

## Western Circuit Women's Forum - Launch Event

About a year ago Kate Brunner QC and I were eating dinner in Truro when our conversation turned to the recent report of Lord Sumption's speech about (and I paraphrase) the unlikeliness of there being sexual equality at the Bar and, in particular, in the Judiciary in our lifetimes. It wasn't a happy conversation until we decided that we should, and more importantly, **would** try to do our part to counter Lord Sumption's prophecy.

A year later, after copious emails and meetings, numerous phone calls and letters, the Western Circuit Women's Forum was officially launched - on Thursday the 13th of October 2016 in Winchester Guildhall.

This is my, very personal, view of the launch event.

Although I want to support women, to help women do well, I am, like others, conservatively opposed to the idea of any 'positive discrimination'. I do not want anyone to say (or think it is appropriate to say) that I, or any woman, only got to where we are **because** we are women. I understand those who are opposed to or who feel unable to support the WCWF.

I was not therefore surprised when two of our speakers at the launch, Lady Justice Heather Hallett and Her Honour Judge Sarah Munro QC both expressed their own hesitation about being part of a Women's only group when they were at the Bar. Both wanted to, and absolutely did, 'make it' because of their skills and tenacity. Both told their own personal stories: of comparatively modest upbringings (comparative to the traditional upbringing of a judge), of raising children and of life changing illness. As they told their stories it was clear that they had largely 'made it' on their own wits and ability, and because they had had to 'go it alone' that extra effort they expended to pursue their careers, gave them, in return, an additional core strength. And that underscored my own

dilemma...how much better do we ultimately feel about ourselves when we have achieved our aim *despite* adversity and with little help? There is a part of me who wants to succeed without help; to be totally self contained and be able to say, I did it in spite of everything.

Their speeches led me to wonder further on whether by setting up what could be termed a 'self help group' it would have the effect of diminishing rather the improving the sense of personal pride that a woman should have on 'making it' at the Bar or in the Judiciary. I hope I'm not alone when I say I had wanted to be 'Wonder Woman' when I was younger (or George from the Famous Five) and felt a pang of jealousy at those who I perceived had achieved that status, whilst I felt I had not.

So why have Heather Hallett and Sarah Munro changed their minds on the appropriateness of such a Forum? They are both now involved with the Temple Women's Forum and are proactive in encouraging women to stay at the Bar and seek to achieve their own individual goals. My own view on why they have (and indeed why I have resolved my own internal dialogue) is because whilst some exceptionally talented and exceptionally resilient women may make it the top despite everything, that handful who make it will never be sufficient to change the depressingly low number of women who do become judges and QC's. There are many many women, who are just as good as their male counterparts, and who could and should become judges and QC's. But because they may not shine quite as brightly, or because they are not, for personal reasons, able to be as resilient, may not reach the heights the exceptional women have achieved without some support during their careers.

The reason, I think, groups like the WCWF and TWF are both necessary and important is not to diminish the sense of pride for those who would have made it anyway, because they are already stellar and should know it, but to make sure that those who would have made it **if** they had been men, can make it, despite being a woman.

That is what I found so inspiring and interesting about the speeches of the other two 'guest speakers'. Elisabeth Bussey Jones spoke of an essential difference between women and men - that lack of intrinsic self confidence. She spoke about the 8 different jobs she had - a coroner, a deputy DJ, a tribunal judge, a Recorder, a lecturer (and others I regret I have forgotten) as well as being a barrister. Her message was clear: take small steps when you can; when your life allows. The job of barrister is flexible (or can be if you don't succumb to your clerks' demands). Push yourself a little at a time. And that sort of insight and suggestion from a woman who continues to aspire needs to be broadcast. Without something like the Forum, those sorts of ideas, which might strike a cord with other women as a way of progressing step by step up the ladder, would be known to only a few.

The other speaker was Louise Asprey - a young barrister, shortly to return to work from her second period of maternity leave. As a gay woman, and, out of choice, childless, I am in awe of mothers generally (their unselfishness, their most extraordinary bond with their child etc), but in particular, I am in awe of woman who rightly believe they can at least try to have a successful career **and** make a success of motherhood. Louise is one such woman. There are many many others at the Bar on the Western Circuit and many who will come through the Western Circuit's hands in years to come. All of them should be given every opportunity to fulfil both aims. If the WCWF can help support and encourage one woman who might otherwise not have fulfilled their potential then that strikes me as a step in the right direction.

Those of us involved in the setting up of WCWF, in particular Rachael Goodall who brilliantly organised the launch, Carol Mashembo who helped guide the mentoring scheme to it's fruition, and most especially Kate Brunner QC who spoke at the launch about the statistics, the imbalance and the need for change, felt a real pride at what we have already achieved in one year. The mentoring scheme is up and running and the launch had been well attended by supportive women and men alike.

Whatever hesitations I had, were most emphatically shelved at the launch. I genuinely believe that the WCWF can be a 'force for good'. The launch gave me the chance simply to be in the same room as a group of passionate and compassionate women and men without the tension of court cases; to discuss the sort of problems, emotional and practical, that women face and to know that someone else in that room has probably been through, and come out the other side of a similar difficulty. That opportunity to meet others (and the possibility of having a less fictionalised role model), will be the real strength of the WCWF.

With thanks to everyone who made the launch such a success.

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