

# Unsung Heroes of Public Interest Law

## Interview with Michelle Burrell at the NSW Council of Social Services

In the battle for social justice, those that advocate the interests of the community range from members of the legal profession, to professionals who deal with social issues. One such advocate is Michelle Burrell, Acting Director of the New South Wales Council of Social Services (“NCOSS”). As the peak body for the social and community services sector in NSW, they coordinate, advocate, educate and develop policy; they have members that range from the smallest community-based service to the largest welfare organisations. However, leading the NCOSS team is only a current snapshot of a life dedicated to social justice.

The journey began in the land of the “westies” as Michelle grew up in the outer suburbs of Blacktown. Raised by a single mother living in the 70s, she was well aware from a young age of the needs faced by the working class and the underprivileged society. Her strong desire to see a “fair go” for all led her into the world of public interest advocacy.

The first step was completing her Social Work degree at the University of Sydney. Michelle was extremely grateful to be able to study under the government’s free tertiary education scheme and is sad that the underprivileged people of today do not have that same opportunity.

Michelle began her social work career, working at Sydney’s Housing and Referral Information service and also on the Kings Cross Homelessness Project. Early on, Michelle became aware that law played a considerable role in the workings of social justice. It was relevant to individual cases as well as broader strategic policy-making, and moreover an important foundation for the social justice system. It was with this in mind that Michelle commenced a law degree at the University of North London.

True to her nature, Michelle continued to fight for the rights of the underprivileged British whilst studying part-time, which gave her many years to fight for justice part-time during her degree. One of her activities was setting up and managing the Tottenham Legal Advice Centre, helping people in one of the most deprived areas of London.

Her London experience allowed her to develop an international outlook and the international experience gave her a firmer basis for work in the Australian social justice realm. Her eyes light up as she remembers “London, back then, gave the vulnerable a right to public housing”. Comparing London’s policies with Australia, although Australia had no such similar provision, there were Australian housing rights that London lacked. “There was no Rental Bond Board when I went there”, she recounts. Tenants’ bonds were kept by their individual landlords, and were notoriously difficult to recover. Michelle actively pursued the matter, broadcasting Australia’s Rental Bond Board system, and the fact that

England should not fall behind. Eventually, after returning to her home country, England followed suit and established its own bond board. Michelle laughs “sometimes I think it should be called the Michelle Burrell Rental Bond Board”.

On her return to Australia, Michelle took on the role as co-ordinator of Kingsford Legal Centre. She was the tireless force behind the successful campaign to increase the funding period of KLC to three years, which in turn made a significant difference to community legal centres throughout NSW. She remembers her time at the centre with fondness, and still enjoys the thrill of unexpectedly meeting former students all over Sydney, in many different areas of work. One of Michelle’s highlights was teaching students and she became involved in the Global Alliance for Justice Education, an organisation which links law teachers all over the world. It was through this that she heard of and won a scholarship to complete her Masters of Law (Public Service Law) at New York University.

Of all her jobs, Michelle enjoys her current role at NCOSS the most. This is not to say that her previous places of employment – Sydney’s Housing and Referral Information Service, the King’s Cross Homelessness Project, Tottenham Legal Advice Centre, and Sydney’s Kingsford Legal Centre – were not enjoyable, rather each one served to provide a step towards her current position. “NCOSS”, she says, “provides the most influence I’ve ever had on changing and influencing policies. It is a well respected organisation, and the people I work with are just great”.

Michelle’s average day with the NCOSS consists of high level meetings with politicians & bureaucrats, lobbying, attending forums, liaising with the media, and commenting on human services issues. Although there is sometimes a long wait before victory, she has never lost faith or felt powerless. “You should always remember it is harder for those people we are representing,” she says. Michelle draws perspective from the resilience of the people she represents.

One memorable involvement was her work for the Victorian Department of Justice to do a statewide consultation for a *Charter of Human Rights Bill* in Victoria. As Australia technically lacks any formal bill of rights, Victoria’s *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* represents a big step for social justice in Australia.

Michelle identifies one of the main areas hindering the progress of social justice: “There is a general pattern of under-funding for human services”, she states. This applies not only to NCOSS, but to all human service organisations. Michelle identifies that some of the major issues the government urgently needs to address include domestic violence against aboriginal women, the growing group of the working poor, rising transport costs, affordable housing and the costs associated with oral hygiene. Perhaps of little consequence to the average Joe, they are significant hurdles for the underprivileged. “Historically, the human services sector is under-funded. The issue is not the amount of funding,

but the issue should be the true cost of services". While people such as Michelle fight for a better society, their efforts would be more effective if the government made these issues higher priorities. Moreover, Michelle informed us that under-funding results in loss of jobs, even at NCOSS. "Really?" we ask in disappointment. She easily convinced us that government funding policies need to change – what the world doesn't need is a loss of social advocates who share the same passion as Michelle.

A lover of cats, dogs, superficial (but entertaining) TV shows and chocolate, escapee of a Luna Park fire, Michelle's dedication to social justice permeates everything she does: her thoughts, values and opinions. From her childhood and throughout her career, Michelle has remained not only passionate, but solid in her stance. Her dedication to broader issues is reflected in her life – when asked whether she drove, she replied, "I don't have a licence". Could this be due to a slack attitude, or does she have a secret fear of driving? Her answer was that it was a personal choice, reflecting her beliefs about improving society: where appropriate public transport is provided people should use it.

In only an hour with Michelle, our eyes were opened to what genuine passion and dedication involves and what it can achieve. It's the heroes that work behind the scenes in order to ensure that the notion of a "fair go" is not merely words. Social justice, whether it is in terms of the law or social issues, is silently won day-by-day by advocates such as Michelle and the NCOSS organisation. Her final words of advice to law students: "don't worry so much...enjoy yourselves".

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#### *Post Script*

*Since this interview took place, Michelle has resigned from NCOSS to take up a position as policy and research officer for the Victorian Law Reform Commission*