

The Women of William Forster Chambers

By Tass Liveris,
Barrister,
William Forster Chambers

Libby Armitage, Sonia Brownhill and Kerry Sibley bring to William Forster Chambers considerable legal acumen together with a tenacious determination to succeed. And I should know. Apart from sharing Chambers with these standout women in the law I've had occasion to lock horns with Libby Armitage at the bar table, known Sonia Brownhill since 1997 when I was a law student clerk at the old Attorney-General's Department and often found myself on the contra argument of Kerry Sibley's when we were both solicitors in the big law firm group.

Libby Armitage

A Crown Prosecutor for most of her career, Libby Armitage came to the Bar in 2010 to broaden her experience base and believes that women can carve a good career out for themselves at the Bar. Sacrifices by her husband and children, now aged 17, 14 and 12, have enabled Libby to meet the often relentless demands of the law. She believes it is possible for women to be both successful lawyers and mothers, provided they recognise a balance is required.

Libby sees younger women often being more unfairly self-critical than men and believes there are untold benefits in mentoring. Having someone to critically and constructively assess your performances is essential to learning, to be able to pause

and reflect on a job well done, to acknowledge errors but not to magnify them and to develop the all-important sense of humour. Outside of her family and the law, Libby often mulls over her next address while she rips up and down Parap Pool, cooks up the next recipe or tends to her garden.

Sonia Brownhill

Coming to the Bar in 2011 was a natural step for Sonia Brownhill, who as Crown Counsel had already racked up 29 appearances in the High Court. That's pretty impressive stuff and is only set to continue for this home-grown mother of two boys, aged 12 and 10.

Sonia decided to join the Bar after receiving encouragement from those closest to her and to satisfy her recurring wonderings of, "what if ... ?". She says her life in the law and most recently at William Forster Chambers has been challenging, engaging and fun. Essential to her career success has been the unfailing support of her husband, who has been a stay-at-home father, as well as the support of her boys.

Sonia has never noticed gender prejudice in the law. Rather, she believes the Territory operates on a level playing field with a clear merits-based selection process. For this reason Sonia does not favour prescriptive quotas of women on boards, on the bench and in parliament as she believes this would only reinforce notions

that women are lacking and in need of artificial assistance in attaining these sorts of positions. Concepts such as these, she says, have the potential to impact negatively on women in modern practise. Practise at the Bar can enable women to self-regulate their work around other aspects of their lives and Sonia sees great potential for the growing representation of women at the Territory Bar.

Kerry Sibley

As a member of the New South Wales Bar between 1999 and 2006, Kerry has observed first-hand the ugly realities of gender discrimination in the law. Thankfully however, she sees the Territory as being a little bit different and the Bar as being a genuine career option for women with an eye on the courtroom.

Kerry sees success at the Bar as requiring self-confidence in relation to matters of ability - to cope, to succeed, to obtain and retain work. Kerry thinks there is not a general push





for women to go to the Bar as a natural career path in the same way there is for men. Many women who might consider joining the Bar are psyched out of it either by those around them or themselves. Concepts of self-doubt are magnified and encouragement and support is not generally given in the way it is for men. For women to break out of this mould requires them to seize the opportunity and take that all important first step.



Kerry says that a supportive partner has been a key to her success as well as managing her life outside of the law well. She sees respecting your client and the work you produce as key in the goldfish bowl that is the Northern Territory. For longevity's sake if no other, it is better to produce good work on fewer briefs than average work on many.



Life at the Bar is not easy, especially in the early start-up phase, but it invariably brings great rewards to those who take on the challenge and persist with it. If the success and approaches of these three women is anything to go by, the future for women at the Territory Bar is an extremely bright one. ●

Sally Ozolins Practice Manager/ Crown Prosecutor, ODPP

'My mate Sal'

By: Nigel Browne
Solicitor

Sally or 'Sal' to her friends and colleagues, came to Darwin with her family in 1981 when she was seven years old. I am reasonably informed that she brought with her an impressive dolls house collection from 'The Big Rocking Horse' at Gumeracha in the Adelaide Hills.

Sal completed all her schooling in Darwin, attending primary and secondary schools in the local rural area. Following a student exchange to Brazil, Sal continued her studies at the Northern Territory University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1997, and a Bachelor of Laws in 2001.

Sal entered into Articles of Clerkship at the Northern Territory Attorney-General's Department (now the Department of Justice) in 2001 and commenced work with the ODPP as a legal officer soon after her admission in February 2002.

Sal currently practises as a Crown Prosecutor with the ODPP, with the added responsibility of Practice Manager for the Office. Apart from her work as a prosecutor Sal has also worked as Complaints Manager with the Health Professions Licensing Authority, and has sat on various boards and committees including her current role as rotating chairperson of the NTFL Tribunal, for which no 'off the ball' incident goes unnoticed.



Born of strong Latvian stock, Sal's dedication to her profession and her practise is a reflection of the positive upbringing she and her sisters received from their parents Karl and Kathy. In an age where commonsense seems a less common virtue, Sal executes her duties with a level of pragmatism, balance, and (as the name suggests) grace that has earned her the respect of her peers and seniors on both sides of the adversarial fence.

Being a local girl it is of course not all work and no play. Living on a 'tranquil' rural block with her partner Simon, the pair raise their own brood of three boys and two girls. Whilst the law takes up a fair portion of her working week Sal still manages to act as coach, driver, sponsor, and spectator at many junior football, soccer, cricket, and basketball matches.

With a sharp wit and a keen sense of humour to match, Sal represents that group of legal practitioners who have built long term work and family lives here in Darwin, those who are mindful that their everyday decisions have real consequences for the communities in which they live. At any level of the law Sal's contribution to the legal profession will continue to grow, as will her investment in the Darwin community. She is an advocate, a mother, a partner, a role model, and a dear friend. ●