# Dr Merle Thornton AM (1930-2024)



*Dr Merle Thornton AM (left) with her mother Jean (right) in 1950*

Dr Merle Thornton AM was an academic, author, playwright and activist whose determination helped change opportunities for women across Australia.

Born in Melbourne in 1930, Merle came of age at a time when women faced restrictions in education, employment and public life. Rather than accepting those limitations, she spent her life challenging them.

In 1965, Merle made headlines when she and fellow activist Rosalie Bogner chained themselves to the public bar of Brisbane's Regatta Hotel in protest of laws that prevented women from drinking in public bars. The protest drew international attention and helped spark wider discussions about the barriers facing women.

Merle's work, however, extended far beyond the Regatta protest. She helped establish the Equal Opportunities for Women Association (EOWA), which campaigned for fairer treatment of women in the workplace.

Through this work, she helped campaign to end the Commonwealth Public Service marriage bar, a policy that forced women to leave government employment when they married. The policy was abolished in 1966, allowing more women to build long-term careers in public service.

A passionate educator, Merle believed women's experiences and achievements deserved greater recognition. In 1973, she helped establish The University of Queensland's Women's Studies course, creating new opportunities for research, learning and discussion.

Throughout her life, Merle also championed First Nations rights, supported the arts, and advocated for equality, fairness and opportunity for others.

In 2015, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to women, Indigenous peoples and the arts.

Today, Merle is remembered as one of Queensland's most influential advocates for change. Her courage and determination helped create new opportunities for women and inspire positive change for generations of Australians.