

10th November, 2009.

This is a copy of the email that David Morawetz, Jan's partner, sent to some of their friends, about Jan winning the Tim McCoy award.

In case you haven't heard:

Once a year, Melbourne's "community lawyers" (lawyers who work for the poorest and most disadvantaged people in our society) get together for a 200-person dinner, at which they announce the prestigious Tim McCoy Award for an outstanding contribution in the field.

Speakers at this annual dinner have included Julia Gillard (Deputy PM), Julian Burnside, Tim Costello, etc.

This year's dinner was held last Friday night. It was hosted by Jon Faine from Radio 774 ABC (himself a former community lawyer), and the speaker was the High Court Judge, Justice Virginia Bell (who started out working in a community legal centre herself, the first high court justice to have done so).

In the last 18 years, 15 of the winners of the Tim McCoy Award have had "Legal" or "Law" in the title (Fitzroy Legal Service, Coburg Legal Service, etc).

Five of the six nominees for this year's prize had "Legal" in their Titles -- including the groups providing legal assistance to bushfire victims and to refugees and asylum seekers.

The sixth nominee was the only non-lawyer to be nominated -- Jan Pentland.

Jan's nomination was especially unusual as it was posthumous. The nomination was submitted (by two colleagues of Jan) just before the deadline, a week or two before the dinner.

Jan's nomination was for:

(a) Lifetime achievement.

(i) In the field of financial counselling, Jan worked with clients, but she also worked in changing the system, in getting increased funding for financial counselling, in supporting and promoting indigenous financial counsellors, and much more.

(ii) Jan also spent much time and effort in linking financial counsellors with community legal centres, so that financial counselling work could be enhanced by the input of lawyers. She also spent a decade (much of it as chairperson) on the board of the Consumer Credit Legal Service, and its successor, the Consumer Action Law Centre.

(b) Bankruptcy Law Reform.

Until recently, creditors could bankrupt a debtor for a sum as small as \$2,000. That is, they could sell the person's house, leaving them homeless, to recover a debt as small as \$2,000. Jan worked for some years to try to get this limit increased to \$10,000 -- and now, a couple of weeks ago, to the howls of the debt collectors, the Attorney-General Robert McClelland introduced a bill that did just that: it increased the limit to \$10,000.

After the six nominations had been read out, the High Court Justice opened the envelope, and she said:

"And the winner is..... Jan Pentland."

Knock me down with a feather! What an amazing thing: in a room full of lawyers, Jan, the only non-lawyer nominated, wins this prestigious Award. I was gobsmacked. I knew about a lot of Jan's contributions, including the ones that she was nominated for -- but I did not realise how highly regarded she was in the "community law" community. Jan was indeed a remarkable woman.

ATTACHED is a photo of the very lovely, warm High Court Judge, Justice Virginia Bell, with her arms around Carolyn Bond (who together with community lawyer Gary Sullivan nominated Jan for the award), and me.

I am tipping that this is the only photo you will ever see of me with a High Court Judge!

Lots of love,

David

Dr David Morawetz
Clinical and Counselling Psychologist
Founder and Director, Social Justice Fund (a fund of the Melbourne Community Foundation)