

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

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Jago, Tamara

Occupation Barrister, Lawyer, Magistrate, Senior Counsel, Solicitor

Summary

Magistrate Tamara Jago (appointed to the bench in 2016) holds the distinction of being the first woman in Tasmania to be made Senior Counsel. Honoured by the 2010 achievement, she understood her promotion to be an important one for Tasmanian women, but also believed it went a long way to dispelling the myth that Legal Aid lawyers are 'second rate options'. Furthermore, having spent the bulk of her career working as a Legal Aid lawyer in north-western Tasmania, she believed her appointment proved there was talent in regional centres, and that moving to big cities in order to 'make it' wasn't always necessary. Taking silk while working as a Legal Aid Lawyer in regional Tasmania, was 'something special,' said Jago, the mother of three young children. 'At Legal Aid there are criminal lawyers that are just as good as anyone else or better.'

Tamara Jago was interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

Born, raised and educated in Tasmania, Tamara Jago graduated BA/LLB in 1993 from the University of Tasmania, having imagined herself as a criminal lawyer from a very young age. 'I don't know what I would have done if I wasn't accepted into law school,' she says, 'because I never had a Plan B.' Unable to explain exactly why she was always driven towards a career in the law – 'I don't recall a light bulb moment', she says – she does remember growing up with a strong sense of what was and was not fair. Issues relating to social justice and basic human rights have always concerned her, which goes some way to explaining why working with Legal Aid for the sixteen years prior to her elevation to the bench 'was her dream job'. The importance of providing justice is a central truth that all lawyers, no matter who they are defending, must remember. 'In terms of contributing to society', says Jago, Legal Aid lawyers are 'speaking up for people who, by virtue of circumstances that are sometimes so outside of their control... can't speak for themselves.' They are 'communicating the relevant information to the relevant person so the right decisions can be made,' a vital role indeed because 'the only judgment that's worth thinking about is an informed judgment'.

Jago specialised in criminal law in a private practice in Burnie before taking a position at the Legal Aid Commission in 2000, a move that many in the profession advised her was a form of 'career suicide'. Instead, she discovered that the breadth of experience and range of defence work opportunities she received has served her well, particularly the many the opportunities to lead counsel in a lot of significant trial and appeal work. Jago hopes that the experience of understanding the many struggles and challenges that defendants grapple with will help her in her own decision-making.

As a senior Legal Aid lawyer, Jago valued her opportunities to mentor young advocates and she hopes she will be able to continue this role from her position on the bench. In regional Tasmania, young practitioners are in danger of falling into 'bad habits' by virtue of the fact that they appear in front of the same one or two magistrates all the time. Furthermore, due to the absence of a middle court (there are only the Magistrates Court and the Supreme Court), young lawyers are unlikely to appear in front of a jury regularly. "When they make the transition into a more significant area of work, such as in front of a jury or doing trials, they struggle," says Jago. She hopes she will be able to assist professional development for young practitioners as a magistrate.

Like all working mothers, Jago confronts work-life balance challenges but acknowledges that for a variety of reasons, including working for most of her career for government employers and having supportive male colleagues when she was starting out, she has found it easier than others. Timing was crucial as well. 'I've been blessed in my career by two things,' she says. 'One is that by the time I started doing law it was accepted that females in law were okay. So much of the hard work had already happened.' Specializing in criminal law in a government organisation made things more manageable too, she suspects. 'I'd be really interested to see what a female doing criminal law but not having come within a government organisation during my era has experienced,' she says. Working in an organisation like Legal Aid, 'where there were standards and expectations and parameters already set... I suspect I was able to transition into specialty criminal law without perhaps hitting some of the hiccups that other people in the private profession may have experienced.'

Published resources

Site Exhibition

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

Newspaper Article

Legal Aid lawyer Tamara Jago awarded Senior Counsel for outstanding work, Pippas, Chris, 2010,
<http://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/684806/legal-aid-lawyer-tamara-jago-awarded-senior-counsel-for-outstanding-work/>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Tamara Jago interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project](#)

Author Details

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Digital resources



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