

COMMITTEE NEWS AND UPDATES

Northern Territory Women Lawyers Association (NTWLA)

The NTWLA wholeheartedly congratulates one of our members, Sonia Brownhill SC, on her appointment as Solicitor-General for the Northern Territory. We are delighted that she has been appointed as the Territory's first female Solicitor-General and are confident that she will bring a wealth of experience and insight to the role.

Sonia has over twenty years' experience as a legal practitioner and holds a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Commerce. She has substantial expertise in native title and Aboriginal land matters and has practised in civil and commercial law with an emphasis in property, administrative and public law, town planning, general contract law, negligence and personal injuries. Sonia also has particular interests in statutory interpretation and constitutional law, which is fitting to her new role.

Sonia has acted as Junior Counsel to the former Solicitor-General in over twenty High Court matters. In addition, she has appeared in the High Court as sole counsel. Sonia was appointed as Crown Counsel in 2005 and held the position until taking up at the private bar in 2011. Sonia was appointed Senior Counsel in September 2015 and is only the third woman in the Territory to receive this title.

To celebrate Sonia's new role, the NTWLA posed a series of questions to find out more about our new Solicitor-General and what motivates her, and to obtain some wisdom to

impart to our members. Hopefully her insights will prompt more Territory women lawyers to consider a career at the Bar as a realistic and fulfilling option.

What inspired you to study law? I enrolled in Law as the second element of combined commerce and law degrees. At the time, I had done a year of commerce and was intent upon becoming an accountant. I thought law would be a useful degree for an accountant to have. Thankfully (and not surprisingly), I found the study of law more interesting.

Who do you admire most and why? That is like asking me to name my favourite movie or song or food. I cannot pick just one. I admire so many people for all sorts of reasons, and they (the people and the reasons) change over time. Admiring a person's particular quality or qualities, while recognising that they are human and therefore imperfect, spreads the admiration net across a broader group and leads to more realistic expectations of the individuals in it. I think that is a healthier approach for both the admirer and the admirees.

Any wisdom imparted by mentors throughout your career? I've been lucky to have two amazing mentors in my career. I consider them to be my mentors even though there was never any formal acknowledgement or decree between us that they would assume that status. They have imparted so much wisdom, mostly without saying anything directly to me. I have learnt much from them just by watching, listening and modelling their behaviour or thinking. Both of my mentors told me that a successful career is assisted by a degree of forward planning, including identifying long-term goals or aspirations. I had my doubts about this view at the time, but I now appreciate that they were right. The other thing they have both imparted is the wisdom of encouragement—the belief and support of people whose judgement you admire is impossible to ignore and it really does compel you to do extraordinary things you wouldn't otherwise have dreamt of doing.

Sonia Brownhill SC



Rosslyn ChenowethPresident
NTWLA

How did you tackle children and life at the Bar? I went to the Bar when my children were fairly independent (ages ten and eleven) and they and my husband were able to function as a unit without my input for days at a time. For us, it required a substantial stepping up on their part and a considerable letting go on mine. As a control freak, I had to relinquish my hold on household matters to them. As a mum, I had to consciously accept a less hands-on role in my kids' lives than I had before. Both things were not easy to do; nor do I claim to have done them fully or gracefully. I acknowledge their sacrifices and efforts in the pursuit of my career goals. We try to compensate by making quality family time the priority in the smaller opportunities we have to be around each other.

How do you manage to achieve a work/life balance? I do not pretend to achieve a work/life balance. I'm still figuring out how to do this. Mostly, it is about saying 'no' or drawing a line, and the key is planning when and how to do that. I know one successful barrister who leaves chambers at 4:00 pm every day so that he can spend time with his wife and young sons—and he arrives very early in the morning so he can. I know another who blocks out of his annual diary all school holidays, and takes them away with his family. I think long hours are inevitable from time-to-time in legal work. For me, they are balanced against designated annual family holidays, making the most of opportunities to hang out with friends or family, and definite 'me-time'. Some things you just have to force in there—I get up at 5:00 am to go to the gym with my best friend thereby killing a couple of birds with the one rock.

Did you ever have an experience that made you question your choice to practice law or the area you practised in? What was it and what did you do about it? I've actually had a number of those experiences, all related to my choice to act as an advocate. One involved cross-examination in a civil case of an uncooperative witness who was argumentative, rude and would not give me a straight answer about anything. Another involved a judicial officer who was so affronted by my construction of the statutory provision in question that he took me to task about it, and every word I uttered in putting it, relentlessly for three hours. Both of those experiences made me feel like I was completely deluding myself to think that I might have what it takes to appear in court. I was embarrassed that I didn't know how to handle the situation better, and upset because I had not expected to be treated that way in a court room. What I did about each experience was: (a) I got through it as best I could, pressing my client's interests,

remaining polite, and not crying in court; (b) after court was over, I applied the salve of discussions with instructors and senior counsel over drinks and dinner where we railed at the unfairness of it all and found ways to laugh about it; (c) I came to understand that many advocates have such experiences from time-to-time and that they do not mean you made the wrong career choice; (d) with experience, I learnt ways to handle such things better; and (e) I keep reminding myself to reflect on what I might have done differently, but to let go of the burdens of self-criticism and taking it all personally.

Any advice you would impart to young female lawyers?

The young female lawyers I see today don't appear to need any advice from the likes of me. They are capable and confident practitioners ready to embrace all manner of opportunities. (If you're faking it, you're doing it well!).

Whether that perception is right or not, my advice is to give serious consideration to practising at the Bar. Even if you think, as I once did, that you would rather gargle glass than appear in court. There are high numbers of female law graduates and high numbers of young female lawyers—there should be higher numbers of women at the Bar. Practise as a barrister permits of a deeper engagement with the law than practise as a solicitor. It is both intellectually challenging and fulfilling. Such practise can be flexible to accommodate home and family needs. It is very hard to beat a good day in court, when everything goes smoothly and you have all the right questions for witnesses and all the right answers for the judge. And there is that incredible satisfaction when working for yourself (on good paying matters, anyway) of knowing that the efforts you put in are directly proportionate to the benefits you get out. I thoroughly recommend it.