

William and Lonsdale – Lives in The Law

Ep 23: Judy Lazarus AM.

Presenter [00:00:05] This is William and Lonsdale, a podcast about the legal ecosystem in Victoria and the fascinating people and stories that make it tick. Today, your host, Michael Green speaks with Judy Lazarus. Judy has had an incredible life in the law, supporting prisoners and their families for almost 40 years. Much of that time was spent working with VACRO, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, where she began as a social worker and finished as the CEO. The impact of Judy's work has been so significant she has even had a prison named in her honor, the Judy Lazarus Transition Center. But when Judy began at VACRO in 1983, she had no experience or training in the sector and only plan to help out for a few months. There was a lot Judy didn't know when she started, and although she would go on to do extensive study, including receiving a Churchill fellowship. Much of her learning came from listening to and respecting the people she was working with.

Michael Green [00:01:01] You noted that there was a common health problem among the families of the prisoners. Cold, the common cold seemed to be endemic.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:01:10] Absolutely. So that was the beginning of another part of my education. I would sit with families and they were all suffering from terrible colds. And I would ask after them constantly until they took me aside one day and said, Look, Judy, this is not a cold we're actually hanging out. We've had drugs and we need more and we've got sniffles I went, oh my lord. That's another part of my learning. So from there, I enrolled in a university course to understand drugs and alcohol. So my learning's been through people. If I've met people and they've given me some wonderful education, then I've taken the opportunity to follow it up. But yes, I learned a lot from families, Christmas and officers.

Michael Green [00:02:27] I'd like to welcome this morning, Judy Lazarus to Lives in the Law. Judy, your life in the law has not been as a lawyer, but has been mainly through working in the criminal justice system with people in prison and people who are transitioning out of prison. And so let's pop into it and find out about how it all started for you. Back in Brunswick, in Sydney Road, in a furniture store which your dad owned and your grandfather and before your dad. Your dad sounds like a wonderful man because he had a very deep immersion in the in his local community. Can you tell us a bit about your dad and the influence he had upon you?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:02:59] My father was a wonderful, compassionate man who connected with the community through his business, and in those days it was a very Italian community. Brunswick was where the Italian community came to settle, and so they often came into my father seeking help. And he was... I always think of my father's benevolent. That's the word I associate with him, most of all. And he would always help people fill out forms, find employment. He would be invited to their homes. And I remember going with him on occasion, but he truly cared about people, and I think that was something that really resonated within me, that it wasn't about just being. It was about doing and helping people.

Michael Green [00:03:50] And you worked with your dad when you were a teenager. What did you learn from your dad in working with him?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:03:58] I worked with my father for a while and it was a wonderful time in my life. We had a lovely time together and I learned about people, basically people... He was a very honest man and he ended up as vice president of the Carlton Football Club when...

Michael Green [00:04:21] I won't hold it against him Judy.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:04:24] And so we also had a lot of contact with young footballers coming into the club and finding work for them and just looking at the way my father treated people with respect, no matter who it was. He was a very respectful man and a kind man, and I think that was very important for me to see the way he interacted with people. I remember when my father died, I was quite taken aback because people lined Sydney Road as the hearse went through, and it was a tremendous mark of respect for him.

Michael Green [00:05:07] And your lifelong work has really been following in the footsteps of your father because it has been community based work. And it started at Warrandyte and Cockatoo. When you were a young mum? How did that come about by chance?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:05:25] Yes. As most of my life has been by chance, and I knew someone who was doing some work in Cockatoo after the Ash Wednesday fires. Working with families and she invited me to come and work with her. So I did that for 12 months and then went back home and didn't do anything and then received another telephone call from the same person who had started work at VACRO. And she asked me what I consider coming to VACRO just for a short time, just to do a little bit of work with families of prisoners.

Michael Green [00:06:03] Now, VACRO is the Victorian Association for Care and Resettlement of Offenders. And you went and worked there at the request of a friend. It can't have been quite as simple as that, Judy, because at that stage you're a mum with four young children.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:06:16] Well, yes... yeah. I decided that I could work part time and work around it, and that's what I did for quite some time. So it suited my lifestyle and it allowed me to do what I was really passionate about, and that was to connect with people.

Michael Green [00:06:38] Can you give us a bit of background about VACRO about its foundation and what its charter is? Is it a government body or is it a government? Exactly. I mean, VACRO, it's a very nice sounding acronym, but I don't think many of us know much about it.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:06:53] No, and people don't know about VACRO until they need VACRO. So VACRO is nearly 150 years old. It's probably one of the oldest not for profit organizations in Victoria. It's older than the Salvation Army here in Melbourne. I know that. And it started life as the Prisoners Aid Society and the Prisoners Aid Society used to provide tools and equipment for men leaving the prison system so they could gain work. And it started from there. And then as the years went on, it morphed into working wider not only with men, with women and with families. And it's an incredible organization. It's very small, very passionate and very professional. And it does quiet work, but great work. I'm very proud of that.

Michael Green [00:07:50] You were a welfare worker there. What did a welfare worker at VACRO do?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:07:56] My first role, I was told to go across to Pentridge. We had a house opposite Pentridge to go across to Pentridge, to the visitor area and talk to visitors to let them know that VACRO existed. So if families needed any assistance whatsoever, we can connect with them. They can come across to the house. So in my ignorance, I walked across to the east gate of Pentridge into the remand area.

Michael Green [00:08:26] Possibly because Pentridge closed Judy. We should paint a little picture of it for people. It was called Bluestone College. It had towering blue stone walls it was a very forbidding building.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:08:40] Yes, absolutely. It was terrifying and I was terrified.

Michael Green [00:08:42] I remember going there as a young lawyer and it was, you know, it sort of took your breath away a bit to be walking into Pentridge. So here are you as a young, welfare-to-work not knowing much about it?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:08:51] Yes, Nothing.

Michael Green [00:08:51] And you're walking over the road to Pentridge Prison.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:08:53] Mm-Hmm. So. I would get to the East Gate and go in and not be treated with much enthusiasm by the officers. They couldn't understand why I would come and work in an area with prisoners and their families. But I would smile and shake and follow the yellow line to the visitor's center. And what I discovered there was families who had come a long way to visit their person in remand. Sometimes they would wait for hours for a visit because the person couldn't be found and children were waiting to see their father. That traveled they were excited. But sometimes they didn't even get a visit because they could not find the prisoner. And this fascinated me. How can you not find somebody? So eventually I went to the governor who allowed me. When I look back, it's rather funny you can go and find them.

Michael Green [00:10:00] In the rabbit Warren that Pentridge was.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:10:02] Oh my lord.

Michael Green [00:10:04] You could go and find the prisoner.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:10:07] Yes. So I decided I would do this. And you had to go through gates where you had to yell out, gate up to have the door open. And I would watch people go and yell, Gate up, and I just couldn't. So I would stand there and say, Gate up, please. Nothing would happen, and often it would have to wait until an officer or someone else of standing came to get through. I was very fortunate that there were some officers who took me under their wing and told me never to ask for prisoner named Mr. Smith. Only officers were Mr. I had to ask for Smith and I found that really, that was my first introduction to the Division of Power. No Mr. in here. So it was really interesting because some officers helped me and prisoners helped me. They could see that I was trying to work with them for their families. So often the prisoners who would help me and direct me. But there was a place called the bail store, and the officers in there took pity on me and they would say, come in here, have a sit for a minute and we will tell you what to do. So I learned by

people again, people were very kind to me, both sides, the blue and the green. And that's how I learned. And we did manage to find people to get them to visit.

Michael Green [00:11:33] And so not a lot of formal training as a welfare worker, but all on the job really hands on learning. Yes. Which probably is the best way to learn.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:11:43] Yes. And eventually went did study. But certainly in those years it was organic.

Michael Green [00:11:52] It's a nice word organic. Down the track a bit, you become the CEO of that group. So starting off as the new person on the block who wanders across Sydney Road to Pentridge and has no idea you've become the CEO of that group. How did that come about?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:12:11] I think there was a step before that when the new remand center was built, which is now the assessment prison.

Michael Green [00:12:17] The one down there in Spencer Street?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:12:20] Yes, yes. So when that was built, I was asked if I would go and work in the prison and be situated in the prison. And at that stage, there were not civilians who were not connected with corrections in the actual prison. So I went along to the remand center. I did some training with officers before prisoners came to get to know them and for them to accept me because I was a civilian. I was seen as a do gooder. I was a female and I certainly wasn't a corrections officer.

Michael Green [00:12:59] Would do gooders look down on a bit?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:13:01] Absolutely, yes. And the way that it worked was training with the officers I got to know them. They got to know me. They trusted me. I listened to them and they listened to me. So we formed a really good working relationship and that was so important because in those days, they could actually hinder your work very, very easily. But I found that over the years, I did as much work with officers as what I did with families and prisoners. And that's how it worked. So that there was there was this mutual respect. I think that was built and that stood me in very good stead. So again, my learning was elevated and then I was asked by the board of VACRO if I would consider taking on the role of CEO, which did surprise me greatly. But I accepted and again went off to do training in welfare administration at Monash. And so I did take it on. I can remember standing in the office that the last CEO had vacated a woman called Helen Laysham, who was a wonderful woman and big shoes to follow. And being terrified to even sit in her chair. But it was a wonderful time for me, a really wonderful time and full of potential and opportunity.

Michael Green [00:14:33] Did you have a philosophy, a guiding philosophy that you wanted the whole of the whole of the VACRO organization to embrace in the manner that it conducted itself?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:14:43] I think I did, but it was probably not verbalized. And when I look back, I believe that I worked from a community development framework, not welfare or social work. And so it was about, again, the word respect keeps coming up all through my working career because I think it's so important and integrity. They were my values and I hope they would go through the organization, which they did and I think continued to this

very day. So it was around how we worked and again, off to university, to study community development and about how that worked, about recognizing what was required, what was needed, where with the gaps and how we would work with that. One of the interesting things back, way back was that our funding didn't really restrict the way we had to work like it does today. It's not as formulated, so we could respond to need very quickly. And the way I always worked, I never shouted from the treetops. But I would approach people and they would listen to what I saw as a difficulty and often respond. And I suppose if I had to describe work quietly, but I had wonderful people who listened and assisted.

Michael Green [00:16:15] When you say funding didn't hinder you as it might today. Where did the funding come from?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:16:20] The funding in that time came through corrections, and there were three organizations that were funded, so there was the Brosnan Center, VACRO and what was called then the Epistle Center. And so we three were funded through corrections to do that, and it was pretty broad. There was really it wasn't prescribed funding in a lot of ways, but between the three of us, we worked with families and the adult males in the system. Brosnan work with youth and the epistle worked really post-release with people, so we each had a little area that. Changed over time when competitive tendering came in, and that changed everybody's outlook on how things worked.

Michael Green [00:17:05] The Labor politician Andre Haermeyer was very helpful to you, I believe when you were CEO. What was your relationship with him and what role did he play in VACRO development?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:17:16] He was a very important part of prison sport and post-release not only for that group, but for many organizations and the prison system. So one afternoon in Coburg at the house, Andre knocked on the door and I had no idea who he was, but he said he was the opposition. And could he talk to me and, did I think there were any problems facing people on release? We had quite a conversation. I think he stayed much longer than what he anticipated. But again, he listened. Then he went on his way, and when he became minister for corrections, he contacted me again and we again spoke about the problems facing people leaving prison. And in many ways today, it hasn't changed. People still have difficulty getting housing, still having difficulty with employment, can't even volunteer in many cases because you've got to have a police check. So even volunteering is very difficult. So this is some of the things we talked about. But the passion of mine was watching people come out of prison and try and integrate with their families again, and things had changed dramatically. So often, women who were left when someone went to prison found strength they didn't know they had. They survived, they looked after their children. But when and I'm talking men now because that's where I worked. But when the men came home, they thought it would go back to where it was before they left.

Michael Green [00:18:55] A patriarchal sort of a relationship.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:18:58] Absolutely, and the women had found a new power, a new way to work, a new bit of self-esteem and even the children. I can remember watching children when the families would meet and the father would say, you know - don't you do that! And the children would automatically look at the mum to see, who do I listen to? So often the families broke up after release because it was so, so difficult. Such a lot had changed. Lots of people found coming out from a prison system incredibly difficult to deal with.

Michael Green [00:19:38] Was anything able to be done back then to help in this very difficult period of change? Or is anything being done now to help in this very difficult period of change when people are coming out of prison?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:19:54] Yeah, a lot lot's happened, and I call it crime prevention, so it's not looking after prisoners, as is often seen as they shouldn't have this support. Other people deserve it more. It's about preventing people going back into the prison system. So the first exciting thing that happened was Andre announced a million dollars to look after people coming out of the prison system. And it was incredible. Nothing had ever been given like that before. And in those days, a million dollars was a lot of money, and we started a program called Bridging the Gap, the gap between prison and going back with families. And we actually worked with people before they were released and then stayed with them during the transition and work with them, with their families, with employment. So a lot of support. And it worked really well. A similar program probably still exists today, but it's much more prescribed and you cannot only work a certain number of hours with each prisoner returning to the community. And in reality, it's not very helpful. So that's really frustrating. But there is work being done, but there's not a lot of funding to support the work needed.

Presenter [00:21:30] William and Lonsdale is brought to you by Greens List. One of the leading multi-disciplinary barristers lists in Australia. Greens List believe in promoting conversation around the ideas and issues that shape not only our legal system, but our wider community.

Michael Green [00:21:50] Judy, you were the recipient of a Churchill scholarship, and you traveled to the UK, Canada in the US to observe, I guess, what was happening in their prison systems and the release of prisoners, et cetera. Did that inform what you were doing with that grow?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:22:06] It certainly did help form a picture in my mind of where I wanted to go. And I did go to a number of organizations that were working with prisoners and their families to learn. The biggest impact for me was in Texas, and it was a time when there were banners throughout America: send us your prisoners to Texas - because there were so many private prisons and county jails that were multi-story buildings. And so that was really important for me because at that time, I attended a program in Texas called the Mamas and the Papas, and it was about children coming into the prison to see their fathers without their primary caregiver and that that was even in Australia, unheard of. And it was a very progressive program. So before the men were able to have these visits, they had to go through a parenting program and then their families could come and go often from other states because that's where prisoners came from. So very important visits and the children would come in to this multi-story building and stand there with their arms spread and the officers would ask them to do anything on them for daddy today. And it was often chewing gum and things like that that they couldn't have. But we went up into this room and the children were brought up. We escorted these tiny children, preschool children up into a room set up like a kindergarten. And the men and the children interacted and was often the first time without a primary caregiver there. And the men had to learn what to even say, how did you do at school this week, what did you learn? And it was one wall was a very big blackboard, and the kids were teaching their parents how to write. It was incredible. And I took up a newborn baby to a man and who sat in a rocking chair with his newborn baby. And he asked me, Could it be unwrapped and could he see it? And it was just incredible, and we unwrapped the baby on the floor and he sat there with the

baby. And just the interaction is quite different when it's just dad and child. And that was a big learning because often they hadn't had a positive relationship to learn from either. So that was really, really powerful. And that did come back to Australia.

Michael Green [00:24:54] So Corrections Victoria, our corrections department, they were open to you bringing that program or programs like that back here?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:25:04] It actually went to a private prison.

Michael Green [00:25:08] Nothing to do with the Department of Corrections?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:25:10] No. So it was a private prison and I managed to get funding for a portable classroom to be located inside the prison at sale. And it was lifted over the wall with the crane.

Michael Green [00:25:26] A big, big sandstone wall that still I can picture.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:25:29] And it was lifted out of the wall and it became a parenting center and the men were able to come to parenting in that center. And I then remember saying to the governor, Could we please have the children in without their primary caregiver? And he and no, absolutely not. But over time, he allowed that to happen. So that was that was an amazing journey for the Australian prison system to be open and just try something new

Michael Green [00:26:04] Has that that sort of program A) do they still exist because we have gone from government run prisons to privately run prisons, and B) has it spread to other states in Australia?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:26:13] No, sadly it doesn't exist anymore. It didn't survive after I left. I think you've got to have people to drive these things. There's got to be passion. And when you've got the passion and the belief and the understanding and you can see the picture, then you can drive it. But priorities change over time, and that one changed.

Michael Green [00:26:36] As I understand it, the priorities with the private prisons is the same as any other business. Make as much money as you can.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:26:41] Absolutely. And I do not like private prisons. I'll be very honest. However, that one, it was again, a person who could see value in what was happening. And that's the pivot, isn't it, when you can get change happening, if a person can understand the value and work for them, let's not kid ourselves it worked for them.

Michael Green [00:27:05] It's got to be a win win.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:27:06] Yes, absolutely. So another part of the fellowship was visiting a women's prison in New York out of New York called Bedford Hills. And when I rang the governor there to ask if I could come out to have a look at a program they were doing with families. She said I was very welcome to, but she would like me to come through the induction process. So as a prisoner came into the prison, they would go through a series of meetings and questions would be asked to ascertain where they sat and what their needs were. So I agreed. I thought, That's okay, that's fine. So I went out to the prison and I was greeted by a wonderful person who asked me, did I have children? And yes, and was there anyone to care for the children when I came into prison? And so

we went through my family history as if I was a prisoner coming into the system. And then I was introduced to another person who asked me different questions about my education level and what I'd learned, and to know that in this prison, education was mandatory. You had to get your general certificate of education before you could go anywhere else and do any other programs in the prison. The next person informed me that they had a child care center in the prison because that prison was allowed to keep children with the mothers until they were 12 months old. And then they had to leave. And so the next person that I went to, she was telling me that she was studying at Stanford and I went, Oh, that's wonderful. What are you studying and how often do you go there? Tell me all about it. I was very, very excited. And she said to me, Judy, I don't go there. I'm a prisoner. And I went, Oh my Lord. And she said, everybody that you have spoken to in this intake is a prisoner here, and we have all been trained to do this because we understand. And this prison governor is very keen that we gain skills and understanding said that was absolutely amazing to me that these wonderful women that I spoke to and were asking about my life were all prisoners serving many, many years. So I came back to Melbourne very excited and thought, wow, we could do this at the women's prison and really provide training in child care and in education. Everybody there was a prisoner that the teachers, the childcare workers, they were all prisoners and I thought, This is wonderful. So off I went to corrections to tell them about this wonderful thing, and they looked at me aghast and said it would never, ever work and that the confidentiality would be a problem. And I said that it wasn't. It absolutely wasn't. It worked. But unfortunately, I could not convince them that this was a very good way to go.

Michael Green [00:30:35] Which is an example that if you've got an open mind, you can make anything work. And if you've got a closed mind, nothing works.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:30:42] Yes, and that's really very true. And the women's region of the prison, there've been some amazing people there who've been very progressive, very progressive, and a wonderful man called Brendan Money was the governor of the women's prison. He's an amazing man and very open and very supportive, but above him just could not cope with the idea of prisoners doing intake.

Michael Green [00:31:12] You were, I think, CEO of VACRO when Pentridge Prison closed and VACRO used that to its advantage. How did you do that?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:31:21] Yes. I was driving home on Friday night and I received a phone call in the car from again, another wonderful, supportive man called John Griffin. And he said to me, Pentridge Prison is closing, would VACRO like to have Pentridge for the weekend to open to the public? And I said to him, well, we would but, can I think about it? And when I thought about it, I thought weekend's not going to work for us. So we asked, could we have it for three months? And it went back to the minister and they agreed. And it was an incredible time because no one had been through Pentridge. It was only if you visited or you'd actually been a resident. So there was a mystery around what was inside those bluestone walls. So we decided that we would have tours of Pentridge, but I was very adamant that they were done sensitively. Not in a way that was, what's the word,

Michael Green [00:32:22] Lurid and, sensational

Judy Lazarus AM [00:32:24] Yes sensationalized, because there was a lot of hardship, a lot of sorrow in pentridge, for families and for prisoners, they have feelings and there was

hardship and sorrow. So we actually recruited prison officers, some we trained them and we had storyboards around each division.

Michael Green [00:32:44] No ex-prisoners?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:32:46] No none came forward but so many came through to bring their families to the cell where they had spent their time. It was quite incredible. We had people on hand to support people if they really felt it was too difficult for them. And it was a wonderful time. And we also held a dinner in B division. And when into B division, I knew some of the things that had happened there. So I asked the Australian Welsh choir to come and sing in B Division and to put some good karma back into the place. And they came out and the acoustics were wonderful, and they have men of harmony and wonderful singing. And it was a celebration of the end of an era, I think. But for that crew, it allowed us to become very independent. Half of the funds that we got went into prisoners programs for prisoner's families, and the other half we were able to buy a building. And at that time, I remember walking down hardware lane and it was not the best part of Melbourne in those days, and I found a floor in the building there. That would be really great. We decided we had to move from Coburg into the city to be central, and we bought that building for \$400000 and it's just stood us in very good stead because we are a very small organization so that it's helped us. So opening Pentridge to the public, it was great for the public and it was educational for the public, but it was also very, very beneficial to that group.

Michael Green [00:34:34] Judy, what about VACRO today? Obviously, you're no longer the CEO. You had five years, I think, on the board and you are a patron of VACRO with David Harper AM, a former Supreme Court justice and our current governor of the state of Victoria. The honorable Linda De So. What is it doing today and what role does it play in the transition of prisoners back into society?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:34:58] VACRO still works very, very closely with people coming out of the prison system. They do it very well. One of the things I'm very proud of about that growth is the work they do is done extremely well. There's a quality about their work. They're small, but they do really good work. The other part that I also am very proud of is their work with the children of prisoners and supporting children through having a parent imprisoned. And I think that's really important, too. They also advocate for the needs of families and prisoners, and I think they've grown as an organization not so much in size, but grown in knowledge about how to work well and how to support people. And that I think there's many programs that they do. But at the heart of it, it is about supporting people coming out of prison. It's about supporting families to survive through the prison system, while they have someone inside and it's about supporting children and children for me are often the unseen victims of crime because they are often ostracized by others. It's loss, it's grief and loss for children. And so I think VACRO's work with that and supporting kids through that is really important. And I can remember, even when I was in the prison system going into a prisoner's cell being asked, could I have a look at it so I could explain to the child where dad was? And I could say to that child that dad had a picture of them on the wall, and he lived in a little room with the bed and the television, he had these pictures, he had his books, and when he was sick, he could see a doctor. And it just painted a picture. So the child could somehow understand where dad was. And the dad still loved her dearly. And I think that work still goes on today with the psychologist that we have. And they do a lot of work at the transition center, with people coming back out with their families

Michael Green [00:37:27] Judy the influence of VACRO must have spread beyond just prisoners because you're dealing with partners, children, parents, et cetera. Are there any examples of macro influencing some of those members of family as opposed to the prisoners themselves?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:37:42] There's lots of stories I could tell you about that, but one in particular is a woman who would come to the house after visiting her son in Pentridge, and she would make a point of coming to the house to have a cup of tea afterwards. And I was sitting talking to her on many occasions, and she told me that she couldn't read or write. She was not a young person, probably in her 40s or 50s. And that she had started to learn to read. And I was very proud that she was doing that because it was not easy for her to do so. And so she was telling me about how she was progressing each week. She would come in and tell me a little bit more about what she'd learned and how excited she was. And she had a wonderful lady who was teaching her to read and write. She would occasionally read a little bit to me or tell me something that she had tried to do over time. And many years later, I happened to meet a woman who said, are you Judy Lazarus that worked at VACRO? And I said, yes, and she said, I know you through a person I worked with many years ago. I taught her to read, and she often spoke about you and how you encouraged her to keep going. And she said, we wrote a book together for her and her family, and a whole chapter was devoted to you and how you actually believed in her and helped her to learn. And for me, that's really a hidden gem because you don't know what you have done the people. Often people will come back and families will come back many years later and say, thank you for what you did, but you have no idea what you did. But somewhere along the line, by listening to people, by just being present, you give something.

Presenter [00:39:59] Lives in the Law is proudly sponsored by City Maps illustrated. Their recent publication, The Melbourne Map, is a celebration of our wonderful city. This stunning hand-drawn illustration, which took more than three years to create, is available as an art print, jigsaw puzzle and calendar the perfect acquisition for your home office or corporate gifting. More information can be found on their website themelbournemap.com.au

Michael Green [00:40:28] Judy, Dame Phyllis Frost is a name that certainly my generation know, and we know she did social work in a general way, but we don't really know who she was, what contribution she made to our community. Could you tell us about her and what role she played in your career?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:40:45] Dame Phyllis wasn't an amazing woman with a huge sense of social justice, huge sense of social justice, and she when I was at VACRO, she was on the board at that stage and then became patron. I think I've got that right. She might have just been a patron, but she took me under her wing. And when I started to go to work at the new remand center, Dame Phyllis had the building opposite. That was the Victorian Relief Committee, sort of a small food bank, if you like, and she would talk to me about what I was doing and how I was managing. And she became a mentor for me. She was a fabulous, powerful woman who imparted her knowledge to me. And over the years, I would drive Dame Phyllis to prisons, to go to visit, and during those car journeys, she would talk to me about her fight for social justice, especially women prisoners. She was, of course, the prison is named after her. She had an amazing influence on me because of her outlook and because she was absolutely passionate about social justice.

Michael Green [00:42:06] Absolutely passion, of course, Judy describes you, I think, in your attitude towards social justice, but I'm really pleased for your saying that in 2003 you retired and you moved to Beechworth for a quiet life. Yes. And to maybe have a little baby unjust and so held that quiet life in Beechworth player.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:42:23] Well, it was a change. It was certainly a change. But as we know, there's a prison in Beechworth and very quickly I became involved with the prison and I know that the governor there, I'm sure he would see me walking up to the prison and shaking his head, and it was forever asking him if we could have prisoners to work with the community. And he was very good man, and he took calculated risks and would allow me to have prisoners work in the community with us and help us.

Michael Green [00:43:02] Did you do any other work in the community involving bookstores and kitchens and things?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:43:07] So I became very connected with the local neighborhood house in Beechworth, and I have a love of books. I'm sitting here looking at your books and I have a love of books. And there was not at that time, a second hand bookshop in Beechworth. And I thought, Oh gosh, it would be so great if we had one. So I went to the Committee of the Neighborhood House and said to them, Would you mind if I started up a social enterprise with a second hand bookshop? And they said, Oh yes, that's fine. There was an empty old church building in Beechworth and we were able to use that, but it was in disrepair. So back to the prison, I went and said to the governor, Can I have some men to help me get this bookshop ready? And those men worked for three months with me. They emptied the place. They painted it from top to bottom. They were very proud of it. And then I heard there was some old bookcases up in La Trobe University at the time in the old May Day Hills. So we went and got those the prison did and did them all up and place them for me in the bookshop, and they were instrumental in getting that happening. We ask for donations from the community. Those men sorted books, they put them into different genres. They cleaned the books. They were amazing. And from there, I managed to get some funding to build a commercial kitchen and a community garden. And again, back at the prison to ask, Could I have men to come and cook if I could get food from food bank? Could they cook? And he said yes, and I said, Could I take them on a bus tour to show them what other organizations were doing with food? And he groaned. But yes, so an officer and I took about eight men in the bus to different organizations to show them how people were preparing meals for the community. We looked at community gardens and kitchen gardens and what I looked like. So we had the men come and we would get food from food bank and they would devise recipes to fit the food we got so they would cook. Meals and they would be frozen and anybody in the community, you didn't have to say, I'm in dire strife. Anybody in the community could come and get those meals. Both the bookshop and the community kitchen is still happening today. I think that's about 12 or 13 years that they're not being good.

Michael Green [00:45:50] Sounds like a very quiet retirement. You had there Judy. Judy, I'd like to just finish off with something called the Judy Lazarus Transition Center. What is it? And how did it come to be named after you?

Judy Lazarus AM [00:46:04] When I was retiring from VACRO, I'd been quite ill and I decided that I would go to Parliament to thank Andre Haermeyer for all he had done for prisoners and their families. So I went to visit him and say goodbye and to thank him for what he'd done. And he said to me, as I was leaving, that he had decided that the new transition center would be named after me. And I started to laugh. I can remember

laughing. And I said to him, all you would need to think about that. And he said, I've thought about it. And 12 months later, when it was built, it happened. And it's the best thing ever. It's a very, very small place. It only houses 25 men at a time. But those 25 men I worked with in the last 12 months, if they sentence to be able to come out into the community, to connect with families, to work through issues to find employment. I'll tell you a story about a man in that prison who said to me, Judy, when I came here, I was welcomed and I was asked to would I like a cup of coffee. And was there anything else I needed and how was the journey down? And he said, I thought, this is a test. This is a test. This is not real. This is some sort of test.

Michael Green [00:47:31] They'll try to trick me.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:47:33] Yes! And I hear that a version of that story quite often because people are treated differently at the transition center. And the recidivism rate is incredibly low for people who go through that center. It's an amazing program. It's credit to the management and staff and to the men of that center and some of their stories that I've heard from people who have left and come back to the prison to tell their story. It's phenomenal. And I was at one stage said to them, it's a shame. It's only for 25 people. And one of those prisoners said to me, Judy, 400 men have been through here. Stop thinking about it as small. It's powerful. And it's something that we are incredibly privileged to be part of. We have never had a transition center for women ever. There was supposed to be one when this was built, but it never happened. I always wonder why we haven't got more transition centers when it stops recidivism. The answer usually is it's too expensive.

Michael Green [00:48:44] As you know, Judy, the real answer is it doesn't win them votes or win the election.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:48:47] That's exactly right. And again, I go back to my earlier comment that all this is crime prevention. It's not treating prisoners in a special way. It is preventing crime. It's preventing people going back to prison. It gives families and people... people in prison are people from our community. Then they're not green. They haven't got horns. And there are some people that should be in prison, I'm not Alice in Wonderland. But there are a lot of people in prison who, given the opportunity, will thrive. And people in the community believe that people go into prison and will come out into the community and fit back into the community and continue with their lives. Will a lot of people didn't fit into the community before they went into prison, so they've got very little hope of fitting in afterwards, especially if they've not had any real help in transitioning back into their own community.

Michael Green [00:49:49] Judy, it's been such a pleasure hearing you speak today. You've had a rich and a wonderful career. You've been justly honored by our society as you should have been honored by being awarded the Order of Australia in 2017 and also being inducted into the Victorian Women's Honor Roll. Thank you for coming today and thank you for enlightening us on all of our listeners on a very important topic.

Judy Lazarus AM [00:50:10] Thank you.

Presenter [00:50:20] 2022 marks the 150th anniversary of VACRO, and they will be celebrating with a number of events throughout the year. You can learn more at their website vacro.org.au, where you can also donate to support the wonderful work they do. Show notes from today's episode can be found at Greenslist.com.au/podcast. There you'll find links of things talked about in this episode. A transcript of the show and some

wonderful photos of our guests. Your host is former lawyer and Greens List clerk Michael Green. Our show is produced by me, Catherine Green, mixed and mastered by Windmill Audio and recorded by Alex Macfarlane, who also wrote and performed all the music for the series. If you're enjoying Lives in the Law, please tell your networks, subscribe rate and review the show. We acknowledge The Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respect to their elders past and present. There is no doubt that conversations about justice have been taking place on this land for thousands of years, and we are privileged to continue this discussion here today.