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"He was a fantastic father and a lot of what I achieved is because of the confidence he gave me. I don't feel angry. I don't feel bitter. All that I feel is a deep sadness that I haven't had a very special person, who I was incredibly close to, in my life since 1983."



Photography: Laura Friezer

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

For Sharon Cook, the outgoing managing partner of Henry Davis York, personal tragedy has spawned a strength of character that has propelled her to great heights. **JULIE MCCROSSIN** finds out what makes one of Australia's most successful female lawyers tick.

Sharon Cook is chatty. When she comes down to the foyer of Henry Davis York's (HDY) striking art deco building in the heart of Sydney, she soon starts talking to the concierge staff. She may be the most senior woman lawyer in Australia, but she's filled with warmth and confidence in equal measure.

HDY occupies the whole building, with 50 partners, more than 400 staff, and an annual turnover of \$100 million. There's also a small office in Brisbane.

When Cook steps down from her position at HDY at the end of the year, there will be only one female managing partner in the top 30 law firms in Australia: Sue Kench at King & Wood Malletsons. Cook's plans for her own future are concise, as you would expect from a managing partner – "a first among equals" – who has led a major change management process at HDY.

Cook's legal track record is solid, but she is open to change.

"I think six and a half years is enough for me," she says. "I want to move on and do something else. I want another leadership role. I would like a senior executive role in a corporate, perhaps, or another law firm. It doesn't have to be in the law."

Recruited from the University of Sydney by (the then) Malletsons after completing an arts/law degree, she worked with the firm for 12 years, including some time in its London office. She also spent a year with Herbert Smith in London before becoming a partner at HDY in 1997.

After four years on the board, she was elected managing partner in July 2008.





A collage of personal photos in Sharon Cook's Sydney office given to her by her staff.

“One of the things I hope to convince the market of when I look for my next role is that the fact I have spent 30 years in the legal profession doesn't mean all I can do is law,” she explains. “The leadership skills I have are skills I believe are as valuable in a corporate and government context as a legal context.”

When asked just what those skills are, her reply is quick and confident: “Strong leadership, strong long-term strategic thinking, strong interpersonal skills, an ability to influence and persuade, being results driven, being focused on outcomes, and being able to deliver outcomes.”

The source of Cook's confidence and genuine concern for people at all levels of HDY can be traced back to her childhood in Kings Cross and Potts Point – and especially her relationship with her father.

Cook, who was the first in her family to go to university, has very happy memories of her childhood in the late 1960s and early 70s, attending Woollahra Opportunity Class and SCEGGS Darlinghurst. She roamed the streets with her brother, Warren, and a mixed band of 12 local children.

“We grew up with this much broader family in an urban environment, and I suspect we had a greater sense of community than many had in leafy suburbs,” she recalls. “We knew most of

the prostitutes on the street and they knew us by name. We knew lots of homeless people and the addicts at the Cross. They would talk to us on the way to and from school.

“My parents, Phil and Jan Bartlett, both had a really strong work ethic. They came from modest financial backgrounds and, through hard work and self-sacrifice, were able to provide my brother and I with an expensive, independent education and great opportunities.”

Cook says her father was a real personality in Kings Cross, owning a newsagency in Potts Point and a second in Kings Cross. He was president of the Kings Cross Lion's Club and worked closely with Ted Noffs at the Wayside Chapel.

“On Christmas Day, we didn't open our presents, nor did we have our own lunch until we'd served Meals on Wheels to local people in Kings Cross,” she reflects.

However, tragedy struck the family in 1983 when her father was shot dead in the Potts Point newsagency. It is, perhaps, a mark of Cook's resilience that she has responded to this traumatic event with restrained dignity.

“He was just 50 and I was 23,” says Cook. “He was shot early in the morning, getting the papers ready for the paper runs at 4am. The person, or people, who did it were never found by the police.”

Is it possible to describe the impact of this loss?

“I don't know,” she says. “Literally a day doesn't go by where I don't think about my father. I used to do paper runs at the shop and get up at four o'clock when one of the paper men didn't turn up. Both my brother and I used to do a lot of work at the shop from when we were quite young, and I used to go down to HMAS Kuttatubul and sell papers on a Sunday morning.

On the day before he died, Cook was working with her dad.

“He turned to me and kissed me and he said, ‘You know I'm very proud of you’,” she remembers. “I could never do anything wrong with him. He was very supportive and encouraging. I'm sure it has had a lot to do with what I've done in my life.”

Cook is quick to point out that her mother, Jan, has always been hard working and supportive – but there is no doubt that Cook's personal confidence and equal ease with men and women, characteristics that underpin her successful leadership style, can be traced back to this much-missed father.

“He was a fantastic father and provider, and a lot of what I have achieved is because of the confidence he gave me,” Cook reflects. “I don't feel angry. I don't feel bitter. All that I feel is a deep sadness that I haven't had a very special person, who I was incredibly close to, in my life since 1983.”

“Firms that don't differentiate themselves will fail, because they will be ... generalists and there will be no reason for a client to choose them.”



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Cook also speaks with passion about ensuring women with children can have careers in the law. She cites the importance of commitment at the top, plus structures and support in the workplace. HDY has flexible work practices, an independent partner candidate review panel, and a flexibility co-ordinator. One third of the partners at HDY are women.

However, a supportive partner is also crucial, she believes. Cook is married to Hartley Cook, who left the law after two years to become an antique dealer. They have two children: Eleanor, 24, who is studying medicine at the University of Sydney, and Harry, 21, who is studying arts/law at the Australian National University.

While Cook spent 10 years working part time when her children were small, she says her husband was always supportive of her career at every stage.

“Hartley has always been a fantastic father and has spent a lot more time with our children than many fathers do, including being more available than most in trips to hospitals, doctors and dentists. I think our children have been blessed by having such an involved and nurturing father,” Cooks says with affection.

Another of Cook’s interests is questioning whether the traditional partnership model is the best way of running a business in these “increasingly complex times”.

“The answer is possibly not,” she says, “because you are at the beck and call of, in my case, 50 partners, many of whom have entirely different views about where the business should be going and how the business should be run.”

“There is the advantage of collegiality and the enormous benefit of being able to brainstorm with a number of like-minded people who all have a serious stake in the business. But there is also the problem of running a business with 50 people who all have a role in it.”

Cook took this challenge head on when she began advocating for change at HDY.

“In 2010, having been managing partner for a little over a year, I saw a need to change the firm’s vision and strategy to make sure we were more differentiated in the market and that we were really playing to our great strengths. And so, together with a small group of partners, I developed a new vision and strategy for the firm,” she says.

“The vision is that we will be a tier one firm, practising nationally, and the strategy that sits underneath that is a focus on the financial services sector, the government sector, and a portfolio of strategic clients. The meat on the bones of the strategy has been formed by committees of partners. I have empowered others to enact the vision and strategy, with great effect.”

The partners agreed to the new vision and strategy at a partners’ retreat, but the ongoing implementation has had its challenges.

“Most partners came on board, many of them enthusiastically,” Cook says. “Some took a little longer to cajole and persuade. However, and not surprisingly, there were a small number of partners who, for various reasons, were immune to my and others’ influencing skills. Some of these partners have chosen to leave. A few remain and I continue to try to win them over.”

Cook says the capacity to influence and persuade are critical skills for a managing partner and she is proud of what she has achieved at HDY.

“HDY is a very successful firm and its future is more secure as a result of the vision and strategy that we have devised for the firm,” Cook says emphatically. “What I was concerned about with Henry Davis York was that we would become an undifferentiated generalist. This is a fiercely competitive legal market now. This is something that has happened since about 2009/2010, post-GFC, with the arrival of the international firms, the increasing sophistication of our clients, and the fact there is probably less legal work around.

“Firms that don’t differentiate themselves will fail, because they will be ... generalists and there will be no reason for a client to choose them.”

Cook’s long-term vision for the firm encompasses all the employees. “I’ve focused all my influencing of partners here on the future, not just for the benefit of 50 partners, but for the 150 lawyers who are coming through – the partners of the future,” Cook says. “I want HDY to be here in another 100 years and to be very successful; providing careers not only for the lawyers but for the wonderful people in the service groups of the firm – from the professionals in our finance, people and development, IT and business development teams to people in the mail room and our secretaries.”

During Cook’s time as managing partner, revenue has increased by 35 per cent. However, 13 staff were laid off from the Sydney office in March this year. “That was a low point for me in my leadership,” Cook says. “The retrenchments were necessary to ensure the sustainability and future success of our business, but they distressed me greatly on a personal level.”

So, what’s next for Sharon Cook?

You can bet it will be exciting – but perhaps not as exciting as her latest hobby.

“In recent times, my husband and I have become interested in performance cars,” Cook says slightly bashfully. “I’ve driven a Porsche, a Lotus and a high-performance Mercedes at over 200km per hour. It’s really not that unsafe because I trust the cars. I trust the engineering. And I enjoy the adrenaline rush.” **LSJ**