Spotlight on Centre Board Member:
Stephen Somerville

Interview by Siqun Dong

Stephen Somerville in robes while a Judge's Associate

Commercial litigation, pro bono advocacy, and community legal work: In this interview, Stephen Somerville – Counsel, Pro Bono at Ashurst – reflects on his journey, the values that have shaped his career, and his current role leading pro bono initiatives.

Siqun: It is a great honour to have the opportunity to interview you today, Stephen! To begin, would you mind sharing a brief overview of your education and career path?

Stephen: I grew up in Perth, Western Australia, and attended university there. I was actually the first person in my immediate family to go to university, and I studied a combined degree in law and science. Initially, I thought I'd pursue a career as an intellectual property lawyer, but over time I realised that path wasn't for me.

While still at university, I started working at Legal Aid Western Australia on their phone line. My role involved providing information to callers, booking legal advice appointments, and making referrals. That experience sparked my first real interest in the legal assistance sector and confirmed that I wanted to work in a people-focused role.

After graduating, I was fortunate to spend two years working at the Supreme Court of Western Australia as an associate to two different judges. My first year was in the general division, where we handled a variety of matters including criminal law, wills and probate, and commercial litigation. It was invaluable exposure, especially working with self-represented litigants and gaining insight into court processes. In my second year, I worked on a major appeal, focusing more on legal research, drafting, and proofreading judgments.

"Having the opportunity to work full-time within a First Nations community in the East Kimberley really opened my eyes to the impact that focused work can have. It was one of those sliding doors moments where I realised that this was the path I wanted to pursue long-term."

I then moved to Melbourne to begin my legal career at Herbert Smith Freehills (HSF). I completed three rotations there, and my previous experience at the court had already solidified my desire to work as a commercial litigator. I really enjoyed going to court and saw that as central to my role as a lawyer. From day one at HSF, I was also actively involved in pro bono work, which became a lasting part of my career.

A pivotal moment came when I undertook a Jawun secondment, spending six weeks with a First Nations organisation in the East Kimberley of Western Australia, working mainly on policy. That experience shifted my focus, and I realised I wanted to work full-time in pro bono. I was fortunate to transition into HSF's dedicated pro bono team, which eventually brought me to Sydney, where I spent around six years focusing on pro bono work in Australia. More recently, I worked at Barry Nilsson for over three years to develop their pro bono practice, and very recently I moved to Ashurst, continuing my journey in the pro bono sector.

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Stephen Somerville and colleague Madeleine Cunningham (nee Meehan) in the East Kimberley, WA while on Jawun Secondment

Siqun: Could you tell me a little more about your current role as Pro Bono Counsel at Ashurst, as well as your secondment at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service?

Stephen: I joined Ashurst at the start of the year and I'm currently based in Melbourne as one of the senior lawyers in the pro bono team. My role primarily focuses on developing pro bono opportunities and building partnerships with community legal centres and other organisations across Victoria. I'm part of Ashurst's global pro bono practice, so I also collaborate with colleagues in other states and internationally.

A key area of focus for me is supporting our First Nations clients, communities, and organisations. I'm fortunate to work alongside two First Nations lawyers in our team at Ashurst, and I contribute to our national First Nations pro bono practice. I see my role as supporting and being led by them in that work, which has been incredibly rewarding.

Siqun: What motivated you to transition from commercial practice into pro bono work?

Stephen: From my very first day at HSF, I was involved in pro bono work. The culture there really emphasised its importance. There was a strong expectation that everyone contributes to pro bono matters, and that resonated with me. I was lucky to get heavily involved early on with one of HSF's key pro bono initiatives in partnership with Justice Connect Homeless Law: the Women's Homelessness Prevention Project. That program provides legal and non-legal support to women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and I regularly represented clients, often in tenancy matters at VCAT. I eventually became one of the team leaders for that program, which deepened my commitment and experience.

My Jawun secondment was a real turning point. Having the opportunity to work full-time within a First Nations community in the East Kimberley really opened my eyes to the impact that focused work can have. It was one of those sliding doors moments where I realised that this was the path I wanted to pursue long-term.

I was fortunate that, having already built strong relationships with the pro bono team at HSF through my earlier work, I was able to move into the firm's dedicated pro bono practice full-time the following year. That transition also saw me relocate from Melbourne to Sydney. In many ways, pro bono work had always been woven into my legal career from the beginning, so shifting into a full-time pro bono role felt like a very natural and logical step.

Siqun: You've spent time as a secondee at various Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and Justice Connect, often while working at commercial firms. How has this shaped your understanding of access to justice in practice?

Stephen: I think it's been absolutely vital. A lot of the pro bono work that commercial law firms do can only happen in partnership with CLCs, so those relationships are essential. Spending time on secondment, being embedded within CLCs and working at the grassroots level, really opened my eyes to the realities they face. It's made me acutely aware of their funding pressures and the serious capacity constraints. They have incredibly limited resources but still manage to deliver so much. They consistently punch above their weight and are being asked to do more and more with less. I think having had the chance to work within a number of different CLCs has really deepened my appreciation of the vital work they do. It's also helped shape the way I've approached and developed pro bono practice within commercial law firms. We simply couldn't do this work without them. So yes, it's been a really formative experience.

In addition to my work at Ashurst, I continue to undertake a part-time secondment at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), where I've been involved since my previous role. I work one day a week in the criminal law team, representing clients—primarily in the Magistrates' Court—on a range of criminal matters. One aspect of that work I particularly value is appearing in the Koori Court, which is a culturally specific division of the Magistrates' Court designed to better support First Nations clients. That experience has deepened my understanding of culturally appropriate legal practice.

Siqun: Looking back, is there a particular pro bono project you're especially proud of, something that affirmed your path or stands out as a career highlight?

Stephen: One project that really stands out is my involvement with The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre when I was at HSF and moved to Sydney. The Shopfront is operated by HSF, the Salvation Army, and Mission Australia, and it provides legal and non-legal support to young people under 25, particularly in criminal law and victims of crime matters. Getting involved with the Shopfront was pivotal for me as it planted the seed for my long-term focus on criminal law within my pro bono practice. Before moving to Sydney, I hadn't even considered that as a path, and I certainly didn't see myself working in criminal law.

Through that experience, I had the privilege of working alongside some incredible lawyers, including Jane Sanders (Shopfront Principal Solicitor), who really took me under her wing. I learned so much, not just about criminal law, but about working in an integrated practice, where lawyers and social workers collaborate closely to support clients holistically. It became clear to me that legal assistance alone isn't enough; clients often need broader support beyond just their legal issues.

Stephen Somerville as a marriage celebrant

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One matter that really stayed with me was helping a young man in his early 20s with a bail application. He had a history of drug offences, and I remember going to court with his parents, his girlfriend, and their son. We successfully obtained bail and he was released, and that moment really underscored for me just how impactful this work can be.

When I later returned to Melbourne, I was able to continue working in criminal law through part-time secondments at CLCs including Inner Melbourne Community Legal, Justice Connect Homeless Law, Fitzroy Legal Service and VALS, but it was the Shopfront experience that really set me on that path. Without it, my pro bono practice would likely have looked very different. It's certainly been one of the most rewarding aspects of my career.

Siqun: What advice would you give to early-career lawyers who want to build a meaningful path in pro bono or community legal work?

Stephen: I would really encourage them to get involved in any way they can. I still vividly remember my early days answering phones at Legal Aid, often feeling like I didn't know very much. But the key is exposure- exposing yourself to as many clients and situations as possible. It's

Stephen Somerville speaking at a fundraiser

so valuable to work with people from a wide range of backgrounds and to gain experience across different areas of law, even those you may not have considered before. Volunteering with a CLC is a fantastic way to do that, even if it's outside your comfort zone or in an area where you have little experience.

I'd also say it's important to be genuine and authentic in your approach. Do pro bono work because it genuinely matters to you, not just to tick a box. I remember at university there was always a lot of focus on building CVs, but what really stands out is when people are truly motivated by the work and its impact. If it aligns with your values and you're doing it because you care, that will shine through and make the experience far more meaningful, for you and the people you're helping.

Siqun: Are there any changes you'd like to see in the Australian pro bono sector over the next five to ten years?

Stephen: I think one really important development would be seeing more pro bono lawyers with lived experience in these roles. I've already seen the clear benefits of this at Ashurst, where, as part of our First Nations pro bono practice, we have two First Nations pro bono lawyers leading the work. I think there needs to be an increased emphasis on that kind of representation across the sector.

I'd also highlight the value of having people with direct grassroots experience in these roles. For example, I've done various part-time secondments, and I think it's really beneficial when pro bono lawyers have worked within the community legal assistance sector or at CLCs themselves. That firsthand experience is so valuable, and it helps ensure the work is grounded in the real needs of the community.

Siqun: I have noticed that you've been a Civil Marriage Celebrant for many years. Does that experience connect in any way with your values or approach to pro bono legal work?

Stephen: I actually became a celebrant for my sister. She asked me to marry her and her now husband, and this was before marriage equality was legal. For me, it was really important because I've always believed strongly in marriage equality. I think the LGBTQI+ community should have the same right to marry as anyone else. I saw it as a significant access to justice issue. So yes, when I decided to become a celebrant, that broader principle of equality and justice was definitely on my mind. In that way, I think it's absolutely informed my approach to pro bono work, especially in terms of understanding access to justice in its many forms. Ensuring marriage should be open to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. ■

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Siqun Dong recently completed her law degree at the University of Adelaide and is undertaking a placement with the Australian Pro Bono Centre between April and June 2025.