

CATHERINE CARNEY

Catherine Carney has been the principal solicitor at the Women's Legal Resource Centre from 1996 till 2005. The centre, which has over twenty thousand client contacts, provides legal assistance to disadvantaged women and children, and offers outreach services in Sydney's greater West and rural NSW, as well as providing a Domestic Violence Advocacy Service.

Catherine has long had an interest in the public interest sector. It has also been an area in which she has excelled, winning the UTS Family Law prize in 1989 while completing her degree.

Upon the completion of her law degree in 1991, Catherine began her legal career in a small litigation firm in the city, and later made the change to work in family law. After acting as an instructing solicitor in many Family Court matters, Catherine decided seek to work in an area where she would be able to provide legal assistance to those who would otherwise be unable to otherwise access it.

Catherine found a part time position assisting victims of domestic violence in court proceedings. She was subsequently offered a part time position with the Women's Legal Resource Centre. The centre was going through a huge period of growth, expanding its outreach and court support services as well as looking to increase its work in indigenous communities.

Catherine was involved in a wide range of work at the centre, and is not only involved in client work, but also in law reform and policy work.

In the time that Catherine has been at the Women's Legal Resource Centre, she has made many contributions. One of the most significant has been her guidance in the development of the services offered to indigenous women and children by the centre. In 1996, the centre established the Indigenous Women's service, and in 2000 this service won the Human Rights Award.

To further the Women's Legal Resource Centre's work with Indigenous women in regional communities, Catherine established the Walgett Violence Prevention unit, which assists Aboriginal Women and children in Walgett and surrounding areas. The Unit has been well received by the community and there has been an increasing demand for the services which it provides.

Throughout her work with WLC, Catherine has felt a great sense of pride in her work, and in the ways in which the services she helped to introduce and foster have grown, with many of the programs having been adapted and used by other government and non-government services.

Catherine hopes to continue to work in public interest law while maintaining strong family relationships and the ability to travel. Her ability to juggle many roles and manage a workplace combined with her strong sense of justice will likely enable her to continue doing so.

As well as the work she did in towns like Moree and Lightning Ridge, Catherine has taken on the role of an activist. She has prepared submissions and attended Senate Inquiries, drawing on her experiences working with indigenous women to push for violence prevention units. She sees this as the most important role of community legal centres, albeit one that is complementary. Centres that take on case work and community training are in positions of real authority to advise the government.

After leaving the Centre, Catherine became a Registrar of the Family Court. She has since left the court as her current commitments to the Mental Health Review Tribunal, the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal and the Migration Review Tribunal have continually increased to become full time. She looks back on her time in indigenous services with great affection. On reflection she notes you "seem to have to go somewhere and start something, and then other services will follow." Hopefully there is no lack of pioneers.