

Making a wave

Belinda Baker speaks to Rangii Mathur about her involvement in the Australian Lawyers Surfriders Association

Belinda Baker (BB): *Tell me about ALSA (Australian Lawyers Surfriders Association). What is ALSA? And how did you first become involved in ALSA?*

Rangii Mathur (RM): Peter Strain, ALSA's founding father and Craig Leggat SC (Patron) started ALSA about 15 years ago with a desire to promote friendship among lawyers who share a mutual love for surfing and the ocean. They also had a strong desire to give back by supporting not for profit groups involved in surfing communities and environmental protection.

I became a member of ALSA entirely by default. My partner who is also at the Bar and grew up surfing on the northern beaches was heading to an ALSA conference at Crescent Head, and at the last minute I decided to join him. It was really just a good excuse to spend a weekend surfing. I remember stepping out of the car in the pouring rain and the only three women who were at the conference were just about to head off for a surf while the boys stood around chatting. I knew instantly which group I was joining!

ALSA has about 400 members which makes us the largest board riding club in Australia by far. We have members in every State and Territory, together with around 25 international members of various nationalities including Japanese, American, French, Spanish and a handful of Germans who ride the river waves in Munich.

BB: *How many women are currently in the women's division of ALSA?*

RM: At the moment, I think there are about 25 Sydney lawyers who are part of the women's division (WALSA) which was formed two years ago. Until the COVID 5km restriction hit, we were meeting about once a month to surf together. It's a dynamic group of women of varying ages, ability and legal backgrounds. We have a world champion Surf Life Saving board paddler among us while other members are still learning to surf. The only 'selection criteria' is enthusiasm for the water. When not surfing together we share anything that's inspiring and related to the ocean or surfing. Recently WALSA helped fundraise for SurfAids



Make a Wave challenge whose mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of families in remote surfing locations. I surfed 40 days straight, carrying the gauntlet for most of our female members who were 'locked out' by the 5 km restriction.

We are sponsored by Pam Burrige (former world champion) who has run two recent WALSA retreats down south. Jess De Simone the Vice President of ALSA is currently working with Surfing NSW and their Her Wave program to increase female participation at each stage of the sport (from lessons for younger girls to more women leading surfing organisations and surf comps). WALSA supported Lucy Small in the petition for equal pay for equal play in women's sport.

WALSA is all about connecting women and getting as many of us in the water together as possible.

BB: *What are some of the benefits of surfing? (For women? For lawyers?)*

RM: Most surfers will tell you that at some point, surfing is no longer just about the pure joy of mastering the technical aspects of surfing, like riding the face of a wave, paddling out the back in big surf or taking the steep drops. At some point what draws you back every day is simply the ocean and its energising force. I find life at the Bar can be gruelling on many levels and for me, surfing releases the stress valve instantly. When I'm out in the surf, I rarely think about work – and that's a nice change! The ocean has a

way of putting everything into perspective. It is a meditation of sorts, mindful presence with a need to find a calming breath and alignment- both of mind and body.

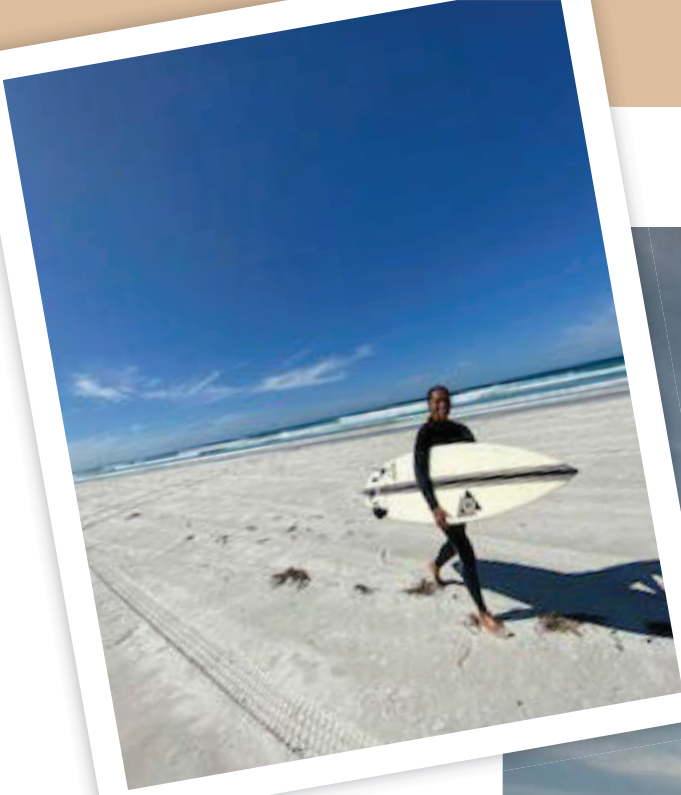
One of our WALSA members recently spoke publicly about her struggles with mental illness, the associated stigma it still attracts in our profession and the therapeutic benefits of surfing. I think most ocean swimmers would find a similar healing relationship with the ocean.

I also just love the physicality of surfing. It's a great cardio workout which balances what is otherwise a very sedentary day. As a woman, I feel there is a real sense of empowerment that comes with feeling physically strong in big surf. I see so many of the young WALSA women as determined and fearless and it's a great energy to be around.

BB: *What are some of the charity events that ALSA is involved in?*

RM: You will be happy to hear that ALSA is not just a bunch of hedonistic anti-authoritarian lawyers on 'the search' for the perfect wave. When ALSA first formed there was an agreement by the founders to leave a positive impact on any location that hosts an ALSA conference. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong connection with Bali. ALSA hooked up with the East Bali Poverty Project (EBPP) and over the years has raised about \$50,000 for EBPP which has been used to build a bamboo development centre and various other capital works. We also sponsor three schoolchildren and pay for their entire education each year with an intention to support them right through to tertiary education.

ALSA also runs a food program for Australian prisoners in Kerobokan Prison. We have been doing this for the past few years. Matthew Norman and Si Yi Chan (two of the Bali Nine) run the program for us. At any given time there are always around half a dozen Australian prisoners in the gaol. Without external help it is very difficult to survive on the small portions of prison food. We donate about \$1500 a year to this project. ALSA members have also



visited Australian prisoners bringing them food and other items. Some members have set up correspondence with a couple of the long-term Bali Nine prisoners. Others have acted for them and for other Aussie prisoners over the years.

For the last ten years or so ALSA has also sponsored a surfing day for Jarjum College, a small Aboriginal primary school in Redfern. We pay for the services of professional surf instructors and the whole school participates in a morning of surfing down at North Bondi. ALSA members come along and help in the water and then cook a barbecue lunch for the kids.

There have also been corporate breakfasts in town to raise money for SurfAid. ALSA competes in the fundraiser SurfAid cup held in Manly each year. At any given time we also try and have one of our members on the board of SurfAid. ALSA is also the official legal counsel for Surfrider Foundation (Australia).

Conservatively, ALSA has over the years raised around \$300,000 for charity. Membership is free and open to friends of surfing lawyers as well. All the money is raised through events or conference fees. It is a 100% voluntary organisation.

BB: *How can interested members of the Bar join ALSA?*

RM: Joining ALSA is easy. Just go to the website at www.surfinglawyers.com.au <<http://surfinglawyers.com.au>> and click the 'Join Now' button.

And any women who are keen, feel free to email me and I will join you to our WhatsApp group chat which will keep you in the loop. There is no judgment or ego in this group, so all you need is enthusiasm for the water and a shared sense of our responsibility to give back in some way. **BN**

