

Appointment of Justice Sarah Huggett

as Chief Judge of the District Court of New South Wales



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On 29 April 2024, Justice Sarah Huggett was sworn in as the first female chief judge of the District Court of New South Wales and president of the Dust Diseases Tribunal of New South Wales.

Justice Huggett was born in Moree, a town with a history of fostering female judicial success: Justice Mary Gaudron, the first female justice appointed to the High Court of Australia, was also born in Moree.

Justice Huggett's father, Bruce, was a senior police officer in Moree. When her Honour was sworn in to the Supreme Court of New South Wales on 12 December 2023, it was remarked that Bruce had a deep and observable bond with his daughter, the fourth of the eight children he shared with Justice Huggett's mother, Vivienne. Bruce is remembered in Moree as a highly respected police officer who was both thorough and competent – qualities he and Vivienne clearly passed on to Justice Huggett, and no doubt all their children, in spades.

Justice Huggett attended high school in Sydney, then studied at Macquarie University and the University of Sydney. After periods working at Blake Dawson Waldron and Phillips Fox, her Honour joined the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) in 1993 and was appointed a Crown prosecutor in 2001. Her Honour also worked at the Crown Prosecution Service in the United Kingdom and was an adjunct professor at the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles in 2009.

Justice Huggett was well liked by her colleagues at the ODPP. In 2000, she set up the ODPP Bathurst office, where she conducted jury trials for the first time. Her instructing solicitor was Fiona Gray, now a Crown prosecutor. Legend has it that the pair moved into an enormous four-bedroom



home in a new housing estate on the edge of Bathurst, where they would spend their days and weeks working on the serious and, more often than not, unusual criminal matters arising in the Central Tablelands. It is said that this work was often done in their pyjamas and, occasionally, amid mouse plagues and smoke detectors falling from the ceiling. One might think it was good training for what was to come as chief judge of the District Court, albeit her Honour usually wears robes these days.

Justice Huggett was known at the ODPP for her immense capacity for work, her collegiality and her humour (which was appropriately dark at times, as those who practice predominantly in criminal law will appreciate). As an advocate, she was known to be thoroughly prepared and quick on her feet.

In 2012, Justice Huggett was a much-welcomed appointment to the District Court. As a judge, she has been similarly highly regarded. Her work ethic remains, and she is a pleasure to appear before; the terms 'fair' and 'considered' are often heard from those who have appeared before her Honour. In recognition of this excellence and the high regard in which she is held, her Honour was appointed as a Justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales in 2023.

Her Honour's work on the Bench has included a strong focus on improving the experiences of women, children and Aboriginal people who come into contact

with the legal system. For example, in a recent decision in *R v MR, JB and CS (young persons) (No 4)* [2024] NSWSC 909, her Honour made an order pursuant to s 26 of the *Evidence Act 1995* (NSW) permitting a witness intermediary to sit beside and assist each juvenile accused in a murder trial if they were giving evidence. The order also permitted the witness intermediary, if necessary, to communicate to the Court if she believed the accused was not able to understand a question due to its form, content or any other reason.

Her Honour replaces Justice Derek Price who served as the chief judge of the District Court from 2014. His Honour retired on 26 April 2024, after more than 35 years presiding on the Bench of three New South Wales courts. Justice Price's term was characterised by significant positive changes to the Court, including the introduction of the Walama List and the Child Sexual Offence Evidence Program. His Honour also steered the Court, being the largest trial court in Australia, through the various challenges of the pandemic.

The District Court that Justice Huggett will preside over faces different challenges; however, her Honour is perfectly placed to navigate them with her characteristic intellect, sound judgement and collegial qualities. **BN**