

THE TIMES

October 2010 Times Article: Interview by Linda Tsang

Margaret Casely-Hayford is director of legal services at the John Lewis Partnership. She qualified as a barrister before joining Denton Hall (which merged with Wilde Sapte in 2000 and is now SNR Denton) in 1986, specialising in planning law. In 1996 she became its joint head of planning and public law. She joined John Lewis ten years later.

What did you want to be when you were a child?

Secretary-General of the United Nations!

What was your very first job?

A temp at the British Council. I had to abide by the Official Secrets Act, which made my filing and photocopying seem immensely important.

How do you start your working day?

As I end it: by checking my BlackBerry, so I can prioritise or find solutions before I hit my desk or read news updates about John Lewis and Waitrose.

What happens during your ideal day at work?

Because of the variation, I get a buzz out of most days. But ideally all my to-do list would be completed – living the dream!

What annoys you at work?

Over-ambition prevents me setting realistic to-do lists.

Who has had the biggest impact on your working life – and why?

Women with whom I've worked or who I count as friends; those who are committed, compassionate and highly principled. And my mother who told me that whatever I do, I should do to the best of my ability.

What was your best decision – and your worst?

Best: marrying Giles: good call! Worst: I'll wait until the final roll call to see which decision had the worst effect.

What's the most adventurous thing you have ever done – or would like to do – non-professionally?

Adopt a child.

What is your most treasured possession?

Recollections of my parents, and their values. These can't be taken away.

Which book inspires you and why?

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, because of the fight for justice.

How do you relax?

Playing the cello or with my family on Exmoor.

What's your most-played tune on your iPod - why?

The Bach cello suites: a tidal wave of beautiful pieces, one of which is even my mobile phone ringtone!

Which film do you wish you had appeared in?

Groundhog Day: I love the idea of having the opportunity for continuous improvement, unto perfection.

Which person, living or dead or fictional, would you have as your ideal dinner guest – and why?

Brian Sewell, Sergei Diaghilev, John Waters and Brian Eno – for wit, wisdom, style, innovation and artistic knowledge. And John Spedan Lewis [founder of the John Lewis Partnership] – to ensure that he approves the way in which we are handling his legacy.

What are your best and worst qualities?

I want perfection; whether that's best or worst must depend on your perspective.