Dispelling myths – from ex-CJ to lawyer mum

Stellar cast offers insights into legal careers in new book

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SOME myths shrouding the legal profession here are debunked in what looks to be one of the best law books to come out of Singapore.

For example, former chief justice Yong Pung How was not the harsh and unforgiving judge who, at the drop of a hat, doubled the jail terms of those who appealed against their sentences.

And justices’ law clerks (JLCs), fresh out of school, do not “decide” cases for judges through their bench memoranda, which summarise the issues and arguments in each case.

Former JLC Low Siew Ling, now a deputy senior state counsel and author of one of 27 chapters of the book, The Practice Of Law, shows why the former chief justice’s reputed crustiness and the “power” of JLCs are mere myths.

She and a stellar cast of contributors to the book – be they lawyers in the private or public sectors, law academics or former judges – offer insights into varying aspects of their law careers.

The book of essays, to be launched on Nov 28 by Attorney-General Sundaresh Menon, was co-edited by National University of Singapore law faculty dons Tang Hang Wu and Michael Hor, as well as lawyer Koh Swee Yen.

It was jointly sponsored by top-end law firm WongPartnership and the Attorney-General’s Chambers. All royalties from the book, published by LexisNexis Singapore, will go to the Special Needs Trust Company, a non-profit group which helps the disabled and the handicapped.

Ms Low, a JLC under then Chief Justice Yong in 2003, wrote that she “learnt more about the law – and about a life in the public service of the law – than I could ever have hoped for”.

On the myth that judges base their judgments on the bench memoranda written by JLCs, she said it was tough to imagine that the best legal minds in the country would place their decision-making powers in the hands of fresh graduates with little or no practical experience.

And to chief justice Yong’s reputation...
as a harsh, unforgiving judge, she wrote that “nothing could be further from the truth”, and pointed out that she knew him to be kind and compassionate when such sentiments were deserved – and not just in his decisions.

Lawyer Thio Ying Ying, 50, wrote in her chapter how she wedded a successful private practice with raising six children.

A partner in Kelvin Chia Partnership whose children are aged 13 to 23, she said she has been repeatedly asked for her secrets to maintaining work-life balance.

“My husband often reminds me... that it was my idea to have six children and how that has caused us to spend at least 5,000 nights (about 13 years) waking up to attend to crying kids,” she wrote.

She said she worked full-time but made it a point to leave the office at 6.30pm each day.

Former district judge Lim Hui Min wrote that making thousands of decisions over a few years made her more of a decisive, disciplined thinker. She wrote: “I used to be guilty of thinking in circles – mulling over a point for ages, worrying over it like a terrier with a bone, but not being able to actually decide what to do.”

She also recounted a humbling meeting with a blind masseur in the course of her work at the Legal Aid Bureau. She was to learn after the case ended that he was a filial son who looked after his frail mother on his low income, massaging her, buying her favourite food and even cooking for her.

“That made me realise that it is within the power of almost every person to help another, if he has the will to do so. Of all the lessons that I have learnt in the different jobs I have had over the years, this has been the most important one for me.”

The book contains chapters by several other heavyweights, including lawyers who made a success of practising abroad.

MP Sylvia Lim, who has taught at Temasek Polytechnic for the last 12 years, wrote of the great satisfaction in serving the public out of a high sense of duty.

The book’s three co-editors said in a preface that the contributors “show by example, in the lives that they lead and the humanity that they display in discharging their responsibilities, that it is possible to do noble things and maintain a sense of purpose while practising law and juggling the demands of family”.

Senior Counsel Alvin Yeo of Wong-Partnership said: “We hope the insights shared... will serve to provide an honest account of the struggles and gratifications one can experience as a lawyer.”

Taken from the book

NO RIGHT OR WRONG CAREER CHOICES

“And so I ended up joining the IMF in September 1997. Fast-forward 13-plus years and I am now back in Singapore in a job that barely resembles what I have done before.

“Appraising lawyers out there should feel free to explore. Short of thievery or high-sea piracy, there are really no right or wrong career choices.

“In any case, what you learn in law school will be largely obsolete within 10 years of your graduation, so you might as well start dreaming now of possible alternatives to a legal career.

“Above all, never let your law degree define what you do in life.”

Lawyer Ho Seng Chee, now Group Chief, Corporate Services of Mapletree Investments, who worked at the International Monetary Fund before

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD’ IN THE U.S.

“Work was no piece of cake either. There were only a meagre six public holidays observed by my company and I had only two weeks of vacation instead of the 24 days that I enjoyed as a senior associate in Singapore.

“The Americans work much harder and had less down time than what I had pre-conceived.

“But the work ethic that I most admired was that there was a clear demarcation between work and play.

“My colleagues spend the weekends and major holidays with their family and it was a major transgression to impede on their family time. They worked hard and played just as hard.”

Lawyer Benjamin Tan, who works in a Wall Street firm, on life in New York