

Social mobility ambassadors

Lynette Wieland tells us what inspired her to study law and why she is promoting inclusion and increasing diversity within the profession by becoming a Law Society social mobility ambassador.

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What inspired you to study law?

At school, I enjoyed listening to and participating in debates where I could listen to competing views and reach my own considered opinion having heard both sides of an argument. Studying law seemed the perfect way to further this interest whilst also contributing to the vital legal frameworks that impact on everything we do on a day-to-day basis.

Did you receive encouragement to pursue your ambitions?

Yes – and I am very grateful for this as it helped me to find balance among the scepticism, which was also in abundance.

After a careers workshop, I sought advice from a teacher who raised my aspirations considerably by encouraging me to consider professions such as law. However, going to university was still an alien concept to me at that stage as neither of my parents had attended. I lived and worked in a socially disadvantaged area and pursuing a career in law was not the usual route to take.

Thankfully, I benefited greatly from an unintended gap in my academic studies. Following a change in my housing and financial circumstances, I left school without A Levels. My initial thoughts were that I should just get a job and earn a living, putting aside any 'pipe dreams' of becoming a lawyer.

On reflection, at that stage, I had underestimated the value of exploring different careers (including law).

I took a job as an apprentice, working at a vocational training provider, where I grasped every opportunity with both hands and became a bit of a campaigner for learners studying through apprenticeships. I used this to springboard into other opportunities such as becoming a member of a National Learner Panel funded by a government department. From there, I was asked to present a speech in the Houses of Parliament for the Skills Commission.

I relished these experiences and by pushing myself out of my comfort zone, I developed and honed new skills without realising it. Importantly, the encouragement and support others gave me provided motivation and immense momentum for me on my journey to a career in law.

A genuine drive and passion to learn about law fuelled the strength I needed to build a support network of contacts to help me in times of difficulty.

My successful application to the Law Society's Diversity Access Scheme was also real highpoint for me and helped fuel my motivation to succeed in pursuing a career in law. The scheme provided both LPC funding and invaluable work experience opportunities. Receiving the scholarship signalled to me that tenacity and hard work is truly valued by the profession and it opened some pretty weighty doors.

Where did you study law?

Whilst working as an apprentice, I eventually decided to take the plunge to do a part time access course in legal methods at Birkbeck to secure my place on an undergraduate degree.

I studied law at the University of York on a course that taught students in simulated law firm environments. This very much played to my strengths as someone who learns better by doing and allowed me to develop the requisite skills for legal practice.

Did you encounter any challenges studying law?

In my second year of university, I noticed it was taking me a long time, hours in fact, to read textbooks and academic articles. I visited the student disability team, who ran a preliminary diagnostic test for dyslexia.

Following a full assessment, I was found to have dyslexia and dyscalculia. These diagnoses allowed me to access reasonable adjustments such as assistive technology and printing credits, as hard printed copies of articles and textbooks were easier for me to read than online equivalents.

I also felt like an imposter at times when attending university careers events alongside more privileged peers. It was difficult to not be consumed with the comparisons I made with others. I remember standing outside a career talk delivered by a barristers' chambers and feeling unable to go in as I thought I did not belong there.

I was often fighting against thoughts of whether I was the right fit for a legal career as I had not followed a traditional path of A-Levels to university and had joined when I was classified as a 'mature student'. Fortunately, the strong support network I built really helped me through these times.

What type of law do you specialise in?

I work in the health and social care advisory and inquests team at Browne Jacobson LLP. My role involves advising healthcare providers and commissioners on their obligations under the Care Act, the Mental Health Act and the Mental Capacity Act, including providing guidance as to best interests, deprivation of liberty and funding disputes. I also manage and represent healthcare trusts at inquests.

Why did you want to become a Law Society social mobility ambassador?

As someone who has overcome significant obstacles to become a solicitor, I recognise the importance of promoting inclusion and increasing diversity within the profession.

By sharing my story, listening to and mentoring others, I hope to empower aspiring solicitors to build self-confidence so that they can succeed in the profession. I also hope to advise change makers on how to make the profession more accessible to those with a disability and those who lack the traditional professional networks or financial means to enter it.

What is the best advice you've ever been given regarding your career?

At a Browne Jacobson assessment day, I was immediately put at ease when a recruiter said; "you do you". That moment, combined with reflections on previous rejections and well-meaning advice, led me to an illuminating realisation; I realised that I did not go into law to escape from the world I knew, and my energy was wasted trying to fit in.

The two worlds I knew (my background and the profession) could merge. My neurodiversity and the challenges I had overcome were strengths, as during times of struggle I had unknowingly developed skills that I could bring to the profession.

These skills included creativity (for example the workarounds I developed for my dyslexia), resilience (built through dealing with hard times and rejections), and communication (through developing support networks). In short, don't be afraid to look at what makes you different and stand out when looking for your strengths.

Has your idea of success changed over time in your career?

I used to think that success meant having good financial means and the right connections. However, I now understand success as having the courage to be yourself and bring that to the work that you do and love.

Diversity is my strength and the profession's strength, if it attracts the right candidates. It allows us as a profession to best serve all our clients. The most inclusive and powerful environments are those where we feel comfortable to bring our unique perspectives and ideas to the table. For a law firm of the future, that is also success.

Do people have misconceptions about becoming a solicitor?

I think there are quite a few floating around, including that you need to have A-Levels, attend a private school, attend a Russell Group university and have a lot of financial means to become a solicitor. The truth is that none of these factors make someone a good lawyer.

Having a slightly different path or outlook may help set you apart from the crowds of students seeking training contracts. If you can demonstrate how the skills you have acquired make you an asset and find a firm that will value those skills, you can use the fact that you came to the profession through a different path to your advantage.

What skills would you say are essential for the job?

An enthusiastic approach to work and dedication to do what is necessary to achieve the best outcome for the client is vital. Depending on your speciality, the role can have different demands.

A strong ability to communicate with impact both in writing and orally is key to ensuring that legal advice is conveyed well and in terms that have meaning for the client. This also allows a quick rapport to be built with clients and tailored advice differentiates the firm's contribution from other advice that may be available in the legal market.

Organisation skills for case and transactional management, to allow you to keep ahead of deadlines and prioritise work to ensure client and the firm's internal targets are met, are also key. These skills will help ensure that clients receive the service they want and expect, and that matters are progressed in a timely manner according to case or project management plans.

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