GW-NSW Joan Bielski AO Memorial Scholarship

JOAN BIELSKI AO – BIOGRAPHY

Joan Margaret Ward was born on November 27, 1923, in Narrabri, daughter of Francis Ward and his wife, Doris (nee Bull). Francis and Doris worked for the State Savings Bank, later the Rural Bank, but Doris left when she married. The family later moved to Armidale and Joan attended St Patrick's Convent Armidale, then St Mary's Convent, Gunnedah, where she completed her intermediate certificate.

Joan's mother died when she was eight and as her father was suffering after effects of WW1 and was unable to cope, the children went to the Catholic orphanage in Armidale. Her youngest brother then aged 2 was also allowed (against the rules) to keep the family together and said from then on, Joan was the 'mother' of the family.

She left school at 14 without gaining her leaving certificate, then worked in a newsprint factory and in clerical jobs until she joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force at 18, where she served as a telegraphist in communications from 1942 to 1945. Assisted by the ex-servicemen rehabilitation scheme after the war, she completed her matriculation at Sydney Technical College and later enrolled in New England University College, graduating with majors in history and economics in 1949. She went on to complete a Diploma in Education at the University of Sydney.

Joan Bielski's lifetime of advocacy began in earnest in the 1950s, with her calls for equal pay for women. She also became an advocate in migrant welfare and joined the Immigration Reform Group in the 1950s. Her voluntary work for migrants consisted of providing translation, information and support services. In 1953, she married **Jerzy (George) Stefan Bielski**, a socialist immigrant from Poland and survivor of Auschwitz Concentration Camp. They supported each other in all their political and social activities.

Joan spent the 1950s and 1960s focused on the sociology and psychology of women's education and workforce participation. Her ambition had been to do law, but she was informed that the profession would not employ a woman.

To her, this highlighted the absurdity of educating women and then discouraging their entry to professions such as law, medicine, architecture or engineering. The barriers to entry to these professions became important sites for her struggle to change the culture of schools, universities and technical colleges. In 23 years of high school teaching through those early years, Joan left her mark on her appreciative students and was an active member of the NSW Teachers Federation.

In the 1960s, Joan worked on migrant welfare issues and was a member of the committee which led to the founding of the Council for Civil Liberties in 1963. In the early 1970s, Joan became involved in local resident advocacy, eventually becoming the New South Wales president of Resident Action Groups. In 1972, she was a founding member of Women's Electoral Lobby Australia, or WEL. She led and worked with others to make submissions to the 1973 federal

commission of inquiry into poverty, which resulted in legislative changes recognising the special needs of single parents and their children. WEL also worked to propose the establishment of the Women's Coordination Unit within the New South Wales government in 1975 and Joan worked to document and lobby for the enactment of antidiscrimination legislation which was passed in 1976.

In 1974, Joan was appointed principal research officer with the Royal Commission on Human Relationships. Her contribution to the commission's final report was in education in human relationships, adoption and equality for women. The report provided the first analysis of systemic and indirect discrimination against women in Australian society and shaped policy, practice and reform in these areas for decades after its publication.

Her focus in WEL was education, employment and anti-discrimination law. This involved her in writing numerous submissions to government, organising conferences and forums, media liaison, public debates and protests.

She joined the NSW Women in Education group in 1973, using it as a vehicle to harness support for eliminating sexism in all its forms in education. Through the lobbying by this group, government ministers and departments were forced to address the disadvantaged position of girls in schools and the under-representation of women teachers in positions leading to promotions. She remained active in this group for nearly two decades.

From 1977 to 1984, Joan headed the social development unit in the NSW Ministry of Education with the task of eliminating discrimination in the education system. During those years, anti-discrimination law was passed, girls apprenticeship programs in the trades were started, issues around girls and mathematics and the sciences were explored. Women in sport and engineering, computer and technical education, the status of women in universities and child care in TAFE colleges all received attention through the work of the unit.

Initiatives varied, but the goals were consistent: open opportunities; bring down barriers; address discriminatory practices. There were many successes. The measure of Joan's achievement lies in the current participation and achievement of girls and women in all those areas.

Joan was not alone in the struggle for reform, but she was a formidable and indefatigable pioneer and persistent promoter of the cause for educational equality. In 1988, she published *Women Engineers* because she saw little progress, with too few girls aspiring to this profession, and she considered it as vital to shaping our built environment.

By the 1990s, Joan had turned her attention to women's political participation. She formed a coalition of women's organisations in 1992 to encourage women to aspire to political office. Women into Politics was non-party political with the primary goal of promoting women as political candidates. Its charter is relevant to this day. This organisation, with the Community Justice Coalition and Women in Prisons Action Network, were Joan's most recent projects and passions.

Her continuing activism with all its good humour earned her the 1999 Grand Stirrer award at the Edna Ryan Awards, given to women who have made a "feminist difference".

Joan Bielski was a mentor and role model for many women, giving them courage and self-confidence. She believed in women's capacity to be equal contributors to shaping their society and encouraged women to seek re-education or training.

Joan was a much loved and long-time member of the GW-NSW (formerly AFGW NSW) and the GW-NSW Education Trust. She was passionate about educational opportunities for women and in particular mature age women facing obstacles and disadvantage. It was always her desire to make funding available for these women. The Joan Bielski Scholarship has been made possible by a legacy from Joan and a significant contribution from her family and many friends.

Joan had returned from a forum on women and ageing organised by the Older Women's Network and was writing a missive on a local development when she collapsed with a massive stroke. She is survived by her brother Frank, George's daughter Jola, nieces Melissa, Louisa and Helen and nephews Roger, Bruce, Joseph, Roderick and James and their children. George died in 2009.

In 1989, Joan Bielski was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to women and girls, especially in education. She became an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) in 2004 for service to community participation through programs to encourage women's participation in political life and through continued contributions to the principles of equal opportunity, access to education and social reform. In her own words:

'My life's work has convinced me that in a democratic society those without power but with the will and the skill and with a case presented with reasoned advocacy can affect reform.'