

Speech by Alison Mackirdy to the 40th anniversary of HCLS, 25 July 2025

At some point in 1983, someone came into the Student Common Room at the law school and said, why don't we start a community legal service.

It seemed like a good idea. Except for the fact that no one had a clue how to go about it. We knew about Fitzroy and Redfern, community legal services on the mainland, but how did they get started?

My recollection is that Fitzroy got started in a basement with some lawyers offering free legal advice at night, mainly to young people complaining about police brutality, being arrested arbitrarily, etc. Fitzroy produced a card for these kids to carry which set out their legal rights. Then they had to produce another card setting out their legal rights with at the top, in big red letters, do NOT hand this card to the police officer who is harassing you.

We didn't think starting like this would work in Hobart. It's a city but it's not a city like Melbourne, although it has its dark underbelly. While I was sitting on the SSAT with Dennis Daniels, who was a social worker for the Dept of Social Services, he told me some tales from that underbelly in hair-raising detail.

I think at that time Julian Punch was involved in setting up a drop-in help centre for young people but we didn't think that would work more generally. We needed a bricks and mortar sort of centre, with specific hours of operation when volunteers would be there to give advice and with no restrictions on the kind of people who could come and seek help or the sort of legal problems they could seek help for.

But how did we go about persuading funders to give us a big bundle of cash to start something like that? We got a small grant from TASCOS to research how it might get started and I put up my hand to do it. I had just finished the coursework part of my Masters in Welfare Law and was working on a thesis which was originally on advocacy but became about community legal services.

So I set out to find out what made mainland community legal services tick. When I say set out, I mean I either got on a plane or in my car and took a ferry. Because just to remind everyone, in 1984 there was no Internet, no emails, no mobile phones, no one had personal computers and researching, gathering material, producing material, disseminating material, was therefore a lot harder than today.

What I produced was a weighty tome, hopefully something so dense that our funders would be impressed by its volume without having to go to the bother of actually having to read it.

So we put in a grant application in 1984 and there was no guarantee that we would actually receive it, as there were other community groups also seeking funding from the same source. In fact, as I recall, it was a bit of a surprise when we succeeded. I think possibly our time had come -- all of the other states by then had community legal services. Tasmania was missing out – which was as good a hook as any.

Having got the money, we had to come to grips with the fact that none of us had practical experience of setting up from scratch a service in the real world. Our committee was made up of social workers and lawyers, no-one had business experience. So we did the simplest and most obvious thing -- we contacted the mainland community legal services and asked if someone could come and help us if we paid them.

We got a young lawyer, Tim McCoy from Springvale. He arrived wearing orange dungarees and sporting a ponytail. If anything screams community legal service, it's orange dungarees.

We only had him for a short time but he hit the ground running. One Saturday we all went out to have a look at a place to rent in north Hobart and suddenly we were in possession of our own office. Although it was out of the CBD a bit, Strahan Street was still a good location. Parking was easy, it was before the State Cinema became an all day, all night happening thing. And it was while North Hobart was still an ordinary suburb and not a restaurant strip.

We put an ad in the paper for an office manager and a lawyer. Did we have furniture? This is where my memory gives out. I don't remember any burst of shopping. I seem to remember that the ALAO was retiring some of its office furniture and we got some of it. Anyway, you have to remember it was simpler days. Our workers would require a desk, a chair, a phone, a filing cabinet and access to a stationary cupboard. However, even 40 years later, I do remember discussions about the photocopier. That was going to be our biggest expense.

Just as an aside, let me give you my personal history of computers. In about 1987 the Commonwealth Public Service Board where I was working got a computer. An IBM computer. One of them for the whole office, a large piece of

equipment that took up a whole workstation. Some months later we got an Apple Mac which was optimistically called portable. It weighed about 15 kg. In 1989 I saw an ad in the paper for an Amstrad -- it cost \$899 which was a bigish chunk of money in those days but I bought one. It had a boxy monitor with green typeface. You put in a set-up disc and then worked on individual discs which each stored about 20 pages. You could then print off onto the attached printer from a ream of perforated typing paper like a big flat toilet roll. Once I got the hang of it, it was a revelation. You could correct as you went, take lumps of text from one place and put them in another, dive into the middle and add stuff, it was like magic. You can never go back to a typewriter after that.

In 1985 that treat was on the horizon but had not yet arrived. Which was why the photocopier was so important.

We had desk and chairs and a bricks and mortar base, now we needed a roster of volunteers to provide the evening legal service. I don't recall this as being hard, I think we quickly had a fairly impressive roster of lawyers and social workers committed to each giving an evening a month. So we got started and it worked! Clients came through the door. They had simple queries (my mother died and it's the law, isn't it, that the eldest daughter gets the jewellery), more serious problems (I'm living with a guy and I didn't tell Social Security. If I go and tell them now, will they send me to jail?) And then there were the men, nearly always men, with a briefcase full of paperwork, who had suffered some injustice many years ago and had run out of complaint procedures and courts to litigate it in. Who had been to every other organisation in town and were pleased to find a new outlet in which to seek guidance for eventually getting justice for their all-consuming obsession. I'm happy to say that even difficult clients like this did not put off our volunteers.

Apart from Grazina who was there for years as office manager we also had paid lawyers, who came and went. Harry Derkley was one of the early ones and he moved on to the Aboriginal Legal Service and we also had Duncan Kerr before he went on to star in Parliament.

One of the early projects we were all involved in was the production of a Law Handbook for Tasmania which was a simple compendium of law where people could go looking for their own answers to problems. We produce two printed

editions before the rise and rise of the Internet made the process of bringing a paper edition up to date no longer worthwhile.

I'm very happy the enormous amount of effort it took to get this service going has paid off and it is still running. 40 years. Amazing. I feel privileged to have been associated with it in its early years and wish you all the best for the future, hopefully another 40 years.

Addendum

This is from the opening statement in my report (mentioned above).

In 1985 the Community Legal Service Committee received \$25,700 from the Commonwealth Legal Aid Council to set up such a Service and the doors will open on the first Tasmanian Community Legal Service in August 1985.

Members of the Community Legal Service Committee are:

Wayne Briscoe

Wanda Buza

David Byron

Liz Dean

Harry Derkeley

Dick Friend

Alison Mackirdy

Colin McKenzie