National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame since 1999
President of the Scout Association of Australia
Convened Queensland Women's Consultative Council 1991-1992
Chaired Office of Economic Development for the City of Brisbane 1991-1992
Member Solicitors' Disciplinary Tribunal – Queensland Law Society
Member Queensland University of Technology Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee
Member Queensland University of Technology Council
Member Queensland Small Business Corporation
Member. Women Chiefs of Enterprise International since 1989
Member Zonta Club Brisbane Inc. since 1971
Member Zonta International Foundation Board 1986-1992
President Zonta International 1990-92
Chaired Social Security Appeals Tribunal during 1980's
Member Queensland Law Society since 1971
Member of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties during 1970's
Founder Queensland Women Lawyers Association 1976
recipient Centenary Medal 2003
Queenslander of Year Award 1991
Woman of Substance Award Queensland Girl Guides' Association 1990
Paul Harris Fellow Rotary Club Brisbane 1990

Published resources

Book
Women Who Win, White, AnneMarie, 2002

Resource Section
Leneen Forde (b1935), National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame, 2000,
http://www.pioneerwomen.com.au/leadfound.htm

Leneen Forde, Supreme Court of Queensland Library, 2003,
http://www.sclqld.org.au/schp/exhibitions/witl/biographies/forde.htm

Edited Book
The International Who's Who of Women: A biographical reference guide to the most eminent, talented and distinguished women in the world, Sleeman, Elizabeth (ed.), 2002

Report
Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, Forde, Leneen, 1999,
http://www.communityservices.qld.gov.au/community/redress-scheme/documents/forde_comminquiry.pdf

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

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

Book Section
Leneen Forde, Currie, Susan, 2005

Archival resources

John Oxley Library, Manuscripts and Business Records Collection
Wives of former governors of Queensland : inaugural Janet Irwin endowed lecture / delivered by Her Excellency Mrs. Leneen Forde, A.C., Governor of Queensland, 13 August 1994

31096 Leneen Forde Papers 1990s

Author Details
Leneen Forde (with Lee Butterworth)

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