

STELLA SYKIOTIS

Stella Sykiotis is the Director of Civil Law at the head office of Legal Aid NSW.

The Legal Aid building has always loomed large in my imagination. Its prominent position in Castlereagh St, its towering height and its commanding view of the park has impacted strongly on my view of the people that work at Legal Aid. But upon entering the building and meeting the very welcoming and affable staff at the building, my presumptions about the centre were immediately dispelled.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Stella and found out what an extraordinary career she has led. Unlike the majority of my peers, Stella entered law school with the intention of a long career in law. But not any area of law. By that time Stella, already had a bent towards public interest law. What ignited her interest was chiefly her family background. Her father was heavily involved in the union movement and Stella was brought up with notions of social justice and a responsibility to contribute back to the community.

It is quite clear that she acted upon her values throughout university and into the workforce. When choosing the university to pursue her interest in law, she decided on the University of New South Wales, primarily because of its reputation as a progressive law school with a social justice centre. During university, at a time when corporate law was hailed as the only place to work, Stella resisted the prevailing culture and enrolled in subjects that had more of a social policy focus. It is quite evident that Stella did not regret her choice. To this very day, Stella continues to remember fondly the inspiring lecturers that had a strong social conscience.

After the completion of her university studies, Stella, not enticed by the idea of working long hours in the service of the private interests of exploitative corporations and uncertain of other options, decided to take on a job in a suburban law practice. Her time at the small firm was not an exciting one: the majority of the work was examining commercial leases. Unsurprisingly, a short time later Stella left wanting work that was more riveting and more in line with her values.

Stella found what she desired in the form of a legal centre. It was a specialist centre named The Accommodation Rights Service (TARS). The centre provided advice to aged people, an area of law which at that time was still in its embryonic stages. There she immersed herself in that area, working on both policy and case work in this undeveloped area of law. It was also at TARS that she developed a passion for law as a policy vehicle for determining and establishing rights between different interests. This exposure to policy reform work fascinated her and gave her an insight into critical legal and political processes that is crucial in law making.

The six years spent at the centre did not only meet her expectations - it far exceeded them. When she began her job, she could have never anticipated that she would become the doyen on the topic of retirement villages in NSW. These are the opportunities that could not have arisen in the private sector. Unrestrained by corporations or even bureaucracies, Stella revelled in the freedom of her environment where she could start initiatives and work on diverse areas that challenged and captivated her.

Her next move, albeit unstartling, was in the public sector. This time the organisation was the Legal Aid Commission, which comparatively was much better resourced than the legal centre. She started as a legal officer in the civil law program at the Fairfield office. It was an exciting time as it was a new office and much had to be done so that it operated effectively. Working in a small group of three people, Stella set about engaging the local community, forming key connections with local stakeholders, and gauging the most important areas of policy that affected the area. In an incredibly culturally diverse area, and faced with a modicum of bureaucratic constraints, the experience was a very challenging and exciting new experience for Stella. Among the numerous activities that she was involved in, the most fascinating and new area of law for Stella was migration work, particularly for refugees.

Four years later, an opportunity came up for Stella to pursue her continued interest in consumer law. She was called upon to manage the consumer law specialist unit at the head office. Two years later, her outstanding track record has seen her become the Director of the civil law program at Legal Aid. Her role now is quite different. She now has more of a leadership, management and administrative focus than before.

In this era of corporate greed and individual interests, it is refreshing to meet someone like Stella Sykotis. It is disappointing to see decreasing number of people who have the same life direction as Stella. However the good news is that there should be at least one person who will be swayed the wisdom of Stella. That's right, Stella is expecting a baby!

Steve Cai
KLC student