

Cross-border

LAWYER

by Francis Wilkins



Sydney-based lawyer Stephen Sander arrived at his current position from Cold War-era Hungary, via an Austrian refugee camp and then years waiting tables in Melbourne and Sydney while he learnt English. *Lawyers Weekly* listened to his story

Stephen Sander, former political refugee and now a lawyer with Allens Arthur Robinson, experienced the power of legal systems early on in life. In the early 1980s, as the Cold War was drawing to a close, the 15-year-old Sander was on a school trip from his native Hungary to Austria. "I just marched into the police station and applied for political asylum," he recalls. "But I was deported because I was under-age."

Now, in a very different world, Sander practises in insurance ("with a bit of a litigation flavour to it") and capital markets. Allens offered him a graduate position in May 2002, following his working with the firm in Sydney, first as a summer clerk and then as a researcher.

Having been deported from Austria at age 15, Sander was promptly removed from high school for his behaviour. He decided to bide his time and finish his education, which he knew was essential if he was to pursue his dream of practising as a lawyer.

"After I came back [from Austria], I was a bit more politically active – attending meetings, going to protests and that sort of stuff. I think I always wanted to be a lawyer – even in Hungary – because I thought even under that system, if you know the law, if you know your way around it, you can make a change. You can point out the problems with the system if you understand the underlying issues and the laws that the whole thing is based on.

"I always thought that if you want to make changes to an oppressive regime, there are only two ways you can go about it: there's revolution and the possibility of bloodshed – which I'm not that keen on – and the other one is working within the system, trying to make changes step by step."

Nevertheless, to become a lawyer, Sander would need to go to university – something that his earlier activities had almost certainly ruled out. "It was very much made clear that [the state] was not going to put me through university after having embarrassed them by asking for asylum when I was 15," he said. "After I was removed from high school, I was put into trade school, but I decided to attend

what they used to call a workers' education high school at night. I was being trained as a chef during the day and I used to go to high school at night, because I realised I was never going to make it to uni anywhere unless I finished high school."

Once he *had* finished, Sander, now aged 19, seized the opportunity to flee the country. "Basically, I got my high-school certificate on a Friday, and on Saturday morning I set off for Austria."

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After entering Austria, he spent some time in a refugee detention centre – "Actually, I think they were pretty much worse than what we have here" – before applying to immigrate to Australia as a refugee. He was given a day's notice before flying out and arrived in Australia on Queen's Birthday weekend, 1988.

Sander had, without doubt, overcome major obstacles to get to Australia. Nevertheless, it would be more than a decade before he would finally join the legal profession as he had planned. "I didn't speak English at the time and all I could say was 'thank you' and 'goodbye'. I started off as a kitchen hand in a restaurant in Melbourne city and I worked in the hospitality industry, in kitchens and then eventually as a waiter for a few years while I was learning the language and getting my bearings."

Sander moved to Sydney, and it was there that he got a lucky – and unusual – break. He was waiting on a table of people from the Commonwealth Bank at a corporate function. They got talking and out of

the conversation came a job offer, which led to Sander's joining the bank's customer service department. He worked there for a while before applying to university, receiving considerable help with the application process from the bank.

In 1997, he entered the University of Western Sydney (UWS) to study for a combined bachelor of business/laws degree, graduating in August 2002. He completed his pre-admission studies at the College of Law in Sydney and was awarded the Centre for Best Practice Prize for Overall Excellence.

Sander attributes his success to his own determination and perseverance and the support he received from his tutors. "I just really batted down the hatches while I was at the College and I wanted to do well," he said. "Also, UWS gave me very good ground preparation. Sometimes you have people who really know their stuff but they can't pass it on, but at UWS, they are very good at doing that."

Sander says he finds Allens a very supportive, positive environment in which to work and hopes to be there for the long term. However, one of his most rewarding experiences since commencing his legal career

has been working first as a volunteer then as a pro bono solicitor at Sydney's Redfern Legal Centre, advising on issues such as family law, domestic violence, employment issues and workers compensation.

His interest in community legal services was piqued by Susan Armstrong, one of his UWS lecturers who, Sander says, combined "the most incredible approach to lecturing" with a broad social conscience and awareness.

"It was an incredible experience working [at Redfern]," he said. "It gives you an insight into the 'real' legal system, or the 'other side' of the legal system, so to speak – the criminal justice system, domestic law issues, the local court system. When you work in a big commercial law firm, you get a very different experience.

"I was able to see the more human side of how it all works. You do also come off the shift with a sense of satisfaction when you've helped two or three people who wouldn't have been able to afford a lawyer and you were able to point them in the right direction."