

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person

**Entry ID:** AWE5667

## Vardanega, Louise

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**Occupation** Barrister, Government lawyer, Lawyer, Public servant, Solicitor

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### Summary

Louise Vardanega PSM is Chief Operating Officer of the Australian Government Solicitor (AGS), a role she has held since 2009.

Louise joined AGS (then known as the Deputy Crown Solicitor's Office) in 1975, and with the exception of 6 months attending legal workshop and 3 months with the Justice and Family Law Division of the Attorney General's Department in 1977, has been with AGS throughout her career.

Go to 'Details' below to read an essay written by Andrew Sikorski about Louise Vardanega for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

## Details

The following additional information was provided by Andrew Sikorski and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

### Early life

Louise grew up in the town of Griffith in New South Wales, where she attended Griffith High School.

Her father Pompeo (known as Bob) Vardanega immigrated to Australia from Italy in 1928. Her mother Evelina (known as Lina) Vardanega (nee Cappello) arrived in Australia from Italy in 1938. Bob and Lina were married in 1939 amidst much celebration – the associated festivities lasted 3 days.

Bob, along with 2 partners, started a plant nursery under the name of 'Premier Nurseries', which ultimately grew to be one of the largest nursery businesses in New South Wales. Bob was also a key player in starting up the Coronation Club – an Italian social club that became the social hub for many Italian and Australian families in Griffith.

Louise is the youngest of 3 siblings. Her brother Roger is a lawyer, who Louise credits with opening her mind to the possibility of pursuing a career in law. Her sister Silvana took over the running of Premier Nurseries when her father retired.

### Education

Louise studied Law at the Australian National University from 1970 to 1975, graduating Bachelor of Laws (Honours) and Bachelor of Arts.

It was during the course of her studies at ANU that she developed a strong interest and determination to practise in government law.

### Career at the Australian Government Solicitor

Louise was admitted to practise as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory in 1976.

After joining AGS in 1975, she spent 10 years working in various areas of law, including general litigation, administrative law and advocacy matters. Much of her practice included appearance work as counsel and the handling of significant matters in both the ACT Magistrate's and Supreme Courts. During this period, she also gained high-level expertise in handling administrative law matters for government departments and agencies in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Federal Court of Australia and High Court of Australia. She also practised for several years in the criminal law jurisdiction appearing in many prosecution matters before the ACT Magistrate and Supreme Courts.

Louise became Director of AGS's Canberra City office in 1991, and was appointed Director AGS Canberra (incorporating the Canberra City and Barton offices) in 2000. She was also National Practice Manager of the Litigation and Dispute Management Practice Group from 1999 until mid-2003.

From 2003 to 2005 Louise was National Director of AGS's Clients and Market Office. In that role she led the national team responsible for developing client relationships and coordinating the strategic marketing and business growth of AGS.

In 2009 AGS's corporate structure shifted to an integrated national model, and Louise was appointed to the role of Chief Operating Officer.

### Professional associations

Louise has always maintained a very active profile in the local professional community as a member of the ACT Law Society since 1976. She has served continuously as Secretary and a member of the Council since 1991 and has been a member of a number of the ACT Law Society's committees. In 2014, the Council of the ACT Law Society conferred Honorary Life Membership on Louise for outstanding service to the legal profession. In his speech conferring Honorary Membership on Louise, Law Society President Martin Hockridge said:

'Through a combination of calm good sense and expert advice, she has played a central role in the stability of the Society and its effectiveness as a regulator of the professional conduct of its members, to the benefit of the profession and the community in general.'

She is also a member of the ACT Legal Practitioners Admissions Board, on which she has served since 2014.

### Client Service

Louise is well-known across the government legal community for her passionate commitment to excellent client service. She is the embodiment of, and driving force behind AGS's client service culture, making it her business to ensure that all in AGS have the knowledge, tools and support they need to provide great service. Her irrepressible energy and enthusiasm are infectious, providing a rich source of motivation and inspiration to many of her colleagues.

She brings a formidable sense of fun and creativity to her work. Nevertheless, she takes her role in AGS, and her

responsibility to the government of the day extremely seriously – a fact that is clearly apparent to anyone who comes into contact with her.

In 2007, she developed the AGS Client Care program and introduced the AGS client service expectations, which form a key part of initial orientation and continuous skills development for all AGS staff.

In 2014 she introduced the AGS Client Listening program. Designed to support all staff in understanding and meeting client needs to the highest possible standard, the program provides ongoing communication training across AGS.

She also publishes a regular internal blog on the topic of client care, presenting AGS staff with information and encouragement to support them in providing first-rate service.

Louise's genuine zeal for client service, and her affection for AGS and its people are manifest in the personal warmth that permeates her interactions with colleagues and clients. Her ability to blend empathy, humour and spirit with exemplary professionalism is exceptional.

## **Leadership**

Louise's legal skills are clearly evident in the many successful outcomes she achieved as legal adviser to a great variety of clients, particularly in the early stages of her career. Her qualities as a leader are equally impressive, and have long been recognised and appreciated by those around her. Louise's role in AGS has been largely that of a leader – setting AGS's strategic direction, and guiding and motivating AGS people to achieve their full potential.

Former Chair of the AGS Advisory Board (2000-2013), John Allen said this about Louise:

'One of the memories that I will carry away from my twelve and a half years here is that in the number two, Louise Vardanega who has been number two all the way since I've been here, AGS has a leader – not with great titles to reflect that but clearly the number two person to both [former AGS CEOs] Rayne de Gruchy and Ian Govey. I've watched how people follow her in my classical definition of leadership. I've also watched how well she works with the number ones, both Rayne and Ian and I'm always aware of watching two leaders interacting.' (Presentation to AGS's Leadership Group, 23 May 2013)

## **Mentorship**

Louise takes great satisfaction from her role as a mentor to AGS staff. Although she has largely moved away from hands-on legal practise, she sees herself as a 'facilitator' of outstanding legal services to government. She makes it a priority to identify lawyers with outstanding potential, and to guide their professional development. In doing so, she is more inclined to provide people with opportunities and encourage them to stretch themselves, than to dish-out proscriptive guidance. If (as 1 AGS lawyer has said), 'a truly great mentor is someone who points you to possibilities and gives you the courage to explore them while giving you complete ownership of the choices you make', Louise certainly fits the bill.

Tom Howe QC, Chief Counsel AGS Dispute Resolution, shared the following thoughts about Louise:

'For the whole of my 30 years in AGS I have worked closely with Louise. She leads, first and foremost, by example. Minute by minute of every day, of every week, over each of those 30 years she has been scrupulous in her judgment, unstinting in her effort, and selfless in her commitment to achieving the best outcome for the people around her. I am often asked how Louise manages to maintain her loyalty and commitment to AGS, and to public service more generally. I think part of the answer lies in the heartfelt pleasure she takes in 'growing' those around her, and then watching them take their place in the world. I am a very grateful beneficiary of this extraordinary generosity of spirit. There are innumerable others.'

Sarah Court, former Director AGS Adelaide, now an ACCC Commissioner, said:

'...the ball of energy that was Louise, motivated me, encouraged and challenged me – and gave me so many wonderful opportunities. To this day she has remained an inspiring role model and mentor, as well as a close friend.' (AGS Alumni Newsletter, December 2012)

## **Awards and honours**

In January 2000, Louise was awarded a Public Service Medal in the Australia Day 2000 Honours List for outstanding public service through leadership and management of the AGS's ACT office.

As Director of AGS Canberra, Louise was instrumental in AGS being named 'Best Canberra Law Firm' in the 2007 Business Review Weekly Client Choice Awards for professional services.

## Published resources

### Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

### Author Details

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## Digital resources



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