

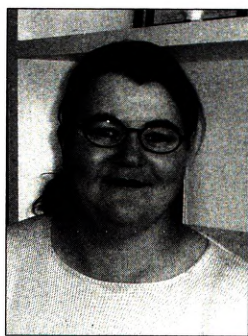
# The Legal Profession: A Diverse Community



By Cindy McGrath, Blake Dawson Waldron and Jane Levin, freelance writer and editor

**Lawyers are not the homogenous group of grey-suited city-types that people may expect. Lawyers come from a variety of backgrounds, with different experiences, cultures and politics.**

The legal profession is enriched by the diversity of its members. Those who attended the Young Lawyers' Assembly in April this year will recall the inspiring and very amusing speech of Sarina Jackson, a commercial and insolvency lawyer and President of the ALSO Foundation (for the Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender community). Her speech opened with: "When did you first realise that you were heterosexual? What do you think turned you that way?" - questions that she has been asked herself, but which heterosexual lawyers are not.



**S**arina is lucky. She does not live her life in secret, amongst friends or at work.

*"My sexuality is certainly not an issue with anyone in my life... I do not live my life... behind*

*closed doors. I work at a small firm called Douros Lawyers. My work colleagues treat me as any other person on the team, and my partner is just another part of the extended work family," she says.*

However, Sarina also realises that for most gay and lesbian lawyers, this is not the case.

*"I am aware that not all people in both our profession and outside of our profession are as fortunate as I am. They have no support from family and very little from their working environments... a very hard life to continue to maintain... There are many lawyers who face challenges on a day to day basis because of their sexuality and feel like they cannot be open about their sexuality, as this might impede on their continued success with a firm... One's*

*sexuality should have no bearing on how one performs their job, just like religion or race should not disadvantage someone's ability to perform their job. Their skills are what should be most important... I am often perplexed by the fact that some people believe that they have to right to disadvantage and alienate others based on sexuality," she says.*



**S**aba Hakim, business lawyer and trademark attorney, began her story at the Young Lawyers' Assembly with humour: "My family is from Iraq - you may have heard of it," and then

continued to relay fascinating and amusing stories of integrating her Muslim beliefs with common practices within the legal profession.

Most of us would not think twice about shaking a client's hand or having a drink (or two) at a client function. However, for Saba, being a Muslim means that alcohol is forbidden, as is physical contact between the opposite sexes. Saba explained that this meant some uncomfortable moments during the beginning of her legal career.

*"I felt I had to attend drink nights despite the amount of discomfort I felt. I thought that this is the only way to be accepted... (And) not shaking hands with clients. Can you imagine that? It's preposterous. It's a ritual that is sacred in the legal profession. When shaking hands with a client I would pretend God is not looking," she laughs.*

Another important issue for Muslims is wearing the veil. Saba recalls bringing up the possibility of wearing the veil at work over lunch with the partner of the suburban law firm she was working for at the time. She says he nearly choked on his food and she pretended the suggestion had been a joke!

*"(The veil) is regarded by many as the flag of fundamentalism and backwardness... I thought*

*law firms would not be too keen to employ someone wearing that sort of neon sign. It made me feel very unhappy. I began to question whether the legal profession is the right one for me," she says.*

Thankfully, Saba has overcome these difficulties. She has worn the veil for the past three years and does not feel bound to attend drinks nights.

*"Having a good sense of humour always helps and of course more importantly, gaining the client's confidence through my skill and abilities rather than through the handshake... Overcoming these little obstacles has been one of the most enriching experiences... And I have never been more satisfied in my job. I now know from experience that success comes with confidence and determination, not with any particular image. Most importantly, success comes when there are people willing to recognise valuable skills. My previous firm, Macpherson & Kelley, did just that. I am forever grateful to them," she says.*

Saba is involved in the Iraqi Muslim community in Australia and proudly sees herself as their spokeswoman within mainstream society. While she acknowledges that not all Muslim communities are encouraging of woman pursuing a career, hers has been extremely supportive.

*"Iraq is my place of origin. In Melbourne, the community is in its infancy. It needs support... especially at these difficult times. Issues such as 'asylum seekers' and the 'War on Iraq' have affected the community and its development in Australia. The community is supportive and encourages me to continue in my path and to achieve success," she says.*

For some, the transition into the traditionally conservative profession of the law may not be an easy one because of their race, religion, sexuality or gender. However, the legal community is beginning to recognise that what makes a good lawyer has less to do with 'fitting the mould' and more to do with skill, intelligence, determination and, as Sarina and Saba have shown, perhaps even a sense of humour. ■