

William & Lonsdale – Lives in The Law

E.73: HH Mag. Urfa Masood

Voiceover: [00:00:08] This is William and Lonsdale, a podcast about the legal ecosystem and the fascinating people who make it tick. This week, we welcome her honor, magistrate Urfa Masood, former criminal barrister and the first Muslim woman to sit on any bench in Victoria. Urfa left Sri Lanka and moved to Australia with immediate family at the age of 11, leaving behind a civil war and a large, deeply connected extended family. After adjusting quickly to life in Australia and excelling at school, Urfa began her law degree at 16 and graduated with honours. So when she started applying for legal positions, it was confronting to say the least to be met with comments from interview panels like, no client is going to want to engage someone who looks like you. After submitting over 100 applications and being rejected at every turn, Urfa concluded that the law would not accept someone like her, and she took a nonlegal graduate role at the ATO. How Urfa got from there to becoming a Victorian magistrate is a tale of talent, hard work, self belief, resilience, and a love of the law that just would not leave her alone. Urfa is not entirely comfortable or even entirely aware that she is a role model. But when news of her appointment spread quickly through the international press, she recognised that whether she liked it or not, being a first would be part of her story.

Urfa Masood: [00:01:36] It was very surprising for me how much it seemed to mean to people around me and overseas. When the announcement was initially made in terms of the press release, and I think the Attorney General at the time tweeted about it on his account, I I still remember within, couldn't even have been fifteen minutes, I got phone calls from the age and I think the Herald Sun saying, We can get a photographer out to your house in half an hour. Of course I said, No. And then I thought, How did you get my phone number? So, you know, it kind of started with that. The news of my appointment started to trend on Twitter. One of my friends rang me and said, you're trending on Twitter. I've never known anyone that's trended on Twitter. I said, neither have I.

Michael Green: [00:02:44] Our guest this morning in Lives in the Law is Her Honour Urfa Masood of the Magistrates Court of Victoria. Good morning, Urfa.

Urfa Masood: [00:02:51] Good morning.

Michael Green: [00:02:53] Urfa, you are unique of course, being the first Muslim woman who was a judicial officer in Victoria, which is interesting and we'll get into the detail of that later. But I'd like to learn about your family because it seems to me you can't have got to where you've got to without coming from what I would consider to be a good family.

Urfa Masood: [00:03:11] Look, think it's correct that we all stand on the shoulders of the people that come before us. My family is originally from Sri Lanka. I'm the youngest of three children and I have two older brothers. So I was born in Dubai. My family, my parents and my brothers were living there at the time. I lived there till I was about seven. Then my family moved back to Sri Lanka. My parents wanted to be closer to family but it was a period of unrest in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka had a very long standing civil war and at the age of 11 we migrated to Australia.

Michael Green: [00:03:46] That civil war was between Sinhalese and Tamils?

Urfa Masood: [00:03:50] That was one aspect of it. Think a lot of people probably heard of the Tamil Tigers as they were called colloquially. So they had that independent struggle on one side. And on the other side, there was a communist uprising from a group called the JVP. So it was this double fronted conflict that was occurring in the country at the time.

Michael Green: [00:04:10] And those two sides, the Tamils and the communists, were both against the singleese majority? Was that what it was?

Urfa Masood: [00:04:17] Well, they were against the government. And of course that meant by default with all the things that were going on with the curfews and the bombs and all of those sorts of things, everyone felt the effects of it. But it was direct conflict with the government.

Michael Green: [00:04:31] Being a child growing up in the civil war, must have had a big impact on you, on your daily life.

Urfa Masood: [00:04:37] It did. And you know, I suppose the most basic basic aspect of it is that every time you went out, army checkpoints and soldiers with rifles on the street was a very common thing. Curfews were a very common thing. Bombs would go off on a relatively regular basis. I still remember being in the house one day and the entire building shaking and the window frame shaking when a bomb went off. You know, political assassinations were quite common. I remember as a child everywhere we went, there was this tension in the air because every person knew someone that had been killed or of someone that had been killed in a horrible fashion. So I still remember all of that tension growing up.

Michael Green: [00:05:16] And any person you passed on the street, in fact, may be an assassin? Is that putting it too....

Urfa Masood: [00:05:22] No, it's not because it is a bit like a sliding doors moment. I know many people who've had stories of I missed that bomb going off by a few minutes. In fact, my husband who grew up in Sri Lanka had that experience as well. There was a bomb that went off, I think it was in the Central Bank Building, and he still tells the story of how he missed it by about ten minutes.

Michael Green: [00:05:44] Your school burnt down?

Urfa Masood: [00:05:46] It did. So at one point what happened was the Sri Lankan government was signing some kind of accord with the Indian government to allow Indian troops to come to Sri Lanka. It was a very unpopular move with the people locally and on the day of the signing of the accord there were these very big protests and riots and they were occurring at Parliament House.

Michael Green: [00:06:08] This is in Colombo?

Urfa Masood: [00:06:10] In Colombo at Parliament House and we lived a few streets away from Parliament House. So one of my most distinct memories of that time is that day standing on the balcony of our house. I could hear the protesters and the rioters

and it's obviously a lot of noise coming from that. And everywhere you looked, you could see these plumes of smoke rising into the air and helicopters flying overhead with these large buckets or vessels carrying water trying to put them out. You know, it was like something out of a movie really looking back on it. But it was that day as part of those riots that my school got burnt down or a significant part of the school got burnt down as well because they were also in that region, the location of the school.

Michael Green: [00:06:49] Urfa, how did a family function in such a situation? You've got your mum and dad, your two older brothers. Did life go on as normal or does life get put on hold?

Urfa Masood: [00:06:59] Life doesn't get put on hold in conflict zones. People still have to live life the way they ordinarily do. So in amongst all of these memories, I have memories of weekends spent with my cousins, going to my auntie's houses. So my mom was one of seven girls and she had four brothers and my dad was one of five. So we had a very large family of over fifty first cousins. So I still remember, for example, going to my auntie's house on the weekend and all of my aunties descending on the property. And you know, these are very loud, confident, funny women who never let anyone walk all over them. So I still have very strong memories of that as well. There were weddings, there were university graduations, high school graduations, all of those things still occur along with having to navigate the conflict that was occurring at the time.

Michael Green: [00:07:52] And your mom and dad are going on with their lives. I think your mom was a teacher. Your dad's got his own business. All these things are just.

Urfa Masood: [00:08:01] So business obviously is affected by curfews and things like that. So that was a challenging time. My mum was a teacher. In fact, all of her sisters were teachers as well. And but at the time my mum was not working when we moved back to Sri Lanka. She wanted to focus on the children and spending time with them. So she wasn't working at the time. But my mum, in spite of that, is probably one of the strongest women I know. She has a very strong sense of herself, a very strong sense of family and family history. She's a natural storyteller. I think that has a lot to do with my sense of belonging because she's given me a very strong sense of my family history. And that's really helped me as well.

Michael Green: [00:08:42] Are you the only family of the extended family that moved to Australia?

Urfa Masood: [00:08:47] That moved to Australia, yes. Except that in the last probably five to ten years, I've had a couple of my cousins move here with employment and the like. So we've got a bit more family, which is nice. But at the time that we moved here, yes, absolutely. It was just us. And it was just us for a very long time.

Michael Green: [00:09:04] And it was the civil war which prompted the move?

Urfa Masood: [00:09:07] It was because things were getting very challenging and my parents decided that if we had the option, would be a good thing to move somewhere more stable and safe.

Michael Green: [00:09:15] And you come to Melbourne. There's been a brief contact with a lady named Alfreda. Alfreda?

Urfa Masood: [00:09:22] Yes. So Auntie Alfreda, Auntie as we called her, was someone that my dad met when we were in Sri Lanka. He'd only met her once a couple of months before we moved to Australia. And I remember he came home and he said he'd met her at some event and he'd said to her that we were planning on moving to Australia. And she said, Oh yeah, sure. And here's my phone number. She told us later she didn't think it would actually happen because it was such a rare thing back then. And Auntie Alfreda had moved to Australia in the 70s with her husband who was a doctor and raising her family here. So a couple of months later, my dad rang her and told her we were getting on that plane and coming here. And she was an amazingly generous woman. She asked how many of us were coming. She asked how many bags we were bringing with us. And she turned up to the airport with her car and two taxis and she took us and she'd never met my mum or the kids, the three of us, and she took us to her home in Wheelers Hill. Her two adult children at the time had moved out, they'd just finished university and she put us up in her house for a couple of weeks, taught us everything we needed to know about how to settle in. She helped us find a house in Springvale at the time and she also had, I remember for all of the kids, for the three of us, she had various different duties and skills she wanted us to learn to help the family settle in. My job was to learn how to read the Melways because obviously there

was no GPS back then. So she sat me down and she taught me how to read this really complex book of maps. I'm sure a number of our listeners don't know what a Melways is, but she taught me how to read this book of maps so that I could help the family navigate around. So that was my job at the time.

Michael Green: [00:11:00] What an amazing person.

Urfa Masood: [00:11:01] She was very generous.

Michael Green: [00:11:02] So what age are you when you come to Australia, you and your brothers? Then Kateri, another point first. English. Is it your second language?

Urfa Masood: [00:11:12] No, actually it's my first language because when I started school in Dubai, went to English medium schools. And in Sri Lanka, I went to an international school, which was an American international school. It was a very diverse environment. There were a lot of expats and diplomats kids at the school. So we had children from over 40 different countries at the school. So I'd always been to school in English and language was never an issue, luckily.

Michael Green: [00:11:40] At home you spoke English?

Urfa Masood: [00:11:43] At home we primarily did. When we were in Dubai at one point my parents did start speaking to us in Tamil, is their native language, because they wanted us to be able to communicate with our grandparents when we travelled back. So I do speak Tamil, not very good Tamil, but enough to hold a conversation.

Michael Green: [00:12:00] And so you get to Australia, Auntie Alfrieda helped set you up. What grade were you in school? You and your brothers, what grades did you go into?

Urfa Masood: [00:12:09] So we were following the American school year, so from September to June. I'd just finished year six. My brothers had just finished year eight and year 10. So I'd finished year six. We moved here in the August and my parents didn't want us to not go to school until the January the following year because I'd be six months out of school. They enrolled us for term four of school here. I can't remember

what years my brother's enrolled in, but I was enrolled in term four of year seven. So I did term four of year seven and then went straight through to year eight after that.

Michael Green: [00:12:44] Was this in Melbourne or did you move to Sydney because of the cold weather in Melbourne?

Urfa Masood: [00:12:49] That term of school was actually in Sydney. My parents did in fact move to Sydney because they didn't like the weather in Melbourne. It was a bit too cold. So we moved to Sydney. We were there. I did term four of year seven in Sydney and then in fact someone said you should try Perth, the weather in Perth is much better and it's much closer to Sri Lanka if you need to travel back. So we ended up packing our bags and moving to Perth and we lived there for four years.

Michael Green: [00:13:14] Adapting to the Australian education system, was it difficult apart from the different timing?

Urfa Masood: [00:13:19] No, not really. Not really. Because we'd been following the American curriculum, I didn't find a huge difference and that wasn't a particular problem.

Michael Green: [00:13:27] And your parents sent you to Catholic schools?

Urfa Masood: [00:13:29] They did.

Michael Green: [00:13:30] Why did they do that?

Urfa Masood: [00:13:31] They just knew that they wanted somewhere that had good values and good discipline. And what they'd been told was that Catholic schools offered that. They also wanted a good education, obviously. So from their inquiries, they thought that was the best fit for us. And so we ended up at Catholic schools.

Michael Green: [00:13:48] But at the end of year 11 for you, maybe year 12 for your, I don't know, maybe university for your brother above you, you moved to Canberra.

Urfa Masood: [00:13:57] We did. So my brother had just finished year 12. I'd just finished year 11. I'd caught up a year because of skipping that year when we moved

here and he wanted to study law. I was also sure at that point I wanted to study law. My dad did his research and for reasons I don't fully understand, he came to the conclusion that the ANU had one of the best law faculties in Australia. And so we moved to Canberra on the basis that my brother got in there. He had already been offered a position there and that I wanted to go there as well. So I ended up finishing year 12 in Canberra. It's a fair bit of moving.

Michael Green: [00:14:33] What about your mum and dad with their jobs and accommodation for the family and things like that? That must have been difficult for them.

Urfa Masood: [00:14:40] My dad was self employed, so that made it easier on that basis. So we always managed that way. And at that point, my oldest brother had moved to Ireland for university there. He wanted to study medicine. He'd just missed out on medicine here in Australia. And he went to a Catholic school where there were Irish fathers at the school and they suggested going to Ireland. So my oldest brother had already moved to Ireland for university And I think my parents didn't want to lose their remaining two children to university as well. So we moved as a family at that point.

Michael Green: [00:15:14] So you and your brother, we're just concentrating the older brother, you and he, your two Muslim kids in Catholic schools. No other Muslim kids?

Urfa Masood: [00:15:24] Not when I was there, no. And this was the early 90s in Perth. So no children of diverse backgrounds were a rare thing back then.

Michael Green: [00:15:34] All Anglo Celtic?

Urfa Masood: [00:15:35] Pretty much, yes. I can think of perhaps two or three others in the whole school that were of diverse backgrounds. But otherwise, yes, we were very much a minority.

Michael Green: [00:15:45] I mean kids typically, particularly at that age, their peer group means a lot to them and they want acceptance by their peer group. Did that make it difficult for you?

Urfa Masood: [00:15:54] It was challenging in that there was always that element of having to explain yourself. Know, you're always a bit of a curiosity and a novelty. It was even basic things like I'd say to people, my family's from Sri Lanka and they'd be like, where's Sri Lanka? Never heard of that. So, you know, it was getting past those sorts of initial impressions. And then as kids normally do, once they get past those initial inquiries, we just got on with the business of being So

Michael Green: [00:16:21] Really, are you saying no overt discrimination or racism?

Urfa Masood: [00:16:25] Not from my fellow students. I'm hesitating because I'm actually, and this is something I haven't thought about in a very long time, but you've triggered a memory of a teacher who pulled me aside one day for something and I can't remember exactly what it was and he used that line, you're living in Australia now, you know, you need to change your ways. I can't remember what it was about, but I do distinctly remember that conversation. But it's something I haven't thought about in a very long time.

Michael Green: [00:16:55] So you get through school, get good marks obviously because you get into law at ANU. I do. You're 16? I am. Was that a difficulty? I mean, a lot of the other students would have been starting at 18.

Urfa Masood: [00:17:08] They would have. Look, being 16 was definitely a challenge socially. I never got bullied or anything like that. I made friends, but when you're 16, turning 17 and everyone else around you is turning 19 and they've got their driver's licenses and all of those things, it's actually at that age quite a large gap. I do feel like if I'd been older, perhaps those relationships and experiences would have been more meaningful. I still keep in touch with a couple of people from uni, but I do feel like if I'd been older, it would have been a different experience.

Michael Green: [00:17:41] Being the youngest person in your year, did you participate in the social cultural side of university?

Urfa Masood: [00:17:47] I did. So I became members of various associations. I volunteered at things. I had part time jobs as you do. And it also helped that my brother

was only a year ahead of me at law school. So we had a number of common friends and he had a driver's licence which helped.

Michael Green: [00:18:03] Helped get you to the parties, etc.

Urfa Masood: [00:18:05] Yes.

Michael Green: [00:18:05] You've used a phrase which I'd never heard before until reading your background, Perfur. Third culture kids. What does that phrase mean?

Urfa Masood: [00:18:15] Third culture kids basically refers to children or young people who've grown up with one foot in two different cultures. For me, that would have been obviously the dominant culture that I'm living in in Australia, as well as my family's Sri Lankan culture and heritage. And growing up in that sort of context, what you end up doing is you draw the best of both worlds and you create your own unique identity. So that's a term that's used to describe children or young people who've grown up in that situation who draw from all of the cultures that influence them and build their own unique identity as third culture kids.

Michael Green: [00:18:54] Is it or can it be a positive experience?

Urfa Masood: [00:18:56] I think it can be. There are challenges that come with it, but I think what it does is it also makes you very resilient. And you have to learn to mould your identity very quickly. You need to develop a strong sense of self to understand and you need to understand yourself to be able to navigate the challenges that come your way. So I do think there are advantages of it.

Michael Green: [00:19:19] So you get through university successfully with an honours degree and like your peers, you're applying for graduate programmes, summer clerkships, etc, etc. How did that go?

Urfa Masood: [00:19:31] Well, I started off very positively like everyone does at that age. I had an honours degree in law, as you said, and a degree in economics. And I thought the world was my oyster really. And I applied for jobs through the graduate recruitment programme. I got a lot of interviews, so that was a very positive thing. But

what happened in those interviews brought me back down to earth very quickly because I was interviewed by national law firms, I was interviewed by a national accounting firm, I registered with recruitment agents and more than one lawyer and more than one recruitment agent said to me, you will not find a job as a graduate lawyer because of the way you look. I'm a visibly Muslim woman. It was a very unusual thing at the time for someone like me to be in the legal profession. And this wasn't an implication. These were the actual words that we used. So I got to the point where I was doing all these interviews, was getting these rejections and at the end of it I must have put in at least 50 applications and I kept getting these rejections and I became very disheartened at the end of it. I got to the point where I thought the law does not have a place for me. Nobody wanted me. And I just got to the point where I thought the law is not for me, the law does not want me.

Michael Green: [00:20:43] Can I just divert for a moment? I'm just interested in this point. Would it be the same now or maybe have we lifted our game significantly in the law as we should?

Urfa Masood: [00:20:52] I think things have changed in that there are a lot more young visibly Muslim lawyers in the profession. I see them in court more. I know of a number of young women that have started their own law firms. So it is becoming a more common thing. But this when I started, it was 1999. And back then the profession did not have the diversity it does now. I think we're improving, but there's still a long way to go.

Michael Green: [00:21:23] And back onto your track, you finish up with a graduate position at the Australian Taxation Office.

Urfa Masood: [00:21:29] I do. So I decide at that point, my father without my knowledge had sent my application into the ATO for their graduate recruitment program. I got called in for an interview there and I got offered the job. So I was so disillusioned at that point. I thought, right, I will take whatever job comes my way. So I took that job and off I went into the world of tax.

Michael Green: [00:21:50] Was it a legal job?

Urfa Masood: [00:21:51] No. So it was the graduate recruitment program and it was at the time that the GST was being introduced. So there was a lot of recruitment going on there. I wasn't hired in the legal section at that point.

Michael Green: [00:22:03] And so what were you hired to do?

Urfa Masood: [00:22:05] With the graduate recruitment program, initially you do a number of different rotations in various parts of the ATO, but you can apply for promotions out of this. So I did apply for promotions very quickly. I ended up at a call centre for the Ralph reforms that were going through at the time. I ultimately ended up as a research assistant to one of the assistant commissioners in the GST financial products area.

Michael Green: [00:22:28] Can I say, when I read about your background, Urifa, and you made these applications for positions and you were successful, it speaks to me of you having plenty of confidence and resilience as you say?

Urfa Masood: [00:22:43] Yes. Because you

Michael Green: [00:22:44] Had suffered knock backs. You'd suffered 50 applications to law firms with not one positive response. But once you got into the ATO, not even in a legal position, you had the confidence in yourself to apply for promotions successfully.

Urfa Masood: [00:22:58] I like to move forward. I'm one of these people that likes new challenges. I don't like, in an odd way I don't like being comfortable with the work that I'm doing. I like moving on to new challenges and pushing myself. So I think that's probably what's driven me with a lot of the things that I've done.

Michael Green: [00:23:15] And yet you only started the ATO for about eighteen months. Under what circumstances did you leave and why did you leave?

Urfa Masood: [00:23:22] The ATO started offering voluntary redundancies and at this point in time I'd started thinking about coming back to the law. In my heart of hearts, as exciting as tax was, I knew this wasn't where I wanted to be for the rest of my life. And I really wanted to go back and give law another go because I wanted to be a lawyer. I'd

done all the hard work to get this degree. In the back of my head, you know, and it sounds silly, but I probably thought I could save the world in some form as a lawyer. And I really wanted to go back and give it a go. So I took the redundancy. And at that time, my brother was working in London. I went overseas for a year to London. And whilst there, I did the practical legal training program through the ANU called Legal Workshop. They were offering it online. I think it was only the first time that a course like that was being offered online, so it was very progressive. And whilst in London, I worked in temporary jobs there, did this course to get admitted and then moved back to Australia a year later.

Michael Green: [00:24:20] Having done that course, this is just a bit of trivia for me. Did you have a formal admission ceremony? Absolutely. So when you came back?

Urfa Masood: [00:24:29] Absolutely. So I got admitted at the Supreme Court in the ACT. Yeah, okay. So yeah, I had the formal admission ceremony and did all of that. I had to be present here for the advocacy aspect of the course as well.

Michael Green: [00:24:42] So you've done your legal training, you've admitted, you want to get a job in the law, you're now a magistrate, so you must have got a job in the law.

Urfa Masood: [00:24:52] I did. What a surprise.

Michael Green: [00:24:54] What was it?

Urfa Masood: [00:24:56] Well, when I came back, I decided I would apply for anything and everything that came my way that was a legal job. So I remember I applied for three jobs. One was with a sole practitioner in the Northern Suburbs of Melbourne. The second was with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and I don't at this stage remember what the third one was. So the sole practitioner gave me a call and asked me to come in for an interview and I went in to see her, had high hopes and she was lovely. She sat me down, she had a conversation, she told me she was the first person in her community to become a lawyer and then she said to me, now dear, I'm not going to give you a job. I just wanted to call you in to give you some encouragement. And my heart just dropped at that point. I thought, really, I don't need your encouragement. I just need

a job. So I walked out of there feeling very disappointed. But then a few days later I got a call from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service asking me to come in for an interview as a criminal law solicitor. Now criminal law is something I'd never considered. A life of crime is not something I'd ever considered. But I went to this interview anyway. I said yes to everything they asked me. They said you'll have to travel around Victoria, you'll be in court every day. I said yes, that all sounds fantastic. And they offered me the job. So that's how I started in the law.

Michael Green: [00:26:16] With your background, I would have thought appearing in court every day in criminal matters would be a high amount than Mount Everest.

Urfa Masood: [00:26:25] It's a challenge for anyone appearing in court, I think. I think court is one of those things you either love or you hate. You'll know from years of experience in the law yourself that there's nowhere to hide in a courtroom. You need to find your feet pretty quickly. But the thing that happened for me was that even though this is not something I had ever considered being in court, even though I was a lawyer, I actually fell in love with being in a courtroom. I loved being on my feet. I loved thinking on my feet. I loved the variety and the people that you got to meet. So it actually turned out to be a wonderful thing from my perspective.

Michael Green: [00:27:02] Did you get support from Vowels? Was there any on the job training to help you with the advocacy?

Urfa Masood: [00:27:07] Not particularly. There was very minimal training. So there were seven solicitors in Vowels at that time who covered the entire state of Victoria. We covered, we shared all of the work in Metropolitan Melbourne, but we were allocated particular regions of Victoria. And for me that was Moir Magistrates Court as it was back then. And every matter that came through that court would land on my table and I'd have to figure out how to deal with it. So when I got hired, another young lawyer was hired at the same time, Sam Brown, and what happened as far as training was that one of the senior solicitors at Vowels whose name was Graham Davis and who's still a good friend to this day, took Sam and I on our first road trip. So our first road trip involved going to Moir Magistrates Court and he held my hand through my first day there and my first appearance in court as a lawyer. And then we went up to Bairnsdale where Sam

was to be the solicitor for that area. We spent a day or two in Bairnsdale. Then we came back to Melbourne and that was it.

Michael Green: [00:28:10] And from then on, the training wheels were off and you were in court every day appearing for a multitude of clients on a multitude of issues.

Urfa Masood: [00:28:19] It was a baptism of fire to say the least and probably one of the best training grounds for the bar to be honest. The next time I went back to Moi, I was by myself obviously. But on that day I had 11 clients on my list. I had not met any of them and had not had any of the paperwork relating to any of those matters. And I remember it as the first and only time I almost cried in court because I wasn't sure what I was doing. But by the end of the year, got the hang of it. And you know, like I said, you sink or you swim.

Michael Green: [00:28:53] Very quickly, and maybe very surprisingly, you find your sweet spot in the law.

Urfa Masood: [00:28:59] I do.

Michael Green: [00:29:00] Which is to be a criminal advocate appearing in court all the time. You're flat out there at Vails for again a period of about eighteen months.

Urfa Masood: [00:29:08] Yes.

Michael Green: [00:29:09] Then you decide you want to be a barrister or you've decided during that period, I want to be a barrister, I'm going to go to the bar.

Urfa Masood: [00:29:15] I did. So it was perhaps a bit surprisingly early to go to the bar at that point. But there were two things that influenced my decision. One was that I loved being in court and I knew that that's what I wanted to do every day. The second thing that appealed to me about the bar was the fact that you're self employed. And I love the idea of not having to apply for a job to work for someone again after the experiences that I had. So I decided I would apply for the bar readers course. I think it was 2003 or 2004 it escapes me.

Michael Green: [00:29:50] Whenever you were 26 because it says here you were 26 when you came to the bar.

Urfa Masood: [00:29:53] I probably was. But it was one of those moments as well where I don't think I'd really given too much thought to what it entailed because one of the first things I realised was that applying for the bar, paperworks that I needed someone to read with. And it hadn't occurred to me that this was something I would need to do and I didn't know who I would approach for that purpose. So I went next door to Graeme's office and I said, Graeme, I want to join the bar. Apparently I need someone to read with. What do I do? And he was lovely. He said, leave it with me. And about an hour or two later, he said, look, I've spoken to Tony Lavery. He's agreed to take you on as a reader. So that's how I got a master at the And I read with Tony Lavery whilst I was at the bar for the first nine months or a year. I can't remember how long it's meant to be.

Michael Green: [00:30:39] And Tony was a criminal advocate?

Urfa Masood: [00:30:41] He was. So he used to run criminal trials in the county court and he was at equity chambers, which no longer exists, as you would know. And all the barristers in those chambers were criminal trial advocates.

Michael Green: [00:30:54] And were they helpful to you? I mean, what we hear regularly on the podcast, and my own experience when I was working here, was that people are very generous in the time that they give to fellow practitioners.

Urfa Masood: [00:31:05] Absolutely, absolutely. And they were all, to put it colloquially, my phone of friends. So the thing about working in court and being in the law is there's always something new that comes up and you need to be able to speak to someone and they were all very good at taking my calls when I needed to or answering my questions in chambers. So they were very supportive people.

Michael Green: [00:31:27] And what style of practice did you develop?

Urfa Masood: [00:31:30] I did primarily criminal law. I ended up picking up child protection family division work as well and criminal work. And I also started doing a bit of family law work whilst I was at the bar.

Michael Green: [00:31:42] And how long were you at the bar for?

Urfa Masood: [00:31:44] Until 2016, so that worked out to about eleven years I think.

Michael Green: [00:31:49] Did you develop a style as an advocate? And if you did develop a style, what was it?

Urfa Masood: [00:31:56] I did develop a style and they were influenced by two pieces of advice that I was given when I was starting out. When I did my legal workshop through the ANU, we had an advocacy workshop and there was a lecturer who said to me, even if you don't know what you're doing, always maintain eye contact with the bench. You'd be surprised at what you can achieve. And those are words I've lived by and they've proved very fruitful in many different situations. The other rule that I also think about a lot is when I was getting admitted here in Victoria through the mutual recognition scheme, I had to get some documents signed by the prothonotary of the Supreme Court. Don't ask me what they do, I have no idea. But I met this lovely lady who signed off on my documents, asked me what I was going to be doing. I told her I was starting off as criminal law solicitor and she said to me, remember the hardest thing about being in court is knowing when to shut up. And I think that is so true. Knowing when to stop talking because the bench is on your side, knowing not to ask that one question too many and knowing when to stop is so important. So those are two pieces of advice that have really influenced my advocacy over the years.

Michael Green: [00:33:08] I'm assuming when you came to the bar, signed the bar role, you certainly would have been the only Muslim woman and possibly the only Muslim, I'm not sure. Was there resistance?

Urfa Masood: [00:33:18] There were no other visibly Muslim women like me at the bar the entire time I was at the bar. And there were barriers, there were barriers. And the best probably, it's probably best illustrated by examples. I remember, for example, a solicitor who once said to me, Who would want someone that looks like you

representing them in the big criminal trials? And then he said, Sorry, because of course that makes it all okay. And again, it comes back to that issue of perception. For example, I went into my clerk's office one day to pick up a brief. After hours, I was with my husband dressed casually in jeans as you are. And I was trying to get into the office. One of the other senior came in and was trying to get in and he looked at me and said, Oh, are you the cleaners? And I said, No, actually I'm the barrister. I'm trying to get my brief. He looked suitably embarrassed. But it just brings you back to that point that when people think of a lawyer or a barrister or a magistrate or judge. They don't think of someone that looks like me. And that challenges people's perceptions and how they interact with you. Because you have to get past that perception first.

Michael Green: [00:34:26] It must challenge you as well.

Urfa Masood: [00:34:28] It does. And it gets exhausting because you've always got to work past that, help them realise that you are a normal person incompetent before you can get on with the business of what you're doing. And in fact, there's another experience that stayed with me for a very long time. When I was at the family court one day and I was appearing for a father, the father and mother were of Lebanese background, they had two young children. And after submissions in court, we'd stood down for the ICL to draft some minutes of orders. And my client said to me, his children were like under the age of five at that stage, so they primarily speak Arabic. They're getting a family report and the counsellor who's running the session might need the assistance of an interpreter. So I went up to the ICL. We were in the foyer outside court. It was very busy. There were lots of people. And I told him that the children might require an interpreter. At this point, the barrister for the mother was standing at the end of the couch. This barrister was a very senior junior. And before I knew it, this person leaned across and yelled in my ear in a very loud voice, you're living in Australia now. And suddenly there was this moment of total silence in the foyer. You could hear a pin drop. I didn't know what to do. All I managed to say was I know where we're living. And I continued my conversation with the ICL. But one of the things I remember the most about that moment is that no one else said anything. There were a lot of senior barristers there, there were other lawyers, no one said anything. And we just moved on as if nothing had happened.

Michael Green: [00:36:01] There is, or there are processes for making complaints to the bar council aren't they? And I would have thought a situation like that called for a complaint.

Urfa Masood: [00:36:10] Look, probably. I don't recall if there were processes in place at that time. This was over twenty years ago now. There might have been. I certainly wasn't aware of them. But the other thing is from a personal perspective, all I knew at that point was that I'd finally got my opportunity to be a lawyer and I wanted to prove that I could be a good lawyer and a good barrister, and I didn't want to do anything to risk that. So it didn't even occur to me to complain at that point. And my way of dealing with it was to rely on my friends. I had a group of girlfriends who were all Muslim women starting off in various different professions trying to make their way forward. So we became each other's support. And that was how I got through. Maybe now looking back, I've had the confidence and knowledge that I do now, I might have lodged a complaint. But back then it didn't occur to me.

Michael Green: [00:36:58] And despite incidents like that, you love being embarrassed.

Urfa Masood: [00:37:01] I do. And that's the thing is that when you're doing something that puts that many obstacles in your way, there's got to be something you love about what you're doing to sustain you. And for me, it was the fact that I just loved being in court and I loved advocacy. So that sustained me and it kept me going. And oddly, there's something liberating about being at the bar table because I came to realize that regardless of how people perceive you, if you make a good argument, that's all they can focus on. Everything else falls by the wayside. So I found that noddily liberating and powerful thing, and I loved it.

Voiceover: [00:37:43] William and Lonsdale is brought to you by Greenslist, one of the leading multidisciplinary barristers lists in Australia. Greenslist believe in promoting conversation around the ideas and issues that shape not only our legal system, but our wider community.

Michael Green: [00:38:03] Loving it as much as you did, when you're offered, or when you make an application to become a magistrate after twelve years as a barrister, did you have some hesitation because of your love of being a barrister?

Urfa Masood: [00:38:16] I absolutely had hesitation. It was more because I'd not had a positive start in the profession. One of my colleagues who was a barrister at the time got appointed as a magistrate a couple of months before me. That was what triggered the thought process in my head and I thought, gosh, I wonder if I could do this. But there's always that self doubt because you've always been told you don't belong in the profession. And I thought, is someone like me allowed to do something like this? You know, is this something that someone like me can do? And I remember I was able to speak to a magistrate I met one day and I used to appear before quite regularly. And he was very encouraging in relation to the idea. And for me, that was a light bulb moment because it made me realise that he saw something in me that I didn't myself. And that gave me the encouragement I needed to continue on.

Michael Green: [00:39:03] And so you applied?

Urfa Masood: [00:39:05] I did.

Michael Green: [00:39:06] And I don't know how long thereafter, but I'm guessing not that long after you applied, you get a call from the Attorney General, I guess, saying come and have a chat.

Urfa Masood: [00:39:13] Well, doesn't work quite that way. With the expression of interest process there's an interview process that you have to go through. So I remember being called into this interview, it was in one of the tall buildings in the city, I can't remember which one. And I remember going upstairs, standing outside these heavy wooden doors of a conference room waiting to go in. You have one of those moments where you think this is it. If I get this right, it's great. If not, that's the end of any ambitions I have on this front. And I went in and there was this massive conference table and there were five people sitting around the table, including the chief magistrate. I think there were some representatives from the Department of Justice, the Victorian government solicitor and a recruitment agent type person. And so we had to go through the interview process I must have said something right because eventually I got a phone call from the Attorney General, which was very surprising for me, mean personally. But yeah, it was a very meaningful moment.

Michael Green: [00:40:10] And not just a meaningful moment for you, but it actually, the news spread around the world, guess in this age of social media, but it's spread around the Muslim world.

Urfa Masood: [00:40:19] It was very surprising for me how much it seemed to mean to people around me and overseas. When the announcement was initially made in terms of the press release and I think the Attorney General at the time tweeted about it on his account, I still remember within couldn't even have been fifteen minutes, I got phone calls from the age and I think the Herald Sun saying we can get a photographer out to your house in half an hour. Of course, I said no. And then I thought, how did you get my phone number? So it kind of started with that. The news of my appointment started to trend on Twitter. One of my friends rang me and said, you're trending on Twitter. I've never known anyone that's trended on Twitter. I said, neither have I. And it started spreading on social media. So I know that it got as far as North America, England. It hit the press in places like Indonesia and Malaysia. It hit the press in Sri Lanka. So there was a radio station there that got in touch with my parents to interview my parents. And I remember my mom was very annoyed because they kept getting her name wrong. And then the other thing was that locally I had so many people from the profession come up to me and say, now that you've done it, feel like I can do it too. I didn't realise how much it would mean to everyone around me.

Michael Green: [00:41:35] That's fantastic, isn't it? But there was some negativity. There Because it's social media, it's uncontrollable, isn't it?

Urfa Masood: [00:41:42] It is. And it wasn't just from social media. I remember one day I came off the bench, it must have been about a week after I got appointed and I found a number of messages on my phone from friends and family asking me if I was okay. And I didn't know what was going on at that point. Then I discovered that news of my appointment had hit talkback radio and suffice it to say that some not very pleasant things were said about it. And there was also an article in The Age that day about the abuse that the Attorney General's Office had received for appointing someone like me to a job like this. So there was a very bittersweet element to it all at that point.

Michael Green: [00:42:20] And yet support came from some unexpected quarters.

Urfa Masood: [00:42:23] Yes. There were a number of colleagues who checked in on me which was very nice and very kind. There was a county court judge that reached out to me because he'd seen the article and he wanted to express his support. He took me out for lunch. Tony Howard, I think you might know. And so, you know, there were a couple of people that reached out to me from other jurisdictions as well, which was very kind just to check-in and make sure I was Okay.

Michael Green: [00:42:47] And so you land up on the bench. How did you go to start? I mean, did you feel comfortable there or did you feel, I might be a bit out of my depth here, this is a bit different.

Urfa Masood: [00:42:58] Look, moving onto the bench is an interesting transition because when you're at the bar table, effectively what you're doing is poking holes in an argument. And when you're on the bench, realize suddenly the buck stops with you and you are responsible for the entire list that is listed before you that day. And you start to discover the burden of decision making because you realise that the decisions that you make will impact the people before you in a significant way. You could be removing their child from their care, you could be sending them to jail, You could be making an intervention order that removes them from their home and potentially makes them homeless. So you do carry that burden, but your skills as an advocate also come into play at that point. And again, to use a colloquialism, court is my happy place. So you kind of go into that space in your head where you think I will be able to manage what comes my way, that I have the tools in my toolbox to figure out how to deal with it.

Michael Green: [00:43:57] You never suffered from imposter syndrome?

Urfa Masood: [00:43:59] Oh, did. Oh, I did. I spent, I think probably the first year or two suffering from imposter syndrome. I kept waiting for someone to tell me they'd made a mistake and they'd got it all wrong. But you do have that because when you've been repeatedly told that you are not welcome in the profession, at some point it starts to have an impact on you. Deep down, you start to question yourself. But I got past that. It's been ten years now, so I've got past that.

Michael Green: [00:44:29] And in those ten years, I was going to say theories is not exactly the right word, but you know what I mean, have you developed about being a

judicial officer, sitting up there and making decisions? Have you got some rules, guidelines for yourself to follow?

Urfa Masood: [00:44:44] My number one rule is trying to make sure that everyone feels heard and put their side of the story or their evidence, I should say, it's not a story. And it's a fine line to walk because you need to make sure everyone has the time to be heard, but you also can't let them take all day because you're in a high volume court. So feeling heard is the most important thing. And the second thing is being able to explain your decision in clear language that they actually understand. Because my experience is that even when I'm making decisions adverse to someone, when I'm able to explain to them why I made the decision and acknowledging the course of that what they have told me that I've considered it and in spite of that reached a particular conclusion, they seem to react as well as they can at that point in time. They react relatively positively at that point in time, I find.

Michael Green: [00:45:38] Gurufar, was it overwhelming becoming a magistrate? Were you given training when you started? And as an observer, a distant observer, it seems to me magistrates have a huge volume of work, just sort of like a tidal wave, hit them every day. Is that what it's like?

Urfa Masood: [00:45:55] It is very much what it's like. So we are given some induction training and support and you sit with another magistrate initially for a couple of weeks if you need to. But it's not until you get appointed you realise the breadth and the depth of the work the Magistrates Court does. We actually sit across about seven jurisdictions. So adult crime is our bread and butter. Then we have the children's court where there's the criminal division dealing with children and the legal considerations there are different to adults. Then you have the family division dealing with protection applications and the like. We deal with intervention orders and family violence. We deal with a civil jurisdiction. We deal with OHMS and work cover prosecutions. So these and it was only a couple of years ago I realised that our power of offences because we deal with disputes in the fencing act as well. So there's always something new that comes up. And in terms of how we approach our day in court, we are a jurisdiction where we have no advance notice of the matters coming before us. What I mean by that is we are effectively given a roster that tells us which list you're in for the next day. So it might be family violence or remands or contested hearings. And that's all we know. So you go

into court for that day and then the matters start coming in. For example, if you're doing an intervention order, you're handed a file, you read the application, you say, now what are Victoria Police asking for? What does the respondent say? What does the AFM say? And then you have to make a decision and move on to the next one because our lists are between 40 to 65, 17 a day that you have to get through. You can do a criminal mention list with upwards of 100 matters listed that day. You're in a

Michael Green: [00:47:40] I mean surely 100 matters, you couldn't do it in a day.

Urfa Masood: [00:47:44] We have to and we do. And it doesn't mean that all of the matters necessarily run as please, but you are hearing pleas and you're dealing with mentioned matters in the normal course of decision making that you have to with mentioned matters as well. So we do have to do that. It's what we're expected to do. When you're sitting in a remand court, basically how that works is that we are responsible for the arrests police have made overnight. So it's always unpredictable to know how many people are going to be in the cells when you start the day. It usually is between, in my experience, certainly when I was at Sunshine, is eight to 12 people a day in their cells. So then you have to manage the are they going to be bail applications? Are they going to be straight remands? You go into court, again, we know nothing about the matters. You've got the accused sitting in the dock, the charges come up on your screen and then the police informant, if they're present in court, gives evidence about what the offending is. So that's when you it's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. So you hear about the offending and then you hear from the defence lawyer about their client and the circumstances that they're in and about why they should be granted bail. So then you consider those issues and make a decision. But again, you know, your average bail application probably take you half an hour, forty five minutes. You make your decision and then you move on to the next one.

Michael Green: [00:49:07] Do you often have to stand something down to go and check the law?

Urfa Masood: [00:49:11] Not always, because the more you do it, the more confident you become of your knowledge of the law. You also become more confident at saying to the bar table, take me to where my power comes from. Which act does that come from? What's the case law relating to this? So those are skills you develop as time goes on

and the confidence that you develop as time goes on. Again, if you need to, you also develop the confidence to say, I will adjourn this part heard or I'm going to stand down to consider my decision and do the thinking that you need to. But we are generally a court where 95% of things are resolved or concluded on that day of the hearing.

Michael Green: [00:49:52] I'm going to say live in fear, but obviously you don't live in fear. But the thought of being appealed, does it play on your mind? Does it bother you?

Urfa Masood: [00:50:00] No. Again, the longer I've sat on the bench, it does not. Appeals can occur for any number of reasons. I think when you start, you think it's because you've done everything wrong and made a mistake. But that is not the case. There are any number of reasons why appeals occur and how matters are put to an appeal court can be different to how they were put to you as well. So I've learnt over the years not to give too much thought to that.

Voiceover: [00:50:26] Lives in the Law is proudly sponsored by City Maps Illustrated. Their recent publication, The Melbourne Map, is a celebration of our wonderful city. This stunning hand drawn illustration, which took more than three years to create, is available as an art print, jigsaw puzzle and calendar. The perfect acquisition for your home, office or corporate gifting.

Michael Green: [00:50:54] For working in such a highly pressured situation as the Magistrates Court is, it's obviously important to have something apart from your work, to have somewhere to go to recover, if recover is the right word, to look after your own well-being. Are you conscious of that? Are you aware that you can't 20 fourseven focus on the matters that are coming before you, that might come before you, etcetera? You've actually got to set aside some time so that you can function as a person, look after your family and have some private time to regenerate yourself.

Urfa Masood: [00:51:27] Well-being is something I'm very conscious of. There's a lot of research now and the profession is becoming increasingly aware about vicarious trauma from all of the things that we deal with. We're often dealing with people at some of the worst points in their lives and we're dealing or we're in a situation where we are under a lot of pressure to make sure that the quality of our decision making is as good at 10AM as it is at 4PM in the afternoon, because that's what the people coming before

you deserve. Well-being for me particularly became an important issue when my colleagues a couple of years ago, he took his own life. It's something that sat very heavily with me since and with a lot of my colleagues who were at the court at that time. And it really highlighted for me the fact that we are a profession where we need to start talking about mental health and well-being. We are a profession that demands we be alpha personalities and that we're strong all the time. And that is simply not possible. No one can be strong all of the time. And as a profession, we need to start talking about the fact that sometimes we need to reach out for help, whether it's from family or friends or whether it's professional help, whatever that may look like, and that it's simply not a weakness. So from my perspective, I think talking about it and especially being leaders in the profession, talking about it is extremely important.

Michael Green: [00:52:47] Now Urufa, that's the theory of it. Practically, what do you do, if you can tell us, for your own well-being?

Urfa Masood: [00:52:54] Well, in addition to being a magistrate, I'm a mum. So I have two children that keep my feet firmly planted on the ground. And I find spending time with them is great because it's a way of blocking out work and all of those thoughts about work. But I don't have a lot of spare time. And one of the things I really like to do, frankly, is exercise. It really helps me work out off the tension that you carry with you through the day. So I try and feed in my strength workouts and my cardio workouts a couple of times of the week. I also find spending time I mentioned to you earlier in the podcast, those friends I used to speak to about the challenges I was facing when I was starting out as a barrister, they're still good friends and we still try and get together every four or six weeks and we have a conversation and being able to share with them how I'm feeling and the things I'm going through helps. The other thing I should also note is the court offers counselling services to magistrates. So we check-in with a psychologist every three months, which is a useful thing to do. You may not always need that help at that point in time, but it is something that is there for us if we need it.

Michael Green: [00:54:06] Whether you like it or not, Perfait, you are a role model for, I think, not only Muslim women in the law, but for many women in many walks of life. Does that sit comfortably with you?

Urfa Masood: [00:54:18] You know, it's a funny thing because it's not something you often think about in your own head. You know, at the end of the day, in my own head, I'm just a girl that goes to work every day and tries to do my best. And other people perceive you in particular ways. I am acutely aware of the fact that people do look at you as a role model, though, and I've become more aware over the years of speaking about my story because it encourages people and hopefully helps people aspire to certain things. So for example, there is now a Muslim Legal Network, which is an association that exists for Muslim lawyers and Muslim law students of which there are now a large number. And for example on International Women's Day they asked me to come in and speak to them and their law students about my experiences in the law. So I'm very aware of the fact that people do look up to you to a certain extent, but it's something I try not to think about all the time.

Michael Green: [00:55:15] No, you couldn't do that otherwise. You couldn't live your life, could you?

Urfa Masood: [00:55:17] No.

Michael Green: [00:55:18] Perfur, it's been wonderful talking to you this morning and opening our eyes to another life in the law and a different life in the law and an important life in the law. Thank you very much for coming in and talking to us.

Urfa Masood: [00:55:29] Thank you for having me.

Voiceover: [00:55:39] Show notes from today's episode can be found at greenslist.com.au/podcast. There you'll find links to things we've talked about in this episode, a transcript of the show, and some wonderful photos of our guests. If you're enjoying lives in the law, please tell your networks, subscribe, rate, and review the show. Your host is former lawyer and Greens list clerk, Michael Green. Our show is produced and edited by me, Catherine Green, mixed and mastered by Windmill Audio, and recorded by Alex McFarlane, who also wrote and performed all the music for the series. We're coming to you from the iconic Owen Dixon Chambers on the corner of William And Lonsdale Streets in our beautiful city of Melbourne. We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respect to their elders past and present. There is no doubt that conversations about

justice have been taking place on this land for thousands of years, and we are privileged to continue that discussion here today.