

Queensland Law Society President's Medal Acceptance Speech

Sofitel Brisbane Central 21 February 2014

John Sneddon, Shand Taylor Lawyers

Your Honours, Attorneys General, President, Councillors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this day 5 years ago, an Australian man sitting amongst us tonight awoke in a Dubai prison cell. It was his 40th birthday. He didn't really know where he was and he was unsure as to what the future held, but he knew that his prospects looked bleak.

His cell was a windowless box with no toilet. His bed was a mattress on the floor and he was fed through a hole at the bottom of a steel door. He had no access to legal representation.

That man's name is Marcus Lee and I am proud to call him my client.

Marcus ultimately spent 9 months in 3 Dubai prisons (including 2 months in solitary confinement) before he was bailed and placed under house arrest in October 2009. Throughout the entire time Marcus was in prison, his wife Julie was alone in Dubai, trying to understand a confusing and alien criminal justice system.

Marcus subsequently endured a further 4 years of house arrest and more than 50 court appearances, 2 trials, 2 acquittals and an appeal before he was finally acquitted for the final time last November.

Marcus and his wife Julie returned to Australia 4 weeks ago.

Marcus Lee has always been innocent. Now he has his freedom as well.

In August 2009, I received a call from a lady named Rosemary Adams who asked me to take on Marcus' case.

In recent weeks, I have been repeatedly asked why I represented Marcus, and why I did so, for so long, on a pro bono basis.

These questions always disturb me - not because I'm worried I will be typecast as one of those "hired gun" lawyers we keep reading about in

the media – but because this line of questioning is based upon an alarming ignorance of the generosity of the legal profession.

I think there are many answers to such questions, but none of them make me particularly unique.

Put simply, when confronted by the facts I have just described to you, I chose to represent Marcus Lee because I believed I had professional skills which may enable me to be of assistance and as a member of the legal profession I felt I had a duty to help.

That, after all, is what lawyers do. We help people.

We help them navigate the myriad complexities of the law, often at times when they are at their most vulnerable and their nerves are stretched to breaking point.

And let's face it. Most of us do pro bono work from time to time, without recognition, but in keeping with our profession's honourable tradition of community service.

I firmly believe this is a message we need to reinforce at every opportunity - Lawyers help people. And we should be proud of that fact. I know that I am.

I commend our new President Ian Brown for his recent comments in Proctor emphasising the need for us to speak out about our achievements. And I can heartily recommend to you all, the many benefits that flow from pro bono activities.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured and proud to receive this medal. To receive professional recognition from my colleagues in the law is a profound and moving privilege.

I would particularly like to acknowledge my fellow nominees. To be selected from the ranks of such distinguished lawyers is a truly humbling experience.

I would also like to thank those who supported my nomination, Walter Sofronoff QC, Rosemary Adams and my former colleague at Shand Taylor, Regina Michaletos.

I would also like to thank Margaret Hoch for her patient and tireless support and her unfailingly sensible legal counsel.

On a personal note I pay tribute to my wife Vanessa O'Sullivan for never questioning my decision to take on this case and her constant support and encouragement.

I am also grateful to my children for constantly questioning me about Marcus and in so doing providing me with the opportunity to teach them that there are things in this world which are more important than money and that sometimes, the good guys (like Marcus Lee) come out on top.

I am grateful for the support of my partners at Shand Taylor Lawyers, John Saunders, John Lowes, Rod O'Sullivan, Matthew Shannon, Richard Waring and Brad Clark, some of whom are here with us tonight. I have always regarded myself as fortunate to be in a partnership with 6 good friends - never more so than one dark day last year when each of my partners received a letter threatening them with litigation as a result of my advocacy for our client. The letter was treated in the manner it deserved and I continued to receive their unflagging support.

Finally, I would like to thank my clients Marcus and Julie Lee for nominating me. Marcus Lee is here tonight. Representing Marcus and Julie was never a chore and always a privilege. I have constantly been inspired by Marcus' remarkable inner strength and clarity of thought under extreme and intolerable pressure. And I am in awe of Julie's cool head and her tireless devotion and support for Marcus.

I am the luckiest lawyer in Australia, I have wonderful clients, who are grateful for my assistance and who have become my friends, and now I have received this wonderful award from my professional colleagues.

I would like to sincerely thank the President's Medal Committee and the Queensland Law Society for bestowing this honour upon me. I am proud and humbled to receive this award.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen