

Q&A: Rosemary Dixon, Special Counsel, Contact Energy

Rosemary talks about what excites her at Contact, in the community, and away from work, and who has inspired her professionally.

This is the first in a series of Q&As with winners of the CLANZ Wigley + Company award for contribution to the community.

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● ***What attracted you to the legal profession?***

After graduating with an Arts degree I spent 5 years working as a history teacher, in Wellington and overseas. While taking a break to have my first baby I was able to re-evaluate my career choice, and I couldn't see myself in front of a class or in a principal's office at 60. Some part of me had always regretted not doing law, as I'd always been keen on debating, and what goes with that – arguing on your feet, an ability to respond, and the adrenaline rush you get from doing that sort of thing. So I did a first year law paper and absolutely loved it. Completing a law degree was an easy decision to make, and I've never regretted it.

● ***What excites you most about your work now?***

The things that attracted me to the profession in the first place. I do a fair bit on my feet and I enjoy courtroom practice. I'm unusual in that I'm an in-house counsel who does court work. That was important to me when I came to Contact.

● ***Who has inspired you in the profession?***

I can think of three people. I was very inspired by Geoffrey Palmer, who went back to teaching after he had been Deputy Prime Minister, and



with all that first hand experience he brought a real immediacy to public law. It was very inspiring to benefit from that. Bill Atkin taught me family law and a medical law paper, and what I found inspiring about him was the strong discipline and rigour of thinking that he required. And Stephen Kos, now a High Court judge, who I knew from my debating days. He brings a quirky sense of humour and a brilliant mind to the law and makes it a real joy.

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● ***Work / life balance – how do you achieve that?***

It is an incredibly difficult thing to do, because life at Contact is very demanding, we've had a particularly busy last few years. I discipline myself to go home, and I'll only respond to a phone call late at night if I absolutely have to. I aim to keep my weekends free, and I've learned the value of taking holidays.

● ***How do you enjoy spending time away from work?***

I recently discovered the joys of walking in the bush. Tramping wasn't a part of my life growing up, but in the last few years I've formed a friendship with a small group of professional women and discovered the joys of walking. It's not just the exercise and being outdoors, but enjoying the company of others. And I'm always keen on curling up with a book.

● ***What prompted you to get involved in community work?***

When I left teaching I wanted to keep contact with young people, and getting involved in debating was a natural fit for me. In the mid-late 1980s New Zealand got the opportunity to join an international competition for secondary schools, and we set up the NZ Schools Debating Council so that we could properly select a national team from the best students around the country. The format still exists, and I've stayed involved at every level. I do a lot of coaching and I'm a world-accredited adjudicator and regularly adjudicate debates at the local and national level. I've also done community law centre work and been involved with Playcentre.

● ***What do you get out of it?***

My debating work is very rewarding on two levels. It's great to see New Zealand teams doing well overseas, and very intellectually stimulating to work with highly talented, intelligent young people. And there's the satisfaction of seeing young people start out very nervously then building real confidence and expressive abilities that help them across their whole lives. It makes them better people – learning how to structure an argument, that there is a world beyond the one they live in, and that there's always another side to an issue. My involvement in debating is a wonderful way of combining my teaching and legal interests. I really enjoy it.

● ***What's the best piece of work advice you ever received?***

I was told to make sure I chose an area of law I wanted to practise in, rather than the area that would bring me the greatest financial rewards. You've got to like what you're doing on a daily basis. And I was also told to make sure I didn't get pigeon-holed into certain types of work because I was a woman and a mother.

● ***What advice would you give to young lawyers?***

That same advice, because it's very sound. And I'd also tell them to be ambitious, especially young women. We've got lots of highly qualified young women coming into the profession but there's still a gap with the number getting into partnerships. So I'd tell young women to be ambitious, and to be assertive if you need to be.

Wigley+Company

PO Box 10842
Level 7/107 Customhouse Quay, Wellington
T +64(4) 472 3023 E info@wigleylaw.com

and in Auckland
T +64(9) 307 5957
www.wigleylaw.com