

AFUW-SA INC. TRUST
2016 Bursary Awards Event 29th June 0216

Guest Speaker: Heather Latz

Speech by Heather Latz at 2016 bursary awards ceremony

The awards we're celebrating tonight were established by an organisation most recently known as Graduate Women SA, but for most of the time I've been a member of the association it was known as the Australian Federation of University Women South Australia, or AFUW-SA, so that's what I'll call it tonight.

I guess I was asked to speak here tonight because of my long involvement with the scholarship program and the Trust Fund, so I'll talk for a few minutes about the history of those things and AFUW-SA.

The fore-runner of AFUW-SA was the Women Graduates Club of the University of Adelaide, which began in 1914. Several other states formed similar organisations in the next few years, particularly in 1920, coinciding with the establishment in London of the International Federation of University Women, or IFUW. The aims of IFUW were to encourage understanding and friendship among university women all over the world and to encourage them to apply their knowledge and skills to addressing problems that arise at all levels of public life.

After IFUW was established, the various Australian state associations linked up to form the Australian Federation of University Women, which is a member of IFUW. One of the first resolutions at the first conference of AFUW in 1922 was to set up a scholarship fund. AFUW-SA members contributed to this national fund firstly as part of their membership fees, but in 1935 they began hiring out hoods and gowns for students to wear in the graduation ceremonies at the University of Adelaide, and that income went to the national scholarship fund. In 1969, AFUW-SA also began using the hiring income to award its own scholarships.

Initially, AFUW-SA awarded a \$500 scholarship every second year. By almost 20 years later, when I became involved, we were awarding a few scholarships totalling 6 or \$7,000 a year. For tax reasons, AFUW-SA established the Trust Fund in 1989 and it started with all of the hoods and gowns and \$97,000 in cash and investments. To avoid paying income tax we had to give out 75% of our annual income in scholarships and were allowed to invest the rest. Over the next 20 years, through hard work and careful management and the addition of some bequests and donations, we gave away \$1.3 million in scholarships and built our assets to about \$800,000. For the last four years before we stopped running the academic dress hire service in 2009, we gave away about \$120,000 of scholarships each year. Income from investments has continued to fund the scholarships since then and, including tonight's awards, we've given away over \$1.5 million dollars since 1969.

So, congratulations to the current trustees. The scholarship Trust Fund is going well – but not so the association that established it.

AFUW-SA has been going for just over 100 years. When I joined it in 1985 it had about 240 members. This year, the association has so few members that it is about to be closed down. Anecdotally, we are only one of many formerly booming voluntary organisations closing down this decade, and I haven't looked for any research about why this is happening, but I'll offer a personal view about AFUW-SA.

One of the reasons that AFUW-SA began in 1914 was simply so that graduate women could meet and talk with each other – in fact the wording of their first aim was “to provide social intercourse among women graduates”. That might sound quaint these days, but it was the main reason I joined AFUW-SA.

When I was awarded my Bachelor degree in 1985 I became one of the 3% of South Australian women aged 15 or more who had a Bachelor degree or higher qualification, according to the 1986 Census. Three per cent. Men weren't that much better off at 6%, but it was a lot harder to spot the graduate women. By the time I graduated, ten years after finishing Year 12, I had lived in America for a year-and-a-half, started three degrees, finished one, and risen to a lower management level in the Commonwealth Public Service. During that time I encountered one female lecturer in the University of Adelaide Architecture department, none in the Flinders University maths department, and one in the University of Adelaide maths department. Out of the 100 students in my final-year computing subjects, 8 of us were women, but five of those were heading home to Malaysia at the end of their degree.

At the end of my degree I transferred from my previous public service job to the IT department of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and discovered that I was the only female programmer. Forty percent of the staff of the ABS SA office were female, but 95% of those were at the lowest levels, mostly working in the typing and data prep pools. The Sex Discrimination Act had been passed that year, but there were still posters of naked women on the walls of one of the all-male sections of the office. That was only stamped out when the Equal Employment Opportunity (Commonwealth Agencies) Act was passed in 1987.

So when I found some information about AFUW-SA among the leaflets on my seat at the graduation ceremony at the University of Adelaide, it was a no-brainer for me to join. At my first meeting I met my Year 11 and 12 maths teachers and found out that they were members, so I was hooked. Each month I got to talk with women who had faced far greater challenges than I had to gain their degrees and build their careers, and I found this inspiring. And, for the rest of her life, my Year 12 maths teacher, who was also one of the original trustees, encouraged me about decisions I made or actions I took in my work and life.

I became the first woman to be promoted to senior management within the ABS-SA office and then the first senior manager to go part-time, in 1996, when my daughter turned 6. In my last 15 years in the ABS we routinely recruited more female than male graduates each year – not by design, we just picked the best candidates – so by the time I retired we were getting close to having as many female senior managers as male. These women have never experienced the working environment I did in the 1980s. According to the 2011 Census, 17% of females in South Australia aged 15 or more had Bachelor degrees or higher qualifications, compared with 14% of males and I expect the 2016 Census will show even higher proportions, so perhaps women graduates feel less isolated these days. We can also use technology to communicate, collaborate and advocate without having to leave our seats and come out on a cold winter's night. I think these factors have probably contributed to the demise of AFUW-SA.

However – and these final comments are addressed to our scholarship winners – I believe that it's important, especially early in your careers, to seek support and advice from people who've already been through what you're going through; and that face-to-face contact is as important as keyboard-to-keyboard contact. Time and again in my career, when working on projects with interstate colleagues and clients, I found that things went more smoothly and enjoyably once we'd had the chance to meet, even if only via video screens. I notice that many of you are using these awards to assist with conference attendance and I hope that, as well as learning about other research and having your work critiqued, you have the opportunity to begin or develop relationships with people who can help in your career and life. This is especially important for women, who are still in a minority in many professional workplaces; and discrimination still exists, although it's much more subtle than in the 1980s. Believe me – my sister is an engineer and a Professor at Uni SA, and has published extensively on this!

I sincerely wish you well in your studies and your careers, and hope that, in a few years, you will be in a position to offer support to those coming after you.

Thank you.