

## Heather Whittaker – almost 50 years in Central Australia

The Women's Lawyers Association has decided to broaden the focus of the articles that appear in its monthly *Balance* column — not only in scope but also in place. We will therefore treat readers to a variety of law related subjects and a number of guest writers.

It was determined that the articles would relate to the theme of the Annual Patron's drinks "Indigenous Woman and the Law". Although the subject of this column, Heather Whittaker is not an indigenous woman or a lawyer, she is known to many of us as the librarian at the Central Australian Legal Aid Service for the past six years and has spent many years working in indigenous communities with indigenous people.

Her story is told by Britt Lardelli, an immediate past secretary of NTWLA who completed a work exchange program in Vanuatu before returning to the Territory and joining Budrikis and McNamara in Alice Springs.

After 20 years in the Territory Britt is proud of the Territory and keen to promote the historical and social fabric of the people that built the Territory of today. And with that in mind she focusses on Heather, who despite her birth in Melbourne can claim to be a "true territorian". Heather is still actively involved in her red centre community notwithstanding that she is 70 years young.

Heather is known to many practitioners and her story of forbearance and persistence is an inspiration to all professional women carving out a living in the Territory.

### Heather's story

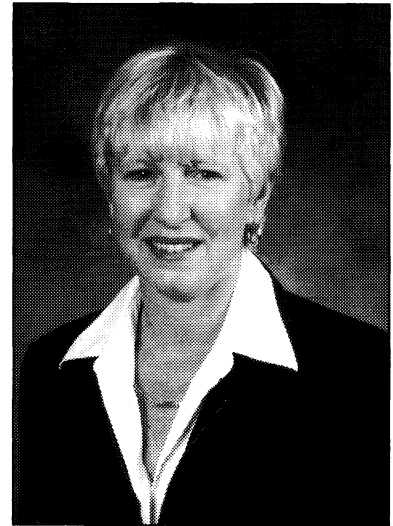
Heather Whittaker is 70 years old and works as the librarian at the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, a position that she has occupied for the past six years.

Having spent almost half a decade in Alice Springs and in places within a mere 500 mile radius, Heather has many stories to tell about what it is like working and living in Central Australia.

Her journey to Central Australia began in 1955. As a single 25 year old, Heather set off from Melbourne with a group of friends to "check out" the centre of Australia. In Melbourne, Heather had worked at the stock exchange and for Trans Australian Airlines at the Melbourne Airport. However, tired of the city and looking for some place else to discover, Heather and a group of friends set off in a Hawthorn Taxi Truck. En route, the taxi was hailed down by a gentleman insistent on having certain papers delivered by the passengers to the nearest Taxation Office. The group also passed through lands close to the Maralinga atomic testing sites. The happy group well remembered the anxious man and his tax problems, the dirt road from Adelaide to Alice Springs but were oblivious to the testing going on at Maralinga.

Heather's first job in Central Australia was with Connellan Airlines where she worked in the hangar as a bookkeeper for three years. The same hangar is now part of a display at the Araluen Cultural Precinct in Alice Springs which also houses several historical aero planes.

In 1958 the Commonwealth Government advertised for persons under the age of 45 years to train as teachers in Sydney and then come to the Territory and work on "settlements" (as they were then called). Wishing to stay in the Territory, Heather did the necessary study and returned to take on her first assignment. The first post offered was Darwin which was kindly refused. Heather was then posted to Papunya community, north west of Alice Springs. Papunya was a new settlement in Central Australia. At the time of her posting, the Pintupi people were being exposed for the first time to European settlements as they came in from living in the desert where they were untouched by colonisation and white settlement. Her first classroom was a Nissan hut with louvre windows, cement floors and mats and a blackboard on a stand. There were 20 - 30 students in the first year.



*Jacqueline Presbury, NTWLA President*

Communication was difficult as Heather did not speak the indigenous language of the area. The Commonwealth government expressly forbade their teachers learning indigenous languages. Policy dictated that Aboriginal people were to be assimilated and learning indigenous languages was inconsistent with achieving the outcome of assimilation.

After Papunya Heather worked for 12 months at Amoonguna community and at Banka Banka station, 100 kilometres north of Tennant Creek. The Banka Banka classroom was a red corrugated iron shed. On one side was the meathouse and on the other, the store. As a woman engaged to be married (a proposal made at Papunya and accepted) Heather was stripped of her permanent employee status with the Commonwealth government as policy (of the time) dictated that women could not be employed and be married at the same time. After a battle with the Commonwealth and two years as a "temporary" teacher at Amoonguna community and then in Alice Springs, Heather got a job at Jay Creek (Standley Chasm). Her time at Jay Creek, which involved a 50 kilometre drive each day, was marked by a scarcity of water and a propensity of bushfires. On one occasion a school student kicked hot ashes into a wurlly wurlly which started a bushfire that could be seen from the top of Billy Goat Hill in Alice Springs.

For a ten year period in the 1960s and 1970s Heather ran the hospital school in Alice Springs. The location and mode

# Heather Whittaker – almost 50 years in Central Australia

Continued from page 9

of classrooms changed regularly, They included old nursing quarters, a caravan and for 12 months classrooms located within the psychiatric unit. The task of hospital teacher was a difficult one. Common childhood diseases included meningitis and tuberculosis, illnesses which often meant prolonged stays in hospital.

Eventually Heather sought new horizons and changed careers. After two years studying librarianship in Sydney, Heather returned to set up the library at Saddadeen High School, the predecessor to the Centralian College. Heather retired about six years ago, only to take on the job as the librarian at Aboriginal Legal Aid.

Heather still works as a relief teacher in remote communities. Her other teaching posts have included Traeger Park School (now closed) Docker River, Areyonga, Kintore and Mt. Liebig. For the past four - five years Heather has also worked for the electoral commission, allowing her to travel to the most remote places for polling.

In the past 46 years, Heather has been involved in a wide variety of hobbies and community activities, including setting up the Camera Club, Bushwalking Clubs and Social Tennis in Alice Springs. Heather has also volunteered for St John's Ambulance.

Heather's advice to the travellers and settlers in Alice Springs is simple. Don't panic when stuck in the desert, there is not much you can do about it. If you get stuck at night, go to sleep and wait until morning. Heather's advice on the benefits of Alice Springs and Central Australia include the life long friendships formed with Aboriginal people, in particular friends she has made at Kintore, the lack of pollution, the peace and quiet, wide open spaces and ancient landforms.

## Events past and present

The Annual Patron's Reception for NTWLA was held on 15 June 2001. The theme Was "Indigenous Women and the Law" and we were privileged to share in the experiences of Libby Carney, Angela Dowling and Colleen Burns.

Libby Carney is an Indigenous Legal Worker with Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS) for the Aboriginal Women's Outreach Project. Libby, her husband and her children live at Belyuen Community, where her husband is employed as an Aboriginal Health Worker. She has been resident in the Territory for two years.

Angela Dowling is also employed as an Indigenous Legal Worker with TEWLS. She has been employed with TEWLS since 1996. Prior to that she was employed with NAALAS as a legal secretary and a field officer for six and a half years. Angela has lived in the Territory all her life. Both Angela and Libby are passionate about assisting indigenous people in the areas of family law and victims rights.

Colleen Burns is the Aboriginal Support Co-ordinator for the Department of Public Prosecutions and as such assists in explaining the Court processes to indigenous people involved in such processes.

## Australian Women Lawyers (AWL) National quarterly meeting in Perth

This was held in Perth on 23 June 2001. Kate Halliday is the NTWLA representative but is presently in East Timor. Melanie Little is fulfilling this role in her absence but was unable to attend. Therefore, Frieda Evans, NTWLA secretary attended.

Discussions included sponsorship for the national executive and the need for a quarterly newsletter. AWL and the



Heather Whittaker

Victorian Women Lawyers are currently involved in a test case with the Australian Taxation Office concerning the charitable status of AWL, however, any determination is some time away.

Daryl Williams, the Commonwealth Attorney General, joined the Board of AWL for lunch. Some issues discussed included the sterilisation of intellectually disabled women, judicial appointments (including part time appointments) and access to legal services for people (particularly women) living in rural and remote areas.

The AGM of AWL will be held in Canberra on 13 October as part of the 32nd Australian Legal Convention.

## LAW SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER

The Law Society annual dinner will be held on  
Saturday 25 August.

Where: Ten Litchfield Street

From: 7pm - midnight

Cost: \$65 per head

(including three course meal, pre-dinner drinks)

Special guest performance by "Get Frocked"

