

THREE BARRISTERS
AT DIFFERENT STAGES
OF THEIR CAREERS
GIVE THEIR VIEWS ON
GOING TO THE BAR AND
UNDERTAKING THE BAR
READERS' COURSE.

Are you secretly a budding barrister wondering about the Bar Readers' Course (BRC)? Do you know how the process of going to the Bar has changed, if and when you should go and what to expect when you are there?

You're not alone.

But help is at hand. The *YLJ* sought advice from three barristers with varying degrees of experience. The barristers at a glance are:

JONATHAN WILKINSON started the BRC in March, having come from an associateship at the Supreme Court. Before that he spent three years at Norton Rose as a solicitor.

REBECCA BREZZI has been at the Bar for nearly two years. She started her career as a project manager, then completed her JD and was an associate to Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Warren before joining Allens Arthur Robinson and then overcoming her nerves when a spot became available on the BRC earlier than planned.

MARCUS CLARKE has been a barrister for 25 years and is a lecturer for the BRC. Since 2007 he has been a director of the Carlton Football Club and has represented a number of players at the AFL Tribunal. Marcus worked as a solicitor for three years before going to the Bar.

Before starting the BRC

JW: Get back to the books. Reading George Hampel and David Ross on advocacy and refreshing your knowledge of the law of evidence is good preparation.

RB: Tutoring and teaching experiences mean you revise without realising. I tutored and developed course materials for a tax and business law course taught to non-lawyers.

Think of going to the Bar like starting a small business: you need to do your research and gain as much experience as you can. Attend seminars, try to get an associateship and sit in court.

MC: Be patient. Reputation is important and people may recall your first mistake and never forget it. Bad news travels four times faster than good news, so look to minimise that risk and build up enough experience before you go to the Bar.

Timing your move

The course

JW: Everyone makes mistakes but this is something you can minimise with thorough preparation. Stand up, have a go and do the best you can in the time you have available. Everyone is very supportive. There is a bit of healthy competition but in general there is a collegiate atmosphere. I made a good circle of friends I hope I can call on for advice in the future.

When to go

RB: No one goes to the Bar thinking it is the perfect time. It can feel like a big jump and is always terrifying. For me it was the right time – you learn so much on the job and there is only so much you can learn from other sources.

It helps if you have been exposed to a broad range of areas at both a low and a high level. Experience in a large firm will prepare you for working as a junior on a large corporations matter, however someone in a smaller firm who has had carriage of their own files can find they are better prepared for appearance work.

Other life decisions (such as buying a home or starting a family) play a part when deciding to go to the Bar. And cash flow in the first year can be difficult. Make sure you have savings or other financial security to see you through the tight times.

MC: The quality of your experience is more important than how long you wait before going to the Bar. Two to three years experience as a solicitor is sufficient if you have been exposed to an array of areas. See barristers both in court and in conferences and mediations.

As a solicitor I was with barristers every second day so got a wide range of experience in a short period of time.

What to expect as a barrister

RB: The collegiate atmosphere is superb – you can call anyone when you don't know the answer. I have only ever experienced openness and generosity when asking for help. Ultimately, though, the responsibility for the brief lies with you.

You initially might feel like everyone knows the answer and you don't but it's OK not to know every answer. You just need to know how to find a way through.

MC: The solicitors who oppose you are often the solicitors who brief you. If you oppose someone and deal with them professionally, they end up being the ones who brief you more than the mates who promised to give you a brief when you first started.

Balance your life. Pursue interests outside of work. Being fit allows you to stay young and healthy in what is essentially a sedentary job. Fitness also makes you a more efficient and productive worker as it allows you to better deal with longer hours and the stress of large cases. ●

JENNIE WILD is an associate to Supreme Court Justice Kim Hargrave. She also plans to go to the Bar and is starting the English Bar Course in September. Jennie has been encouraged by her experience in Melbourne, working for the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office and as an associate at the Supreme Court – an experience she says provides invaluable opportunities to witness many "do's" and "don'ts" of advocacy.

HARRY VENIZELAKOS is a trainee solicitor with Venizelakos Lawyers and Notaries. He plans to go to the Bar once he gains sufficient experience as a solicitor. Harry is drawn to the Bar because he enjoys the process of preparing and arguing in court and the independent lifestyle a career at the Bar offers.

BRC facts and figures

If you want to go to the Bar, you have to enrol in the full-time BRC. It runs for 12 weeks, with courses commencing in March and September each year. It is a pre-requisite for signing the Bar Roll at the completion of the course and attendance is compulsory.

The BRC aims to help new barristers adjust to their life at the Bar and provide readers with the opportunity to develop skills required for their new role.

Current cost of the course is \$3960 (exclusive of other costs such as Bar subscription, chambers, clerk and insurance).

Changes to the BRC

The Victorian Bar has made changes to its admission requirements for the BRC. Once being admitted to practice, a solicitor would traditionally sign the Bar's "waiting list" and wait, sometimes as long as three years, to be eligible for the BRC.

As of 2011, the waiting list has been replaced by an entrance exam.

The aim of the exam is to ensure that those admitted to the course have basic levels of competence and can demonstrate aptitude for the skills required of a barrister. A pass mark of 75 per cent will be required.

The changes have reduced the length of the course, removing the need for the BRC to include a general revision of civil and criminal procedure, ethics and the rules of evidence.

Exam features include:

- closed book;
- three hours in duration; and
- an understanding of procedure (civil and criminal), evidence and legal ethics.

The September 2011 intake must sit the exam. For further information contact the Victorian Bar (www.vicbar.com.au).