

Jean Alcorn

27 August 1924–17 August 2005

The following is a version of the eulogy given at Jean Alcorn's funeral by her sister, Mrs Helen Goode.

Jean Alcorn was the third child and second daughter of Thomas and Janie Alcorn, farmers of Merrigum. Leaving school at 13 armed with her Merit Certificate, she began her working life on the farm, milking cows, often by hand, feeding the animals, collecting eggs and carrying out a host of other chores. No doubt she pondered what the future might hold for her. Remarkably, she retired in 1988 as a solicitor and partner in a Melbourne law firm, following a successful career as a triple-certificated nurse.

Acquiring an education in the country in the 1930s wasn't meant to be easy. As a small child she walked the 3½ kilometers to the Merrigum school most mornings, although a parent collected her and her siblings in the afternoon. When she was eleven, her parents bought her a bicycle. Her younger sister rode on the carrier.

After school activities included Sunday school, piano and art lessons and, later, sewing and dressmaking classes. The Methodist Young People's Guild provided the necessary social outlet: at Guild concerts Jean and her sister and brother played piano duets and trios. When war came in 1939, Jean, her mother and sisters knitted woolen socks, mittens, balaclavas and gloves for soldiers and airmen.

When she had left school her father had extended the dairy, buying another twelve cows to provide Jean with a job. Milking was hard work, especially in winter when the machines shut down because there were fewer cows. It would seem that Jean, always free-spirited, had a wider perspective on what her future might offer. Accordingly, in 1942, aged 17, she left the farm to become a trainee nurse at Mooroopna Base Hospital. The nurses were always invited to the dances arranged for the airmen stationed at Shepparton and the soldiers on duty at the POW camps at Tatura.

Various nursing postings followed, including Heathcote, Kilmore, Edithvale and Morwell. By 1947 she was fully qualified in Midwifery: whenever there were problems with a patient in labour, her services were in demand. In 1948 she was posted to the Bush Nursing Service at Hopetoun and almost immediately found herself, at 23, in charge of the hospital. Staff shortages were an immediate problem –she overcame this by offering casual employment to qualified nurses who had left the service due to marriage. Perhaps it was at Hopetoun that she became aware of the need for an understanding of the law as it applied to hospital management and the nursing profession.

Leaving Hopetoun after two years, she continued her studies in infant welfare, leading to an appointment as matron of the Melbourne City Creche. By now she had obtained adult matriculation and in 1951 she commenced studying for a law degree, with her brother George, who was later librarian of the Supreme Court Library. To be close to Melbourne University, she applied successfully for the position of Staff Sister at the Women's Hospital, and within a short time was Sister-in charge of one of the maternity wards. Being in charge of all the Midwifery wards at night, a duty rotated among the Sisters, was not a popular task: Jean volunteered to take a night shift permanently in order to fit her lecture schedule. She remained in this position for 12

years until her graduation in 1963. On this occasion, a feature article appeared in the *Age* and local papers: asked what she intended to do next, she replied, "Get some sleep". In fact she took a holiday to Greece with her elder sister Ruth, the first of many such trips they enjoyed together. No continent and no corner of Australia was left unvisited. The mandatory slide shows that followed were conducted with a watchful eye on any errant snoozer.

On returning from Greece, and after her admission to the bar as barrister and solicitor, she was offered a position with the firm of Maddock, Lonie and Chisholm, with whom she remained for 23 years, successively as employee, partner and consultant.

Her nursing background, however, was not forgotten. She lectured to nurses on the topic "Legal Responsibilities in the Nursing Profession". This was part of an involvement and participation in a wide range of community activities that were a source of amazement to family and friends. Her membership of the Australian Federation of University Women extended over many years and included a period as Victorian President (1982–83) and longstanding involvement with the Eastern Suburbs Group, which she represented for many years on the AFUW-Vic Central Committee. Presidency of a chapter of Soroptimists, together with membership of the Board of Management of the Coburg Presbyterian church, were typical of her wide range of community interests.

She never married: her extended family were her siblings and their children and grandchildren. Birthdays and special occasions were never forgotten for them or for the many friends who will remember her friendship, generosity and service.

The Jean Alcorn Bursary was awarded to Deborah Mayersen, University of Melbourne, in 2006.

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