

‘Coming back as a mentor I feel welcomed, like part of a family. What do I get out of it? In a word, happiness’

JULIE

When you get to my age you find you’ve done a lot, but essentially my life’s work has been the criminal justice system. I’ve been a teacher in maximum-security prisons, and for the last 17 years I have volunteered as an independent prison visitor. Now I’m in the education team at the Supreme Court in Melbourne. I realise the importance of people gaining a thorough understanding of the legal system. It’s not *Judge Judy* in court, it really isn’t.

I’ve also been a corporate consultant, restructuring companies that are on the brink of going into administration. I’ve always had empathy and understanding for the underdog and what I’ve experienced in the corporate world has given me additional empathy into the ramifications of decision-making from a lofty position.

I was Googling something at the University and I came across the mentoring program and I thought, why not? I believe this country has been very good to me so it’s good to do these volunteer roles and give a bit back.

My academic skills are hardly anything to write home about. Maheshi would run academic rings round me. But more important for mentors is a sense of worldliness, an understanding of what the world is about.

Maheshi and I don’t have set times to meet – the flexibility of the program is really quite important to both of us. We have a coffee together and I’ve also taken her to the Supreme Court. I think Maheshi was overawed by the extreme formality, the rules. She would like to volunteer with me but she said she’s not ready yet – and that’s fine. When she does she’ll be much better appraised of what’s actually involved.

For me, learning never stops. I do say to Maheshi, keep your mind open. Even if at this point in your life you are thinking of being a criminal barrister, the law has many other applications. Don’t think you’ve failed if you decide it doesn’t suit you. The days of doing one thing all your life are gone. Every few years, reinvent yourself, reinvent the manner in which you do things and go into new fields.

My own experience at the University of Melbourne was fantastic. I loved it. Coming back as a mentor I feel welcomed, like part of a family. What do I get out of it? In a word, happiness. I love learning and that someone like Maheshi wants to learn.



PICTURE: CHRIS HOPKINS

A Melbourne education involves much more than lectures and libraries.

For third-year arts student Maheshi Kapilaratna, one of the highlights of her degree is being mentored by alumna Julie Ritchie (GDipEd 1985). Julie, 68, and Maheshi, 20, speak to **Val McFarlane** about their relationship.

MAHESHI

For a long time I was looking to do medicine. My parents would like me to be a doctor, but chemistry and maths have never really got my heart racing. But when we did legal studies in year 11, that really captured my interest. We went to the County Court and seeing that was really interesting to me.

But I didn’t really have any practical knowledge of law. There aren’t any lawyers in my family. My cousins are all in science and teaching, and culturally, law is seen as a masculine profession.

It was amazing to be accepted into the mentoring program. At uni all I’m thinking about is studying and I don’t really think about what comes after graduation. I feel like this is a good step towards making a decision that’s outside my studies.

I didn’t know anything about Julie before we met for coffee on campus. She told me all these stories about prison life and all these people that she knows. To talk to someone who’s been doing this stuff for a very long time and is very learned was a bit unnerving but I tried to hold my own.

Now we mostly talk on email. Julie hoped I would volunteer at the Supreme Court on its education program but it’s a bit too demanding – maybe I’ll do it in the future. For now the goal is to get into Honours and then after that – fingers crossed – into law school.

Because I don’t know anyone personally who is in the law, to actually have someone who’s in the system gives me better insight to see how I would fit. To hear how people work in that environment has been really good.

Law is very competitive and it’s easy to get discouraged because you are told there are so many barriers. As the daughter of Sri Lankan immigrants I perhaps don’t fit the mould of your typical Australian lawyer, but having Julie on my side is helping me get a foot in the door.

Julie and Maheshi were introduced through the University’s Access Connections Mentoring Program, one of a number of mentoring programs run by the University. New alumni mentors from all fields are always welcome. Find out more:

alumni.unimelb.edu.au/volunteering-opportunities