

# COMMITTEE NEWS AND UPDATES

## Northern Territory Women Lawyers Association (NTWLA)

The NTWLA was once again pleased to be able to sponsor a young female lawyer to attend the Australian Women Lawyers (AWL) 6th National Conference which was hosted in Perth from 8– 10 April 2016 at the Crown. We were also fortunate to be able to sponsor attendance at the Gala Dinner for a second young female lawyer, Kendra Frew. I would like to thank everyone who attended our fundraising event for International Women's Day this year, including particularly William Forster Chambers for co-hosting the event—without the support of our members and the wider profession, we would not have been able to provide this sponsorship opportunity.

This year our lucky sponsee was a sole practitioner from Alice Springs, René Laan. René's practice, Libertas Legal and Consulting Services, is the only firm in Alice Springs focusing on employment law. René received her law degree after a career in community development and qualified for the sponsorship on the basis of her being admitted for less than five years. The committee was delighted to award the sponsorship to a lawyer from the Centre. The whole committee thought that Ms Laan showed initiative and a strong commitment to the Territory and, as a professional working independently in a small community, we believed she would benefit greatly from the learning and networking opportunity.

I can attest to the value of the conference, having been lucky enough to attend along with our Vice-President, Bronwyn Haack, founding AWL member, Merran Short, and four other wonderful female Territory lawyers. Indeed, I have to say that the NT attendance rate ratio blew all other jurisdictions out of the water!

After the conference I sat down with René and asked her about the conference and what she took away from it. Here is what she had to say:

**Prior to becoming a lawyer you spent twenty years in community development, tell us about your transition between the two fields.** I have had a fairly trouble-free transition into law from community development and from there into private legal practice. Maybe it is because I was a mature female student entering a new career, maybe it is because I am used to battling the odds in the community development field or maybe it is because I had a thorough grounding and full-on immersion into the ins and outs of a legal career during my time with Povey Stirk Lawyers & Notaries here in Alice Springs. I feel humbled and grateful for those women who have gone before me in the world of law.



**Roslyn Chenoweth**  
President  
NTWLA



In this life, you need to know what you are running from and what you are running to. I ran from my first career of twenty years in the community development field to a second career in law and found myself face-to-face with exactly the same issues I had been dealing with as a community development worker. These are accessibility to opportunities and services and equality for all.

**What did receiving the NTWLA sponsorship mean for you?**

First, winning the scholarship from the NTWLA enabled me financially to attend the conference, which I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. Secondly, I felt privileged to attend the AWL Conference in Perth because it meant I was able to spend the whole weekend in the company of a roomful of amazing women, who just happened to be legal practitioners.

**Tell us about the Conference and what the highlights were for you?**

There were ninety-six women barristers, lawyers from big and small firms, magistrates, government lawyers, in-house counsel and community legal organisations from all over the country at the conference. There were also about three men present. The speakers ranged from the Law Reform Commission, professors, acclaimed authors and the Chief Justice of the Family Law Court of Australia. Senator Penny Wong spoke at the conference dinner. The speakers covered topics such as resilience, the non-tax deductible nature of childcare, Aboriginal recognition in the Australian Constitution and an update on the *National Attrition and Re-engagement Study (NARS) Report*, commissioned by the Law Council of Australia. All of their messages had the undertone of 'Don't give up, there is still a lot to do'. For me, the conference reminded me about how far we have come as women in the legal profession, but also underlined how far we still have to go, not least when it comes to equal work and equal pay. For me, this is a sad and sorry state of affairs especially when our law schools are churning out more female graduates than ever before.

**The theme of the AWL Conference was 'Where do we want to be in five years?'; where do you see yourself/the female legal profession in five years?**

Despite a strong sense of optimism and a call to lateral thinking to ensure the best outcomes from clients and lobbying for changes to law and policy from the speakers and attendees, I could not help but feel that five years from now will look

pretty much like five years ago from now for women lawyers, unless we keep the issues of diversity and equality on the agenda. This view is based on what I heard at the conference from our speakers and during informal conversations over the three days. Issues that were raised related to the flexible workplace, commentary on women lawyers being lumped with the choice to suck up long hours or move on, and the unconscious bias towards women lawyers when it came to promotions and allocation of work. We all know the statistics for depression, divorce and misery in the legal profession. As an employment lawyer, I find this aspect of the legal workplace particularly disturbing.

However, I do see light at the end of the tunnel. The workplace is a workplace, it is not an arena filled with gladiators and lions. Every single lawyer, male or female, aims to do their best for their client to ensure the best possible outcome for every matter. This is hard work. In my native South Africa, during the Apartheid years, the speaker at big rallies would shout "Amandla!" This is a Zulu and Xhosa word that means 'power'. The crowd would then answer "Ngawethu!", which means 'to us'. It is up to us to work towards turning our workplaces into havens of equality, respect and professionalism—I think it is within the reach and the responsibility of every single director, partner, solicitor and clerk in the Northern Territory. What are we waiting for?

*\*With thanks to René Laan for providing us with an insight into the AWL Conference and her thoughts on the future of the female legal profession.*