

The Man Behind the Mask



‘Call me Jeffrey,’ he said at the beginning of our lunch at the Singapore Cricket Club. This came as a pleasant surprise to me. Before the lunch interview, I was told that Dr Jeffrey Pinsler was serious and reserved. I reminded myself not to ask too many probing questions, which I am told that I tend to do during interviews. I found instead a warm and affable man who openly shared his views with me in an amusing and entertaining manner.

His Day

He wakes up at 5.30am on most days and starts working on his legal writings

before feeding his baby, Sophie. In the evenings, he can often be seen on his own at the soccer field near his home shooting at the goal (unobstructed by defenders and goal keeper!). Football, swimming and nature walks serve as relaxing exercise for him.

His Career

Jeffrey’s career and credentials need no introduction. Jeffrey, a Singaporean, started his legal career in the field of admiralty. Mr GP Selvam, for whom he has considerable respect, was his pupil master. In 1984, Jeffrey chose to leave

legal practice for academia (for which he always had a penchant), and brought his experience and interest in evidence and civil procedure to the National University of Singapore. He found his niche in teaching and writing in these disciplines which he believes are the foundations for the proper functioning of the litigation system in Singapore. His contributions to learning resulted in his appointment as a full professor in 2001. In March 2004, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws (LL.D) by his alma mater, the University of Liverpool, for his work. The LL.D is a higher doctorate awarded for supreme academic

Alter Ego

distinction in Law. Understandably, it is very rarely awarded.

The Law

'Jurisprudence is a crucial subject that looks at law from an underlying perspective. It is one thing to appreciate the scope and application of a rule and quite another to question its validity. It is the latter attribute which has resulted in the great legal developments of our time.' With regard to procedure, he says: 'For many, this is a dull subject. Indeed, many may think me dull for finding this discipline fascinating. My wife, Leena, is now used to me reading civil procedure reports on holidays, although at first she wondered whether she married the right person!'

'Procedure is wonderful in its flexibility. It permeates virtually every substantive law subject and adapts to the latter's particular needs. More than just a set of rules, it imbues the legal system with the qualities of fairness and justice. A dynamic force, it presents the civil litigator with the latitude to take initiatives appropriate to his or her client's case. The availability of new and expanded interlocutory reliefs (a consequence of the development of the Rules of Court since the 1990s) has enhanced this adversarial role.'

Teaching

'There is no short cut for developing analytical skills in the law. As a teacher, I prepare very hard for classes and I expect my students to show the same level of commitment. Tutorials are a vital component of university education because they provide the student with an ideal opportunity to articulate his

thoughts and develop his thinking. I often tell the junior students that while knowledge can be gained by self-study, they will only acquire the highest level of legal reasoning if they subject their thinking to the scrutiny offered by the classroom. Certainly, no less will be required of them when they eventually present their arguments in court.'

The Legal Profession

Jeffrey feels that the legal profession has a vital responsibility in the training and development of law students. 'Most pupil masters, being senior and established lawyers, are extremely busy. Although they have little time to spare, they can really make the difference between a pupil leaving or remaining in practice. The master's role is akin to that of a spiritual master initiating an acolyte into some great tradition. The master-pupil relationship is one which should inculcate in the latter all that is noble about the profession. However, pupil masters should not be expected to carry the whole burden. Every lawyer has a responsibility to his fellows and, for this purpose must, at the very least, be a role-model. Lawyers also need to rediscover how to enjoy their work in the face of modern day societal pressures.'

Listening to Jeffrey's views on the role of lawyers, I am reminded of what Sam, whom I had written about in my last column, shared with me. Sam lamented that many lawyers in Singapore treat their jobs as a routine task and that the passion for law is often missing. He further shared that a lawyer should live the law and not do the law. Lawyers should be the drivers of the legal profession and not be passengers who only react to changes.

Lawyers bemoan that they cannot make any changes to the profession. To Sam, if you don't try, you will never know the kind of difference that you can make.

His Students Speak

I had the opportunity to read some of the comments made about Jeffrey by his students for the academic year 2003/2004. I reproduce some of their comments:

'Professor Pinsler, during the introductory lectures, made Evidence sound much more interesting than it in fact is. You can tell he's excited by what he teaches, and he's able to incorporate evidence issues into current events, and go off on relevant tangents that make class much more enjoyable and effective.'

'He has a wonderful style of teaching. He is one of the best professors/lecturers I have ever come across in law school. He is very clear and organised and he has a very good structure of explaining issues. He is able to simplify difficult concepts and make it interesting for the students. He encourages questioning and response. He is able to get the class thinking after making sure that it understands the concepts. Best of all, he is funny, nice and jovial. A most brilliant teacher.'

Most Important Events

Jeffrey says: 'My marriage to Leena and the arrival of our daughter Sophie were the most important events in my life. They made a huge impact on my life. I am very grateful for them.'

Rajan Chettiar

Rajan Chettiar & Co

E-mail: rajanchettiar@pacific.net.sg