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## **Q&A: Selena Cartwright – ‘Age is really no match for ambition and hard work!’**

In our latest Q&A, **Selena Cartwright**, principal of Baldwin Cartwright Lawyers, discusses the challenges and advantages of being a young female lawyer practising in a regional city.

### **You became a sole principal at 25, you are still in your 20s and you are in charge of a very successful firm in Gympie, a regional city in Queensland. What do you attribute to your success?**

So much. My journey has certainly been a tumultuous one. Around the time of becoming a sole practitioner the world was entering a global economic crisis, not exactly the best of times to take on a law firm. But ambition got the better of me! Thank goodness I have never been shy of hard work and overcoming obstacles, but it was really tough.

Rather than cry over split milk I had to get on with business. The recession forced me to analyse every aspect of the practice. In short, I started with looking at the practice’s situation, where it needed to go and what it needed to do to get there. What followed was a period of managing and implementing necessary and strategic change. I diversified the firm’s practice areas, restructured and reallocated staff, and implemented a series of policies and procedures, including a costs policy which was crucial in managing cash flow. I formed strategic alliances, negotiated for the practice to be a preferred supplier, tendered and secured works. But it hasn’t stopped there. To maintain a competitive edge I undertake regular evaluation analyses, innovation and implementation. A big part of my success is the fact that each day I challenge myself to be proactive, progressive, innovative, listen to the market and act accordingly.

Another critical ingredient of my success has been surrounding myself with a team of professionals who complement all of my weaknesses. This includes a business advisor and mentor, an accountant, financial planner, like-minded staff and, most importantly, my invaluable husband. Collectively through hard work, commitment, determination, tenacity and self belief we have achieved, and continue to achieve, success.

### **You were passionate about law from an early stage. What attracted you to the profession? And has it lived up to your expectations?**

A number of adverse childhood events and experiences drew me to the profession, but the deciding factor came after spending time along with my mother and siblings in women’s refuges. Rather than

allow those events to have a negative effect on my life I wanted to use those experiences to help and inspire others.

For me a career in family law seemed an obvious choice. Ten years on, I have now realised that my choice was rather naïve. I have learnt that what we have in Australia is a legal system and not a justice system. Everything we do as practitioners is confined by legislation and in some instances you can't help but feel that our legal system is letting clients down. The profession has otherwise lived up to, if not exceeded, my expectations.

**What new skills or qualities do you think a younger generation of female practitioners, in particular, can bring to the profession?**

Without taking anything away from our male counterparts for whom I have a lot of respect, I think a younger generation of female practitioners can bring a whole new dimension of skills and qualities to the profession. Women by their nature bring a far more empathetic persona to the role. We have nurturing qualities and for these reasons we are in some cases preferred over our male counterparts.

**You were a finalist in the national Telstra Business Women's Awards and won the Queensland Commonwealth Bank Business Owner Award. What does such recognition mean personally and for the firm from a marketing perspective?**

Personally I was overwhelmed, honoured and very humbled to have been the recipient of such an award. It personally reaffirmed everything that I had achieved and made all the sacrifices and hard work worthwhile.

With that said, however, I didn't want the award to be all about me and it is for this reason that it has not been capitalised upon as much as what it otherwise could have been. I am the same person today as what I was before receiving the award and my approach to business has not changed. Further, I don't consider myself to be any more skilled than any other person in law or business. As proud as I am, I am simply an ordinary girl living her dream, so the award for me is really about being a role model, inspiring and motivating other women – and men – to get the message out there that age is really no match for ambition and hard work!

At the end of the day it doesn't matter what walk of life you come from, it doesn't matter how many times someone tells you that you cannot do something or will never do something, if you work hard, believe in yourself, have the tenacity and willpower to overcome any challenges you can achieve amazing things. You can live your dream no matter what it is and I am living proof of that.

**Does operating out of a regional city such as Gympie present any particular challenges from a law firm management perspective?**

Yes. One of our biggest challenges is it is very difficult to attract staff to our region and the only way to address this is to work on promoting our region in a positive way. I, along with other business leaders, was recently invited to meet with the mayor and our local council to discuss the shaping and the future economic development of our region.

From a personal experience I have lived in Gympie all of my life and it really provides the best of both worlds. We are half an hour from Noosa and are on the doorstep to the Fraser Coast while only being a short drive to Brisbane. Gympie provides a beautiful regional setting, affordable housing, similar attractions to those found in the city but yet at a much slower and laidback pace. It has afforded me an opportunity to support myself financially through university, acquiring a portfolio of assets, travelling a large part of the world, climbing the corporate ladder at a very young age and now I am in a position of affording other young people the same opportunities as well as giving back to our local community.

There is, therefore, a lot to be said for living in a regional centre and the idea is not one that should be dismissed because it can provide tremendous and life-changing opportunities without the pressures of traffic, long hours and higher costs of living! Ultimately, it is the opportunities that I am prepared to provide that has been successful in luring staff from the city ... I otherwise talk with all of the schools and we recruit staff at the end of their schooling lives and offer administration traineeships. For those students wishing to study business or law, we employ them and financially contribute to their university fees as incentive for them to remain in Gympie. The flip side is we have the opportunity to mentor and retain young ambitious staff, so it is really a win-win for all.

**There is a lot of discussion but not always a lot of action from city law firms about work-life balance. What advantages does regional practice offer in this respect?**

Because of the difficulties in recruiting staff and keeping staff in a regional area, promoting work-life balance and being competitive is a must to attract and retain staff. So there are a number of advantages that regional practices offer. I offer initiatives such as flexible working hours, working remotely from home, offering paid study leave and a financial study assistance program. In doing so it affords staff greater flexibility.

**How would you describe your management approach? Are there any particular philosophies that have helped you succeed, or any mentors have helped you along the path to career success?**

I certainly lead by example. Everything that I expect of my staff I equally expect of myself. There is no hierarchy in our firm. Everyone is as important as the next in the firm's functioning. All of our staff are recognised, valued and rewarded for the contributions that they make. I allow our staff to have a great

deal of autonomy while at the same time providing enough support so that their workload can be shared. I foster an environment where staff are encouraged to provide input into the mechanics of our operation and I welcome their feedback and suggestions.

I don't look at Baldwin Cartwright as a team but rather a family. We work together, we socialise together, support and encourage each other not only professionally but personally.

In terms of mentors, there have been so many people over the years who have taught me so much and contributed in some way to shaping the practitioner that I am today. The list comprises past employers, barristers, colleagues and even competitors, and I am grateful to each of them. The two who have influenced me the most and have played an integral role in contributing to my success and where the practice stands today is my husband, Michael Cartwright, and my business advisor, Michael Graham.

One of my biggest challenges when I took over the practice was that I had absolutely no prior background or experience in business. To overcome this, I surrounded myself with people who could complement my weaknesses. Thankfully my husband has completed a Bachelor in Administrative Leadership and has therefore played an integral role in the success of the business by providing a strategic vision and mission and then by assisting me with the implementation and management of change, providing endless advice, guidance and support. It is his knowledge which has indirectly contributed to the practice's success and where it sits today.

Michael Graham is another mentor who I also regard as a close friend. I have known Michael for 10 years now and he has mentored me from the very beginning as an articled clerk to every step along the way. He has been invaluable in my professional development.

**One of the keys to your success has been diversifying the firm's service base to cater for more clients. How have you managed such expansion, particularly in a regional firm where resources, in theory, at least, are scarcer?**

It has been challenging simply because of the challenges we face in attracting staff to the region. So I have had to do the best I can. This has included recruiting new staff when candidates have been available and willing to work in the region, recruiting young people and training them, reallocating staff internally, using locums when required.

**Baldwin Cartwright prides itself on its innovative streak. Are there any initiatives which you are especially proud and which have aided the firm?**

One of the biggest was a complete upgrade of our servers, computers, software and intellectual property. Our firm currently runs Affinity, a product sold by Lexis Nexis. While the firm has had the program for some time, I recently undertook the latest upgrade which has significantly improved the



functionality of the software as well as creating enormous efficiency gains that were not otherwise able to be recognised. It is a superior product. Further, I am constantly developing specialised workflow procedures, precedents and templates which add to the efficiencies for our clients and staff alike.

Another initiative that we have is supporting our local community by providing a pro bono service. We have formed a partnership with Taylor Street Community Legal Centre in Gympie wherein we run information sessions for people wishing to apply for divorce. We donate our time and our office to run such sessions, which provide an opportunity for all people to access such support and advice. We also donate time to provide free legal advice once per month. We undertake in-house fundraising and the funds raised are donated to community groups as voted for by our staff. In addition we support and donate to a range of community groups.