OBITUARY

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 was born in Sydney in 1953, the oldest of four children. The family moved to Harden when she was two, and later to Cootamundra. Her brilliant school record is nicely tracked by The Cootamundra Herald. The edition of 7 February 1969 notes on the front page—complete with photo—her appointment as School Captain at Cootamundra High. The edition of 9 January 1970 records her success in winning a Commonwealth Scholarship. The editions of 12 and 16 January 1970 congratulate her on being Cootamundra’s top student—1st in the State in Modern History, 5th in French, and 16th in English—and applaud her success in being offered yet another scholarship, this time a Teachers College Scholarship tenable in Sydney.

Interestingly, Phillipa decided to accept the Teachers College Scholarship, and was in the course of moving to Sydney when she received an urgent telegram from ANU Registrar Colin Plowman. Somewhat belatedly, the telegram offered her the NUS that enticed her to change her mind and come to the ANU. An alert mind in the ANU administration had noticed that this young girl, who did not quite have the marks for an NUS despite her outstanding school results, had not sat the same number of subjects at the same level as the other successful applicants. The ANU contacted the school, which confirmed that it had been unable to offer some subjects at the highest level. To its great credit, the ANU promptly awarded Phillipa an NUS. The Cootamundra Herald of 30 January 1970 ran a front page article on Phillipa’s achievement, and devoted a full editorial to congratulating her, acknowledging her teachers and parents, and noting the pride of the people of the town and district.

The pride of the people of Cootamundra was not misplaced. Phillipa went on to graduate from the ANU in 1974 with a Bachelor of Arts, with first class honours in history. In his autobiography, Professor Manning Clark, then Head of History at ANU, likened Phillipa to his former University of Melbourne students, Geoffrey Blainey and Ken Inglis, both of whom later achieved national prominence as Professors of History.

It looked like Phillipa might follow in their footsteps when she tutored in history at Flinders University of South Australia for the rest of 1974, and, indeed, she continued to tutor in history at ANU when she returned to Canberra in 1975 to join the Department of Foreign Affairs. In 1976, however, she turned to the law, embarking
on a graduate-entry law degree at ANU. Her husband Ian Hancock, also then an ANU historian, remarked recently that Phillipa’s abandonment of a career in Foreign Affairs meant that, rather than have them wasted on the Russians, ANU was to become the lucky beneficiary of her considerable skills of tact and diplomacy.

Phillipa graduated with first class honours in law in 1979, and a swag of prizes, including the ACT Supreme Court Judges Prize for the best honours result on graduation. Her talent, and her potential for an outstanding academic career, were quickly spotted, and she was recruited by Professor David Hambly and Dean Don Greig when she was but a student in Family Law in 1978, to teach that subject in 1979. As David Hambly observed at a memorial gathering held at the ANU on 31 August 2006, ‘Phillipa accepted the invitation, and with her consummate discretion, continued as a student in the Family Law class with the secret knowledge that she would be the lecturer next year.’

A tenurable position in the Faculty of Law became available in 1982, and Phillipa found herself enmeshed in some controversy. The demands that the Faculty had made of her in relation to teaching and administration had delayed her acquisition of postgraduate qualifications, and, moreover, the Faculty was looking 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. Fortunately, the Selection Committee was persuaded to invest in Phillipa’s potential, and, in fact, she completed her LLM in 1987, her thesis on trade union law winning the ANU’s prestigious Crawford Prize. By force of the circumstances of her appointment, she also 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 earned a reputation as one of Australia’s leading labour lawyers, and that is one of the many communities mourning her loss.

Phillipa was appointed as a Professor of the ANU in 2001, giving the lie to the common belief in academic circles that you have to move sideways to move upwards. I had the honour of introducing her Inaugural Lecture, a kind of professorial inauguration ceremony, on 20 May 2002, coincidentally the same day on which East Timor was inaugurated as a free and independent nation. Phillipa 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.
And 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.

It is not possible in a brief newspaper obituary to capture the richness and complexity of a human life. Readers interested in more perceptions of Phillipa will be pleased to know that the proceedings of the memorial gathering held at ANU are reproduced in volume 34 of the ANU College of Law’s Federal Law Review, along with the eulogy delivered at Phillipa’s funeral. The anecdotes related on those occasions reveal the human side of a saintly person: her prowess in the footy tipping; her forgetfulness that led her, on one occasion, to leave her lapel microphone on after a lecture and thus to broadcast her private conversation to the entire class; and her sometimes mischievous sense of humour. She was a wonderful colleague and a very special person, and is sorely missed.

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 Mabille at the ANU College of Law on (02) 6125 4070.

Phillipa Weeks 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
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