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Bisley, Paulette

(1945 -)

Born	19450101, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Barrister, Lawyer, Solicitor, Volunteer

Summary

In 1968, Paulette Bisley (nee Parkinson) became the tenth woman to sign the Victorian Bar Roll. Although she spent most of her career pursuing activities outside the legal profession, she credits the legal training and experience she received for helping to ‘shape and define different parts of my life. It made me stronger and helped find my voice that I could use to help others.’

Go to ‘Details’ below to read a reflective essay written by Paulette Bisley for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Paulette Bisley and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

My career at the Bar was fuelled by ignorance and optimism.
I attended Elwood High School, a newly established high school, and matriculated in 1962. I received a Commonwealth Scholarship to attend University. My elder sister went to Monash University to become a teacher but I chose to go to Melbourne University to study law. The University appealed to my love of history.

The Law School was somewhat confronting. There were very few women and they were mostly private school girls. There has always been snobbishness in Melbourne about schools but up until then it did not concern me. At Law school, indeed at the University, the refrain was often, “but tell us where did you really did go to school”. My parents had decided that a University education was better than paying for a private school – the stipulation being “unless we were brainless” and then they would have to use connections to find a vocation.

I confess to enjoying myself at Law School to the detriment of my studies. I met my future husband at University. I passed, but many law books were left unread.

As a High School girl without inspiring marks it was very difficult to get Articles. I ended up, through my husband’s family connections, to be Articled in Dandenong. I was set to work with an unqualified Law Clerk in Common Law. The practice was commercial and the partners largely left the Law clerk to his own devices. This was my first experience of being marginalised by a male. The clerk corrected every sentence I wrote and I dumbly believed he was helping. He hid my work and made me appear foolish in front of the partners. He was later sacked when he did this to a male colleague.

The politics of the office left me cold and the Bar beckoned. My inspiration came from the young barristers whom I had briefed. I knew I was bright and with the arrogance of youth and lots of encouragement thought I would become a Barrister. My admission to practice was moved by Richard McGarvie QC. Since I was a woman it was decided that I would most likely only succeed in a practice in Domestic Relations. Bear in mind I had no connections whatsoever with the legal profession, and no old school ties to help. But encouraged by a family that believed women could do anything, and with the financial and positive support of my husband, I was prepared to have a try. My Master was a specialist in Matrimonial Causes as it was then. There was no formal training to be a barrister and you relied on learning from your Master. I signed the Bar Roll and was told that a Bar Council meeting was held to determine the length of my dress. I was never sure if that was true or not. My borrowed wig (when I needed one) perched upon the bouffant sixties hair.

I engaged a Clerk, put a desk in the corner of my Master’s room, and awaited a brief. My Clerk was very supportive and encouraging. The only woman at the Bar then was Molly Kingston. I was too much in awe of her to seek any advice and she certainly did not make any attempt to welcome me. The other women were absent as Joan Rosenove had retired and Lynne Opas was in New Guinea. My Master had no idea what he should do with me so did nothing. Not once did he help, just kept saying “have a go, have a go”. I quickly realized this was largely because work I received was nothing to do with Domestic Relations. It was largely motor accident damages described in those days as ‘crash and bash’, drunk driving, petty crime and the Imprisonment of Fraudulent debtors. The cases were mostly in the Court of Petty Sessions but sometimes in the County Court and rarely in the Supreme Court. None were to do with Matrimonial Causes. Cramming at night, I survived and learnt much from the men on my floor who were very supportive and helpful. I was known as Bisley Mrs.

I could never pluck up the courage to eat in the Dining Room which was on the top floor of Owen Dixon Chambers. I could not eat in my room as my Master I discovered, to my horror, spent his lunch hour reading girlie magazines. I was appalled. Most barristers were supportive but many thought it would be fun to tease and make suggestive remarks. I was often asked what was in my brief case, was it the shopping and did I carry my books in a shopping bag. I was often asked out but I learnt quickly to say no as their motives were less than honourable.

I duly finished my six months, slightly terrified but exhilarated at the same time.

I set up Chambers in Tait Chambers. I was often told that “this case is hopeless but since you are a woman you can talk the magistrate/judge around.” I was also advised, tongue in cheek (I thought so), to wear a low cut dress in front of some Magistrates. I did not.

Without adequate training and lack of support of a Master, as my practice started to build up I was becoming out of my depth. Supreme Court appearances to do with Company Law, which I had not studied, were fearful. I was and am still indebted to Harry Emery, Kevin Mahony, Charles Wheeler, Graeme Uren and the other men on my Floor for their support at this time. My biggest fear was that they would be on the other side of a case and could not help.

Despite the loving support of my husband who believes that women can do anything, I had what is called an anxiety state. I was supplied with a prescription and told to continue working. Neither of those options was a match and I decided it was time to leave practice to start a family. My thought being that I would have children, resume study and then go back to work. However it transpired that an overseas posting when my youngest child was in prep meant I had to make alternative plans. We stayed away eleven years but my legal career was my passport to many different roles.

My husband worked for Exxon Chemical Company and we went first to Connecticut, USA. I learnt quickly that I could not work for money (no visa) but could do volunteer work. American women were not ashamed to put volunteer work down on

their CVs. I learnt to do the same. I became involved in their Newcomer Group, that was very active as most of the population of our town was itinerant. American women moved at least every three years. These were often professional women who gave up a lot for their husband's career. My law degree was highly respected and gave me entrée to many interesting and exciting activities including being a docent at the Wilton historical society. I could say it helped define me and my time at the Bar gave me confidence to express myself. From Connecticut we went to Hong Kong.

I was never a lady who 'lunched'. It was important to me that the social issues that arose for women in the expat life be addressed and support systems put in place. In Hong Kong I became the Secretary of the English Speaking Members Department of the Young Womens' Christian Association (YWCA). In this role I determined the activities of the organisation.

My law degree was highly regarded by the Board of the Association, the members of whom were all Chinese. Indeed when it came time to leave because we were moving to Tokyo they refused to take me off their books. They even suggested that I fly back to Hong Kong weekly. On $6000 Hong Kong dollars a month I did not think so. I was told that the Chinese husbands would allow their wives to attend this very British department because I was a barrister.

The YWCA with its 'At Home' programme for newcomers taught me how to understand the problems relating to relocation. There were many issues, particularly for women who had had busy professional lives but now could not work and lacked friendship groups, family and an inability to network. Asia in those days was very trying for intelligent western women. In the programs we developed we were able to provide the framework from which they could launch themselves into a productive life. Again I became involved with history and museums as I had done in America.

In Japan I had to really stand on my own two feet as my husband was often away and we relocated into a largely Japanese community. Very little English was spoken in the 1980's. Friends were made through the Australian-Japan Association. Again my law degree opened doors and earned me initial respect. I was asked at one stage to speak on the role of women in Australia – I had not lived in Australia for some years so I spoke to academics at Latrobe University who had completed research in this area. I was a bit depressed as women had not progressed very far.

I returned to Australia hoping to study for a social work degree and to prepare I decided to volunteer and do the course for the Citizens Advice Bureau. It was from this role that I was nominated to sit on the Legal Aid Review Panel.
Then life changed again. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995. And in 1997 we left for Singapore for a final posting. In the meantime we had started a vineyard in the Yarra Valley which was demanding my attention.

In Singapore I again looked to museums to hold my interest. I became a docent and trained with Singaporean colleagues. Believe it or not they were the first ever Singaporeans trained as docents for their museum (the first Museum was started in 1819). Again my law degree was my currency. I also worked with the Australian Association and worked towards making life easier for newcomers. Depression and anxiety were common among many women. Many were successful in their careers but had chosen to accompany their spouse, take a few years holiday and have a bit of fun. However many found that it was very difficult to start a new life. This was where my experience at the YWCA proved helpful. I also worked on the Magazine committee of the Tanglin Club where my Law degree gave me entrée.

We returned home to Australia in 2001 and since then I have been involved in the vineyard and my three acre garden which is open often for the public for charities. I am now Chairman of the Trust of the Regional Museum of the Shire of Yarra Ranges amongst other interests.

While I left the Bar many years ago the experience helped shape and define different parts of my life. It made me stronger and helped find my voice that I could use to help others. It has proved to be my entrée to a very different life than I had imaged when I first entered the courts in my borrowed wig.

Published resources

Resource
Women Barristers in Victoria: Then and Now, The Victorian Bar, 2007,
https://www.vicbar.com.au/wba/

Site Exhibition
Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers

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Digital resources



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