

## ACT Law Society Awards Night 2019: Winners' full biographies

### 2019 ACT Young Lawyer of the Year: Farzana Choudhury

Farzana is a Senior Solicitor in Street Law, a program of Canberra Community Law that provides outreach legal services for people who are experiencing, or are at risk of, homelessness. She regularly appears in the ACT Magistrates Court for Street Law in criminal cases, and she has developed new outreach legal services for the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of our community to complement Street Law's existing services.

In October 2018, she established Street Law's health justice partnership with the Junction Youth Health Service. This is the only youth focused health justice partnership in the ACT, and only the second in Australia. Farzana has worked alongside health practitioners and youth work staff to address the unmet legal needs of young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Through this partnership, Street Law has provided legal assistance in a healthcare setting to young people who might not have otherwise received support on a range of legal issues, including dealing with debt and fines, housing law issues, criminal matters, obtaining ID, and connection to other free legal services.

Earlier this year, Farzana established the Women in Prison Legal Empowerment Sessions (WIPLES), a series of legal education seminars and advice clinics with the goal of supporting and empowering women in prison. WIPLES aims to improve the health and wellbeing of incarcerated women by addressing their legal problems, building their knowledge in legal areas that affect them, and preventing legal issues from escalating. WIPLES also supports women in prison who are at risk of being evicted from their public housing tenancies. Farzana has secured funding from the Capital Giving grant and the Chief Minister's office for the program to operate into September 2020.

As well as her work with Street Law, Farzana volunteers with several community organisations. She is a volunteer with the Night Time Legal Advice Service. She researched, edited, and co-authored a book on the history of Australia's oldest women's refuge, Beryl Women Inc, which is sold to generate funds for the refuge's child and youth programs. She is also Chair of the Board of Directors for the Women's Centre for Health Matters, Chair of the Management Committee of Beryl Women Inc, and serves on the organising committees of Homeless Connect Canberra and the International Tenants' Day.

Farzana has contributed to law reform in relation to public space offences that impact marginalised groups, and she has spoken to the media about access to justice for people in poverty. She has written articles on youth homelessness and health justice, and the impact of public space laws on people experiencing homelessness. She also coordinated the ACT arm of the Australian Research Council's national study into the criminalisation of poverty and homelessness in Australia.

For the past three years Farzana has been co-convenor of the National Association of Community Legal Centres' National Human Rights Network, working with legal services across Australia to develop and implement national policy on human rights violations confronting individuals facing poverty and disadvantage. She is also a member of the Law Society's Inclusion and Diversity Committee, and was elected to Council in September 2018.

Farzana was recently shortlisted for the Churchill Fellowship for her ground-breaking project on 'empowering people facing poverty through social and housing status rights-based models'.

Particularly impressive is Farzana's drive to use the law to improve the lives of members of our community facing significant disadvantage. She is doing this through a multifaceted approach, including the practice of law, law reform, community engagement, and innovation. She is an impressive young lawyer with an arsenal of self-driven and impactful accomplishments spanning the course of her relatively short career.

## 2019 Government Law Award: Michael Deasey

Michael Deasey is Special Counsel at the ACT Government Solicitor, managing the property and commercial section of the office. Since joining the ACTGS in 2005, he has worked on a range of complex legal matters, often associated with a high level of public interest or political sensitivity.

He was the lawyer in charge of advising the Territory on the property aspects of the Mr Fluffy legacy, and in the development of an equitable response to affected homeowners that was both community-focussed and compassionate.

Michael was the primary lawyer in the restructuring of the Territory's Land Development Agency, and the creation of the Suburban Land Agency and City Renewal Authority. This was a major project with a high level of media and public interest, where Michael had to deal with highly sensitive information and provide complex advice within short time frames.

He has also advised on many major construction projects for the Territory, including the University of Canberra Public Hospital, the Majura Parkway, and on most of the projects developed under the ACT Health Infrastructure Plan. He also acts as probity adviser on a number of major Territory projects, providing advice on processes under the *Government Procurement Act 2007* and regulations.

Michael regularly provides training to his colleagues at ACTGS as well as clients, on topics such as probity, procurement processes, pro forma contracts in the construction practice, and updates in the legislative area, such as the Building Code and Security of Payments. He circulates written papers and bulletins within ACTGS and more broadly for his construction clients, regarding developments in the law that are applicable to his practice. Notably, he has published two bulletins for the ACT Government on *The Effect of the Building Code 2013 on Territory Projects*, and *Updates to the Building and Construction OHS Scheme*.

As a leader within ACTGS, he is a mentor to both peers and junior solicitors, and he is known for displaying sensitivity and kindness to all. He is always keen to acknowledge staff successes, and is dedicated to offering professional support to each employee, no matter how junior or senior.

As a result of his hard work and commitment to a positive work environment, he has effected significant change in the office during his time as manager. He has either delivered or arranged training encompassing not only technical legal issues, but also professional development, leadership, resilience, and key attributes like respect, equity and diversity.

His colleagues describe him as always approachable. He is the first port of call for property, commercial and construction questions, making himself available, taking time to listen carefully and identify the legal issue and possible solution and, if he cannot do so himself, suggesting other avenues or people who may be able to provide further assistance. There is never any sense that this is an imposition on his time or a distraction from his other responsibilities.

Michael served 26 years on the Law Society's Professional Conduct Committee (formerly the Complaints Committee), and also volunteers with the Society's Legal Advice Bureau, giving free short legal consultations to members of the public.

He also volunteers at the Canberra City Uniting Church Early Morning Centre, helping to serve breakfast to Canberra's homeless once a week before work for the past five years.

Michael's knowledge and practical and legal experience are an invaluable resource for his colleagues and the ACTGS office as a whole. His willingness to assist despite his own heavy workload, are recognised and appreciated by staff and clients at all levels. He sets and achieves high standards for himself, and his reassuring guidance helps his colleagues realise their potential, increasing their confidence to undertake new and challenging tasks knowing they'll be supported.

He is an outstanding solicitor and role model, an invaluable and integral part of ACTGS, and a worthy recipient of the 2019 Government Law Award.

## 2019 Pro Bono Service Award: Vanessa Parkins

Vanessa Parkins is a Senior Associate at Sparke Helmore Lawyers, working in the area of CTP insurance. She also volunteers as the Canberra office's pro bono coordinator, championing pro bono culture to her colleagues and sourcing pro bono opportunities in the local community.

In the year that Vanessa has been coordinating Sparke Helmore's local pro bono activities, she has achieved 705 hours of total pro bono legal work at the firm (equivalent to 23.4 hours per FTE lawyer). This is on top of her considerable personal pro bono work, where she has completed 132.5 hours (worth \$42,618), in addition to her regular duties.

She regularly volunteers her time to the Women's Legal Service Divorce Clinic, and coordinates other lawyers' involvement at the clinic. Her team provide pro bono assistance to unrepresented applicants in the Family Court for lodgement of a divorce application. These clients are mainly disadvantaged women who may be experiencing family violence issues, and who often do not speak English as a first language. The social impact of this clinic is significant, as it allows disadvantaged women the legal help required to be granted a divorce through the Federal Court. In the last year, as a result of Vanessa's coordination and championing of the clinic, lawyers from Sparke Helmore's Canberra office have contributed more than 220 hours of pro bono legal assistance through this clinic, with Vanessa alone responsible for 78 of those hours.

Another significant project in which Vanessa has played an integral role in Sparke Helmore's Aboriginal Wills Clinics, through which the firm aims to make a positive impact on Indigenous communities through the provision of culturally appropriate wills clinics in regional and remote communities throughout Australia. The main focus of the clinics is to reduce the extraordinarily high number of burial disputes among the Aboriginal community (an estimated 70% of burial disputes that go to court in Australia involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).

Late last year Vanessa organised an Aboriginal Wills Clinic in Canberra in partnership with the Women's Legal Centre ACT, and also volunteered her time to meet with clients and draft their estate documents over a two-day period.

Vanessa coordinates Sparke Helmore's involvement with the Law Society's Legal Advice Bureau, as well as volunteering there herself. She has also organised three pro bono secondments to the Law Society's Pro Bono Clearing House, which amounts to more than 280 hours of pro bono legal assistance to date.

Vanessa has worked tirelessly to develop training modules and staff handbooks, mentor younger lawyers, and engage directly with the community to develop creative solutions for client needs. She has been a strong role model for the Canberra pro bono team, and her leadership in this space is highly valued.

Her passion for pro bono work and the commitment and energy she brings to this aspect of her professional life is not only a great reflection of her own values but equally of the values Sparke Helmore seeks to instil in all their staff.



## 2019 Pro Bono Service Award (Highly Commended): King & Wood Mallesons Canberra

King & Wood Mallesons believe strongly in giving back to the community through a variety of activities involving all their staff. To achieve this, they have developed a program called KWM Community Impact.

This pro bono and community program reflects the firm's commitment to the community in which they live, work and operate. The specific aim of the program is directed to those who are most vulnerable in society, aiming to reduce inequality and poverty, particularly amongst children and young people.

The program has led to 100 per cent of lawyers in their Canberra office participating in pro bono work, and their lawyers have met the National Pro Bono Target of at least 35 hours per year.

Some of the pro bono clients they have assisted in the ACT are the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Kulturebreak, Marymead, the Canberra Glassworks, the Women's Legal Centre, Lifeline Canberra, Anglicare, RSPCA ACT, Toora Women's Inc, the Youth Law Centre ACT, Equality Australia, and the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples.

The firm coordinates an Artists in Residence Project in collaboration with Waringarri Arts Centre in Kununurra, WA to increase understanding, relationships and respect. The project hosts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to share skills, knowledge, stories and journey with KWM's staff and clients. KWM has supported the Waringarri Arts Centre more broadly by providing important IP copyright legal advice.

The firm also encourages a culture of giving through participation in charity sporting events, and direct donations via DigDeep® (KWM's workplace giving project). Every dollar that a staff member contributes is matched by the KWM partners.

## 2019 Pro Bono Service Award (Highly Commended): Proximity

Proximity take the view that pro bono work in the Canberra community requires a conscious and collective effort. Through their core values and direct consultation with staff, they have promoted a pro bono culture at the firm by consciously resourcing and supporting their team to fulfil their pro bono obligations.

Established in 2011, Proximity were the first incorporated legal practice to sign up to the National Pro Bono Target, and assisted the Australian Pro Bono Centre to develop a Statement of Principles for incorporated legal practices.

In the last financial year, Proximity contributed 852.85 hours of pro bono work to the Canberra community, an average of 56 pro bono hours per lawyer. In addition to their pro bono legal work, Proximity also contributes many hours to other corporate social responsibility activities, resulting in a total community contribution of over 63 hours per lawyer.

They provide a full-time secondee to the Women's Legal Centre, helping to represent disadvantaged women in the ACT. They are the pro bono legal provider for The Farm in Galong, a charitable organisation in country NSW established to support women who have completed rehabilitation from alcohol and drug misuse. They are a longstanding pro bono partner of Menslink, a charity working with young men in Canberra to deliver counselling, mentoring, and education.

They have provided a short-term secondee to ADACAS, a not-for-profit advocacy organisation helping people with disabilities, senior people, and their carers. They have also provided short-term secondees to the Law Society's Pro Bono Clearing House, and several Proximity lawyers are members of the Pro Bono Clearing House Assessment Panel. Several of their lawyers also volunteer at the Law Society's Legal Advice Bureau. They also provide pro bono legal advice through the University of Canberra's Small Business Legal Advice Clinic.

## The 2019 President's Medal: Michael Kukulies-Smith

Michael Kukulies-Smith is one of Canberra's most experienced criminal lawyers, and has been deeply involved in local law development and reform. He graduated from the ANU in 2003 before going on to work with Ken Cush & Associates, and since 2010 with Kamy Saeedi Law.

His areas of expertise include sexual offences, serious motor vehicle offences (including those involving death), assaults (including family violence matters), fraud offences, drug trafficking and importation, confiscation of criminal assets, and human rights.

Over the course of an extensive legal career, he has represented clients in the ACT Supreme Court, Magistrates Court, and the ACAT, in NSW local and district courts, and in the Queensland Supreme Court. He has also appeared in the Family Court and the Federal Circuit Court, the Federal Court, and the High Court.

He has taken on several matters relating to wrongful imprisonment on a pro bono basis, pursuing one such matter all the way to the High Court of Australia.

Since 2010, Michael has been chair of the Law Society's Criminal Law Committee, and he is often called upon to represent the Law Society in the media, in government inquiries, and in Legislative Assembly committee meetings, where he has consistently shown great dedication to advocating for better laws in the ACT.

On behalf of the Society, he has spoken out on such topics as the recent retrospective legislation changes in the Crimes Act and the Firearms Act; the introduction of the ACT's Drug and Alcohol Court; drink driving and drug driving penalties; proposed cannabis laws; and the government's CTP changes.

He has also served on a number of court and departmental committees and advisory panels, including in respect of the reform of Sexual Assault Reform Program (SARP) in the ACT.

Each year, Michael participates in the Burgmann College Volunteer Mentor Program, freely giving his time to mentor students considering a career in criminal law. He also gives regular guest lectures at ANU in areas of criminal law.

Michael carries his advocacy work to the national stage as the Law Society's delegate to the National Criminal Law Committee convened by the Law Council of Australia. In 2015, he coordinated the Canberra protest as part of the Law Council of Australia's national day of action calling for increased legal assistance funding.

For his outstanding work for the Law Society as a volunteer expert in criminal law, his always cheerful willingness to answer obscure questions at odd times, and his professionalism in dealing with the media and the government, he is a worthy recipient of the 2019 President's Medal.