

# LATE STARTERS REAP REWARDS

DRAWING ON THEIR RICH PROFESSIONAL LIFE EXPERIENCE IN VARIED FIELDS, THESE FOUR LAWYERS WERE DETERMINED TO BEAT THE OBSTACLES TO PRACTISE LAW. **BY KARIN DERKLEY**

The career you start with is increasingly less likely the one you'll continue through your entire working life. That means there's a real possibility that many currently working in the law are planning their exit from the profession. But it also goes the other way, with those from other professions looking to move into the law as their next career.

For many of the "later lawyers" the *LJ* interviewed for this story, going into the law has represented a chance to engage intellectually, to solve problems, to make a difference. It's not necessarily an easy path though. Being a mature age student alongside those just out of high school can be a challenge in itself. Law degrees are long and demanding, which can be hard for those already working full-time, often with family commitments as well. Law requires a whole new way of thinking that can be difficult to pick up when you've been immersed in a completely different discipline. Then there's the fact that later lawyers are by definition older and competing for clerkships and jobs with fresh-faced young graduates who law firms might consider easier to mould to their needs. As Allen Bagatsing, one of our later lawyers and the co-chair of the LIV Later Lawyers Network says, "there's a myth that mature age professionals are not hungry enough, less technologically savvy or less passionate to practise law compared to their younger cohorts".

Getting past those obstacles requires resilience and determination, she points out.

But coming from a business background or other professions, later lawyers bring to their practice a rich life experience, different perspectives and new insights – not to mention connections with a wide range of people. That's a big plus for a profession that is increasingly recognising the value of diversity of thought and background. There's also more the robust sense of purpose, clarity and calmness that comes with age and experience, Ms Bagatsing says. One of the best ways later lawyers can build confidence and skills is to learn from others going through similar experiences, such as via the Later Lawyers Network. Here are the stories of some who have successfully made the move.

## Craig Evans – Arnold Bloch Leibler Law graduate

After he finished high school, Craig Evans' mother encouraged him to go off and join the circus. He did, studying drama at the Victorian College of the Arts and going on to have a successful career as an actor, comedian and radio announcer for 12 years.

"I loved radio and I loved stand-up comedy. It's a really

rewarding profession and there's no greater feeling than making a room full of strangers laugh". But there was a point where making a joke about Kim Kardashian's latest gaffe was no longer satisfying. "It's not exactly intellectually rigorous conversation," he says.

Deciding on a career change, he tossed up between journalism and law, and then realised law was for him after he knocked back an offer from Monash Law School. "As soon as I hung up the phone, I knew that was the worst decision I've ever made. Thankfully they let me in when I called straight back."

Going into the law was like learning a new language, he says. "Not just the legislation, but how to think like a lawyer, how to speak like a lawyer, how to advocate, how to form and develop legal arguments." He was fortunate to get work as a legal assistant to Adviceline Injury Lawyers, which gave him both an income during his Juris Doctor and an entrée into the world of legal thinking.

Becoming a lawyer at a later age requires a level of humility, he says. "You need to be comfortable not knowing anything and with the fact that you're sometimes taking instructions from younger people."

However, his background serves him well for dealing with the demands of a legal career, Mr Evans believes. "As later lawyers we bring an outside perspective to the profession. Having worked in the commercial world, I have experience in the ways the commercial world deals with problems."

And while working in comedy and commercial radio might seem a long way from the law, he says it gave him skills in quickly building rapport with clients and in storytelling that are invaluable for negotiation. "As a comedian, you've got 10 seconds to make a room full of strangers like you."

Now working in litigation at ABL, he says he loves the problem-solving aspect of his new role. "We come in when things are falling apart. I love that, and I love the diversity of clients we have at work."

He says his friends still find it "weird" when they see him in a suit. "They kind of laugh. But I want to break down the stigma of lawyers being boring. This is a really great profession. It's one of the most collaborative and collegiate groups of people. And just ask any lawyer for some war stories and you'll have comedy gold within like, five minutes."





## Allen Bagatsing – SBA Law property solicitor

Allen Bagatsing worked as a senior auditor for five years at accountancy firm Arthur Anderson in the Philippines before she decided she no longer wanted to count other people's money. "I wanted to switch to something that required a different skill set than just looking at a bunch of numbers and converting it into a financial statement. I was more interested in the kind of issues that you can grapple with as a lawyer.

"I wanted to be part of that noble profession and I was interested in helping to create a socially just environment for everyone. Knowing your rights gives you the platform to fight for people's rights."

While studying her Juris Doctor in Manila, Ms Bagatsing worked part-time in the Philippines Supreme Court. She was admitted in the Philippines and then relocated to the United States where she undertook the New York Bar exam and worked for 12 years as a legal counsel at a pharmaceutical company.

Coming to Australia in 2016 she returned to law school yet again to do her bridging studies including 10 Priestley subjects, and did her PLT. In 2018 she was admitted to her third jurisdiction at the Victorian Supreme Court. "I never minded going back to uni, because it opened more doors to question things and broadened the horizon on how you think in terms of a legal perspective," she says.

After doing a clerkship with Wisewould Mahoney, and then working for the firm as a solicitor, Ms Bagatsing recently moved to SBA Law as a property solicitor.

She acknowledges there are challenges for later lawyers who are often stereotyped as being too old or lacking the right culture, or not being committed enough. "We have to compete with somebody who's been doing the same job for six or seven years. We have to work more and prove more than the average cohort."

As co-chair of the LIV Later Lawyers Network, Ms Bagatsing encourages those coming into the law at a later age to "hang in there".

"You need to build resilience and do personal branding. If you can't find a job or PLT training, just go out and volunteer because you need to demonstrate that you have the basic legal skills, such as simple drafting of affidavits or briefs or just talking to people."

But coming to the law from another career gives later lawyers a richer life experience that can be leveraged into the mix of skills, she says. "You have more of a sense of clarity and purpose of what you want to do, because you've got the whole gamut of experience from another area."



## Mark Suss – pro bono legal advocate

Anaesthetist Dr Mark Suss decided to study law partly out of interest in lifelong learning but also to give himself another career option down the track. But his legal education has proved invaluable in the shorter term for his work advocating for health care worker safety during the pandemic.

Dr Suss started studying law via distance learning at University of New England in 2014. Running his own business as an anaesthetist gave him the flexibility to dial up or down his study commitments depending on how busy his job was. It took him around seven years and he has now also completed his PLT at the College of Law.

"I took it very slowly so I wasn't feeling overwhelmed and I could actually sit down and really read cases and understand concepts. If you've got another full-time job, you need to accept that you might not be moving at a steady pace."

In the process he discovered a great interest in the development of law throughout history. "I'm interested in the development of property law, for instance, through the Middle Ages and through Mabo to today, or the origins of equity. But I'm also very interested in the intersection of medicine and law and am working on a paper looking at the history of vaccine litigation."

There's a marked difference between the thought process and logic that applies to law and medicine, he has found. "Legal proof and scientific proof are very different issues, and it's a bit hard initially to get your head around that." It has required a flexible mind, he says. "You've got to be able to accept that the answers to legal questions might not work the same way as they do in other fields like medicine or engineering."

His legal education has also equipped him for his advocacy work in the media during the pandemic, calling for personal protective equipment and for immunisation and boosters for healthcare workers. "Having that legal background helps you address things like workplace safety and the justification for doing it, rather than just relying on the scientific proof for what we have to do."

For now COVID-19 is keeping him busy helping out in ICU, but he is currently providing expert witness services in anaesthesia and perioperative care as well as doing supervised pro bono legal work with asylum seekers. "That's been a good way of doing useful work for people but also having a connection to the law industry." Longer term he may partly move to in-house work in a hospital setting. "My day job is very intense and active, on my feet all day, so I feel that this would eventually provide the potential to move into the legal profession."

## Anita Ward – Brown and Proudfoot principal director

Anita Ward came to the law from a varied career that ranged from brand manager at Scholl Australia, working on country newspapers in Victoria's north east with her husband, running a florist shop and a café. She is now the principal director of 133-year-old Horsham firm Brown and Proudfoot.

"I left school partway through year 12, but I always enjoyed legal studies at school. When I had a very young family I saw an ad for an online law degree with Charlies Darwin University. "After she completed the law degree, Ms Ward did her honours and then a masters in family law at ANU.

She originally studied law more out of interest than with the intention of practising law, she says. "I just liked the idea of learning law. But then I got a sponsorship to do regional rural and remote practice through a community legal centre in Mildura, working with the Indigenous population up there, and doing outreach to small communities nearby. That was really interesting and that led to me volunteering at Legal Aid in Horsham."

In 2008 she answered a job ad for an associate with Brown and Proudfoot in Horsham. "I started doing all the things the practice didn't otherwise do, which was family law, criminal law, and anything in dispute. "After she had been there eight years, one of the three partners retired, and the two remaining partners asked her if she would like to take over the practice.

She is now the sole principal director, the first woman in that role in the firm, while previous partners Ted McCabe and John

Brack continue to act as consultants. "It's a really good practice. It's got tens of thousands of deed packets and we've got amazing staff. I have a library here with books going back to before the Constitution. There are generations of families who have come here. We've got strong relationships with everyone."

She loves the problem solving and helping those who have fallen foul of the law. "It can sometimes be frustrating and make me angry to see injustices. But even for clients who have done the most heinous of crimes, I want them to know that there's people who can help you."

Ms Ward says coming to the law later gave her life experience and resilience essential for practising in the profession. "I think it would have been tougher if I had come to the law as a younger person because I would have been far more sensitive and I wouldn't have had the life experience to deal with some of the things I have to deal with."

Her varied career has also given her the ability to relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds, she says.

"What I brought to the law is good communication. I can relate to people intuitively. I can appreciate the complexities of the law and why law can be a burden for people. I understand the reactions you get from people and how to deal with them empathetically. I help people feel comfortable." ■



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