

**Speech Given at the Memorial for  
the Late Honourable Acting Justice Linda Ashford  
Thursday, 27 August 2020**

I extend my condolences and those of the ACT Supreme Court to Carol and other members of Linda's family.

Justice Michael Elkaim is here today, and I bring apologies from Justice Chrissa Loukas-Karlsson, who would have liked to be here.

I thank Tricia, Michael and Linda's other friends who have provided this opportunity for us all to pay tribute to Linda.

People sometimes say that your best friends are those whom you meet early in life and with whom you have travelled life's road. But that is not necessarily the case; given time and consideration, good friends can be found at any stage of life. Linda was proof of that.

Linda had a talent for friendship, both human and animal. Throughout her life, she cultivated new friends as well as nurturing old friendships. Look around you and you will see Linda's friends from the many different phases of her personal and professional lives. She made the effort to keep up with all of us—from time to time, most of us have answered our phone to hear Linda's warm and genuine inquiry, "how's things?".

I met Linda in about 2004, when she was in the prime of her life (still in her early 60s) and I was a judge on the NSW District Court. That year, there were rumblings on the Court because the Compensation Court was to be abolished and the judges of that court transferred to the District Court. With the charity so characteristic of lawyers, my District Court colleagues grumbled about the likely impact of the incoming hacks and time servers on our universal reputation for efficiency and brilliance. More importantly, the seniority of existing District Court judges might be diminished by that of the interlopers!

As far as Linda was concerned, those fears were ill-founded. She seized the new challenge, quickly mastered the criminal jurisdiction, and established herself as one of the most efficient judges on the Court. If she did receive a boost to her seniority, it was thoroughly deserved.

The capacity to change and learn new ways was part of her genetic makeup.

Upon finishing school at Fort Street Girls High School, she trained as an obstetrics nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and then studied midwifery at Hornsby Hospital.

She was an early adopter of the "gap year". In 1964, she travelled to London, where she worked in a hospital and travelled around Europe with friends. The "gap year"

extended to four or five years. She never lost the taste for adventure; thereafter, she fearlessly travelled to all corners of the earth.

Not long after she returned from Europe, she decided to change careers and she began to study law at night.

Why did she do that? I am sure that Linda was a wonderful nurse. The qualities that made her a good judge would have made her a good nurse—compassion, industry and common sense. On the other hand, I doubt that she liked taking orders from young doctors imbued with their own self-importance. She would have seen herself as better suited to giving orders than receiving them.

While studying law, Linda slaved as a law clerk in personal injury law firms, putting her nursing knowledge to good use. In one such job, at McClellands, she met Greg Keating, who became a lifelong friend.

In 1984, she was admitted as a solicitor. She began to work for Taylor and Scott, and was soon promoted to partnership.

In 1987, she was appointed as one of the first Commissioners of the Compensation Court and, in 1997, she was appointed as a judge of that Court. In 2003, she was appointed to the Dust Diseases Tribunal.

At the Compensation Court and Tribunal, Linda made close friends, including John O'Meally. Linda was possibly one of the few people who fully appreciated his outlandish sense of humour, which aligned with her own wicked sense of humour.

It was only when she retired in 2013 at the mandatory 72 years of age that I first realised how old Linda was. She certainly didn't act like a 72-year-old ready for the judicial dumpster—and history proves that she wasn't.

In the following year, 2014, she was, at last, appointed as an acting judge of a first world court, the ACT Supreme Court. She relished the variety of our work. She was always willing to take on matters, even at short notice. She became a much-loved member of our Court family—joining the more functional side of the family.

Linda's great interest in young people extended to our Supreme Court associates, with whom she enjoyed chatting. She would pick up conversations where they had been left off months ago, when she was last in Canberra, and volunteer recommendations on all manner of subjects, from books to antique furniture shops. Her loss was strongly felt by the associates.

Linda was always keen to sample Canberra restaurants. Our plans to dine at a dumpling restaurant recommended by the associates were thwarted by Linda's untimely passing. But, in the week after Linda's death, the associates held a dumpling lunch to honour her memory.

For more than three decades, Linda applied her compassion, pragmatism and strong intellect to difficult issues affecting ordinary people—people who were often disadvantaged. Her decisions were rarely appealed—and when they were, she took it in her stride.

These days, we hear a lot about change and the need for resilience. Linda was a living example of resilience in the face of change, but at the same time she valued constancy—as fundamental to equality before the law and to true friendship.

Linda was a gifted judge, and she loved being a judge. On the Friday that turned out to be her last day on this earth, she did the work that she loved as a judge and it was a good day. She completed her allocated short matters and then assisted another judge—no reserved judgments, of course. She chatted to me and my chambers staff, showing snaps of Dicky Bird, a handsome homing pigeon from South Australia who had found refuge in her Annandale backyard. And why not? He was fed breakfast, lunch and dinner, and found companionship with Bella, the dog, who usually chased away the birds. Incidentally, I must claim credit for playing a small role in the adoption by Linda and Carol of their beloved dogs Hugo and Bella, who, by coincidence, had earlier acquired the same names as my dogs, Hugo and Bella.

That last day, as she had time to spare before her flight from Canberra, I suggested that she sit with me on an admissions ceremony. It is always a joy to see fine young people, especially women, joining the next generation of lawyers—and that was Linda's last act as a judge.

This ceremony was particularly special because my senior associate, whom Linda knew well, was admitted. We also admitted a young Indigenous woman who was wearing her grandmother's ceremonial headdress. She had provided us with some information about the laws of her country, Fraser Island, and their generosity and good sense appealed to Linda. After the admissions ceremony, Linda shared a bottle of champagne with my senior associate and her family.

Linda then made her way briskly—but not too hurriedly—to the airport. I expect that she relaxed in the airport lounge with a glass of wine. As always, she would have been looking to the future—phoning Carol and her friends, planning her weekend, and anticipating the next busy week of judging. Had she paused to look backwards, she would have reflected on a life filled with many friendships, a rewarding career and rich experiences—a life well and fully lived.