

A man of faith

At the tender age of 24, Sean Lau has already chalked up some impressive achievements, including the University Medal in Law and First Class Honours in Philosophy at the University of New South Wales in 2012. Now living at Oxford University as the 2015 NSW Rhodes Scholar, he isn't studying law. He has Christian theology on his mind instead.

JULIE MCCROSSIN finds out why.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON MCCORMACK



Sean Lau is the kind of student who could choose to study whatever he likes. After graduating from James Ruse Agricultural High School, with a University Admissions Index of 99.90, Lau considered medicine and optometry before deciding to study arts and law on a Scientia Scholarship at the University of NSW.

“To be honest, I fell into law by accident,” he explains. “It was a bit more of a generalist degree and it seemed to be a good thing for people who didn't really know what to do.”

We're talking in the café on the ground floor of Sydney's Governor Macquarie Tower, where Lau used to work as the Legal Officer to Justice Peter McClellan, chair of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, before heading off to Oxford University.

“Basically, my job was to work directly under Justice McClellan and our Senior Counsel, Gail Furness, and to provide advice about some of the really difficult legal problems the Royal Commission faces,” he says. “Procedural fairness and natural justice issues came up quite often. I also helped in a research capacity on a couple of our major projects.”

This was the second time in his short career that Lau had the opportunity to work closely with highly experienced members of the judiciary and the legal profession.

After graduating from university, he served as an associate to Justice Virginia Bell at the High Court. It was, he says, “a formative experience”.

“The role of the associate at the High Court is to make the judge's life a bit easier,” he says. “It involves a combination of research tasks, helping out in court, and some judgment production tasks.”

I ask how this experience influenced him in his thinking about the law and his own future.

“On a practical level, I got from the High Court the normal things that you'd expect. I got more accustomed to court process. I got to see some really good advocacy. I got to think more carefully and closely about certain key areas of law, especially public law, constitutional and administrative law, criminal law, a few areas of commercial law. In fact, pretty much everything.

“I didn't study tax at university, but I had to get on top of the area quickly at the High Court.” He laughs

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at the memory of his rapid encounter with tax law.

“At a philosophical level, what I really got from the High Court was an appreciation of the importance of impartiality,” Lau says more seriously.

“When I was at the High Court, we had to deal with a few cases that were really contentious and I found that the next day, after the decision had been handed down, the media opinion pieces tended to be quite critical. The criticism was along the lines that the High Court didn't take the same ideological or political perspective as the commentator's own view,” he remembers.

“The High Court's role is to decide cases on their legal merit. It would be a much less legitimate and respected institution if it was not impartial, so the value of impartiality is what I really came to take away.

“Regardless of what I do in the future, I feel that being impartial, being seen as a straight shooter, will be a really high priority for me.”

This focus on impartiality in the context of public debate is deeply connected to Lau's current vision for what he wants to do in life – a vision that is surprisingly clear, despite his youth.

“I am very much trying to take it slowly and work things out as I go along,” he says. “But someone who I admire and whose career path I could see myself emulating is Frank Brennan. “Frank Brennan is a Jesuit priest and also a lawyer. I value him as a role model because I think he is great in the way he combines an obviously devout religious perspective with his legal expertise.



He is able to comment on really controversial, public issues and quite sensitive issues from a faith-based perspective. So you don't tend to dismiss him as another religious nut, but rather see him as someone with a lot of moral and ethical authenticity about him." Central to Lau's vision for his future is his own religious faith.

"If I'm going to look at the major influences in my life, it would really have to be my religious beliefs," Lau says with quiet sincerity.

"I converted to Protestant Christianity in my high school years and even though my faith has gone through a number of iterations and I've been continuously revising my religious beliefs, it is the main lens through which I look at the world and what I am going to do and what my actions will be as a human being.

"I am studying a masters and plan to follow it with a doctorate in Christian theology at Oxford. First of all because I have a deep and personal interest in it and, secondly, because I am really bothered by the way in which religious rhetoric gets thrown around in the Australian public sphere today.

"I've taken to calling it 'morally irresponsible religious rhetoric' when such rhetoric is used to justify some policy positions.

"I find a mix of religion with a lack of taking care of other people just absolutely reprehensible. For example, some Christians say we don't need to do anything about climate change because God will preserve the earth.

"I feel that having the opportunity to study Christian theology and ethics will give me time to think about those kind of issues and how to correct irresponsible religious rhetoric when it comes up."

During his masters year at Oxford he is

studying 20th century doctrine on themes such as salvation and eschatology, the study of the ultimate destiny of humans.

"However, for my doctorate, I want to get stuck into a very specific issue of moral responsibility," he says.

"I'm interested in putting into dialogue a philosopher named Hannah Arendt with a couple of major Christian theologians of the last century, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer – former Prime Minister Rudd's favourite theologian. All three were writing at the time the Nazis had control of Germany. A lot of their writings were in response to the failure of people to do anything, during the Nazi regime, against the political zeitgeist."

Who will employ him when he returns?

"I think initially I'd like to be based in a university," Lau replies. "I wouldn't mind joining or starting my own think tank eventually. Or, if I stay in a university, starting my own research institute."

Lau speaks with enthusiasm, but also, despite the scope of his goals, a natural humility. Given that he did not grow up in a religious home, what was the catalyst for the religious conversion that is influencing his decisions so profoundly?

"I am ethnically Chinese," he says. "My parents grew up in Malaysia. They came here in 1986. My mum, Josephine, works as a teller at a bank and my dad works in IT. I was born and raised here. I have a sister, Thea, who works at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We lived in Epping and then moved to Pymble on the North Shore. I was raised atheist and my parents aren't religious.

"I went to a selective high school that was very much supposed to be secular, but, nonetheless, there was quite a large

and thriving Christian group of students at that school.

"In all honesty, I didn't have a good reason for converting initially. I just did it because everybody else did it. It was the cool and hip thing, funnily enough, to do at my school.

"In late high school and early university years I came to realise that my beliefs before had been more based on the fact that, as a second generation Asian, a lot of us don't feel as if we've kept to our Asian cultural heritage. So we are in this weird, cultural no-man's land where we don't really fit. So religion provides easy answers to that."

Lau went through a period he describes as "soul-searching and an existential crisis". His decision to study philosophy as an undergraduate, in addition to law, was part of his ongoing exploration of faith.

"I was motivated to search out whether there were better reasons to believe," he says.

Lau clearly found those reasons. And he also discovered he liked law.

"First of all, I like the intellectual challenge. Law keeps providing really conceptually difficult problems. Secondly, law provides a very good lens through which to understand society. It has exposed me to areas of life that I just would not have knowledge of. It can provide social justice, or justice more generally for people. I think that is what partly led me to stick around in it."

Two lecturers at UNSW were especially influential in his decision to stay with law.

"I had the incredibly good fortune of having Ed Santow, who is now the CEO of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, appointed as my academic mentor through a program called the Scientia Scholarship.

"I really admire Ed for two reasons.

Firstly, he is really, really passionate about what he does in the areas of human rights and social justice and that really came through when he taught me administrative law. Secondly, he is someone who is genuinely academically and intellectually open to other people's viewpoints.

"Another influential person for me was my first-year law teacher, Frances Foster-Thorpe, who taught me foundations of law.

What I really admired about her is simply her enormous interest in student welfare. Even though she was teaching about 100 students a semester, she took the time to meet up one-on-one with them twice throughout the semester.

"She convinced me that mentoring makes such a big difference. I was edgy about studying law at that stage, but she was able to really solidify my interest and that made me committed to sticking around in it, at least for a bit."

When I ask if his faith has been tested by his work with the Royal Commission, he pauses before answering gravely. "Yes, in the sense that I now have much greater first-hand

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experience about the depth of human depravity. I can see how humans can be absolutely terrible in unspeakable ways to other human beings. But on the flip-side, I have seen how resilient human beings can be in response to great suffering."

Lau was living with his parents before going to Oxford. He is single and appears to be totally devoted to his work, his faith and his intellectual life. He attends an Anglican Church in Turramurra.

Whatever the future holds for Sean Lau, it is likely to be intellectually engaging and enriching for the community in which he lives. Let's hope his flight path brings him home to Australia. **LSJ**

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Sayer-Jones, Media law for non-lawyers. 2nd Australian Edition. Pret-a-Porter Publications. 2014.

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