

Timelines

Unshackled in an earlier era

ENID RONALDS

1919-2008

ENID RONALDS was one of those women of a previous age who fought and endured and, in a way, liberated herself before women's liberation made its mark on society.

She battled through the Depression, fought against an unhappy marriage, stood as a single woman with children in the days when such people were often seen as pariahs, did a solicitor's job without the formal qualifications and made sure her daughters had a good education.

Ronalds, who has died at 89, was the second of four children of Jack and Effie Walshaw. They lived at Naremburn, when Jack, a merchant seaman, was not sailing to such "exotic" places as China. Enid went to North Sydney Girls High School, but left at 16 to begin office work.

In December 1941 she joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force, where she encountered one of her first experiences with discrimination. She was discharged in July 1942, supposedly on "compassionate grounds", but in reality because she was about to marry Jack Ronalds and married women were not wanted in the armed forces, even in wartime.

Jack served in the army in Darwin. Back in Sydney, they lived, like many young couples then, in a Nissen hut due to the housing shortage. In 1950 they moved to a housing commission home in Eastwood. Ronalds had three daughters born from 1945 to 1951, Judith, Sue and Chris, and a son, John, who lived for only a short time.

The girls attended Denistone East Primary School, where Ronalds was a founding member of the P&C. Denistone East, then on Sydney's edge, had no community facilities and little public transport. Ronalds worked for 12 years to raise funds for a swimming pool and other sporting facilities. The girls went on to Cheltenham Girls High.

An avowed atheist, Ronalds sent the children to a Congregationalist Sunday school three kilometres away. An Anglican church stood across the road but Ronalds confessed later that the time spent walking brought her peaceful Sunday mornings.



Determined ... Enid Ronalds ensured her daughters were well-educated.

Besides, Ronalds walked everywhere. She never learnt to drive, believing she was one of those people not meant to get behind a steering wheel. She was wiry and tough and her daily round walk of about six kilometres between home and office to save bus fares also built up her constitution.

Her husband had demons not visible through the eyes of young love. He was an alcoholic and the marriage was unhappy, marked by separations and reunions. They finally separated

in 1965. Ronalds was a single mother without financial backing, formal qualifications or recognised skills.

She found accommodation for the family. She had long ago determined that her girls would never be in the position she found herself - without the educational qualifications to support themselves. The nightly dinner table discussions were about what they would study at university, not whether they would go.

Mealtimes were also filled with

word competitions and discussions of news and politics, although her daughters did not adopt her conservative leanings, much to her horror. The three children were the first generation in their extended family to go to university. Such a path was unheard of in the housing commission area where they lived, but the daughters collected degrees in physiotherapy, arts, law and social work. Ronalds saw Chris made a member of the Order of Australia (AM), although she was too ill to see her take silk as a barrister.

Ronalds found work with Marie Byles, the first female solicitor in NSW, at Eastwood. Byles and her staff trained her as a registration clerk to perform duties in the city, recognised her intelligence and organisational capacities, and offered her the chance to study at the Solicitors Admission Board. Family commitments ruled it out, but Ronalds was trained so that she ran a full legal practice with little or no solicitor supervision. Her wit and fondness for literature and language helped.

In 1977 she moved to the Eastwood office of Hunt & Hunt. Applying for the job, she said she was 48, not her true age of 58. Ronalds ran a substantial family law practice for 12 years. In 1989 the firm said that, since she was 60 and a woman, she would have to retire. Negotiations followed and she stayed until 1991, when head office considered she must leave at 62. She was actually 72.

She did not suffer fools gladly and made decisions carefully and critically. Once she decided that someone was a friend, she was loyal and supportive. For many years, she was a member of a small reading group, loved ballet and theatre, enjoyed musicals and was a member of Zonta International, the women's community organisation committed to promoting the status of women internationally.

Enid Ronalds, tenacious, intelligent and witty, slipped into dementia in her last years. She is survived by her daughters, and grandchildren Hannah, Penny and Tim. **Tony Stephens**