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## Cover story:

# Sisters in Law take to the courts

Five women presided over Darwin courts for the first time in March, assembling the largest ever female jurist contingent to sit in one place in the Territory. Justice Sally Thomas, Chief Magistrate Jenny Blokland, Acting Magistrate Tanya Fong Lim and Magistrates Melanie Little and Sue Oliver, were referred to as the “five sisters in law” in an *NT News* report on the day of the court, 27 March.

NT Women Lawyers Association president, Georgia McMaster said, “It was a proud day for the Territory, as well as for lawyers from both Venus and Mars.

“At a rough calculation between the five ‘beaks’, there are at least 100 years of practising experience, 11 children, and they’ve circum-navigated the Territory enough times to go to the moon and back,” she said.

“When one considers the legal achievements together with their personal achievements, it is almost impossible to see



*Acting Magistrate Tanya Fong Lim, Magistrate Sue Oliver, Magistrate Melanie Little, Chief Magistrate Jenny Blokland and Justice Sally Thomas*

how there was (or is) any time left for each of them to enjoy themselves.

“But they’re all pretty happy

with their “lot”, I suspect, or they wouldn’t be where they are today,” Ms McMaster said.

## The Territory’s Sisters in Law

Profiles courtesy of the Department of Justice

### Hon Justice Sally Thomas AM

Sally Gordon Thomas was appointed as a Justice of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1992.

At the time of her appointment, Justice Thomas was the Chief Magistrate of the Northern Territory, having held that position since 1986. Prior to that, Justice Thomas had been a magistrate in the Northern Territory. She had been a partner in a legal firm in Sydney before coming to the Territory in 1978.

Justice Thomas was a Mem-

ber of the Northern Territory University Council from 1989 to 2003. In 2003 the Northern Territory University changed its name and became part of the expanded Charles Darwin University. Justice Thomas was appointed to the Council of Charles Darwin University and elected Deputy Chancellor, a position she still holds.

Her Honour was Chairman of the Legal Aid Commission from 1990 to 1996. She was Chairman of the Northern Territory Winston Churchill Fellowship Committee from 1992 to 2004. In 2004 she was appointed Deputy National Chairman

– Fellowship, of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and currently holds this position.

Justice Thomas is patron of numerous organisations and was an Honorary Colonel in the NT Cadet Corp of the Australian Army from 1993 to 1997.

In June 2000, Her Honour was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia.

### Jenny Blokland, SM, Chief Magistrate

Jenny Blokland has a Bachelor of Laws and Master of Laws from the University of Adelaide.

She has worked as a Barrister and Solicitor, General Counsel for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Dean of Law (Faculty of Law, NTU), Acting principal legal officer for the Australian Legal Aid Office, Solicitor for the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and Barrister at James Muirhead Chambers.

Ms Blokland has also been a member of the NT Criminal Code Review Committee, NT Legal Aid Commission Review Committee, NT Bar Association and NT Law Society. She is also past president of the Criminal Lawyers Association (NT).

Since becoming a magistrate in 2002, Ms Blokland has been a guest speaker at several workshops, launches and functions; developed (and continues to develop) the Community Court in Nhulunbuy; presented papers on alternative sentencing and the CREDIT court; and continues to regularly give talks to school students on the courts and other legal subjects.

As a legal academic she taught criminal law, evidence and public international law, and published in those areas as well as in the areas of Indigenous people and the law and legal issues concerning women. Previously she was a part-time judicial registrar in the (Federal) Industrial Relations Court of Australia and Land Council Nominee to the Community Living Areas Tribunal. She is current Chair of the NT branch and member of the Board of the Winston Churchill Fellowship Committee.

## **Tanya Fong Lim, Acting Magistrate**

Tanya Fong Lim has a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Economics from the University of Adelaide.

She was senior solicitor at Poveys and Cridlands, working in personal injuries, civil litigation, workers compensation and some family law matters. Her work as senior solicitor at Waters James McCormack included work health, personal injuries and probate matters.

She is the Judicial Registrar in the Local Court and Work Health Court. Her duties are to preside over all prehearing/ conciliation conferences, training staff, presiding over interlocutory applications, small claims hearings and crimes victims assistance hearings.

The Judicial Registrar also consults with the Chief Magistrate on the new procedures and practice directions and provides advice to Civil and Criminal registry staff regarding procedures.

Ms Fong Lim has been a member and past council member of the Law Society NT.

As well as acting magistrate, Ms Fong Lim has also been a previous acting deputy coroner.

## **Melanie Little, SM**

Melanie Little studied law at the University of Adelaide and was admitted to the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1985.

She undertook a Masters of Philosophy in Social Justice at Stirling University in Scotland in 1992/1993.

She worked in a variety of legal positions and organisations in South Australia, including private practice and Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement until 1996.

In 1996 Ms Little moved to the Northern Territory. Since that time she has worked at the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, undertaken various locum positions and operated her own legal practice and was president of the NT Women Lawyers Association for two

years. She was appointed a Magistrate in 2003.

She was Editor in Chief of the Northern Territory Law Reports from 1997 to 2004 and has been an active member of a wide range of community and legal organisations.

Since her appointment as a Magistrate she has been based in Alice Springs.

## **Sue Oliver, SM**

Sue Oliver has a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Adelaide and a Master of Laws from the College of William and Mary in the US.

She began her professional career as a legal adviser to the Territory Government before moving to the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. She is a past NT Legal Aid Commissioner and has practised law in the private and public sectors.

Ms Oliver was the first Dean of the faculty of Law, Business and Arts at what was then the Northern Territory University. She was the acting Executive Director for Legal Services and the Director of Legal Policy in the Territory's Department of Justice.

As an academic, her teaching areas included contract, employment law and defamation. As Director of Legal Policy she developed the Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation and the reform of the Criminal Code, including the reform of mandatory life sentencing.

The organisations to which Ms Oliver has been a member include the NT Legal Aid Commission Review Committee, the Council of Australian Law Deans and the South-East Asian Law Advisory Committee. She was also on the council of the Law Society NT.