

“Change what you can’t accept”

Admission of Lawyers Ceremony

12 December 2014 1230

Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory

Chief Justice Murrell

To the newly admitted practitioners, your families and friends – welcome.

Today I am sitting with the Honourable Justices Refshauge and Burns.

The Court acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land. We pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

We congratulate the newly admitted practitioners. For each one of you, your admission today is a great personal achievement. We warmly welcome you to the legal profession.

An admission ceremony is not only about the person being admitted, it’s also about their support crew. And so we also congratulate the support crews, the friends and especially the family who have supported a loved one through the stress and exhaustion of many years of study, followed by more study, practical experience and more study. Well done - you didn’t choose to enrol in law, but you have probably more or less done the course, and now you have made it to the finishing line.

I hope that you’re comfortably seated and not too hot. So many students are applying to be admitted these days that we have to pack you in like sardines, or should I say a sausage factory? I think that is more apt. The air conditioning was on the way out yesterday so I invited the barristers appearing before me to remove their wigs. In unison, they quickly removed them... it was the only agreement that I had from them all day!

I would especially like to welcome the women who are being admitted today.

Times have changed since I started my legal career as a young woman lawyer in Sydney in the late 70s.

In those days, just about the only place that you could find a woman judge was at a CWA lamington competition. I am happy to say that I preside over one of the few superior courts on which women are well represented. Indeed, sometimes I think that the ACT generally is run by women (at least on the north side of the Great Dividing Lake).

Sadly, in other jurisdictions, women do not reach the top of the legal profession in numbers that reflect their representation at the entry level. For more than 20 years, women have comprised over half our law graduates. Women now make up 63% of

law graduates.¹ But they are significantly under represented among the judiciary, at the senior bar and among partners at law firms.² One reason is that women still routinely experience discrimination in the law. Another reason is that the way in which law is practised is not conducive to a well-rounded lifestyle.

So to the new women practitioners, I say - Change what you can't accept.

And to the new men practitioners – I say the same thing.

I would like to acknowledge the tragic and sudden passing of Stella Young on the weekend at only thirty-two years of age. Probably like many of you, I know Stella Young mainly through Q & A. Her sassy and bold attitude to life resonated with many Australians.

She wrote a letter to her eighty-year-old-self, which was recently republished in the Sydney Morning Herald. In it, she said to her much older self:

I can't tell you for certain that you and I will ever meet. Perhaps that thing I always say flippantly, usually with a third glass of wine in my hand – that I'm here for a good time not a long time – perhaps that's true.

But on my path to reach you, I promise to grab every opportunity with both hands, to say yes as often as I can, to take risks, to scare myself stupid, and to have a shitload of fun.

As you embark on the next great adventure in your life, take some time to think about your own eighty-year-old-self and to reflect upon the opportunities that you will encounter between now and when you meet that person.

What do you hope for your 80 year old self?

I'm not talking about the number of Audis that you will own with your personalised numberplate on them, perhaps saying "GR8 lawyer". I'm talking about your capacity to lead not only a long life but also a good life, one in which you are rewarded as much by what you give as by what you receive.

What do you want to change?

As a lawyer, you have the tools to advocate not just for your clients, but also for those who are disadvantaged or unpopular, and for the legal profession and the broader justice system.

¹ Graduate Careers Australia, *Law: Bachelor Graduates (All)* (2014)

<<http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/Research/GradJobsDollars/BachelorAll/Law/index.htm>>.

² Women now make up 9% of NSW's silks. Of 411 silks, 38 are women.² Of the 73 barristers [Svetlana says 69, Bar Association website says 73 though] who hold ACT practicing certificates in the ACT, 9 are women (12.3%)

Whatever you choose to do as a lawyer, you contribute to the laws and values of this country. By defending an accused person, you join a great tradition of lawyers ensuring that every person receives a fair trial according to law.

By prosecuting offences committed against the state you represent the people of the Territory, State or Commonwealth, ensuring public safety and fairness.

By drafting commercial contracts you not only protect the rights of the parties, you also facilitate open and efficient commerce, to the benefit of the community generally.

By drafting legislation, challenging the legality of legislation or advocating for legislative change you contribute to supporting the rule of law in our society.

Although I am not quite eighty, it is getting on towards four decades since I was admitted to the profession in this very courtroom (fortunately, I won't have to say "this very courtroom" for much longer). When I stepped out as a new practitioner, it was to a world of letters and white out, typewriters and carbon paper. Just before I was appointed to the District Court bench in 1996, my floor of barristers installed a computer system, and each of us acquired a large desktop computer and an email address. I considered that to be a waste of money and a waste of space on my desk. I had no idea what an email was, or how it could possibly benefit the practice of a barrister. I was relieved that I could forget about such rubbish when I began as a judge.

How times have changed. Where would I be now without multiple email addresses and an Ipad for Court. In fact, I owe my appointment to this court to Viber - I was travelling in the US (with my Iphone of course) at the time when the offer was made.

And the pace of change is hastening. I cannot imagine the content of your reflections when you are 80 – or even five years from now.

But I hope that on your professional journey, like Stella, you grab every opportunity, take some risks and scare yourselves stupid.

May the road rise up to meet you – wherever your journey leads.

The Court will adjourn.