

VALE PHILLIPA WEEKS 1953 – 2006

Phillipa Weeks spent much of her life being too young. She won her first major scholarship in 1963, a Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese Bursary to enter first year of high school as a boarder at Our Lady of Mercy College Goulburn, but had to forfeit it because she was only 10. Six years later, having completed her schooling at Harden Catholic Primary School, Cootamundra Catholic High School (to year 10), and Cootamundra High School (to year 12), she won a prestigious National Undergraduate Scholarship (NUS) to attend the Australian National University at the age of only 16—too young even to have a drink, legally, at the University Union bar. And on 4 August 2006, she died of cancer at the age of only 53—far too young for a person whose outstanding achievements to that point, and whose remarkable impact on those around her, only underlined how much more she still had to give.

Phillipa graduated from the ANU in 1974 with a Bachelor of Arts, with first class honours in history, having made a considerable impression on Manning Clark, who later mentioned her in his autobiography. After a brief stint with the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1975, she turned to the law in 1976, embarking on a graduate-entry law degree at ANU. She graduated with first class honours in law in 1979 and a swag of prizes. Her talent and her potential for an outstanding academic career were quickly spotted and she was recruited, when she was but a student in Family Law in 1978, to teach that subject in 1979.

A tenurable position in the Faculty of Law became available in 1982 for a specialist in property law, one of the few subjects which Phillipa had not been called upon to teach in her four years of temporary teaching appointments. The selection committee wisely invested in her potential and she turned herself into a leading property lawyer, though the scholarship for which she is best known is her work in the area of labour law. She won ANU's prestigious Crawford Prize in 1987 for her LLM thesis on trade union law and subsequently earned a reputation as one of Australia's leading labour lawyers, one of the many communities mourning her loss.

Phillipa was appointed as a professor of the ANU in 2001. In her 2002 Inaugural Lecture, she spoke on 'Fairness at Work', a subject on which she was not only an incisive and insightful scholar, but also, in her capacity as Associate Dean and Head of School from 2000 to 2005, a masterful exponent.

Phillipa's scholarship made a significant contribution to our understanding of labour law, particularly in the areas of trade union security, freedom of association and public sector employment. Her book on the last topic, co-edited with Marilyn Pittard of Monash University, will be published posthumously; checking the proofs was the last work-related thing she did before she died. She also made a significant contribution as a teacher, and not just because of the clarity of her exposition or the sweep of her erudition. Generations of students attest to the personal interest she took in them, citing in particular her practice of writing personal notes of congratulation and encouragement; this in an era in which teachers of larger and larger classes are hard-pressed to know their students by name let alone have a meaningful relationship with them.

Edited version of an obituary that first appeared in The Canberra Times on 16 December 2006.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

- 1 ANAO Better Practice Guide, *Legal Services Arrangements in Australian Government Agencies*, August 2006, p. 23.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 18.
- 4 Ibid.

If her contributions to scholarship and teaching were significant, her contributions to the university and the wider community were astonishing: Director of the Credit Union of Canberra, Member of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, Chair of the ACT Sex Industry Consultative Group, and a plethora of like offices and activities. Although quite ill, she was fittingly honoured for her service to the university community at an ANU graduation ceremony in December 2005, when a packed Llewellyn Hall rose to its feet as one and movingly paid tribute—a magical moment that will live in the memory of those present.

It is not these contributions, however—significant as they are—for which Phillipa Weeks will be primarily remembered. Every now and again, a person comes along with personal qualities that (if we assume, as we must, that they are capable of acquisition rather than simply part of our genetic inheritance) are truly inspirational. A mere catalogue cannot do Phillipa justice, but these are some of the values and qualities with which she was typically identified: grace, empathy, generosity, integrity, compassion, courtesy, kindness, modesty, collegiality, humanity, commitment, honesty, respect, wisdom, warmth, positiveness, unaffectedness, courage, gentleness—and yet, amidst these saintly characteristics, an indelible professionalism, even a certain toughness when the situation required it. She was, most of all, a refreshing and powerful antidote to cynicism, an awesome role model, and incontrovertible, though regrettable, evidence of the truth of the aphorism that it is indeed the good who die young.

A measure of the affection and esteem in which Phillipa was held is that at the ANU College of Law Annual Alumni Dinner on 25 August 2006, a group of alumni spontaneously initiated some fund-raising for a scholarship in Phillipa's memory. Most likely, the scholarship will assist intending law students with a country or regional background not dissimilar from Phillipa's own formative experience in Harden and Cootamundra. Interested contributors to the fund should contact Michellé Mabile at the ANU College of Law on (02) 6125 4070 or michelle.mabile@anu.edu.au.

Phillipa Weeks was a wonderful colleague and a very special person, and is sorely missed. Her presence defined the spirit of collegiality that pervades the ANU College of Law. Her memory will continue to do so.

**Professor Michael Coper
Robert Garran Professor and Dean
ANU College of Law**