

Calling it a day

By Geoff Hull



Ruth Ross, clerk of Thirteenth Floor Wentworth / Selborne Chambers retired in September after 25 years in chambers. *Bar News* charts the career path of one of Phillip Street's most experienced and highly respected clerks.

On 1 September, more than fifty people gathered at L'Aqua, in Cockle Bay, to mark the retirement of the clerk affectionately known to many as 'Ruthless'. Floor members past and present, such as Ian Harrison SC, Cecily Backhouse and his Honour Judge Bennett, were among those who gathered to say farewell.

Ruth began her career as a junior clerk at Ninth Floor Selborne Chambers. She was a 15 year old from Sans Souci, who had left Moorefield Girls High with a dream to travel overseas. Barristers and floor staff alike were quick to spot her natural aptitude for work in chambers. The clerk on adjacent Ninth Floor Wentworth asked her to work for him as a junior. She took up the offer and was soon promoted to receptionist, a role she filled for the next three years.

In 1981, Ruth accepted the position of clerk at Thirteenth Floor Selborne Chambers. She recalls the grilling she received at the hands of a selection committee, comprised of Backhouse, McLaughlin, Davies, Harrison and Hallen. Also on the floor at that time were Laurence Gruzman and Janet Coombs, who was renowned for her extensive array of hats.

The appointment to the Bench of Cecily Backhouse and John McLaughlin marked the beginning of the floor's transformation, with Davies SC, Hallen SC, Gruzman and Khan the only members who remain from the time she began as clerk.

The next stage in her career came in 1991, when Trish Hoff resigned as clerk of Thirteenth Floor Wentworth Chambers. It was resolved by majority vote that the time was right for the two floors to merge. Ruth was to become clerk for the new joint floor: a position she held for the next fifteen years.

The original Wentworth members still on the floor are Thomson, Henderson, Barrett and Gregory. David Davies SC, whom Ruth believes was a major influence on her career, was floor secretary when Ruth began and is now head of chambers.

Ruth would often have a 'walk past' of her office doorway between 8.00-8.30am. Readers and junior floor members,

including those from the other side of the building, know this as the time for picking up briefs.

A quarter century affords a good perspective from which to reflect on the changing role of clerks at the referral Bar. Perhaps the most noticeable change, according to Ruth, is the decline in the day to day contact with list clerks and court officers. But barristers will always need a clerk, regardless of the changes to the job title.

Outside of chambers, one of Ruth's enduring interests has been swimming. For many years she swam at Sans Souci and played water polo for Cronulla. Lacking the time to go to the pool during the day, she would often swim at North Sydney at night. She has also taken part in many ocean races and whilst waiting for the starter's gun on a sunny Sunday morning, would often recognise other Phillip Street swimmers such as Malcolm Holmes, John Robson and Chris Simpson.

For many years Ruth also competed in the Sydney Opera House Biathlon with her team mate, Ian Harrison SC. Ruth would take on the swimming leg of the course, leaving Harrison to do the run. A keen rival in the biathlon was fellow clerk, Paul Daley. Harrison recalls one year in which Ruth built a commanding lead over Paul's swimming partner, who was still in the water long after Harrison had set off. Daley chased Harrison for the whole eight kilometres but could not run him down. Harrison credits the victory to Ruth's swim and not to his running speed. In the same event in the years that followed, Paul and his partner never gave them the same start again.

In 1995, Ruth decided to undertake some further study and enrolled at the University of Technology, Sydney, where she began a Bachelor of Social Science degree, part time. She graduated in 2000.

Ruth's plans for retirement include travel, perfecting her golf swing, spending time with family and friends, as well as part-time work. To be sure, there are many people who will miss her calming presence around chambers and her friendly disposition. We wish her all the best for the future.