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In memory of Marie

The Marie Wilkinson Prize both celebrates and furthers the work of an admired and respected teacher, public service adviser, policy advocate, and social worker.

By Nigel Bowen

The late Marie Wilkinson and her partner Tom Kelly are pictured above.

Page opposite: 2011 prize winner Kayleigh Ellis.
Photography: John Feder

Dr Marie Wilkinson worked at the University of Sydney for a little over a decade as a senior lecturer in Social Work (now the Faculty of Education and Social Work). One of the University’s most energetic staff members, she would have enjoyed a significantly longer tenure had she not died at the tragically young age of 51.

After Marie’s passing in 2003, her partner Tom Kelly approached her colleagues for advice on an appropriate tribute to honour her memory. Throughout her career, Marie had been a determined advocate for children’s rights, and had conducted and published significant research in the field, such as her PhD thesis, *From Neglected to Protected: Child Welfare in NSW: 1945–1988*.

He decided to establish an annual gift awarded to a student in the final two years of the Bachelor of Social Work course who produces an insightful essay about children’s welfare and/or rights.

“It’s always gratifying to meet the winners: terrific, bright students who share the same passion as Marie,” he says. “They always ask about the background to the award and I enjoy telling them about the person it’s named for and what a great teacher she was.”

There are no conditions or expectations about what the money is spent on. “If the students want to use it to travel after finishing their course, or to pay off debts, that seems like a good idea to me,” Tom says.

Positive role models

For Kayleigh Ellis, the 2011 recipient, it was the validation that was most rewarding. Winning provided a big confidence boost.

“I’m not from Sydney originally so I’ve always had to contend with the costs of living away from home,” she says. “I’d been applying for various scholarships since I started my degree. The award, along with a NSW Rural Allied Health Scholarship I received certainly helped with the costs of moving around – to Sydney first, then to Broken Hill where I did my social work placement.”

Her research focus entry looked at how NSW child protection policies and practices do not necessarily reflect the principles of social justice or child wellbeing, and the role of social work in addressing these concerns.



There's no doubt Kayleigh is the type of high achiever Marie would have appreciated, with a promising career ahead of her.

A few years on, Kayleigh is still seeing a positive impact on her career. "I'm sure it is taken into account, along with my other qualifications and achievements. So far I've had a positive experience with securing positions."

After graduating she spent two years working with the homeless at a crisis accommodation provider in Surry Hills. The position was both challenging and affirming. It cemented her belief in the repercussions of negative childhood experiences, which can affect a person across their lifetime.

Kayleigh is currently building on her work experience in two part-time roles: as a community development worker on the University of Sydney's Glebe Community Development Project and as a support manager at The Bread and Butter Project, a social enterprise working with refugees.

Though she hasn't yet decided on an area in which to specialise, Kayleigh says she wouldn't be surprised if her career followed a similar trajectory to Marie's.

"I believe in lifelong learning too," she explains. "I'm sure I'll do further study, and may one day become a teacher. I never met Marie but I was honoured to have the opportunity to talk to her partner Tom at the presentation ceremony. He told me about her passion for child protection, the advocacy

and research she'd done and the mark she'd made. Having that kind of impact is certainly something I aspire to."

As for Tom, the gift is a way of affirming the ongoing relevance of Marie's life and work. While he finds the annual celebration of his late partner can stir up bittersweet emotions, it's something he remains committed to.

"I've made sure it is funded and set up in a way that allows it to be awarded in perpetuity," he says. "All I have left of Marie is memories, and this is a way of enshrining those memories."