

# Marlia Saunders

## Senior Litigation Counsel at New Corp Australia

**Eli Fisher**, Senior Legal Counsel at ViacomCBS / Network Ten and co-editor, chats with **Marlia Saunders**, Senior Litigation Counsel at New Corp Australia about Marlia's career and her thoughts on International Women's Day.

**ELI FISHER:** Tell us about your role, and how your career led you here?

**MARLIA SAUNDERS:** I'm the Senior Litigation Counsel for News Corp Australia - I've been in the role for just over 3 years after working at Ashurst (nee Blake Dawson nee Blake Dawson Waldron) for 13 years. I always wanted to be a media lawyer, so I studied a Journalism/Law double degree at UTS, then started at Blakes as a graduate. As soon as I rotated into the IPC team, I started working on defamation matters (mainly for News) and loving it. As the end of my rotation drew nail-bitingly near, the amazing Kiah Officer accepted an in-house role at Nine, and I was lucky enough to inherit her office (including an original Paul Mallam artwork) and all of her defamation files - it was a very steep learning curve but I felt so fortunate to be exactly where I wanted to be. Over the years, I worked on some high profile defamation cases (including the Daniel Snedden matter, in which we successfully defended "war criminal" imputations), and also worked on copyright, trade mark and consumer law litigation; sponsorship, production and licensing deals and privacy advices. I also did a few secondments, including at Foxtel and Telstra, and really enjoyed in-house life, but wasn't ready to make the move until my current role came up for grabs. It was the perfect in-house role for me because I have the opportunity to run my own defamation litigation in-house, as well as working with a range of incredible external law firms and barristers. Our editorial legal team has six lawyers and we all work together doing a range of prepublication advice work, complaints handling, litigation, commercial work, training, suppression orders and law reform.

**FISHER:** What's the best work-related advice you've ever received?

**SAUNDERS:** To trust your own abilities and push through your

comfort zone. I think taking on diverse opportunities and throwing everything you have at them improves your resilience as well as your confidence.

**FISHER:** What's the greatest risk you've taken as a professional?

**SAUNDERS:** Leaving Ashurst after being there so long and having built up a lot of support and respect was a huge decision for me. I had a lot of sleepless nights wondering if I was doing the right thing for my career. But I think I always would have wondered if I hadn't taken up the opportunity, and I haven't regretted it for one minute. I've been at the coalface of some extremely high profile matters, including the Geoffrey Rush defamation litigation, the George Pell contempt proceedings (in which I was cross-examined for the first time in my career) and in the Dylan Voller case concerning liability for the publication of third party comments on Facebook which is soon going to the High Court. News' key role in the Australia's Right to Know coalition of media organisations has meant I was heavily involved in drafting submissions and participating in consultation throughout the defamation law reform process. I feel that coming in-house enabled me to become fully immersed in the media industry, which I am incredibly passionate about. So I think the risk paid off!

**FISHER:** What does International Women's Day mean to you?

**SAUNDERS:** International Women's Day is about having a designated day each year where we celebrate women and how we can work together to achieve equality. It's hugely important to me that women are recognised, remunerated and rewarded as equals to men. I feel that I've been fortunate in working with women and men throughout my career who don't seem to operate along gender lines,



however I think there are still so many improvements that need to be made, particularly around flexible work (although COVID has assisted with that), the mental load, remuneration and career advancement. I would love it if it could be International Women's Day every day!

**FISHER:** Who is one woman in the industry whom you really admire, and why?

**SAUNDERS:** Can I have two? I would say Anita Cade, who was one of my partners at Ashurst, and was and still is a mentor and role model for me. She is an incredible lawyer, which is an inspiration in itself, but she is also an extremely caring and patient boss. I always appreciated how she takes time out of her busy schedule to talk things through with junior lawyers so that they learn and develop. Anita also showed me how it is possible to be both an amazing partner and an amazing mum. My other, equally admirable choice is Lyndelle Barnett. We started as peers in adjacent offices, where we would pop next door to debate a legal point or case strategy with each other (she always beat me in the verbal stoushes, of course). Now she has forged such an inspirational career as the go-to barrister for the media and I am very proud of her and all she has achieved.