

Geoffrey Wills Pulsford (1953–2011)

The following eulogy was delivered by Steve Rickards at a thanksgiving service on 21 June 2011.



Geoff has been my dear friend, business partner and professional colleague for close to 30 years. There are many colleagues of Geoff's who would speak of him today. These words are a collaboration with Les Einstein who, since Geoff went to the bar, was his mentor, supporter and friend. Les is not able to be present here but he will join us later.

It is impossible to differentiate Geoff the lawyer from Geoff the man. To the practice of his profession he brought the same passion, energy and enthusiasm he brought to every aspect of his life. Geoff is Geoff in all circumstances and at all times. Likewise, I find it impossible to differentiate our professional and personal relationships. To use a metaphor that Geoff liked to use, they are a tapestry.

Geoff was admitted as solicitor in 1979 after graduating from Sydney Uni with a BA LLB with Honours in English.

After graduating, Geoff joined the firm then named Hall and Hall

where he trained under two fine lawyers, Dick Toltz and now Judge Margaret Sides.

In 1985 we at Ferrier and Associates were running a mammoth piece of litigation acting for about 80 plaintiffs. This case consumed almost the entire staff resources of the firm for almost 2 years. Geoff came to us at that time as a locum. There we first saw his prodigious energy at work. Les was managing the litigation and remembers thinking, 'I just want to be his friend'.

During that time Geoff made his foray into the world of fashion design with his label 'Geoffrey Wills'. As always, he went at it with gusto. He had a showing in New York. I recall going to one in Sydney, at the Hilton Hotel. Bronwyn can still remember the Geoffrey Wills outfit she wore that day and another colleague told me recently she had only just now consigned her Geoffrey Wills creations to the charity bin.

The big case finished but Geoff remained with Ferriers as a senior commercial litigator and from 1989 as a partner. He stayed with Spencer Ferrier until he made his move to the bar in 2005 and from 1995 until the move they worked very closely together.

Spencer says of that time:

Geoffrey was a remarkable lawyer. He could focus so sharply and identify information so quickly and clearly.

He was always initially dubious about the value of the cases that came to him and would quite quickly see the part that the client was playing in the problem they were involved with.

Once Geoffrey had worked his way through the thicket of the moral turpitude of his client (and there is always some of that) he was also very quick to forgive when he had seen the true extent of the case he was faced with. Geoffrey would not take on a case where there was outright trickery or chicanery in his client. In that respect his high moral standards shone through. Fortunately most of the people who he worked for understood this about him and he understood them.

His abruptness and harshness in first contact with anything made him like a case hardened marshmallow he was tough at the start, but rapidly became very human, understanding and kind. That was his apparent paradox, but it wasn't a paradox at all: it was the way that he was.

I miss him already, I will miss him. I will continue to miss him.

Geoff had long had a wish to go to the bar but the bar is financially risky and, with a large young family, it was not until the mid 2000s that it became a real possibility for him. In 2003–04 he completed a Masters degree in Criminology.

In 2005 he became a member of the New South Wales Bar.

After he joined the bar Geoff was always my first port of call in any litigation that came my way. Having seen Geoff's abilities at Ferriers, I had always thought that if I ever became personally involved in litigation, he is the one lawyer I would want on my side. With Geoff as a barrister, I could rely completely on the thoroughness of his research, his application to the work, his availability when needed, the promptness of his responses, his ability to get to the point, his preparedness to take on new cases

in areas outside his experience and his ability to recognise when he was out of his depth.

With Les, we worked together on two major cases in the last couple years. I always felt safe knowing Geoff was in the case. For me that statement epitomises Geoff. You always feel completely safe with Geoff, as a colleague and as a friend. You know there'll be no censorship of any view he's formed, nor any malice in the harsh observations he makes about you. You also know that your confidences are completely safe with him. My goodness he can be difficult, but you never feel unsafe with him.

Geoff is a warm, generous and caring person. Yet the abruptness of his manner is legendary. Rarely would a phone conversation with Geoff end without the phone being peremptorily slammed down by way of indicating Geoff had said and heard all that was necessary. Geoff's forthrightness and fearlessness was not reserved for his colleagues. Clients and witness got exactly the same the same treatment. One witness who was half way through being interviewed and who was getting the classic Geoff treatment rang me and said timorously, 'Do I have to see Mr Pulsford again, couldn't you do the interview.' The answer of course was No, because Mr Pulsford drills down into the case relentlessly and that's why he's so good.

Geoff, of course, was completely unaware of this. When I once pointed out that his manner seemed rude, he was genuinely uncomprehending and hurt. For all his fearlessness Geoff is sensitive and vulnerable. We had one little routine

that I love. He'd expound away on some point and when he'd finished and saw my mouth begin to open, he'd yell, 'I know, I know, you think that's complete bullshit and I don't know what I'm talking about, right.'

Geoff chose a hard road in going to the bar. He was a late starter and the competition for work is strong. It can be difficult to get the work and having got it, it can be difficult to get paid. Geoff had his share of those problems. But he was clear about building up his practice in the criminal jurisdiction.

Part of Geoff's life at the bar was a free legal advocacy and advice service of last resort for people in desperate circumstances.

It became known as 'the Law Kitchen', a concept developed by Geoff, Les and me. Geoff pursued it with a passion. For Geoff, there was never a shortage of customers and they were not of the pin stripped variety.

Nor were they to be found in Geoff's Chambers waiting room between 9 and 5. He found them on the streets late at night and into the early hours of the morning in areas ranging from Martin Place to Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Central Station.

Geoff and I spent one memorable night together as two homeless men. We set up with about a dozen homeless people on the steps of the Mitchell Library. Geoff wanted some insight into what it was like to be homeless. Typically, Geoff thought the highly publicised sleep out night for CEOs at Luna Park was missing the point.

For Les, Geoff's presence in the Law Kitchen, on a day to day basis, was

his rudder and keel. Les says that whatever success the future of this organisation meets owes itself to Geoff's passion and drive to give back to the community and to leave this world in a better state than he found it. This, Geoff achieved in spades.

Geoff's pro bono contribution did not end with the Law Kitchen; he was also an active participant in the NSW Bar's Legal Assistance Referral Scheme and one of the NSW Bar's duty barristers.

So there you have it. Geoff's life as a barrister spanned an astonishing spectrum, ranging from areas of complex commercial litigation to criminal law to cases for people whose circumstances - physically, emotionally and financially - were desperate beyond measure.

For Les, at the bar Geoff was his very best friend. Les's sorrow is best described in an email received from Liz Giles, head of the Homelessness Unit at Sydney City Council. This is the email:

... There aren't words to properly describe the hole in the Universe that occurs when a man like Geoff departs these earthly corners of it; he was giant in soul and person. I can only imagine how much you will miss him.

Me, right now I'm just feeling empty and a bit lost.