The Hon Sally Thomas AC
Chancellor, Charles Darwin University, 2010 to present

01 The Hon Sally Thomas on:
I came to the Northern Territory in 1978. I’d never been here before that time. I was appointed as a magistrate. I became a judge of the Supreme Court in 1992. As a judge and a magistrate you deal with probably the darker side of life. The university is totally different. You see lots more positive, you see the people who are succeeding and not being down-trodden, and getting an opportunity. That was such a wonderful difference for me.

I found it quite a highlight to work with Council. As a magistrate and a judge you work alone, and you make decisions alone. It’s quite a wonderful experience to be making a decision with Council, with a whole group of people. It’s quite a new experience, a different experience, to being the one and only person who makes the decision. I really enjoy it. I really enjoy that discussion, the fact that it is the Council that makes the decision not the Chancellor.

02 The Hon Sally Thomas on: becoming involved with tertiary education in the NT
The first time I became involved was in about 1986/87. I was Chief Magistrate at that time. The gentleman who was The Warden of the College of Queensland University, Jim Thompson, he telephoned me and asked if we could meet. And then he asked me if I would be prepared to stand for election as Deputy Chairman of the new Council for the College of Queensland University. I thought this sounded a very interesting development. I thought it was wonderful that the Northern Territory would be having a university. I was aware of some of the battles that had taken place to have it established. And so I was very delighted and then it was a matter for election.

I have a very clear vision of that first Council meeting, and it was very big moment for me – I know there was a Community College but I had not been involved with that. That was a very important part of the Northern Territory but for me personally this was my first involvement with the University College of Queensland.

There was a lot of delight felt certainly by many in the Northern Territory that there would be a university. It had been a considerable struggle for the Northern Territory Government to have it established but it did have great support in the university. I found it very exciting to be involved in part of it. I never really had anything to do with universities, the running of universities – there’s nothing like the totally ignorant (laughs) – which I was at that time about how Councils operated and what it really meant. So it was a bit overawing I suppose.
03 The Hon Sally Thomas on: the merger between DIT and the UCNT

The event that occurred of course was the paper that was issued by John Dawkins, by the Federal Government, and we were required to merge with the then Darwin Institute of Technology. There was a lot of angst on both sides and neither wanted this merger. I had a lot of sympathy for both so it was understandably a very difficult time. For the first few years of the Northern Territory University it really did require a lot of work. That really was a considerable issue for new Council to try to accommodate the very strong feelings that existed. Not with everybody – there were a number both of the College of Queensland and the Darwin Institute of Technology who could see that this could be a very positive way forward.

04 The Hon Sally Thomas on: the appointment of Mal Nairn as Inaugural Vice-Chancellor of the Northern Territory University

Council appointed a group of people of whom I was one to select the Vice-Chancellor. We interviewed a number of applicants and we were all in agreement that Mal Nairn was the outstanding applicant and of course he was our choice. We were very fortunate to have him as our Vice-Chancellor.

We were in fact one of the first universities in Australia to become a duel sector. Now that it has occurred, I think probably the majority of people I speak to now think it is wonderful.

05 The Hon Sally Thomas on: the change of Vice-Chancellors at NTU in 1994

We did have a change of Vice-Chancellors, so of course the Council were again responsible and again I was on the selection committee with respect to the appointment of Ron McKay. I think he’s actually been the longest serving Vice-Chancellor. He was Vice-Chancellor for about 7 years. We have been very fortunate to have very hard working Vice-Chancellors who have always taken a very great interest in what’s good for the university.

06 The Hon Sally Thomas on: the funding cuts in the later years of NTU

The financial management of the university is also a very big part of the University Council’s responsibility. Funding is always a challenge because the university does rely on funding from both the Federal Government and the Northern Territory Government. It’s very difficult to go back. When there has been money there, and people are able to do things, it’s very, very difficult then to have to make the cut. Ron McKay did have to wear that. That was very difficult for him. It’s a difficult issue for the Council. At the end of his term it was decided that we would have a look at the whole operation of the university, and we were very fortunate to have Ken McKinnon who came with a great reputation and an enormous knowledge of how universities should be administered. He came in for a year. He said, “I can make a lot of hard decisions and then I go”.
I think it has been exciting from the beginning that we are increasing our student numbers all the time. That’s very exciting. Probably because when I go back to the memory of the start and the concerns that were raised, “oh you’ll never have enough students”, and yet each year we have increased our students, and that’s of course what we are all about.

The Territory doesn’t really have a great deal of its own industry. I think it has been fascinating how it has absolutely transformed the Northern Territory. We are now a very big employer. We have 22,000 students. A lot of them of course are online and could be living in various parts of the world but nevertheless that is a very substantial number of students, a substantial number of staff – around the 1500 mark. So I think now what would it have been like if the university had not happened? But I can understand at that time it was probably thought with that population how is a university going to survive. But those of us who lived here I think thought “of course we’ll survive, of course it’ll work, of course it will happen”. But I am aware that the Federal Government may not have been quite so confident about it. But we were. And to their credit – the Federal Government - we still get the substantial amount of our grant money from them for the university to function. I think quite frankly they now also see us as important because we are close to Asia, we have close to a 1000 international students, we work on getting students from South-East Asia and China. We are adapting to the new world that we are in which is part very much of an Asian community. And of course also trying to promote bringing in Aboriginal people and giving them an opportunity.