

Ellie Crespi: My International Women's Day heroes

March 2022

This 8 March, I would like to remember some phenomenal women who taught me invaluable career lessons – almost exclusively not related to the practice of law...

Mrs Mary Turner, or 'Mrs English Turner', as pupils would refer to her by way of differentiation from 'Mrs Maths Turner' (also fabulous) was the first teacher to really harness my love of reading, but she also had a lot to say about compassion. I recall her telling us that if she had a child, the one gift she would wish to bestow upon them – notwithstanding the suffering it would bring – was compassion. Every time I read about empathetic leadership – and it's a hot topic these days – I think of Mrs Turner, 30 years ahead of the trend, taking the time to understand the human needs of her pupils.

The learning curve for me at undergraduate level was steep, and my first term at Oxford was a baptism of fire. I crashed and burned in my Anglo Saxon exams but managed to achieve my highest grade at Moderation in the very same subject, thanks to Dr (now Professor) **Carolyne Larrington** assuring me that to fail is simply to make one's first attempt in learning and that we learn a lot more from our mistakes than getting it right first time (thankfully, I got it right in the exams that counted).

I trained at CMS Cameron McKenna and of all the excellent women I worked with, it is corporate powerhouse **Louise Wallace** whom I remember most vividly and not for her corporate law nous. On arriving one morning to the office we shared to find me – and my 3am delivery food – still there, she thanked me for my dedication and told me she felt we'd get on very well if I could clear my dirty dishes, her pet hate. I don't naturally enjoy giving constructive feedback, but every time I need to assert a boundary in the workplace, I remember Louise's ability to do so *and* treat me like a human being.

Newly-qualified life at Allen & Overy Moscow gave me my first experience of a high-challenge, high-support environment. I had the rare privilege of learning from formidable finance partner **Irina Mashlenko** and – and I have told her this – for the first few months I was terrified of her and convinced that the exacting feedback she gave me was bad news. Imagine my surprise hearing her glowing review in my first annual appraisal; I won't share it here, but it touched me. We became, and remain, friends.

From A&O Moscow I bounced over to Hong Kong where three very different women inspired me in very different ways. **Yvonne Ho** demystified the Chinese lending market for me, and – splitting her time between family in Hong Kong and her practice in Beijing – showed me the real meaning of work-life balance: sometimes we need to make great accommodations in life to progress our career goals. I'm not sure I would have had the courage to relocate from Hong Kong to the BVI and build a new life at 37 without her example. ICM partner (then friend) **Catherine Husted** demonstrated how impactful our profession can be when harnessing privilege for the greater good decades before ESG, sustainability and workplace wellness became buzz words. **Virginia Devereux-Wong** showed me that it is possible to be resolute *and* courteous: collaborating with her on industry boards was like working with Ruth Bader-Ginsburg.

One of the common discussion points in our profession is how we, as women, can possibly 'make it' without adopting stereotypically male behaviours or trying to be 'one of the boys'. I can point to many women who buck this trend. When I made the move offshore in 2013 and expanded my practice area to incorporate corporate law, it was **Rachel Graham** who was always first to share knowledge; be it precedents, workarounds, institutional wisdom or anecdotal advice, and always without condescension. Experience without ego! What kind of miracle was this! Here was **Bronwyn King**, one of the first brave souls to bring her authentic self to work, and **Michelle Frett-Mathavious**, lending a quiet dignity to the practice of law and showing me the importance of emotional intelligence in our profession.

There are so many women to look up to and learn from in the British Virgin Islands: our Attorney General is a woman, our Chief Justice is a woman, the CEO of BVI Finance is a woman. I am lucky enough to lunch from time to time with the former Deputy Governor and learn from her experience. I must, however, give special thanks to my financial services mentor, Rotary sponsor and BVI 'Mom' **Lorna Smith**, for whom the phrase 'formidable woman' seems to have been coined, and who has empowered me to give back to the community and our industry and so enriched my life in doing; her energy is infectious.

It is common wisdom that who you surround yourself with is who you become, and I have learned so much from my friends; to keep on going when going through hell, to mark life's successes with champagne, that anything can be workshopped over a power-breakfast and that it's never time to stop self-improving. **Heather Chen, Nicky Kerr, Carolyn Aldous, Cassie Ngai** – thanks for lifting me up.

All of the women I remember have touched my life in a different way, but they have all actually done exactly the same thing; when I have needed help, they have given it, and given it gladly.

I am only a year into a leadership role, but I already admit a certain fatigue in being asked about women in law, work-life balance, or surviving in a man's world. I'd actually much rather talk statutory merger or restructured bonds. I also have little interest in blaming men: there are far too many decent men in our profession atoning for the sins of their forebears and walking a minefield whilst doing it. The workplace isn't perfect, but women have never had it so good, and we all have the power to do something very simple to help ourselves, each other and the next generation coming up.

Be like Lorna. Be like Yvonne. Be like Mrs English Turner.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

#BreakTheBias

Celebrate women's achievement | Raise awareness against bias | Take action for equality

For more information please contact:



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