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PROMOTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE LAW

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Beyond childhood dreams -
pursuing law across two
countries

*interview with Serbian FQL Marija
Wood*





MARIJA WOOD

Interviewed by Ying Ning Loo and Mei Gong

Born in Serbia, Marija is a well-spoken individual with a positive can-do attitude. In 2015, she graduated in Law from the University of Belgrade, a well-known university in Serbia. She subsequently relocated to Australia and started working with Perth Family Lawyers in 2017 where she discovered her passion for family law. Marija then enrolled into Curtin University and was able to complete her law degree studies in just over 2 years' time. Marija is currently completing her practical legal training and expects to be formally admitted as a lawyer in the near future.

Outside of work, Marija has a strong commitment to fitness, and you can often find her waking up at 4:30am on weekday mornings to train in the F-45 gym training programs before her work day. Marija is also passionate about Indigenous legal issues and addressing domestic violence.

Humble Beginnings and a Lifelong Love for the Law

Marija's love story with the law began when she was a child. Growing up in a small town in Serbia, Marija knew a friend's grandmother who was a lawyer and became enamoured by the stories she heard about clients and court hearings. At the young age of 7 years old, Marija confidently told her grandfather that she wanted to be a lawyer (even till this day, Marija very much has her career ambitions set on being a lawyer). While we all have been asked what we wanted to be when we grew up, Marija was likely one of the few of us that knew for certain what she wanted to be.

Although Marija's parents were always supportive of her dream and wanted the best for her, Marija's grandfather was concerned that a legal career would cause people to dislike her. The funny thing about love is, it changes a person. Having seen how persistent Marija was in her pursuit of the law, her grandfather's worries faded. Perhaps, he also saw the light we saw in Marija when she spoke of the law.



A Pursuit of Love and Law Across Two Continents

In 2012, Marija's other love story began when she met Steven, an Australian citizen who was traveling through Europe. Their love endured a 3 year long distance relationship, until 2015, when Marija graduated and relocated to Australia.



Marija candidly shared that not only was her move to Australia not planned but she wouldn't have even imagined moving to Australia had she not met Steven. Spoiler alert: Marija and Steven remain happily married.

Upon arriving in Australia, one of the first hurdles Marija had to face was the significant fees for a law degree. After exploring all of her options, Marija found that having permanent residency would make the pursuit of a legal career more affordable.

In 2017, while waiting for her permanent residency, Marija joined Perth Family Law (a boutique family law firm) first as a receptionist, and later, she pivoted to being a personal assistant for 2 solicitors when they realised her passion for the law. When Marija later commenced her tertiary legal studies, the firm kindly offered Marija a part time role for the duration of her university studies (and a full time post-graduation role). 5 years later, Marija has remained with Perth Family Law and is soon to be admitted to practice as a lawyer with the firm.

It was through working with Perth Family Law that Marija developed a love for practising family law. While Marija admits that it can be a very stressful area of practice (given the wide ranging legal issues at stake, which can include division of property and children custody battles), she relishes from the personal connection she is able to form with her clients. Marija also enjoys the fact that no day is the same, and she could be working on anything ranging from a divorce, restraining order, commercial disputes, custody arrangements and asset divisions. During the pandemic, Marija even had to advise on issues arising from when parents have differing views on whether their child should get vaccinated or not. For Marija, there is certainly never a dull moment in family law!

Unexpected Surprises During the Requalification Process

Regardless of the hurdles that Marija had encountered as part of her requalification journey, she always overcame each challenge with incredible optimism, grace and resilience.

The first hurdle was certainly an unusual one. When Marija applied to study law at Curtin University in 2019, she needed to submit her graduation certificate from Serbia.

However, she had not formally obtained her graduate certificate from the Law University of Belgrade (even though she had completed her legal studies). Much to Marija's misfortune, the Law University of Belgrade informed Marija that she needed to collect her certificate in person (and that was the only way Marija would be able to get a copy of said certificate).

Despite the short one week's notice, Marija decided to fly back home to Serbia to get her certificate as well as spend some time with her parents. In retrospect, given the COVID-19 pandemic that ensued which prevented Marija from visiting home in the following years, Marija cherished the time she got to spend with her family (even though the cause was a bureaucracy nightmare).

As an aside, Marija is unequivocal about her love for Serbia and light heartedly joked that she gets quite fiery when her first home is not spoken about fairly. She loves to share about her country, so, if you ever have the privilege of speaking with Marija, do ask her about her favourite moments and things about Serbia.

The second hurdle came when Marija subsequently realised that with a quarter of her law degree in Serbia being transferrable credits to her law studies in Australia, she would be able to complete the degree in a shorter amount of time with a catch. The catch was she needed to study 12 units a year (rather than the normal 8 units load). Marija accepted the catch and completed her tertiary legal studies within the very short time frame of 2 years and 3 months.

Marija had to adapt to learning about the common law system in Australia (whereas her legal studies in Serbia was based on a civil law system) and despite this significant challenge, Marija offered a pragmatic and reassuring perspective:

"Once you master how to interpret the law, regardless of the presence or absence of precedents, you can arrive at the same conclusion."

Marija also noted that she preferred tertiary legal studies in Australia to Serbia. In Serbia, Marija had to complete 100% closed book oral exams. In contrast, Australia embraces a more gradual
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approach to learning, with grades being portioned through assessments and assignments throughout the term, which allowed for continuous review and consolidation of legal knowledge which Marija preferred.

Best Career Advice for Aspiring Foreign Qualified Lawyers

When we asked Marija about the best career advice she has received to date, Marija remarked that it was advice given to her by the solicitors whom she works for in Perth Family Law.

"Say 'Yes' to the things that scare you."

Reflecting on the impact actioning this advice has had on Marija's life, Marija shared that she was initially scared of public speaking and constantly worried about 'sounding silly' given that English is not her first language. She would worry about sharing the wrong information or sounding the 'wrong way'. With additional practice since then, Marija has found public speaking has become easier. Where she used to feel faint, heart beating and panic attacks before a presentation, now she reminds herself,

"I am not scared, I am just excited. Embrace it"

Marija also remarked that it was important for aspiring foreign qualified lawyers to remind themselves of why they decided to relocate to Australia and why requalifying was important to them and to keep that in their mind throughout the requalification process. And for those who are still wondering whether they should requalify, Marija added

"Just do it, otherwise, you will always wonder. Especially when you are a bit older and more mature."

These are indeed some wise advice and we certainly recommend you action on them to stretch your comfort zone a bit more!

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