

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4085

Powell, Heather

Occupation Union organiser

Summary

Heather Powell was the first female union secretary in Broken Hill, serving with the Clerks' Union for 23 years from 1977. In 1994 she was elected to the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC) executive. Heather retired in 2001.

Details

With five brothers, Heather was the only daughter of Lance Joseph and Eileen May McQuillan. Her great-grandparents on both sides migrated from Ireland in the mid 1840's and settled on farming land in South Australia and Bendigo respectively. They were among the pioneers of Broken Hill, settling there in 1885 and 1886.

Heather's father and brothers all worked at the mines and union matters and politics were regularly discussed at home, absorbed by the young Heather 'like osmosis'. Her mother, in Broken Hill tradition, could not undertake paid work outside the home but raised her six children as well as volunteering for the St John's Ambulance, the Red Cross blood bank, polio immunisation, meals on wheels and home care. In 1988 she was awarded the Broken Hill Citizenship medal for her services to the community.

Educated at St John's, then St Joseph's Convent School at Broken Hill, Heather held ambitions to be a doctor or a teacher but the family was not wealthy and she accepted a commercial scholarship with the mines. The scholarship paid her school fees with the promise of a job at the mine following matriculation, but the job was declined on her behalf by the headmistress of St Joseph's who declared that 'a monkey can be taught to use a machine: you have a brain'. Instead, Heather took up a secretarial position with the De Franceschi family.

After some years Heather moved to Sydney and continued secretarial work. She married Barry Ellis, bought a farm on the North Coast of Australia and had two children, Louisa and Luke. After some years they moved back to Sydney but finding the urban lifestyle too stifling, she decided to move back to Broken Hill in 1975 to enable the children to enjoy a free, independent and safe lifestyle.

Heather began work for the Clerks' Union in 1977 as union secretary (the first female) and retained her position for 23 years. In 1994 she became secretary of both the Clerks' Union and the Shop Assistants' Union and was elected to the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC) executive, charged with resolving disputes, setting up a system of delegates, and drafting policy around employee wages and conditions. She was elected vice-president of the Barrier Industrial Council in 1996. In 1998, she amalgamated her two unions with the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) in Adelaide.

Heather married Michael Powell in 1996 and retired from the Barrier Industrial Council and the Unions in 2001.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Unbroken Spirit: Women in Broken Hill, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bh/bh-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Private Hands (These regards may not be readily available)

Interview with Heather Powell

Author Details

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