

CALIFORNIA DREAMING: WENDY GWYN

21 December 2017 | Alumni Insights

Wendy Gwyn transitioned from being a banking lawyer to becoming a mentor and coach to teenagers, and full-time student. She also shifted continents, moving from Australia to California, where she also uses her passion for yoga to support disadvantaged girls.

WHY DID YOU JOIN HERBERT SMITH FREEHILLS (OR FREEHILLS, AS WAS)?

I joined Freehills as a summer clerk. Aside from the fact that Freehills was a top firm, I had an inspiring summer clerkship interview with Kim Santow, and that made Freehills a standout in my mind. After the summer clerkship, I worked at Freehills part-time while I completed my law degree and then started in the graduate programme. Freehills had great work with great people. It was kind of a “no brainer”.

YOU BECAME A PARTNER IN THE BANKING AND FINANCE GROUP. WHAT APPEALED TO YOU ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR SECTOR?

I had completed a rotation in Litigation and in Property, but I still wasn't sure what kind of law I wanted to focus on. My great friend, Danielle Kelly (Ainsworth) had been working in Banking and Finance and loved it. When I completed my second rotation, Danielle was leaving to live overseas with her husband, and encouraged me to take her spot. I don't think I would have ever chosen that group on my own, but it turned out to be an excellent recommendation. I really enjoyed negotiating and documenting the transactions, and the deals almost always involved some interesting legal issues that allowed me to work with people like Margaret Stone, John Carter and Mark Clifton.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE MEMORY OF YOUR TIME WITH THE FIRM?

Like any lawyer, I loved closing transactions. However, my favourite memories are probably those of being in the trenches with colleagues, and the camaraderie among the team when working through difficult issues or in challenging situations (Fiona Smedley, I know you know what I mean ...). I particularly recall a conference call with another party in London that went from 7pm one evening to 7am the following morning. We played jokes on each other and kept ourselves laughing throughout the night. You really develop deep relationships with your clients and co-workers during those difficult times. I've heard it referred to as "Type 2 fun" - challenging and maybe even miserable while it's happening, and legendary when it's over. Those are the times I remember most fondly.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOST MEMORABLE DEAL AND WHY?

Some of the transactions that I worked on with John Angus are probably my most memorable. His deals were always challenging, and I learned a lot from John. He always had a calm demeanour and could make a stressful situation seem light.

HOW USEFUL WAS YOUR TIME WITH HERBERT SMITH FREEHILLS, AND WHY?

As a lawyer, knowledge is a key asset, and self-directed learning an essential skill. It is a skill I hope I will never stop using. I also developed a strong eye for detail - although my kids complain it's a little too strong! These are both skills that I am currently using as a PhD student, particularly as I am studying in Sydney, but living in California. As you can imagine, this arrangement requires me to be self-motivated and firmly in charge of my own learning process.

YOU LEFT IN 2013 AFTER NEARLY 20 YEARS WITH THE FIRM. BY THEN YOU WERE ALREADY STUDYING FOR A MASTER'S. HAD YOU ALWAYS PLANNED TO CHANGE CAREER?

I initially left the firm for a one-year sabbatical in order to spend some time thinking about what I wanted to do with the rest of my working life. I felt that I had already experienced one great career, but believed I still had another, different career in me. I initially thought I might be interested in executive or leadership coaching, but after volunteering as a coach with The Helmsman Project, I became passionate about working with teenagers. As a coach and mother of teenagers, I have experienced first-hand the enormous capacity for positive development during adolescence. My PhD research is directly related to The Helmsman Project and its potential impact on a number of positive psychological outcomes, including hope, resilience and self-regulation. The programme's ultimate goals are to improve its participants' educational engagement and wellbeing, thereby assisting those participants to flourish and reach their full potential.

HOW DID YOU COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE HELMSMAN PROJECT?

The Helmsman Project was founded by two students who also completed their master's in coaching psychology at the University of Sydney. Many of the coaches who volunteered at The Helmsman Project, including me, were also master's students in this programme. It was an incredibly rewarding experience in which I think I grew as a person almost as much as the participants.

YOU ALSO HAVE A PASSION FOR YOGA AND NOW FUND A PROJECT THAT USES YOGA TO HELP DISADVANTAGED GIRLS. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT AND HOW DOES YOGA HELP THESE GIRLS?

I started doing yoga seriously when I left Herbert Smith Freehills. I decided to take it to the next level by undertaking a teacher training course, which I completed in 2015. When I moved to California that same year, I founded the Art of Yoga Project (AYP). AYP provides an innovative programme combining yoga, meditation, creative arts and writing to marginalised girls in short and long-term detention and rehabilitation centres, as well as substance abuse recovery settings, and alternative high schools in gang-impacted communities. The mission of AYP is to lead these at-risk, exploited and incarcerated girls toward accountability to self, others and community by providing practical tools to effect behavioural change.



WHY DID YOU MOVE TO CALIFORNIA?

At about the same time I left Freehills, my husband, Rhys, also decided to “shake up” his 20+ year career in banking. He was accepted into a year-long fellowship programme at Stanford University, so we made the move to Palo Alto, California to support him through that experience. Originally from the US and a graduate of Stanford, it was fun to come back to a place where I already had connections.

We expected to be back in Sydney after the fellowship finished, but life in California was such a hit with our two younger children that we decided to stay. Rhys is now working at Stanford's Life-span Development Laboratory, with a focus on redesigning a long work life (I'm sure you can see a theme here!).

AFTER TWO YEARS, HOW DO YOU ENJOY LIFE THERE?

We are enjoying California and all that it has to offer, as well as exploring other parts of the US. It's a great community where we live. The kids love going to the local public high school – it's co-ed, there are no uniforms, and they have an open campus. There is also a big biking culture here (and flat roads), which gives them a lot of freedom. The weather is not dissimilar to Sydney, and it's a beautiful place to be. Of course, there are things I miss about Sydney, like the beaches, the coffee and the "food scene", not to mention a decent healthcare system!

ARE PEOPLE MORE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS THERE THAN OTHER PLACES YOU HAVE BEEN TO?

I found people in Sydney to be fairly health-conscious, so I'm not sure if Northern Californians are more so, although I've never seen a cigarette in Palo Alto. There is also a high environmental consciousness here, so you'll need a compost bin and an electric car if you want to fit in. And with Stanford University and Silicon Valley at our doorstep, there is at once a "nerdy" and "cutting edge" vibe to the place. It's not uncommon to see self-driving cars or robots delivering groceries, and just the other day I saw a student riding a motorised desk to school. And if you're planning to visit, make sure you swap your business suit for jeans and sneakers.

WHAT ARE YOUR LONGER TERM PLANS?

In terms of my career, I hope to continue working with teens and undertaking research that helps to better inform our support of the adolescent developmental process. I'm also looking forward to getting my kids through high school and into university, so I can satisfy my travel bug more frequently. Ultimately, I'd like to live between Northern California and Sydney – chasing an endless summer would be fine with me!