

# my career

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## A long road to the top

### How to be Sohila Zanjani law brokerage chief

**W**HEN Yuri Rapoport and I were in business together, many people thought we were a curious mix — a Jew and a Muslim working side by side. If only the world today thought the same as we did when we built our business.

Although I am now the managing director of Australia's largest legal brokerage business, Prime Law Brokers, my path to this extremely rewarding career has been fraught with difficulties and setbacks.

I was born in 1955 in Tehran, Iran. My mother stayed at home and raised me and my four brothers and sisters, while my father ran his bicycle shop. My mother's unfaltering commitment to education was of great importance and I excelled in natural science and literature.

After secondary school, I enrolled in a computer-language course in 1973. Computers and the information technology industry were still in their infancy at this point in time, but I could see great potential. The course was full of young girls, with hardly a male in sight.

In my last year of the computer course, the Bell helicopter company posted job ads calling for graduates and I landed a job in its computer programming team. As the amount of computer hardware in helicopters had increased, so, too, had the need for staff

trained in computer languages.

I enrolled in an economics degree at Tehran's English language-only university, exposing me to an array of fantastic people and new, like-minded friends. I travelled to Italy, India and South-East Asian countries with them several times.

In 1981, the ultimate opportunity to escape presented itself in the unlikely form of a man from Australia whom I thought I liked. We met in Tehran, but quickly set about travelling the world together for three months. We got married very quickly, but when we came to Australia, my husband revealed he was unemployed and had a very poor financial status. I took control, landed my first job with Integer Computing, worked 10-hour days, fell pregnant and had to resign.

For a while I stayed at home to look after my son, sending out job applications by telegram because we had no phone. After 18, I picked up a position in computer programming for the Australian Wool Corporation but I became pregnant again. These were really dark times — I was not able to write a program for my personal life.

I was unemployed, fell pregnant again and gained the courage to leave home. I received a sole-parent pension, started a graduate diploma of education



Sohila Zanjani's Prime Law Brokers now boasts 230,000 clients.  
PICTURE: HARVEY PUBLICITY

course in women's studies and decided on a legal career. Monash University said my Iranian high-school qualifications were not relevant, so I had to pass VCE and then completed my law degree in 1997. I sent off 52 job applications and didn't receive a single call until I stumbled across an ad from a gentleman called Yuri Rapoport who was looking for people interested in setting up Australia's first ever legal brokerage firm — Prime Law Brokers — to connect people

with the right lawyer for their needs.

I found my responsibilities fascinating and rewarding — when I directed a client to the right lawyer, I had helped someone. Yuri started advertising; he met the lawyers while I handled all the clients. We all were learning how to do our tasks the best way possible then, without warning, Yuri met the woman of his dreams and decided to leave the business.

I took over and worked diligently on my own, spending the little money I had flying interstate to meet with lawyers. It was tough going but I felt alive for the first time in 15 years. The firm was in many ways the physical manifestation of my years of poverty, hardship and struggle.

Now I have more than 230,000 clients and Prime Law Brokers is the biggest and best-known legal brokerage in the nation — not to mention my pride and joy. Operating every day of the year, we take pride in finding the right lawyer to suit every individual and business need and try to handle every client in a compassionate, caring and human way.

We believe more than ever, businesses and individuals need care, skills and knowledge in a personal and human way when it comes to selecting a lawyer. More often than not, my clients are in distress and their choice is restricted because the process of selecting a lawyer is too time-consuming and impractical. So I take the time to talk to them about their predicaments before deciding which legal firm or

### CV

**Born** Iran, 1955.

**Education** Bachelor of science (degree in Insurance and economics), Tehran College of Insurance, 1978; bachelor of laws, Monash University, 1997; graduate diploma of education (women's studies), Victoria College, 1991.

**Jobs** Computer programmer analyst with Integer Computing 1981; Computer Accounting Services, 1983; Australian Wool Corporation, 1984; business-woman with Prime Law Brokers since 1996.

**Good breaks** I have been fortunate to travel extensively, to the US for a month and Paris for three weeks, and before coming to Australia I travelled to India, Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Germany, Thailand.

**Mentors** Yuri Rapoport.

**Ways to unwind** Cycling, dancing, running, talking with God.

lawyer is right for them. We have learnt that people want personal service no matter what type of legal issues they have.

I am so proud of how successful Prime Law Brokers is now. In many ways, I owe a lot of the success I enjoy today to Yuri's mentoring, guidance, energy and tutelage — he is a truly wonderful individual and indeed my silent partner. More importantly, though, my four children are each growing up and following their dreams, which is all that I ever yearned for. Indeed, although my life has been tough and riddled with hardship, I wouldn't change a thing.

PAUL EDWARDS