

THE JUDICIARY: BOTH SIDES OF THE BENCH

Interview with Ms Sim Khadijah



Ms Sim Khadijah is an Assistant Registrar with the Supreme Court. She has prior experience in the legal profession, having been a litigation lawyer at Rajah & Tann. She won the Advocacy Cup in her second year at NUS Law and graduated in 2007.

Are you involved in anything apart from your job as an Assistant Registrar?

Apart from my day job, I am a Legal Skills Instructor with the NUS Faculty of Law, and this will be my fourth year teaching the LAWR Course. I also teach Advocacy for the Part B Course and conduct mediation training for the Singapore Mediation Centre both locally and abroad.

On a personal note, apart from the academic articles I write on mediation, I also write articles for 2 Muslim magazines – The Muslim Reader and Teens’ Crossroads. These articles are my musings on life’s lessons and challenges. I also volunteer at a Muslim organisation, coaching and judging their youth debates and conducting storytelling sessions for kids.

How do you balance between these various commitments?

Now that I’ve listed the various areas I’m involved in, it does seem a little overwhelming. (Laughs)

My motto has always been to work hard, play hard and rest hard. The mind, body and spirit need to be constantly recharged in order to perform at its optimum. That means getting the proper exercise, rest and nutrition that you need. It also means focusing on each task you have, and not being half-hearted about anything. Too often, students or young lawyers worry too much about what they need to do and don’t channel enough energy into actually doing that task. Take breaks when you need to, but once it’s time to focus and deliver, give your 101% and you will find that the speed at which you’re clearing your tasks will be astonishing, leaving you time for your other interests and activities.

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What is the difference between working in the public and the private sector, given that you have experienced both?

The biggest difference I have experienced since the switch from the private to the public sector is the way I feel about my work. Don't get me wrong, I cared deeply about my clients and their cases when I was in private practice, but I knew that the impact of my cases were, more often than not, limited to that individual or company that I was representing.

By contrast, as a judicial officer, the impact of my decisions may be more far reaching. My decision has the potential to affect not only the individuals or companies themselves but future litigants, or the development of the law. As such, there is a heavier responsibility to ensure that each decision is the best decision in the circumstances, and under the law. Also, as a legal service officer, I am given opportunities to assist or even spearhead initiatives in my project and committee work. So, instead of just reading about changes that are taking place in the legal sector or being a part of the community impacted by those changes, I get to be a part of the community which helps to initiate and shape those changes, which is immensely rewarding. This allows me to have my say, to some small extent, on how the law and the legal landscape in Singapore ought to develop over time.

That said, I wouldn't have traded my experience in private practice for anything. It is my sincere belief that my experience as a litigation lawyer has enhanced my experience as a judicial officer. I am able to understand the constraints and realities of practice, and I hope that the lawyers who have attended before me have been able to pick up on that. I remember what it was like being on the other side of the table, arguing my cases. To many lawyers, the most important thing is not the outcome but the process of the hearing. To feel like

you have been heard and understood, regardless of the outcome, was something that was very important to me as counsel and continues to be a yardstick for me as a judicial officer. Needless to say, the perspective that I gain as a judicial officer will also come in handy, should I ever decide to return to practice one day.

In terms of the workload, I would say that I am just as busy as I was in practice, but because I love my work, it doesn't feel like work at all. I wake up with a sense of purpose every morning, and go home with a sense of satisfaction at the end of the day. If you love your job, you never have to work a day in your life. I never quite understood that feeling until my current job.

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How do you think your legal education has contributed to your life?

Now that I have trained my mind to work in the way that it does, I cannot imagine not being able to think or articulate my thoughts in this manner. So much of my ability to absorb, analyse and utilise information is due to my legal education and in particular, my training in legal skills. I love the way my mind works, and I have my skills instructors, such as Prof Eleanor Wong and Prof Joel Lee, to thank for that.

To be able to comprehend and dissect your own thought process, communicate that thought process and come up with convincing ways in which to persuade someone else is a gift not just in your legal work, but in your personal life as well! On a more serious note, being legally trained has allowed me to help others, whether in practice or as a judicial officer.

As a lawyer, I tried my best to advise my client not just on the law, but in accordance with his individual needs and financial capabilities. So, if there was a more cost-effective way for him to achieve the desired outcome, I would ensure that my client was properly advised as to his options.

As a judicial officer, I try my best to ensure that any litigants who are unrepresented understand the legal process. Whilst I am unable to advise them as to their substantive legal rights (as the Court is a neutral party), I will try to ensure that they do not leave my courtroom with any misconceptions on the law or on the hearing that has taken place.

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What were you like as a law student?

I think I was an earnest student. I was eager to learn, but not always successful in grasping the concepts that were taught to me. I excelled in some subjects but wasn't able to perform well in others. Over time, I began to understand myself better, and tapped into my strengths to excel in school.

I suppose I was also a bit of a loner, though. I kept to myself a lot in law school and wasn't the most outgoing or participative in school activities. I had a handful of close friends, but never quite mixed around with other students until I participated in the Law IV musical in my 4th year.

What was your motivational force, when you were in law school, and now that you're working? Especially given that you have various different commitments?

My motivational force has always been my family. My family was not well-to-do and we faced financial hardships from a young age. Working hard was the most logical way to help my family out of the bind that we were in. The idea was to work hard and land myself a good job, so that I could provide for my immediate family, and so that my future children would not have to suffer the same fate.

I used to join the moot and advocacy competitions, not to land an internship or gain a good reputation in law school but for the prize money, which would go a long way towards covering my university fees and daily expenses. I honestly did not expect to win, but winning the Advocacy Cup in 2005 opened many doors for me, and even helped to land me a research assistant job which then allowed me to work and study so that I was no longer an additional burden on the family income.

Now that I'm a member of the workforce, my motivations still include my family, but they are no longer my sole motivation. I understand that as a member of the legal profession, I am in a privileged position to impact the lives of the average citizen. It is a responsibility I would gladly shoulder and to a certain extent, I do think that having gone through a rough time growing up has made me more compassionate as a lawyer and a judicial officer.



Knowing that I may be in a position to effect positive change in the lives of others is what drives me the most today. On days when I feel tired or overwhelmed, the reminder of the privileged position I am in pushes me to keep giving my best.

As for what drives me in my teaching appointments, my students mean everything to me. They are the reason I work on the weekends and late into the night to find pockets of time to develop my lesson plans, because I understand that they are the ones who will carry the torch when my time to shine is over. And what greater legacy to leave in your wake than committed members of the legal profession who will strive to effect positive change and serve the community at large?

What advice would you give to young lawyers, who are just starting out?

For young lawyers who are just starting out, I would say hang in there. Expect your first 3 years to be rough, but this is the time when you learn and develop the most. These are the years you will look back on

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and recognise to be the formative years of what I hope is a long and illustrious legal career.

After the first 3 years, life will get better. I have been there, and I have found this to be true: You will learn to work faster and smarter; you will learn to manage your clients’ and bosses’ expectations better; things that used to be an uphill task for you will be achievable with greater ease; you will learn to manage your time better and you should be able to balance your

work commitments with other interests and passions, the way I was able to take on my teaching appointments which are such a large part of who I am.

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What are some nuggets of wisdom you wish to share with incoming freshmen?

To the new law students, I would say stay positive and avoid negative thoughts like doubting your own abilities or overly focusing on the fear of failing. Just do each task as it comes, and understand that progress may be slow and steady. There will be a bit of an adjustment period when you first come into law school, because you will find that ‘A’s will not be as easily attainable as they used to be – after all, every student in law school was previously an ‘A’ student. Learn to accept that it’s fine not to hit the ground running, but to pick up speed as you go along. I’ve had my fair share of Bs and Cs in law school and things turned out fine for me.

Understand that we will be training you to think and develop your mind in a very unique and challenging way, and allow yourself to be receptive to attaining and

honing those skills over time. Set realistic goals for yourself, but always, always dream big. Nothing is impossible, if you put your mind to it and apply yourself.

Also, know when to push yourself, and when to cut yourself some slack. Moderation in everything you do will help you to stay balanced and keep you from burning out, which is a danger that not only students but also lawyers face. Finally, know your limits but be ready to test them, because you’ll never know what you are capable of until you try.

I wish you the very best in your journey through the law and I look forward to teaching and mentoring you, whether in law school or in the Part B Course after you graduate. ■

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