

AIJA Indigenous Youth Justice Conference

Speaker

Day 2 – Session 9: Girls in Custody



Debbie Kilroy OAM

Founder

Sisters Inside

Debbie Kilroy OAM is one of Australia's leading advocates for protecting the human rights of women and children through decarceration – the process of moving away from using prisons and other systems of social control in response to crime and social issues.


Debbie's passion for justice is the result of her personal experience of the criminal (in)justice system and an unwavering belief that prison represents a failure of justice. Debbie was sentenced to 6 years imprisonment for drug trafficking in 1989. She witnessed the only murder inside an Australian women's prison, and was stabbed herself during the incident. Whilst in prison, Debbie lost almost everything: her marriage, her home and her children.

Debbie was in prison during a brief period of reform, allowing her to access opportunities for education, employment and day release, sharpening her special skill to 'think around corners'. During her time in prison, Debbie worked hard for a degree in Social Work and took on the huge task of turning her life around. Since then, she has qualified as a Gestalt Therapist and Legal Practitioner, and has completed a Graduate Diploma of Forensic Mental Health.

Debbie Kilroy Sisters Inside

After her release in 1992, Debbie established Sisters Inside, which advocates for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system and responds to gaps in the services available to them. Sisters Inside isn't just another service provider: it is an organisation of women with shared experiences supporting each other to change their lives and change the system. Sisters Inside has won international recognition for its work and its unique structure which ensures it is driven by women with lived prison experience.

In 2003, Debbie was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for services to the community for working with women in prison. She was also awarded the Australian Human Rights Medal in 2004 and a Churchill Fellowship to explore decarceration



strategies and programs internationally in 2014. In 2017, Debbie was appointed to the Queensland Government Sentencing Advisory Council. Debbie was admitted to the legal profession by the Supreme Court of Queensland in 2007 – a rare achievement for someone with serious convictions. She now has her own law firm and (in addition to her work as CEO of Sisters Inside) is one of Queensland’s leading criminal solicitors.