



Women with Disabilities ACT

WWDACT HISTORY & ACHIEVEMENTS 1995-2017

*Adapted from Sue Salthouse's speech at the 2017 I-Day Gala Event and WWDACT
AGM.*

BEGINNINGS

1. WWDACT began operation as a loosely structured volunteer advocacy group around 1995 or 1996. At that time the office of the national lobby group for Australian women with disabilities, Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA), was also located in Canberra. It was somewhat difficult to distinguish between the national and the local group, because a group of WWDACT key members had official roles as well as volunteer roles in WWDA as well.
2. During those early years, WWDACT was led by **Diana Palmer** and **Patricia Woodcroft-Lee** who had been seasoned campaigners for women in the disability rights movement, since the 70s. They were part of a breakaway group of women, along with **Margaret Cooper** from Melbourne, who recognised that the rights of women members of the Disabled People's International (Australia) were not on the agenda.
3. In the early days of WWDACT the core group of volunteers included 4 of the women who are members of the inaugural WWDACT board in 2017. **Dianne McGowan** and **Christina Ryan** both worked as financial managers for the national organisation at different times as well as organizing events for the local group. **Sue Salthouse** joined up in 1996 soon after emerging from the spinal cord rehabilitation unit in Sydney, and **Louise Bannister** was recruited from the University of Canberra soon after that.
4. WWDACT held semi-regular meetings and forums for its members and placed representatives strategically on committees and advisory bodies. Even after WWDA moved its headquarters to Hobart, ACT women held prominent national representative positions on its behalf. Actually, this is not much different from our current *modus operandi*.
5. WWDACT women are still actively striving for the rights of women with disabilities and are recognised advocates locally, nationally and internationally.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

6. For nearly a decade WWDACT relied on one-off grants for project activities. WWDACT women formed the majority of a WWDA telecommunications lobby group. We recognised the potential of assistive technologies and internet access to reduce isolation and enable women with disabilities to participate more actively. Today, most WWDACT women are experienced IT users, but unfortunately poverty still puts many of our members on the wrong side of the digital divide. We also ran a couple of projects with Charity Computers and the InfoXchange to enable women to learn skills at no- or low-

cost. Our lobbying and research over a number of years delineated how the Digital Divide affects women with disabilities. The Digital Divide remains a widespread problem and continues to engage academic minds today.

7. Reports included *Telecommunications and Women With Disabilities (1999)*, *Bridging the Digital Divide (2000)*, and *Telecommunications use by Women with Disabilities in remote, rural and regional Australia (2001)*.

FIRST SURVEY OF ACT WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

8. In 1999, with a HealthPACT grant, Lou Bannister conducted the first community-based ACT-wide survey of women with disabilities. The 175 respondents identified access to information as very important with information about government services, support services (like Home Help) and information about sports and recreation being their top priorities. In 1999 the internet was utilized least as a source of information. The report *A Profile of Women with Disabilities in the ACT & Region: Preliminary Survey Report 1999*, was launched in 1991 and reprinted in 2000.
9. Seventy-four percent of our respondents were affiliated with at least one disability organisation. They provided the most important sources of information along with disability service organisations. This fact is doubly relevant today when the disability landscape is changing under the NDIS.

PEER SUPPORT TRAINING PROJECT

10. At the same time, another HealthPACT grant enabled us to conduct a Peer Support Training Program in the first half of 2001. In the *Women with disabilities supporting each other* program, women learned confidence building skills, conflict resolution and how to make long term plans.

WELL AND ABLE FITNESS PROJECTS

11. Interest in sporting and fitness activities was high. Armed with this information, WWDACT then turned its attention to programs which addressed this need. *Well and Able: A community development project to promote Health and Wellbeing for women with disabilities in the ACT* was conducted in 2005, and won the Chief Minister's Inclusion in the Community Awards, and was the winner of the overall award for Excellence in Inclusion in that year. We followed this with the Well Able and Mobile (WAM) project which continued our association with fitness programs at the Chifley

Wellness Hub as it was being established. The Hub remains an affordable fitness centre where staff have expertise to work with people with disabilities.

12. Through these Health and Wellbeing projects, WWDACT began its close association with the Women's Centre for Health Matters. With the vision and support of the Board and CEO Marcia Williams, WWDACT obtained a seeding operational grant with joint funding from the Health Directorate and the Disability Directorate. This enabled us to employ our first part time staff in 2008.
13. In the early 2000s WWDACT members also contributed to information gathering for a report to the Disability Advisory Council on *Quality in Disability Services – a consumers' view*, as well as two reports specific to women: *Improving the Status of Women with Disabilities in Australia through Systemic Advocacy (2005)* and *Advancement through Advocacy for Women with Disabilities (2007)*.

WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR HEALTH MATTERS YEARS 2008 TO 2016

14. From 2008 to 2016 WWDACT remained as a flat-structured collective of strong women. Unable to receive operational funding in our own right, we were auspiced during this time by the WCHM. On our behalf they employed two part time staff. **Nicole O'Callaghan-Dittmar** was our Community Development officer and **Emilia Della Torre** our Senior Policy Officer. Their work enabled us to raise the profile of women with disabilities, and ensure that we took a more professional approach to our advocacy.
15. WWDACT has benefited from operational funding from the office for disability over these 8 years. This has enabled WWDACT to continue to have members in key positions on advisory boards in the ACT.
16. **Lou Bannister** and **Christina Ryan**, sitting on too many advisory bodies to name, have my personal thanks for the work they have done over all this time to keep the issues that are important for our constituents at the forefront of government and community discussions.

STRONG WOMEN: GREAT CITY SURVEY 2010

17. In 2010, WWDACT undertook another ACT-wide survey. The *Strong Women: Great City (2011)* report had 185 respondents and gave us valuable information about ACT women with disabilities. This survey aimed to give us information in areas not covered in Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys, like the triennial Survey of Disabilities Ageing and Carers (SDAC). Areas surveyed included: demographic characteristics, disability,

Internet use, transport, social connectedness, safety, access to health services and education, employment and income.

18. We found that 33% of respondents had caring responsibilities; 60% lived in privately owned accommodation, and 50% were single. The majority of women assessed their physical health and emotional status as fair to very good, although 50% said they would like to improve their fitness levels. Importantly, the survey showed the high numbers of women who receive care and support from family and friends with a lower number relying more of paid supports. This is an important survey because it enables us to compare pre- and post-introduction of the NDIS.
19. Somewhere in these hectic years, WWDACT hosted Therese Rein as our guest speaker at a community morning tea at the Legislative Assembly. More than 100 women and community members participated.

STRONG WOMEN: STRONG VOICES - FLASHMOB 2012

20. Keeping an eye on policy development is a serious activity. And sometimes WWDACT likes to liven things up a little. In 2012, we decided that staging a Flashmob would do the trick. It also raised awareness of the need for a safe and secure city for all individuals. With a Women's Grant we set about organizing a takeover of Garema Place. Our choreographer, **Malou Midgely** (at that time with Dance Edge studio) is here tonight in another role to serve you drinks. Thank you Malou for being such a fantastic dance teacher. To the strains of Pink's ***Raise your Glass*** and Aretha Franklin's ***Respect***, 70 women rocked the Merry-Go-Round and sent a rousing message about community safety to astonished passers-by.
21. In 2012 WWDACT was awarded the **ACT Chief Minister's International Women's Day Award - Community Category.**

STRONG WOMEN: CIRCUS SISTERS – CIRCUS TROUPE 2013.

22. On a similar theme of community engagement, in 2013, WWDACT formed a Circus Troupe. Our 12 troupe members were largely drawn from Canberra College, with several members from the general community. Working with the Circus Warehouse over a series of weeks the women learned an astonishing number of circus skills – plate twirling, beam balancing, balance sticks, poi, juggling trick sticks. The troupe's mastery of new skills meant that at the end of the term we were able to put on a 10 minute performance in City Walk. Thanks to Hands Across Canberra and the Snow Foundation

for a boost to our Women's Grant Funding. **Marcus Freeman**, from CIT devoted many hours of volunteer time to make a 10 minute captioned video of the process and performance. The film was premiered in April 2014 as part of a showcase celebration of WWDACT activities.

23. A spin-off project was a photographic exhibition of framed black white photos taken over the course of the training by **Aart Groothuis**. With an I-day grant, our exhibition was launched on December 4 and ran for 10 days at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre.

DATA-SET INVESTIGATION PROJECT (D-SIP) 2013

24. At the same time WWDACT was commissioned by the (then) Disability Advisory Council to investigate gaps in the collection and public availability of data about women with disabilities. Any systemic advocacy organisation is hampered by lack of access to data. Much is available through the Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers and other ABS surveys, plus information in Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) surveys or Australian Institute of Health and Welfare surveys. The cry comes from WWDA , WWDACT and equally from the UN that we all need robust data sets in order to plan effectively. We need that data disaggregated gender and disability. Over the course of the last 20years, after persistent lobbying from many bodies, including WWDACT, more disaggregated data sets are now publicly available. Analysis of ACT data in national surveys often has percentage error margins which render the figures unreliable. Targeted surveys are therefore very important in our jurisdiction. The D-SIP project identified 13 useful data sets, albeit with some that do not yet have publicly available data disaggregated by gender.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

ACT CRISIS SERVICE SCHEME – E-LEARNING MODULES launched 30 November at I-Day gala event

25. WWDACT has played a part in shaping the ACT policies to eliminate violence against women through **Anna Saxon's** and **Sue Salthouse's** membership of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council. Although we have not had membership of the DVPC since 2015, the importance of ensuring that women with disabilities are an integral part of the Family Safety measures being developed. The incidence and prevalence of violence against women with disabilities, whether in the mainstream community or as members of other marginalised groups such as the ATSI, CALD and LGBTIQ+ communities warrants

direct involvement and close consultation with those with the lived experience of disability.

26. In 2013, concern about levels of violence against women with disabilities PLUS recognition of the enormous barriers to leaving a violent relationship, prompted the (then) ACT Disability and Community Services Commissioner, **Mary Durkin**, to convene a working group to map out how the ACT might assist these women.
27. Women With Disabilities ACT, the Domestic and Family Violence Crisis Service, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre and the Victims of Crime Commissioner, were the original core group which began work with the Commissioner.
28. This began a long journey to develop the ACT Crisis Services Scheme to assist women with disabilities to establish a pathway to safety. A crucial part of the scheme has been to upskill crisis workers in disability awareness and conversely to upskill disability workers in Domestic and Family Violence awareness as well as in Sexual Assault support. Training in disability awareness was delivered for workers at the DVCS and CRCC in 2015. In addition an interactive e-learning module is available on the website for access at any time.
29. The e-learning modules which will help disability workers gain understanding about DFV and Sexual Assault were launched in 2017 by the Victims of Crime Commissioner, **John Hinchey**.
30. WWDACT works from a human rights framework, backed by the articles in the 7 Human rights Conventions at the UN which Australia has ratified. In recognition of our years of work in this field WWDACT was awarded the **2015 ACT Chief Minister's Inclusion Award for Advancing Human Rights**

INCORPORATION – A NEW PHASE IN WWDACT'S JOURNEY

31. This overview brings us to the next phase in WWDACT's Journey. In mid-2016, the WWDACT Steering Committee, that stalwart 4 women of Lou, Di, Christina and Sue turned our thoughts to the future. We decided that, after 2 decades of operation, it was time to become an incorporated association. Since then, our journey has been something of a whirlwind.
32. We became an incorporated association on 13 December 2016 – just under one year ago. We have recruited and welcome to our Board, two new members, Kerry Marshal, and Karen Hedley, and appointed a CEO, Caro Roach.

33. WWDACT has a new home, with an office in SHFPACT, a logical and fruitful symbiotic relationship between our two organisations.

CONTRACEPTION AND CONSENT PROJECT

34. Our major work in the first half of 2017 was to undertake a comparative analysis of the legal frameworks for accessing contraception. This forms the preliminary half of a project to understand more about sex education for women with disabilities in the ACT and how well equipped women are to exercise their rights to sexual expression and reproductive rights. The report is ready to be launched, when funding for the second half of the project has been identified.
35. There is much work to be done still to make sure that ACT women with disabilities can participate fully in a community that is safe and provides opportunities for fulfillment.