



yin& yang *Felicity Zempilas & Felicity Negus*

WA's innovative mental health court has brought together two passionate Felicities, aged 45 and 24.

Felicity Z

I always loved the character of Portia in Merchant of Venice, so perhaps that's where my interest in the law began. After high school, I went to uni straight away and really enjoyed my studies, particularly those subjects where the law intersects with the human condition — I just really love people and their stories.

From very early on, I knew I wanted to be a magistrate but it happened earlier than I expected, at age 37. I've been very fortunate that most of my professional experiences have in some way contributed to where I am now as magistrate of WA's Mental Health Court Diversion Program (Start Court).

Start Court was still in its pilot stage when I was given the opportunity to take it on. Because it was so new, the model was still relatively unclear and there is no precedent for it anywhere in Australia. I was keen to set down guidelines for the court so that we have a clear model and process that we are following and also to ultimately measure the effectiveness of what we are doing.

Producing working guidelines for a court like this is actually a huge task and a colleague suggested I get an intern to help out. I approached the McCusker Centre for Citizenship at UWA and that process delivered me Felicity. When I read her CV, I couldn't have imagined a more perfect fit for the job. She came with a lot of existing knowledge about mental health and a real passion and interest in the project. She picked up the concepts very quickly and was incredibly diligent — there is a lot to grasp in this area and it's not taught in universities.

I really needed someone who would be in sync with the way I think and write and Felicity quickly became that person. We'd bounce ideas back and forth very easily and usually come to the same conclusion. She has an intelligence and a quiet dedication that will see her go a long way.

What we are doing here with Start Court is very important. People experiencing mental health issues are among the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our community. What this court does is try to address all the relevant risk factors for one person in a way

that ultimately reduces their likelihood of reoffending and increases their connection with appropriate services. We must ensure there is a fair and just outcome for their charges but also try to improve their mental health and wellbeing wherever possible. And it's really working. I hear about 85 cases a week and every day witness amazing transformations. People who have significant health issues and broken family relationships can turn their lives around in a matter of months. It's miraculous sometimes and quite an emotional thing to see.

Felicity continues to come in on a voluntary basis and there will definitely be ongoing work for her here because I don't want to lose all the knowledge she's gained and I like bouncing ideas around with her.

Felicity N

When I was 12, someone close to our family was affected by depression and mental illness and I really started to see the impact that it was having on their lives and relationships. I felt quite helpless at that age in terms of what I could do to help. When I finished high school, a friend of my brother's suicided, and I saw how badly it affected him. It got me thinking about getting involved in something like Lifeline.

To become a Lifeline volunteer, you have to do about 12 months of training. I completed this while studying arts (as a pathway to law) at UWA and then started as an employee on their online chat service. Working at Lifeline teaches you the skills of active listening, empathy, patience and remaining calm under pressure. I started to think about how I could transfer these skills into a future legal career — basically how I could combine my passion for mental health with the law.

A friend spotted the Start Court internship opportunity and forwarded it to me. Thank goodness she did. The very concept of the court made so much sense to me. People affected by mental illness are very vulnerable and when they come into contact with the justice system, we need to have supports in place for them. The right support results in



PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

fewer people having to go to jail and families remaining intact — there are huge flow-on effects in many areas.

When I received the email to say my application had been successful, I thought there must have been a typo. A Felicity working with a Felicity? I just don't meet that many Felicities! I thought I would address her as magistrate but she insisted on calling her Felicity. Our email exchanges look pretty funny — "Hi Felicity ... from Felicity".

I was nervous about meeting her ... but she was instantly so welcoming, friendly and down to earth. She had so much enthusiasm to make the court and its processes so much more efficient and supportive, and that really excited me too.

Felicity is genuinely interested in my opinions and observations and we've had some great discussions about how particular issues in the guidelines and how to word things.

Having someone show you that level of trust and respect and to invest so much time in you is very special.

It's been a pivotal experience for me so far, especially in terms of finding that connection between mental health and the law. I have formed faith that Start Court is the right way to support people in these legal situations. It's given me a lot of hope and confidence that I can find a future career pathway that brings together my passions.

Carrie Cox

'I was nervous meeting her.'