

Yes Minister

Greg Gaunt would never have been a lawyer had he not been inspired to enter the profession by his classmate, Defence Minister Stephen Smith. Briana Everett reports



Greg Gaunt can thank Defence Minister Stephen Smith – and his apparently good note-taking ability – for what has been a very successful legal career, spanning more than 30 years.

It was the current Minister for Defence's drive to become a lawyer during their school days together which led Gaunt to do the same.

Gaunt followed his friend Smith from high school to the University of Western Australia, where they both studied arts and law.

While Smith only practised for a short time, Gaunt has remained in the profession ever since.

"He had this driving passion to be a lawyer ... I followed him and used his notes and got

through law school," laughs Gaunt, who now leads Perth-based firm Lavan Legal.

But despite reaching the top ranks of the profession, having joined the partnership of Phillips Fox (which later became Lavan Legal) in the early 1980s and later becoming managing partner, Gaunt admits he never really felt he was cut out to be a lawyer.

"I'm not a real lawyer's lawyer. I never have been," he says.

Small beginnings

Confessing that he enjoys his work as a managing partner more than he ever enjoyed practising law, Gaunt fondly remembers his days as an

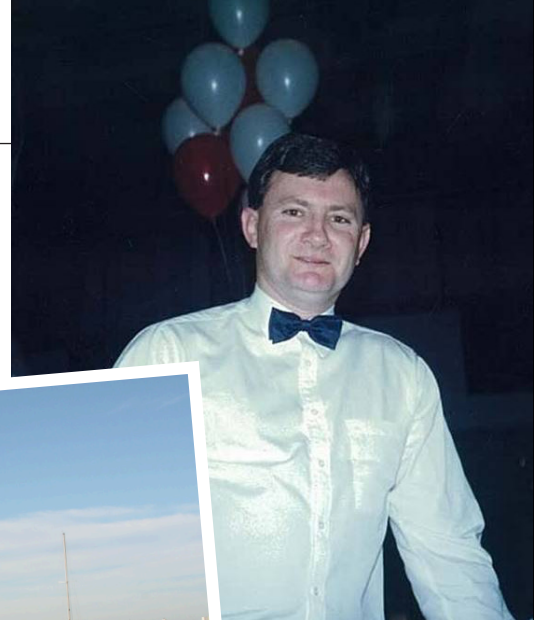
articled clerk.

"It's funny, I kind of see the law from an outsider's viewpoint, more than I do from an insider's viewpoint," he says. "I think that probably helps in terms of what I do."

Starting his legal career in Fremantle at Lavan & Walsh, as it was then known, Gaunt admits he "mucked around quite a bit" working in the firm's converted hotel office, with just one partner and a solicitor.

"I started at Lavan & Walsh in its Fremantle office. This was before America's Cup time. It's not fair to say it was a sleepy place, but Fremantle was a totally different place to Perth," says Gaunt, who eventually went back to the firm's Perth

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office.

It was during his early days completing his articles when Gaunt formed a relationship with two of his biggest mentors; Edmond Frichot, who started Fremantle firm Frichot & Frichot and Kevin Hammond, a former chief judge of the District Court who joined Lavan & Walsh in 1978 after working in the town of Northam.

“Edmond Frichot was my principal when I started doing my articles. He was a very, very interesting character, so I thoroughly enjoyed my time down at Fremantle in an extremely small office,” Gaunt recalls.

“Both Edmond Frichot and Kevin Hammond were just fantastic characters. They had an entirely different background to your normal partner within a Perth city firm,” he says. “Edmond had everybody in fits of laughter. The instant he was out of the lift you knew he was there. The value of enjoying what you’re doing and having fun, and having characters who can do that, is just fantastic.”

Completing his articles under the guidance of Frichot and Hammond gave Gaunt some “pretty good life experience”, which he says most young lawyers of today would not typically have. “I still look back on my articles very fondly. I just loved it ... I was doing things like going up to Fremantle prison. Back then it was the maximum security prison,” he says. “It was relatively common for me to be up there or down at the Fremantle local court. You just dabbled in a bit of everything.”

By 1998 Gaunt had reached the top, becoming managing partner of Phillips Fox after Lavan & Walsh became Lavan Solomon in 1983 and then Phillips Fox in 1984.

Leading the national firm from 1998, Gaunt maintained his position as managing partner at Lavan Legal, which was established in 2006 when parts of the Phillips Fox partnership walked away from the firm’s national structure in favour of an independent, state-based firm model.

That, he admits, was a difficult period, but Gaunt hasn’t looked back since separating from the national firm.

“I guess it was a bit of a concern as to whether we did have better prospects as a stand alone, state independent firm,” he says. “Clearly, the partners who left Phillips Fox thought they were better within a national structure. The rest of us thought we weren’t and I know we’ve proved ourselves to be correct.”

Without being critical of national firms in general, Gaunt points out the difficulties of being part of a national firm when sitting on the outer edge of such a structure.

“I’ve always felt that if you’re going to be in a national firm, you probably need to be at the centre of it, rather than be a satellite,” he says. “I was never mad keen to sit here in Perth and be part of a national firm.”

While Gaunt and his partners have left Australia’s group of national firms, they are still well aware of their pulling power.

“We need to be well-known. We’re fighting against the national firms which are known for that, so we have to be extremely well known,” he says, laughing that the split from Phillips Fox gave Lavan Legal a profile, albeit not quite the one they wanted.

Here for a good time

Although he runs a firm of 20 partners and an additional 50 lawyers, Gaunt confesses he doesn’t work as hard as the team he looks after.

“I don’t work anywhere near as hard as the real workers here. I just don’t,” he says. “I can’t complain about my workload.”

With a lesser workload, Gaunt’s time away from work is now taken up by two recent additions to his family – a four-year-old and a two-year-old – adding to his four older children,

aged between 19 and 26.

“I’ve got little kids again and they keep you pretty active,” he says. “Having the little kids is a great interest because it’s something I didn’t think was ever going to happen. You have a better opportunity to kind of do it differently the second time around. You enjoy them more as little kids.”

When he’s not spending time with his children, Gaunt can be found somewhere on the water. Growing up just 200 metres from Perth’s Swan River, Gaunt says he could sail before he could swim, influenced by his father, who still sails today.

“I sailed from the time that I was about five or six but I couldn’t actually swim. You had a life jacket so it didn’t matter,” he laughs.

While he doesn’t sail any more, Gaunt is still windsurfing – something which he’s done since the 70s.

Enjoying life outside work is something Gaunt has tried to inspire his younger lawyers to do, especially during his early days as leader of Lavan Legal when he made it his mission to improve the productivity of his lawyers and get them out of the office.

“It was kind of a hangover from the late 1980s/90s period where the people who spent the longest time in the office were supposed to be your best performers. I was always really cynical about that. I always thought we probably spent too much time in the office – even now – but I was trying to drive people to be productive. We’re not here for a long time, we’re here for a good time,” he says.

“I guess that’s part of what’s always driven me. I’m here because I like being here. I like having a good time.” **LW**