

Interview with Phillipa Gormly

An interview by Rena Sofroniou

Phillipa Gormly came to the Bar in 1996, having worked prior to that time as a solicitor for about two-and-a-half to three years. I met her and her husband last year at a very enjoyable performance of *A tale of two cities* (staged at the Genesis Theatre and, incidentally, featuring Brian Donovan QC) and have wanted to interview her ever since. This interview addresses the perpetual question, but with an unusual twist - how does a busy barrister juggle a burgeoning commercial practice, the raising of four children, part-time judicial membership of the Administrative Decisions Tribunal *and* multiple sclerosis? Phillipa Gormly provided this little black duck with a lesson in self-discipline and the maintenance of a positive attitude.



Rena Sofroniou: Were you planning a career at the bar when you were studying law, or was that a later idea?

Phillipa Gormly: I always knew that I wanted to go to the Bar, but it was something I wouldn't have told anyone I knew.

Rena Sofroniou: Why the secrecy?

Phillipa Gormly: I imagined everybody would have said 'oh that's right, she's just doing what the father does.' So I kept it to myself.

Rena Sofroniou: Because you come from a legal family, don't you?

Phillipa Gormly: Yes I do. There is my father, Frank Gormly, who was a QC, my brother Jeremy Gormly SC, another brother, Julian Gormly, who is a solicitor and who has also worked at the Bar and my uncle Kevin Coleman, who was a judge at the Workers Compensation Court.

Rena Sofroniou: Who was your role model?

Phillipa Gormly: Both Mum and Dad were wonderful people who provided me with the upbringing and example I rely on so often. Dad had a particular quality that many people who knew him also recognised. It is difficult to put in words what that quality was but he genuinely appreciated each person for themselves.

Rena Sofroniou: Were you pressured to become a lawyer when you were growing up, or was it in the blood?

Phillipa Gormly: Oh, no, no, not at all. I think you grow up with it, so you tend to follow what you are familiar with, rather than it necessarily being 'in the blood'. Certainly no pressure was applied on me from anybody to work at any specific career. We were advised to find out just what each of us was good at and to focus our energies on doing that.

Rena Sofroniou: What attracted you to the Bar?

Phillipa Gormly: I'd have to say I am very commercially oriented and so originally I did economics and accounting with the intention of studying law but the call of commerce got me. So I worked in the commercial world when I left university.

Rena Sofroniou: Do you notice the paucity of female commercial barristers?

Phillipa Gormly: I think there are a number of women working in family law and there are a lot of women working in criminal law too, but neither of those areas appeals to me. Commerce and tax areas are the areas that interest me. For my own part I have only ever had a positive experience at the Bar. I have had a large number of silk over the years leading me in matters and I have only ever felt welcomed. They have been accommodating when they have needed to be because of the wheelchair and things like that. The members of the Bench have always been accommodating, too. I've never actually had a problem, so whilst I know that there is obviously a huge discrepancy between the number of men and number of women working in the area I prefer to work in, perhaps I am just lucky.

Rena Sofroniou: Do you have business interests other than your legal work?

Phillipa Gormly: No, only inside my legal work. I really only have time for the legal work. The only reason I would stop at this stage is for health reasons. Certainly the MS is no reason for me

to stop work. It is possibly, probably, now as bad as it is going to get. I'm not particularly bad for an MS sufferer - I'm just dramatic because I'm in wheelchair, so people notice me!

Rena Sofroniou: It is interesting that you say that. I have no preconception of what an MS sufferer is 'supposed' to look like. I guess I notice nothing other than your wheelchair. Do you find that people project onto you their expectations of what MS sufferers are meant to be like?

Phillipa Gormly: Certainly not here at the Bar. I feel at home here, I feel welcomed, I feel accepted and people are always willing to lend a hand if I need it, which I do often, such as help with opening doors. I can't carry a silk's bag but nobody minds that, so in the legal world here I feel that this is my stomping ground, my home ground.

Rena Sofroniou: Actually, I think you're lucky that some QC doesn't just fling their bag onto your lap. You might end up with a whole pile of them.

Certainly initially I found that solicitors hesitated to brief me when I first got into a wheelchair. Nowadays there is less hesitation.

Phillipa Gormly: Sometimes I invite them to throw their bag on my lap! Really my legs are quite numb so they wouldn't feel that bad with the bag lumped on top of them. Though that is not an invitation to do it!

Rena Sofroniou: Now you have got to answer this, *Bar News* wants names. Tell me honestly who has been dumping their red bag on top of you!

Phillipa Gormly: (*Laughs*). No names! There is no preconception here in the legal world. Out in the public world absolutely there are preconceptions. The preconception is that if you are in a wheelchair, or if your legs have gone, your brain is gone.

Rena Sofroniou: Is it as stark as that?

Phillipa Gormly: Oh, absolutely! In shops and in all sorts of other places.

Rena Sofroniou: I don't understand the correlation.

Phillipa Gormly: No. No. Well, I would love to say something but I won't say it in an interview!

Rena Sofroniou: Well you can tell me later! It occurs to me that it has been a long time since we have seen hundreds of war veterans around. I suppose there might have been a time when entire generations of people would have been habituated to seeing injured people, on crutches, in wheelchairs who have been away on service and have returned to the practice of their professions. I wonder whether that plays a part.

Phillipa Gormly: Lack of exposure. Definitely the more exposure people have, the more they know how to respond. I would say to an able-bodied person, check a wheelchair person out by looking at their eyes, because often the eyes can tell you

whether they are disabled intellectually or whether they are an aggressive wheelchair person. For example, for me, I appreciate a push up-hill but some other people in wheelchairs growl at any offer of help from an able-bodied person. My sister tells me that she will not offer other people a push because she gets growled at, since they insist on being so independent. Well personally, I just appreciate the help, so I think that the growling is silly. Who wants to prove that they can push themselves up a hill? I certainly have other things to do with my time.

Rena Sofroniou: Do people step out of their comfort zones to make the offer of assistance?

Phillipa Gormly: They certainly do around here. Around Wentworth/Selborne I have always received help and I feel that I can always ask. People do offer to help me up that little ramp between Wentworth Chambers and the court, for example.

Rena Sofroniou: Well you belong, don't you?

Phillipa Gormly: I feel like I belong. People certainly make me feel like I belong. But in other public areas, say to get myself from chambers down to the ADT in the St James Centre. I would hesitate doing it these days because I am not so keen on just asking anybody in the street to give me a push, whereas if I see a familiar face I'd ask.

Rena Sofroniou: It's probably a safer than dealing with strangers anyway.

Phillipa Gormly: Well, you can imagine the scene if they pushed me into the road to stop the traffic! There are some weirdos around.

Rena Sofroniou: Pedestrians are pretty desperate in this part of town, have you tried crossing Phillip Street lately?

Phillipa Gormly: Exactly.

Rena Sofroniou: What about the attitude of your clients to your wheelchair?

Phillipa Gormly: Certainly initially I found that solicitors hesitated to brief me when I first got into a wheelchair. Nowadays there is less hesitation. In fact I am very busy, but my briefs come from institutions, or regular solicitors, so I have built up a core of solicitors who know me and know my work. It's probably the same as for any barrister I would say but mine has just been a bit slower.

Rena Sofroniou: But you weren't in a wheelchair when you first came to the Bar, were you?

Phillipa Gormly: No, no.

Rena Sofroniou: So you are saying that the wheelchair had an impact on your practice?

Phillipa Gormly: Oh absolutely, no doubt about that. I can see why, actually. Frankly, if an able-bodied man is standing beside a disabled woman, well not even just disabled, but a wheelchair

woman and you the solicitor are going to be charged their fee at the same rate, which one would you choose to brief if you were a young solicitor?

Rena Sofroniou: (*Sigh*) The smarter one, Phillipa?

Phillipa Gormly: Well yes, but if you are a young solicitor who's pushing his or her own career then you are not going to be so brave. Now that I have seven years seniority at the Bar, I find that it tends to be the more senior people who brief me, and the young ones don't have to decide. As a more junior barrister I had a real problem.

Rena Sofroniou: Well you are telling me this with a very understanding attitude. I would find it quite vexing! Because it is stupid, it is arbitrary.

Phillipa Gormly: Well it is, but that's what it is. There are so many vexing things about this. I could become really frustrated, particularly when you realise that I walked for 43 years. I just haven't walked for the past three, so I could become frustrated when I find that I can't do things that I used to be able to do. For example, in the beginning, when I expected to be able to stand up, I used to fall out of bed because I would swing my legs out and go to stand up before I properly woke up. I'd land on the floor, and think 'oh, that's right, I can't stand up!' I soon figured out that it is better not to fight what I can't change. I told myself just to keep going, that everyone would get used to me, that they would see that I haven't lost my mental capacity and so it would all be OK. And that is what has happened.

Rena Sofroniou: Has the experience strengthened you? You are describing a thought process that I would imagine would require a considerable degree of self-discipline and practice.

Phillipa Gormly: Don't you think that the law is self-discipline? This work that we do is self-discipline.

Rena Sofroniou: If it's OK I'd prefer not to have to answer that question, actually.

Phillipa Gormly: It's all about self-discipline. When I first started studying, first I did school normally, then went and did a degree in economics and accounting, so that was all straightforward. Soon after that I got married. I worked for Citibank for two or three years, got married and had four children in very quick succession. If you have a lot of little children around you, you have to be self-disciplined. You can't say 'I'm too tired!' because with children the buck stops with you. You have got no choice when one wakes up in the middle of the night. You have to get up, because nobody else is going to get up for them.

Rena Sofroniou: Sounds like Dante's *Inferno* to me.

Phillipa Gormly: No, they are really cute. It was a really nice time of my life. It was busy but so what? We are all tired now anyway! Everybody's tired. So really having babies is just like that.

Rena Sofroniou: A worthwhile tiredness?

Phillipa Gormly: Oh yes, really worthwhile. Oh yes.

Rena Sofroniou: So self-discipline was in any event a major part of your personality, in terms of motherhood and legal practice.

Phillipa Gormly: Yes, when my youngest child was 15 months old and I still had three pre-schoolers I undertook SAB studies so that I could stay with the kids, which was what I wanted to do. So they would have an afternoon sleep and I would study then. That was managed by self-discipline. Then they would go to bed at 6.30 or 7.00 o'clock and I would work some more from 7pm until late in the evening. So self-discipline has just been part of my life for years.

Rena Sofroniou: And extremely good organisational skills, by the sound of things. Don't you have the urge to let an amazingly self-indulgent side of you let rip, after all of the years it has been held at bay?



Phillipa Gormly: There are things I would love to do now that I can't do.

Rena Sofroniou: *Really* self-indulgent things?

Phillipa Gormly: Oh, yes! I used to love doing active things such as going to the beach and snorkelling, scindiving and sailing, and also horse riding. I can't do those things any more. There are lots of things I'd love to do. But I should tell you that whilst I am self disciplined with the things that I really want to do and really have to do, but I have absolutely no interest or application in unimportant things. If, for example, the children were sick, then the fact that the house might be falling down around my ears and the washing was piling up was totally irrelevant to me. What was important to me was the kids. So I am able to let go off things that other people might find important.

Rena Sofroniou: It's all about priorities?

Phillipa Gormly: Absolutely. I would just prioritise things and focus only on the most important things. These days, I don't

have to clean the house, cook, wash or iron because fortunately I really can't do any of those things.

Rena Sofroniou: I should record that there is a huge beaming smile on your face as you say that.

Phillipa Gormly: Well there is too, I'm lucky, aren't I?! I go home and my dinner is on the table and I am really quite looked after in that way. I couldn't do all this without my husband, that is the reality of it. He is a really nice fellow. He is an organised, conservative Englishman, really and so we have far better organised house than we ever had when I was looking after it. And we eat better, too, because he is a far better cook than I ever was. I just couldn't do it without him. We work as a team. I am really lucky. After I divorced from my first husband I was raising the children on my own for about eight years.

Rena Sofroniou: A long period.

Phillipa Gormly: Yes, but in the final analysis, I must say I am proud of each of my children.

Rena Sofroniou: What's the prognosis with regard to the MS?

Phillipa Gormly: There are three or four different types of MS. I have what is called relapsing remitting, which means it relapses for a period and then comes back, making it a very difficult condition to diagnose. The symptoms can repeatedly come and go. Sometimes people suffer from it for a number of years and nobody even knows.

Rena Sofroniou: Including themselves?

Phillipa Gormly: Including themselves, and once you are in a wheelchair, leaving aside the MS, it is easy for your muscles to atrophy. I should be exercising more – I love swimming but I am flat out with my practice.

Rena Sofroniou: Not just your practice as a barrister, I suppose. You are also a part-time judicial member of the ADT until October this year. Do you take on another term after then?

Phillipa Gormly: I hope I wouldn't because my practice really has taken over and I really don't have time to do it.

Rena Sofroniou: Have you enjoyed your time there?

Phillipa Gormly: I really enjoyed it. It was a very interesting experience, and it was interesting writing judgments.

Rena Sofroniou: You sat in the Community Service Division?

Phillipa Gormly: Yes and in the Equal Opportunity Division, although that is not my area of interest. Because of the wheelchair it is very easy to be slotted into disability or equal opportunity work and I am not really interested in being an advocate for disability issues.

Rena Sofroniou: To what degree is that role imposed on you?

Phillipa Gormly: Certainly there would be attempts, but I have a very strong personality. I make it clear upfront. I am a director of the MS Society and am happy for them to use me as they wish to, for example, if they need I give a speech, that's fine. But as for work, I am interested in the law and preferably commercial law. So I am just showing by example, and if people can use me as a good example then that is great.

Rena Sofroniou: You sound as though you can face the future with equanimity and confidence.

Phillipa Gormly: Oh absolutely - better to, don't you think? I don't waste any energy beating my head against a brick wall. It is not just a smart way to go, is it? Better to find out what you *can* do, which is what my Dad said and pursue that. Don't pursue what you are not good at.

Rena Sofroniou: What message did you give the schoolkids who heard your recent 'Law as a career' talk during Law Week?

Phillipa Gormly: There were a number of us speaking at that function. I told them that I loved it, that the Bar is a very accepting workplace and that people should just pursue what they want to pursue. I think it is a great profession. I love the camaraderie of it and I like the open door policy that has survived to date.

Rena Sofroniou: Well if you really feel the urge to do it, then I don't suppose that you can possibly be as satisfied doing anything else, can you?

Phillipa Gormly: I think it will depend on what life has to offer me.

Rena Sofroniou: Do you divide your life into separate compartments, each of which must be balanced and maintained? A checklist?

Phillipa Gormly: No I don't think you can split up your life like that. I do think that I am actually an example for young women who might be thinking 'can I manage all of this or can't I? Can I juggle or can't I?' Well it can be done and it can be done successfully, but perhaps slower than for a man's career because of the demands on your time that might not have occurred for him. I think it has always got to be a constant balance between the two. You just can't push one aside while you pursue your career. You have got to balance it. And you have got to be kind to yourself.

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