

In conversation with...

Pamela Legal Officer



What does your role involve?

As a senior legal officer in the Adult Legal Team, I work in a supported decision-making framework assisting clients with impaired decision-making ability to make decisions about their personal legal matters. I do this for clients who are under public guardianship for decisions about legal matters.

What is your professional background?

I studied a Bachelor of Laws/Bachelor of Arts (Justice Studies) and started my professional career at the Public Trustee of Queensland doing various roles within the Official Solicitors Office there while completing my practical legal training. After being admitted as a lawyer in 2008 I worked for the Public Trustee before moving to Scotland to work as an Investigations Officer with the General Teaching Council of Scotland. I also worked in private practice but it wasn't for me! I wanted a role with purpose which would allow me to help people which then lead me to OPG.

What does your typical work day look like?

My days are extremely varied and very busy with a lot of cases where I help people with legal issues, many with more than one legal problem. The primary purpose of my role is to help people make decisions regarding their legal matters; typically in criminal law, bail, domestic violence, child protection, family law and mental health-related legal issues. I engage legal representatives for my clients and then assist them to instruct their lawyers and ensure they understand and comprehend the advice they are given or, if they don't understand, I can progress legal matters on my clients' behalf. On a typical day I attend court to provide information and assistance about how the Court should deal with a client's matter. I also regularly attend client meetings where I assist clients in understanding advice from their lawyer and provide consent for them to take certain actions, such as enter a plea of guilty to criminal charges.

What are some challenges you've faced?

There are always challenges when you are advocating for the rights of vulnerable adults who are frequently in trouble with the law for behaviours related to their disability or mental health issues. In particular, I find it challenging having to continually fight the unhelpful mythology that because an adult has an impairment

they are deemed unable to be a parent. I have seen clients who have done nothing but be born with a disability have their children removed from their care. This is something that I find challenging in my role as a legal officer but I regularly advocate for my clients to prevent this from happening or, where it does happen, to ensure that a relationship can be supported and maintained where it's safe to do so. I am hoping that recent legislative changes in child protection can support more parents to maintain relationships with their children whether they end up being reunified to their care or not.

When have you played an integral role in promoting and protecting OPG clients' human rights?

Late in 2018 I was involved in a family law matter where I was assisting a client to instruct her lawyer regarding an agreement with her former partner around spending time with her four children who lived very far away from her. This client suffers anxiety and can't travel long distances so hadn't seen her children for more than two years. I spoke with my client and assured her that I would be involved along the way in court proceedings. I took steps to assist her lawyer to file legal documents and advocate on her behalf so that the client could see her children over Christmas. When the matter came

before the judge, she was very sympathetic towards my client's position and it was agreed that the father bring the children to see my client for two weeks over Christmas. My client was thrilled! My client wouldn't have continued with the legal proceedings if OPG wasn't involved, so it was a good feeling to know that our role was crucial to give her an opportunity to see her children again and hopefully many more times in the future.

What is the best part of your job?

I love to interact with my clients and see that I can help them move past their legal matters so they don't have those issues hanging over their head. It is rewarding to know that the work I do is valuable to the most disadvantaged people in society, even if they don't know what I do behind the scenes or see me face-to-face.