

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5734

Yeats, Mary Ann

(1941 -)

Born 1 January, 1941, Kalamazoo Michigan United States

Occupation Judge, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Her Honour Mary Ann Yeats was the first US citizen admitted to practice law in Western Australia and the second woman, after Her Honour Antoinette Kennedy AO, to become a Judge of the District Court. After studying law at the University of Western Australia, she was admitted to practice in 1982 and worked in the Crown Solicitors Office, until she was appointed a judge in 1993. In 1995 she served as President of the Children's Court of Western Australia. She retired from the District Court Bench in August 2011.

As a judicial member of the Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration (AIJA) she spent 10 years as convener of the Indigenous Justice Committee, a group of judicial officers and Indigenous people working together to provide cultural awareness education to the judiciary throughout Australia. Appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in January 2014, for her significant service to the law, particularly Indigenous justice, she was initially uncomfortable about accepting the honour, feeling that the Indigenous people who helped her were not adequately recognised. She changed her mind when she realised how acceptance would draw attention to social justice issues that have been important to her throughout her personal and professional life.

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

Details

Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1941, Mary Ann Yeats was the fourth of five children born to parents who were, in Yeats' words, 'committed to education'. Her three older brothers and younger sister were all 'exceptionally talented', having started their learning at home through their mother's Montessori teaching methods, well before they started school. 'I was reading from the time I was about three,' she says, 'and I just knew things because I was from a family that talked about things.' Dinner table conversations covered a range of issues, including politics and economics. Along with a stable and loving home and family life, another constant in her upbringing was a strong connection to the Catholic Church. Her father was a Lutheran who converted to Catholicism in order to marry her mother. They were 'good Catholics', raised in 1940s and 50s America. 'We developed a deep faith,' says Yeats.

The foundational importance of family and faith is crucial to any understanding of Yeats' sense of self. Growing up with three brothers, she was always confident in her capacity to move in 'a man's world' and her parents' belief in education for all their children only reinforced this. A rich spiritual life enhanced her self-belief. 'I started with my parents building my confidence,' says Yeats, 'and then faith gave me this idea that you can give your problems to God...that the Holy Spirit will help you through hard times.' This is not to say that she has asked God what to do; rather, she calls upon a source of wisdom and knowledge that has given her confidence to 'think things through and make the right decisions'. This capacity to seek guidance through prayer has played an important role as she navigated difficult situations in the course of her personal and professional lives.

Her father's work saw the family move to Chicago and then to Kansas City, where Yeats did her secondary education. She attended St Teresa's Academy for Girls in Kansas City, Missouri, a private, Catholic girls school, where she served as President of the Student Council in her final year. She graduated in 1958, received a scholarship to attend the Catholic University of America but left after only a year, much to the disappointment of her father who thought she had dashed any hopes she might have had for a brilliant career. Instead, in 1959, she decided to do 'the best thing she ever did in her life' – marry her husband, Don. She was eighteen, he was twenty and their relationship has been another source of inspiration and support, for nearly sixty years.

Mary and Don have two sons and a daughter and by 1964 the Yeats had three children under the age of four. Mary Ann did not go out to work while the children were little, except to do some tennis coaching (a good excuse to play the sport she loved and excelled at), preferring to enjoy the time with her children. Her strength was tested when her second son became gravely ill with a brain stem tumour when he was four years old. It was, naturally, a terribly distressing time for the family that triggered a deepening of their faith. He survived after extensive treatment and therapy and during that time Yeats 'sort of stopped worrying about cleaning the house or doing the ironing...I sort of let it go.' She decided to focus on having fun with her children. 'Home-making was not my best skill,' she says, 'but child-raising was great fun'. Being a young mother had its benefits, she thinks, although she understands not everyone saw it that way. 'I never thought it was going to stop me from having a career,' she reflects, 'but I think a lot of people thought it would.' Yeats feels sure that coming to study later and with some accumulated wisdom, worked in her favour.

When her sons started school, Yeats began to get involved in community and social activism. She joined the League of Women Voters in America and would take her daughter, by then a toddler, along to meetings. It was then that she began to sink her teeth into political issues, working with some really outstanding women at the time. This involvement developed until in 1974 she was the Missouri state chairperson for the Equal Rights Amendment – a movement to amend the US constitution to guarantee gender equality. Although the push was not successful, the process was formative for Yeats. 'Working on the ERA' she says, 'attending committee meetings, making submissions; it was all this work that made me think that if I really wanted to do something, I should study law.' The lawyers she met had 'a way of thinking that I needed to pick up.'

1974 was the year the Yeats family migrated to Australia so that Don could take up a position to set up the English Department at the then Western Australian Institute of Technology, which became Curtin University. 'That was an exciting time!' remembers Yeats; a time made even more exciting when she discovered that tertiary education in Australia in 1974 was free. She applied and began studying law at UWA in 1975. After graduating with First Class Honours, she took up a position as Research Officer to the Solicitor-General of WA, The Honourable Sir Ronald Wilson (AC KBE CMG QC) in 1977 and later to the Honourable Kevin Parker AC. She then worked in the Crown Law Department until she was admitted to practice in 1982. She became an Australian citizen in 1986, a decision not taken lightly, but one she felt was necessary if she wanted to continue doing the high level policy work she was doing. Yeats continued her career in the Crown Law Department until she was appointed to the bench in 1993. Once she was there, she realised that the bench 'was where I'd always been headed.' Becoming a judge was one of the most important, if not the most important, events in her life.

Because she had chosen to grow a family before her career, Yeats was a relatively mature 'trailblazer'. Having only eighteen-odd years to leave her mark at the bench – judges must retire at 70 – she had firm views on issues she wanted to address if and when she had the chance. One was the role of Justices of the Peace in the Children's Court, who underestimated the important role they had in the administration of juvenile justice. The other was the lack of understanding amongst Aboriginal people of the justice system and their rights in law. That the misunderstanding was systemic and operated across both sides of the bench was a problem she worked to alleviate through her work as a judge and on specially established committees, such as the Cultural Awareness and Indigenous Justice Committees of the Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration. Judicial officers simply had to be educated to understand the culture and laws of the Indigenous people they were called upon to deal with; the risk of injustice was much too great.

Needless to say, there were challenges to confront as a judge, especially decisions about sentencing or hearing testimony that documented the sad and violent lives that some people experience. Despite this, Yeats loved everything about the job, especially the places it took her and the people she met. She loved doing the circuit work out on country, meeting Indigenous people and learning their concerns and problems with the criminal justice system. She has a particular regard for Aboriginal women who are trying to fix their communities and help their young people develop self respect. She has met some extraordinary people, domestically and abroad, who have enriched her life and her understanding of the law; the Honourable Justice Mary Gaudron QC, Catherine Branson QC, the Honourable Christine Wheeler AO QC, Peggy Holroyd AM and Puisne Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Claire L'Heureux-Dubé, have all had an important role to play in the person she has become. She has enjoyed the opportunity to mentor young women lawyers entering the legal profession along with Indigenous law students. When asked, she has offered experience on boards and committees beyond the legal organisations she belonged to; she served as a trustee on the Sister Kate's Home Kids Foundation, a role she has now stepped down from.

Despite having a relatively short period on the bench, Yeats was ready to retire when she did. 'The life of a judge is full on,' she says, 'and the days are very long.' Tiredness creeps up and takes over. While there was some adjustment when she retired, it didn't take too long for her to start enjoying it. She now divides her time between Perth and the family farm near Augusta, spending time with her husband, enjoying time with their four grandchildren and, as a longtime member of the Cottesloe Tennis Club, playing as much tennis as she can. According to Her Honour, 'Life is very good and very full and goes for a long time.'

Published resources

Article

Meeting the demands of justice, Reidy, Mark, 2014,
<http://www.therecord.com.au/news/in-depth/meeting-the-demands-of-justice/>

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Mary Ann Yeats interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

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Digital resources



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