



st mary's women

VALMA CEARNS (Davies '51) Disability Advocate and Retired Lawyer



"St Mary's played a big part in my journey by showing what sharing and forward thinking meant."

Valma Cearn (Davies '51) was one of only two women in her year at UWA to graduate with a law degree and subsequently, became one of only a handful of women lawyers in Perth at the time. She later became a Senior Partner of a law firm, an exception for women then, and has served the legal community with distinction.

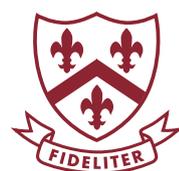
After starting her family, Valma worked as a pro bono volunteer with the Citizens Advice Bureau. Her dedication was above and beyond the call of duty and in 1999 she was awarded a Commonwealth Recognition Award for Senior Australians. In 2003, Valma was honoured in the Disability Service Commission 'Making a Difference Awards'. Valma has devoted much of her life to providing access and inclusion for those with disabilities. Valma's incredible empathy for the challenges faced by individuals and their families is in part due to her own health issues. Here she shares her story and how St Mary's helped her pave the way forward.

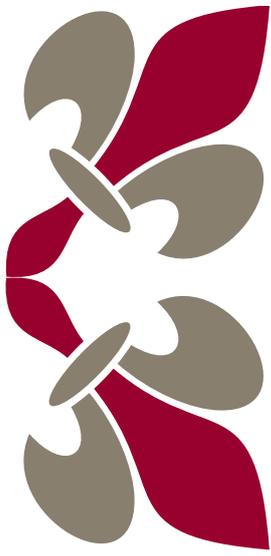
"Shortly after World War II, St Mary's set up a boarding school in Nedlands and I became one of eight boarders. Subsequently, we moved into a home in West Perth.

In 1948 I contracted polio and did not return to St Mary's until 1950, as I was hospitalised in what was then known as the Infectious Diseases Hospital at Shenton Park. Polio left me with paralysis of the legs, and weak muscles in my body and arms. On my return to school, I could not stand by myself and could only walk with non-bending, full-length calipers (leg irons) and crutches. I could only walk a short distance very slowly and awkwardly. I was the first person in WA to be fitted with hinged calipers, enabling me to bend my knees when sitting down.

All the girls at St Mary's, particularly, the boarders, were wonderful. The School's Headmistress, Mrs Myles, a woman greatly admired and loved by the students, said helping others was character building. They shared my disability in so many ways, helping to carry crutches upstairs whilst I slowly pulled myself up by holding on to bannisters, and accompanying me with my slow walk across from the school boarding house (approximately 60 or 70 metres). Some, I'm sure, walked cross-legged or two steps forward and one back for fun as I was so slow.

My home was in Collie. There were no facilities for people with disabilities and few, if any, work or career opportunities.





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It was Mrs Myles, who encouraged my parents to return me to school to complete my education with my peer group. Mrs Myles also arranged for a professional vocational guidance group to visit the School and guide me (amongst others) in a career choice that I could manage. Vocational guidance was very new in 1950. Once it was agreed that I should consider law as a career, Mrs Myles arranged an interview for me with Professor Beasley, Professor of Law, at UWA. She also spoke on my behalf as to my being accepted as a student.

The old Law School at UWA had six or seven steps and no bannister. This was a problem to me but not to Professor Beasley. His answer, "This Law School is full of young healthy men - they can carry you up the steps if needs be." No thoughts then of inclusion and access committees! However, the young men were wonderfully helpful. I married one and the others remained lifelong friends. Perhaps it was the bonding and the sharing of my disability.

I must say that I have indeed been fortunate in my friends. They know who they are. I have also been fortunate in my family who have always been there when needed.

You may wonder where all this detail is leading. It is important that we all realise that each of us has an important part to play in our community. It is important to

help others, including those who have a disability that can be shared.

People are not disabled – they have a disability and usually this means that with assistance and help sorting out problems, a person can be part of a community and give back and achieve a happy life. St Mary's played a big part in my journey by showing what sharing and forward thinking meant.

There are people who are natural leaders and achievers of great things. However, it is important that we know that it is not only leaders who make a difference in the lives of others. The rest of us can also make a difference by acts of kindness.

Without the support of my parents, and Mrs Myles, her staff, and St Mary's students, I would not have been able to continue with my education. This includes my tertiary education and going on to be admitted as a lawyer.

I have always been very grateful to St Mary's for the care, understanding and mentoring given to me. Their support was a great gift that enabled me to go forward and establish a very fulfilling life on both a personal and professional level."

