

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Leadership in the legal profession needn't be an all-male club, as **Keily Blair '03** of PwC proves – and she is determined other women are able to progress their careers in a variety of sectors.

Words: **Wendy Jacob** Photography: **Paul Tait**

Keily Blair is running late, allowing time to admire the view over the rooftops from PwC's award-winning London office. With offices in 158 countries, PwC are a leading professional assurance, tax, legal and advisory service company, employing more than 250,000 people worldwide.

Keily currently heads PwC's Contentious Data Privacy Practice, part of the firm's world leading Privacy practice. An alumna of Oxford Brookes, Keily's journey to here is a story of talent, determination and resilience – and maybe a little bit of luck.

The story starts in Dublin, where Keily attended a private, all girls, Catholic school. Looking for adventure, she travelled to America, staying with an aunt who had studied at Oxford Brookes. This was fortuitous, as Keily was also offered a place through clearing to study Law and Politics. Asked why she chose to study law, Keily

explains: "I enjoyed history and English and was argumentative as a child. People at school recommended a career in law as a good idea". Work experience at a barrister's chambers, and a dose of TV legal drama and she was hooked on embarking on a legal career.

Aware that there was a high drop out in the first year, Keily quickly buckled down and focused on her studies. "I did not want to be the person who was not there next year. I was set on what I wanted to do - I originally wanted to work in the City, as a finance lawyer ." This was to change during her training, when she discovered her niche in litigation and investigations. "I am inquisitive and like problem solving. What I like best about this area is that when things don't quite add up, you have to investigate thoroughly and then apply the law," she explains.

Keily enjoyed her time at Oxford Brookes. As well as focusing on her studies, she threw herself

into other activities – becoming president of the Law Society and setting up its pro bono group. "The teaching methods, learning and environment were conducive to forward thinking and there was real support for new ideas. Plus, I had a lot of very good tutors. My training at Oxford Brookes also enabled me to get a contract with a 'magic circle' law firm Allen & Overy - one of the top law firms in the country. I had access to the best lawyers, worked on major investigations and travelled the world - It has been an incredible opportunity."

Keily continues to support Oxford Brookes and believes that the reputation of the law school is increasing. "There are good legal minds, which have a modern and practical approach to legal problems, coming out of Oxford Brookes. I think that the law school will keep going from strength to strength." >>





Asked her views on diversity in the legal profession, Keily admits that there is still a long way to go.

“Unfortunately, we work in a legal profession where the leadership is still usually pale, usually male and usually of a certain social background. We need to change that. Our clients now demand that change too. We are increasingly asked to provide our diversity statistics in order to win work. It is not enough to just turn up at a pitch with a diverse panel - that same people must also deliver the work. We also have some very senior women on our board at PwC, providing great role models for people like me and everybody else in the firm.”

Although progress is being made towards equality in the workplace, Keily believes it is still too slow and in 2015 she founded Fractio Vitri (FV) – breaking the glass ceiling – a space for women at the start of their careers to network, learn and share experiences.

“I was on maternity leave after having my first daughter and it struck that in most cases my female peers would often take a step back in their careers when beginning a family by default; even if they were

the most talented person, or the higher earner in the relationship,” recalls Keily. “Women were counting themselves out, or staying in jobs they did not like or that did not challenge them, as they were concerned about maternity rights and packages. There is a need to address the problem of the female talent pipeline to encourage women in the early to middle stages of their careers.

“FV creates positive solutions to some of the challenges women face in the workplace by tackling issues such as how to prepare for a performance review, or ask for a salary rise.”

Keily says that embracing her own differences has helped her to succeed and encourages others to find their own unique voice. “Women have a different style. Charisma for a female leader can be very different from that of a male leader and it is important for women to embrace that difference, to enable them to progress.”

FV is helping women through an online community and by arranging opportunities for learning, networking and sharing ideas. But where else should discussions on inclusivity and equality in education

and the workplace be held? Keily believes that it is important to discuss issues around diversity at home and to include men in the conversation. “Men and boys need to have positive role models to look up to, who are successful at work and also play an active role in family life. More equality benefits everyone.”

Discussion is one way to increase awareness, but Keily believes there is more that can be done in a practical way to encourage social mobility. “I would like to see organisations using data to deliver better outcomes. For example, I am in favour of different admissions standards for people identified as coming from lower income backgrounds or who have faced other social mobility challenges. Until we take positive actions to address these things, it is hard to see how you get any meaningful change.”

Keily has so far resisted the urge to become formally involved in politics. However, with her energy, passion and charisma, one wonders if she could be persuaded to make her mark in a wider arena in the years to come.