

Jenny Thornton

How did you get started out in your career?

I started like everyone else I suppose as an article clerk in a law firm, Parker & Parker, and worked there for two and a half years, then went overseas for four years. I ended up working in South Africa in a law firm doing litigation and then went to Cambridge, did my Masters, and then came back to the same firm, Parker & Parker, and became a litigator, and got asked by a partner in the firm who I'd never worked with before called Oscar Shub if I was interested in coming into insurance litigation. Because at that stage I was doing banking and finance litigation. And I said, 'I don't know anything about insurance'. He said, 'I'm sure you'll be able to learn', and started doing insurance litigation. By this stage I was about 31 or 32 and had been a lawyer for about eight years, so till then I hadn't done any. And I loved it. I thought it was great. I loved the work, it was very complex on many occasions and then became a partner in insurance litigation. I did that at Parkers, subsequently merged with Freehills, and then Freehills decided they didn't want to do insurance litigation and could I just go back to my old role as a finance and banking litigator. And I said no! So came over to Allens. And because Parker & Parker had been part of the Allens Arthur Robinson group, I actually felt very comfortable coming over to Allens.

How do you define success and being successful?

I think success is hard to define. I think success as a lawyer is probably defined by the respect that you have from your clients and the fact that they keep giving you more work, the respect that you have from your peers and your colleagues, and I think that it's very important that if you have the respect of the lawyers on the other side and that you are known in the legal community as someone that can work well with other colleagues, that is something which means I think that you are a successful lawyer. It really is having the respect and admiration of everyone in the community, not just the very one or two people that you work with, or the one or two clients that you work with. That's success as a lawyer. Whether you're successful as a person of course is a more difficult question.

Did you or do you have mentors?

From my very first days as an articled clerk, I think my mentor then was Chris Staedtler who was my principal who went on to become president of the Court of Appeal and has just retired. He was a

wonderful mentor and guide and encouraged those around him, and was always supportive of those around him. We all looked up to him, not only because of his legal acumen but because he was just a genuine, very decent, hard working lawyer who cared about people, and was concerned about social and moral issues as well as legal. And very ethical. I've had a number of mentors since then. I had a mentor as a partner at my firm in Johannesburg where I worked for a few years, Oscar Shub was another mentor for me for many years. I have had a number of mentors and I think they're very important to anybody, not just women in a career, that you've got someone that you can look up to and respect and perhaps help you get through a few issues and also guide you as to how you should be acting as a lawyer. I've never had a formal mentor. I've grabbed onto people I think and followed them along and seen how they act and behave and do things. I think I have been able to get the best out of lots of people and we tell our young lawyers to try and work with as many people as possible, because they've all got attributes that you might aspire to, and it might be little bits of a lot of people that you end up adapting. But I've never had someone who's tapped me on the shoulder, except for Oscar I suppose who said 'come and work with me', who's been like a formal mentor. I've never had a formal mentor cause in my day there really weren't female mentors of any kind. In fact when I left Parkers after having worked there for about two and a half years, one of the partners said to me, 'we're disappointed you're leaving because we were hoping one day you'd be our first female partner'. You know, they were thinking ten years down the track. And when I came back they had made a female partner and she was someone from my year. So it did take six or eight years after I graduated for someone to become a partner. I didn't know any other female partners, and there weren't female barristers unless you were doing family or crime. There was one female barrister who's now the chief judge of the District Court and she did all criminal work. So there weren't many female mentors in commercial law firms.

How do you balance work and life?

I do try and do lots of exercise if I can. Sometimes during the week it gets hard to do that. If you've got early mornings or late nights. I try and have at least one day off on the weekend when I'm not doing any work. I've got a family that makes me want to balance. I do take all my holidays, I'm very strict about taking holidays, and cause I've got school aged children we have to sort of have at least some time in the holidays, their school holidays, with them. So I do try and get away from Perth and

get away from the office at least, even if it's just going down south, just to clear the brain a bit! I escape to Rottneest quite often, where I lie on a boat and forget about what's happening in the office! Even on a weekend sometimes we just do that. It's really important. And to catch up with people who aren't in the law, that's very important.

What has worked for you and good advice for someone coming up in their career?

Learning from your mistakes, and being prepared to put your hand up when you have got a problem. Talking to your peers, whether it's other law graduates, other lawyers, other senior associates or other partners, whenever you've got a problem not trying to solve it yourself. Then the most important piece of advice I ever got was that if you're worried about a file, and you just can't bear it, pick it up and give it to someone else! Which I thought was great. But if you can't do that, the next best thing is to actually tackle the problem, because invariably the problem or the difficult file is not as difficult as you thought it was going to be. And it's amazing, you'll have something sitting on your floor and you think, I just can't bear the thought of it. But you pick it up and then do it and then think, why have I spent three weeks fretting about doing it when it's only taken me half an hour to do the job and I shouldn't have been worrying about it. So to deal with stress, it's actually tackle whatever's stressing you and don't let it sit at the back of your mind and worry about it, because that's very stressful. But if you really can't face it for whatever reason, and Oscar told me this, he said 'pick it up and there's always someone else that can deal with it'.

Apart from the Law, what would your dream career be?

If I wasn't a lawyer I'd love to be at university I think. I'd like to be just someone who studies full time and perhaps lectures a couple of days a week! I think that must be the best job in the world! And I'd love to study something like English history or Tudor history or you know, that would just be the best job in the world, to be paid to indulge yourself while you read historical novels. I think that'd be a pretty good job.

Who is a women you find inspirational? Why?

I've always studied Tudor history, so I love Elizabeth the First. I thought she was an amazing woman who obviously had been brought up to be a leader but she managed to run a country and to send men in ships off to other countries and to pillage and come back with tobacco and all the things that they came back with, potatoes, and she fought wars and took on men as not their equal but really

their superior. She was their boss. And they answered to her and I thought to be a woman without any male by her side, at least ostensibly, she seemed to do an amazing job at corralling what was a very male dominated society and to get them all to go out and do things for her, so you know a bit like Joan of Arc I suppose. Some women are able to achieve that. So I probably have studied her more than anyone else, but I'm sure there are lots of other women leaders that we could talk about.