

JUVENILES' MOST WANTED

Teresa O'Sullivan is among the most wanted as one of Australia's few Children's Law Specialists.

Teresa has always been dedicated to her work of promoting the rights and interests of children caught up in the criminal justice system. From the age of 17, Teresa began her legal career as an articled clerk with a Brisbane law firm. Upon completion of her tertiary studies at the Queensland University of Technology, Teresa joined the Brisbane office of the Legal Aid Commission practising in criminal law.

From 1990-1997, Teresa developed her specialisation in Children's law during her placement at the Marrickville Legal Centre's Children's Legal Service where she advocated in all areas affecting young people. At the time, there were very few (only two or three) Children's law specialists in NSW. Over the past 15 years, the number of Children's law specialists has increased to over 20 which Teresa sees as an incredible improvement.

During her time at the Marrickville Legal Centre, Teresa undertook a secondment to the National Children's and Youth Law Centre. Her contribution to children's legal services included promoting test cases, policy recommendations and educational work on a national basis.

In recognition of her outstanding achievements in the legal representation of children, Teresa was awarded the Inaugural National Children's Lawyer of the Year in 1997.

The demand for Teresa's work has given her the opportunity to travel to several locations, including London where she practised in criminal law for a year, and Alice Springs in 1998 where she worked at the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. During her time in the Northern Territory, Teresa's work was centred on advocating the legal interests of Aboriginal defendants, especially children.

A particularly memorable "community legal education project" which Teresa became involved with was her role as the legal consultant for an ABC television drama series called "Fallen Angels" which was produced in 1996. This was originally a part-time commitment but became a full-time engagement and extended over a period of six months.

Currently, Teresa is the Solicitor in Charge the Children's Legal Service division of the Legal Aid Commission of NSW where she is responsible for managing the Legal Aid solicitors positioned across four Children's Courts in metropolitan Sydney. Teresa clearly remains very devoted to her work.

The inspiration for Teresa's interest in upholding the rights of juveniles who have been swept up by the criminal justice system stems from the insight given to her by other strong advocates she has worked with in the community legal centre sector.

As can be imagined, an encounter with the legal system can be quite daunting, even for adults, let alone for children. From Teresa's experience, children often find it difficult to understand legal proceedings, and Teresa plays a significant role in using her expertise and communication skills to "enhance the capacity of the client to participate in proceedings that are about them".

Interestingly, Teresa has found that working with the adults in the system is sometimes the biggest challenge faced by herself and her clients. This may be due to the failure of successive governments to adequately resource and prioritise children. She is firmly of the opinion that the best way to prevent juvenile crime is to support children and their families before children reach school age. There needs to be a serious commitment from the government departments responsible for income support, housing, health, welfare and education when children are very young.

While there are still areas which could be improved to further increase access to legal advice and justice for juveniles, there have been improvements over recent years. For example, the introduction of the *Young Offenders Act 1997* (NSW) provides alternative sanctions such as warnings, cautions and youth justice conferences, for dealing with children who commit certain offences. Teresa feels that this is "something that works really well" as an alternative to court proceedings.

Teresa has respect for her young clients, especially in light of the hardships they often have to face. Teresa is often amazed by their strength and their achievements – whether it is managing to get through school, holding down a job or merely surviving.

Teresa's work is driven by her ambition to be a strong advocate working towards social justice – a value instilled in her by her parents, whom she considers are great role models.

The community is grateful to people such as Teresa who have dedicated their time and effort to championing the interests of our future generations.

By Winnie Ching and Simmy Lai