

# THE *mid-life* LAWYER

All his life the law had been calling Stephen Adorjan – from his teenage years, through adulthood and across two continents until it finally caught up with him last year at the mature age of 55.

At ten minutes past five on 11 November 1997, Stephen heard the loudspeaker in the examination hall declare “law students stop writing”. He put down his pen and broke into a cold sweat, momentarily overwhelmed at reaching the end of a personal odyssey. He was about to become a lawyer. He had just completed his final law exam, and he knew instinctively that he had passed and passed well. Weighed down by emotion, his head dropped to the desktop and he thought: “I’ve done it, I’ve got a law degree, the (Australian) law degree that was denied to my father.”

As a young boy growing up in Budapest his father told him he could be anything he wanted to be in life, except a lawyer. There was no joy, his father explained, in practising law in a communist state, as Hungary was in those days. His father, a lawyer, spoke from bitter personal experience. Lawyers were loathed in the People’s Republic. Branded as class enemies, they had to endure the gross indignity of attending court knowing that the secret police had informed the judge before the trial exactly what the verdict would be.

At 17, following the 1956 uprising, Stephen fled Hungary, and shortly afterwards migrated to Australia with his family. Among the first observations his father passed on to Stephen in Melbourne was to ignore his earlier advice about studying law. In Australia, the law could be practised without government interference. But young Stephen’s mindset had already been established. When he matriculated, he resisted the lure of the law for his other love, architecture. (His father’s qualifications were not accepted in Australia, and he was never to practise law again.)

For 30 years Stephen practised as an architect, starting as a cadet in the commonwealth Department of Works, working his way from design architect and eventually construction to contract administration and management. But the call of the law would not leave him alone. His work as project manager brought him into contact with lawyers and contracts: doing deals, setting quotes, negotiating. He thrived on the process, even attending seminars on construction and related laws.

The urge to take up law grew stronger, but he continued to dismiss the notion as



Answering the call: Stephen Adorjan at last achieves his lifelong dream of becoming a lawyer.

too fanciful and impractical. Besides, he now had a family and a mortgage, and a successful career as an architect. Surely he was too old to go back to school. “Forget it,” he counselled himself.

Sometimes it requires events beyond one’s immediate control to turn life around. The nature of architecture was changing. The 1990s saw the profession in crisis; work was scarce. At Stephen’s workplace the cutbacks were severe, and he realised that to be marketable in the profession he would have to upgrade his skills and qualifications. The obvious path was familiarising oneself with computer-aided design, going back to university to get an MBA, or formal qualifications in project management.

Around the same time, a close friend, married to a barrister, remarked after a long conversation that: “You really should be a lawyer. As a graduate, you can complete a law degree within three years full-time study.” This set him thinking that, should he return to study, it should be in a discipline that interested him and that meant the law, not an MBA. “I went into

architecture because I liked art, but over the years I had drifted away from that side of architecture. An MBA would move me even further,” he recalled. “So I decided to explore the possibility of studying law as a mature-age student.”

The sense of relief that arose from finally making a commitment was quickly erased by the onerous task of translating the concept into reality. His initial inquiries to the law faculties of the major universities were met with studied indifference. A less determined person would have thrown in the towel there and then. Once he had made up his mind, however, there was no going back. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that no one was jumping out of their skins to recruit 50-year-old law students looking for new midlife career paths.

His persistence was finally rewarded when he sat for the mature-age entrance exam in late 1993, and was offered a place at Monash University for which he was given 24 hours to make up his mind. Panic was the first response, but this was no time for nagging doubts or bouts of pragmatism. It was go for broke, or forget the whole

damn, crazy notion. He had come too far to turn back, and there are moments in life where fortune does indeed favour the brave (or is it the foolhardy?). His director at the department rearranged Stephen's work schedule so that he could continue to work while studying part-time. He did this for two years, before taking a package and completing his law degree full-time, two years later.

"I worked out that if I finished within two years, and was accepted for articles, I would just about manage, financially," he said. "So I became the grey-haired student – literally – in a class where all of the others could have been my children."

As it turned out, among his classmates was one Sonny Adorjan – his sole offspring! Studying together with your teenage son had some early complications. But there were advantages as well. "Sonny had started law a year earlier, so watching him and his mates at work helped because I'd seen their assignments, and thought 'I can do this', and besides, the work seemed interesting," Stephen said.

From the outset, Stephen had assured his son that he would keep well out of his way, and not embarrass him by his presence. After a month, the son invited the father to sit with him and his mates in a lecture they shared.

Going back to study in middle-age took some getting used to. "What came as a pleasant surprise was how much I enjoyed the learning process, because I was learning something I really liked, even though it was very hard going at times. Most unexpectedly, I enjoyed being in the company of these young people.

"I was pleasantly surprised that I was ultimately accepted by them. At times I had to keep reminding myself that these students, some of whom sometimes seemed to act like morons, were in fact, ranked among the top one per cent by intelligence and experience. It was a real challenge to keep up with people who were 30 years younger than I was. So it was very stimulating on both academic and philosophical grounds, as well as the personal. I made new friends there, some of whom I'm still in touch with, which was the last thing I had expected," he said.

If passing his final exam was traumatic, trying to get articles was pure hell. Who could possibly want, or even consider taking on, a 55-year-old articulated clerk? The short answer was, the South Yarra law firm of Meerkin & Apel.

Why? According to managing partner, Isaac Apel, Stephen was an outstanding candidate in the way he presented himself and grappled with the legal issues the

selection panel threw at him. And then there was his story – this story – a story that could not fail but to impress the imagination and engage one's senses.

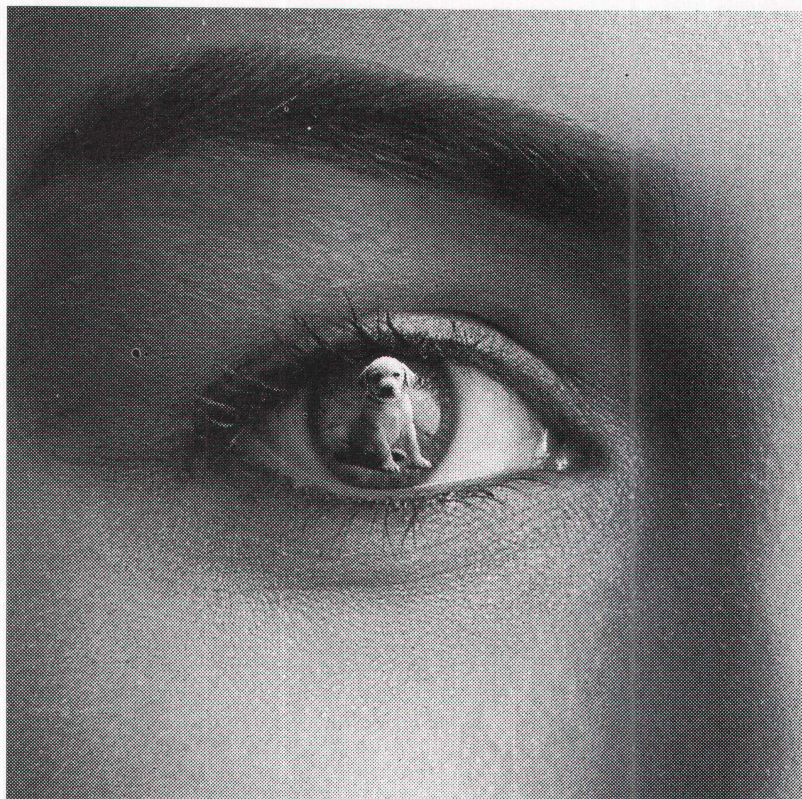
"I put myself in his position and concluded that here was a successful architect, who for his own reasons had made a new career choice. He obviously had the support of his family, and to be able to fulfil the challenge he had set for himself was an outstanding feat." Isaac concluded that getting this far displayed precisely the kind of qualities that make a good lawyer.

What's more, he decided, at 55 his new recruit brought with him experience, maturity and a broad range of life experiences. There were risks, he acknowledges. Age can bring inflexibility, but he had already gleaned that here was someone prepared to be flexible, who was able to listen and adapt. "There's always a risk, whoever you hire," says Isaac. "And this was one we were prepared to take on."

The punt on the old boy is already paying off. The firm is using Stephen's expertise in the building industry to their mutual benefit. "With Stephen we are getting the perspective of an architect as well as a lawyer." ■

PETER WEINIGER

Peter Weiniger is a freelance journalist.



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