

OBITUARIES

Holding court to end

Stephen Thackray

Judge

Born: Wongan Hills, 1955**Died:** Perth, aged 65

Wearing a lime-green shirt so striking it could have frightened any horses met along the way, judge Stephen Thackray strode boldly out from the Bell Tower on Perth's Swan River foreshore.

He was a man of many missions, but this one was dear to heart and mind.

He was among more than 200 people out of bed early to participate in the inaugural Law Access Walk in May 2016.

The 4.4km event ended with breakfast at Annalakshmi restaurant at Elizabeth Quay.

Leading up to the day, Thackray — chief judge of the Family Court of WA — had been posting online, to the amusement of colleagues, about his strenuous training regime.

This was all about fun raising and fundraising. Alongside the smiles, there was a serious purpose: boosting the cause of making family law accessible to all. Law Access is a not-for-profit organisation co-ordinating pro bono (free or reduced cost) legal assistance.

Most of the judge's career was in family law. When standing down as chief judge, he was accorded a ceremonial farewell.

As someone keen on furthering Aboriginal access to family law, his own speech included thanks to a notable guest from Newman, Devon Cuimara.

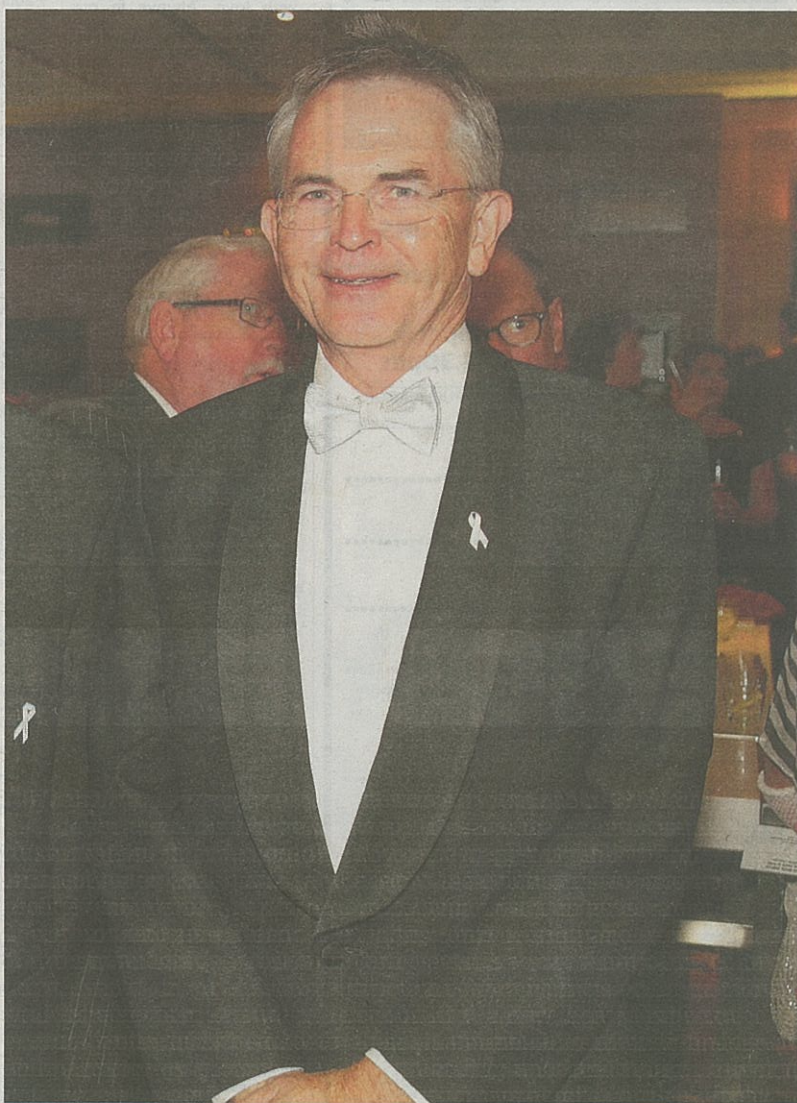
"It was my chance meeting with Devon," the guest of honour said, "that provided the spark for our project with the Martu and Nyiyaparli people of the Western Desert. This has sustained and exhilarated me in the final stage of my career and given me the privilege of working with an extraordinarily talented and committed group of people from the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Family Law Services, Legal Aid WA and Pilbara Community Legal centre."

This inclusive touch resonated with the judge's boyhood in Mogumber, near New Norcia, where his family had a farm.

Primary school classmates included those who would one day be described as part of the Stolen Generation.

Stephen Ernest Thackray was born in Wongan Hills on January 25, 1955, the fifth of six children of Mary (nee Vidler) and Richard Thackray. After leaving Mogumber primary, Stephen's first two years of high school were as a boarder at St Patrick's, Geraldton. After the family sold the farm — Coolibah, 7km east of Mogumber — and moved to Perth, he attended Christian Brothers College, Leederville (now Aranmore Catholic College).

He completed a law degree at the University of Western Australia in 1977, gaining the highest class of honours



awarded that year. Taking articles at Lavan and Walsh, he was introduced to family law by the then principal family law partner, Diana Bryant, later to be chief justice of the Family Court of Australia. He served as acting chief justice of the Family Court of Australia during her absence overseas and upon her retirement.

In 1980, Thackray joined Paterson and Dowding, a specialist family law firm, and became a partner the following year. In 1997, he was appointed principal registrar of the Family Court of WA, where he served until retirement in January last year. He became chief judge in 2007. Presidency of the Family Law Practitioners' Association was among his official roles. Many admired his vigorous advocacy against removal of Federal funding for indigenous family liaison officers who worked in the Family Court early in his term as chief judge.

Relationships Australia WA is among the non-profit organisations to have benefited from Thackray's "energy and care", as mentioned in its tribute notice. The chief executive, Terri Reilly, adds: "Stephen envisioned a highly skilled system supporting the work and clients of the Family Court."

"His ability to make this vision a reality resulted in a system operating in the best interests of families experiencing separation. He promoted a non-adversarial approach that built bridges unique in Australia. As a result of his efforts, this collaboration of legal, dispute resolution and other specialist services can

bring about outcomes achievable for families, including those with complex needs."

After retirement last year, he continued working as a mediator throughout Australia.

One consistent trait was the ability to make speeches that blended information, praise for others, and entertainment stemming from a sense of humour that described himself as a "punsioner (sic) who worried about inflicting further punishment (again sic) on my audiences". His honour's impartiality allegedly faltered only when the fiercely loyal West Coast Eagles fan saw an umpire pay the opposition a free kick. Love of gardening restored serenity to the household.

Warmth and compassion were hallmarks of a man who as lawyer made many judgments but who, as husband, saw the decision to marry Janet Ashworth as perhaps his best.

Stephen Thackray died from a brain aneurysm on March 30, survived by Janet, daughter Amanda, son James, daughter-in-law Leandri and brothers Peter and Gregory.

The breadth of vision that marked the Thackray career extended to personal music preferences. Beethoven and Mahler were favourites, but with 21st-century stars, he was also on the case. In one farewell speech, he thanked young legal associates "who told me about Madonna, Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston. I also know that U2 and YouTube are two different things, so feel quite confident as I step out into the world beyond this court."

Patrick Cornish