

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5736

Reaston, Bev

Occupation Gardener, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Bev Reaston has practised law in Cairns since 1980 and was the first lawyer in the city to combine fulltime work with mothering after she had her first child in 1983. She has practiced exclusively in the area of Family Law in Far North Queensland for over thirty years, developing expertise across a wide range of areas including complex children's matters, international relocations and high end property cases. She is (in 2016) the Queensland Representative of the Family Law Council of Australia. She was one of the first appointed Independent Children's Lawyers in Cairns.

As well as working in private practice (most recently in partnership with her husband, Jim, and Deanne Drummond at Reaston Drummond Law) Reaston has been engaged with a number of community organisations, ranging from local kindergarten and sporting committees to community law services. She has served terms on the management committees of the Cairns Regional Domestic Violence Service, Legal Aid and the North Queensland Women's Legal Centre.

Bev Reaston 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

Trailblazing comes in a variety of forms and it doesn't always involve a 'crash or crash through' moment. As befits her style and priorities, Bev Reaston's trailblazing involved quiet achievement while combining work and family responsibilities. Admitted to practice in Queensland in 1980, she moved with her husband to Cairns the same year and established her own practice. When her first child, Kelly, was born in 1983, Bev took her to work in a bassinet; formal childcare was non-existent in Cairns at the time, as was the presence of working mothers in the legal profession. Bev Reaston was the first solicitor in the city to combine full time work with being a mother, and then the first pregnant mother to practise. She is an old hand at managing the work/family/life balance that professional families continue to negotiate.

The juggling act was never an easy one, especially when her three children were babies. Memories of leaving court after giving submissions, to be told that there was baby vomit down the back of her black jacket, or of the anxiety that consent orders needed to be obtained between four hourly feeds are laughing matters thirty years later. But the arrival of each child heralded social and cultural changes that made the practicalities of combining work and family easier. The daughter Reaston took to work in a bassinet in 1983 is now a lawyer, with children of her own. 'Things are so much easier now for her, as they should be,' says Reaston, who never would have imagined that she would not only blaze a trail for working mothers in the legal profession but, perhaps, be first in a dynastic line of Far North Queensland women lawyers!

The only girl right in the middle of four male siblings, Bevee Reaston (nee Waters) was born in Darwin in 1956, did her early schooling in Raymond Terrace, New South Wales and completed high school in Townsville. Her father was in the air force, hence the moving around; her mother worked on phonograms, ringing through telegrams. Sporty and quite competitive – 'that's what having four brothers does for you' – Reaston was a very good student and was school captain in her final year. She did well enough academically to earn a scholarship to ANU but her parents simply couldn't afford to send her. She was lucky enough to attend Townsville State High School, however, which ran some innovative teaching programs, including a special social justice program. The teacher who ran the program was married to a partner in a local law firm. This teacher helped Bev to get a position at the firm so that she could complete legal studies via the articled clerk route, a course undertaken by many people in regional Queensland. In 1974 she began her articles at Wilson, Ryan and Grose, making her the second woman the firm had ever taken on as an articled clerk.

Reaston knew people who went away to study law at university and doesn't think she was disadvantaged by not doing so herself. Perhaps she missed out on a bit of theoretical background, but she was well served by the practical education she received from practitioners in the region. As well as learning the nuts and bolts of the system, they were tutored by people who came up from Victoria, bringing perspective from a different jurisdiction, and local experts, some of who went on to become Supreme and District Court judges. The collegiality amongst the clerks at the firm was an added bonus. Despite being paid a pittance for the very hard work she was doing, she knew her friends at university 'weren't having the fun [she] was having as an articled clerk'.

Reaston says she never felt gender discrimination within the context of the firm; it was when she moved into the courtroom it became observable. After a certain amount of time and experience, articled clerks were allowed to appear for adjournments or consents in the Magistrates Court and that was where she saw differential treatment. Magistrates gave women representatives a 'harder time in court', and some of them struggled. 'It was a bit unfair...you learnt you had to put that bit of extra mileage in to be acknowledged.' Later on, even as a lawyer with a number of years experience, she discovered that some law firms adopted discriminatory practices they would never get away with today. Hoping to return to work after her second child, a partnership offer was withdrawn when she refused to accept one of the terms; that she would not have any more children. Fortunately, an opportunity emerged with another firm where maternity was not regarded as a problem.

Once qualified and admitted, Reaston discovered there were still some parts of Far North Queensland where women lawyers weren't welcome. Bev married Jim Reaston, who was a year ahead of her in completing his articles at Wilson, Ryan and Grose. He was offered a job in Mackay and asked if there were any openings for Bev, who would be qualified soon. 'Oh no,' he was told, 'Mackay's not ready for a female lawyer yet!' Jim turned the job down, and Mackay's loss was Cairns' gain. A bigger centre offered more possibilities and while work didn't come to Bev immediately once they moved to Cairns in 1980, it wasn't her gender, so much as her marital status, that deterred potential employers. 'We can't have you practise with us while your husband works for another firm,' she was told. 'Clients wouldn't like it.' Gender and regionalism combined to create a difficult situation for a woman lawyer married to another lawyer, wanting to practise law in the 1980s. Fortunately, Farrellys Lawyers, who employed Jim, found her a position and this was her foothold into practice in Cairns.

After Farrellys, Reaston established a general practice with Bruce Johnston. They set up a legal advice service at Rusty's market on market days, working out of a set partitions and sitting on deckchairs, building their business at a time when distances were huge and there were no such thing as computers, digital communication and the internet. Given that much of their work included Administrative Appeals work and Personal Injury cases, often for people on remote Indigenous communities, this posed significant challenges that practitioners coming to practise now could not imagine!

Reaston began to establish expertise in the field of Family Law, building upon experience she developed in Townsville even in the era determined by the Matrimonial Causes Act before the Family Law Act (1975) was passed. Many of the large Cairns firms in the 1980s referred work to her; as a labour intensive area of practice that was complicated to bill, they were happy to pass her the work, although things have changed and the large firms have big family law departments now. As a cross-vested jurisdiction, Family Law has often thrown some very complex cases her way, with many farming families owning multiple farms and trusts across the region over which decisions must be made. In more recent years, international

relocation orders and custody matters have created additional complexity, as Cairns becomes a global tourist destination, attracting people who form relationships, have children, experience relationship breakdown and then want to leave. A lack of family law experience at the local bar saw her running many of the arguments herself, a situation that worried her at times. 'We had Chief Justice Nicholson coming up...and [solicitors] are running arguments and I'm thinking: what do they think of the Cairns practitioners?' In time, the local experience at the bar grew and southern barristers and judges were attracted to work in the north, particularly in the winter months! Reaston notes that the family court judges and counsel who came up were struck by the complexity of the cases confronting them, especially those involving children.

Her commitment to protecting children's interests and their rights explains why Reaston was one of the first practitioners in Cairns to take on work as an Independent Children's Lawyer. Working on behalf of the children is satisfying, but it can also be extremely frustrating as she observes the, often destructive, behaviour of the parents. There have been occasions, for instance, when she has been watching her own children playing junior sport in teams where children she represents have also been playing. It is heartbreaking when that child runs to her, instead of either parent, for help or encouragement. 'Can't they see what they are doing?' she asks. A child does not need to be the victim of abuse and argument to feel personal pain and suffering.

In over thirty years of practice in Cairns, Reaston has seen many changes to the way family law is practiced, some for the better and some not so beneficial. She is concerned about the amount of self-representation that happens; particularly its impact on women whose partners have been abusive. She is deeply worried about the expanding role that substance abuse has in the breakdown of families and the way this affects children. But she is glad for the focus on mediation that has become more common between opposing advocates and she is grateful for the increased levels of support – never adequate, of course! – that can be called upon from professional experts and other women practitioners. Of particular importance to her have been Townsville barrister, now retired, Wendy Pack S.C., and Brisbane based senior counsel Dr. Jacoba Brasch Q.C. and Kathryn McMillan Q.C., who will come up to run cases from time to time, offering assistance and expertise preparing complex cases, often for little recompense. 'They pick me up so much', says Reaston, 'they remind me why I am doing this work.' She now (2016) does the work in a newly established partnership with her husband, Jim Reaston and Deanne Drummond, who she met years ago when she was working at Farrellys.

Beyond work and devotion to family, Reaston has been active in a number of Cairns community organisations, ranging from local kindergarten and sporting committees to community law services. She has served terms on the management committees of the Cairns Regional Domestic Violence Service, Legal Aid and the North Queensland Women's Legal Centre. When she needs to think or de-stress, she goes into her garden, a work of art that has featured in the local press and on national television. It has grown and evolved as her career and family life have; paths and shelters created when her children were little now accommodate a dinosaur cave built for her grandson. 'You change as you go along,' she says. And, like all gardeners, she knows that experience teaches that what might have failed in one part of the garden might work in another. Good advice for any lawyer, it would seem.

Published resources

Magazine article

Gardens of Life, Carter, Denise, 2016

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

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

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Digital resources



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