

WILLIAM & LONSDALE – Lives in the Law

E011: Peggy O'Neal

Voiceover [00:00:12] This is William and Lonsdale, a podcast about the legal eco system in Victoria and the fascinating people and stories that make it tick. Today, your host, Michael Green, has a wonderful conversation with Peggy O'Neal, well known to many as the president of the Richmond Football Club and the first female president in AFL history. What is less well known are the details of her life in the law, both here and in the United States. Peggy's work and achievements in pension and superannuation law and on countless boards and committees are too numerous to list here. But we thought they summed it up pretty well when she was awarded the Order of Australia for services to superannuation and finance law, services to Australian Rules football and her work advancing women in leadership roles. With such an illustrious career it is both charming and incredible to hear stories from her childhood in the small mining towns of West Virginia USA.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:01:02] They used to use ponies in the mines to pull out the coal and transport the coal before it was all mechanized, but some of those ponies had escaped over the years or they became feral, and I remember being in the schoolyard at recess and the teachers would say the "ponies are coming through" and there'd be a herd of little ponies that would gallop through and we would all have to go inside until the ponies were gone. So I look back and I think it was pretty wild when you think about it.

Michael Green [00:01:54] Our guest this morning is Peggy O'Neal, an American lawyer who has practiced in Australia for the last 30 years and coincidentally is president of the Richmond Football Club. Peggy, good morning.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:02:03] Good morning to you, Michael.

Michael Green [00:02:05] Peggy, you've got a background which is not common in Australia, being American, obviously, but even, I suspect, not common in America because you grew up in coal mining towns in the southern states of America, West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia. Can you tell us a bit about what it was like growing up in that part of the US?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:02:21] Well, they're part of the country is called Appalachia. It's in the Appalachian Mountains. It's a very poor part of America. It still is. But the coal mining towns, when I was a child, lots of times the coal companies own the towns like they do here, mining town. So we lived in coal camps. We lived in the houses provided by the coal mines, they were just little communities that grew up around jobs. That was when coal was being mined extensively and then, of course, fell away as oil took over. And then had a bit of resurgence in the 80s. And now it's fallen away again as people move to other energy sources. But I guess it's only with hindsight and on reflection, you think about what it was like to grow up there, because when it's all that you know, you think everybody grows up that way. But there were very small towns. The town where I started school had about twenty five houses and doesn't exist anymore because they've all just fallen into disrepair because no one lives there. But I remember starting school in a two room schoolhouse, the sort of sounds like Abraham Lincoln, doesn't it? And there were seven grades and in two rooms. And then you had to take a bus for about an hour to go to high school when you got to that point. But the school was up on it was a little valley and the school was on one side of the little ridge. And then there was a train tracks and then the houses were on the other side. So you had to cross the train tracks to go to school. And I remember if the

the trains were moving, which was transporting the coal out of the communities that they would park sometimes on the tracks and school would be about to start, this sounds incredible, but I remember the mothers would stand there and say, OK, you can go under the train now. We would crawl under the train and go up to school on the other side, it just seemed like something you did, it wasn't every day. Sometimes there were no trains there. But looking back on it, I think that was not a usual experience, just you went under the train, the coal trains, in order to get to the school and the other side.

Michael Green [00:04:21] Absolutely fascinating. I mean, without wanting to sound judgmental, the word hillbilly sort of comes to mind.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:04:27] Well, it was used to describe those people up there and country music started around there, sort of a combination between Irish and scottish folk music and music from slaves in Africa. And it all sort of went together. And hillbilly was concocted as a phrase, as I understand, in the 30s, to describe that kind of music. And so people got called The Hill Billies. So, yeah.

Michael Green [00:04:56] Interestingly, in your story, the scouting movement had an influence upon you as a young woman, and it's had an influence upon many women who are currently in the US Congress. As I understand it, the number one common factor among women members of the US Congress is that as girls, they were members of the scouts. Can you tell us a bit about the scouts and what is it about them which has had such a strong influence on someone like yourself and many other women who have gone on into leadership positions?

[00:05:25] Most of America is small town America. And if you think about small town life, which I've just sort of described, the Scouts provided a real social outlet for me. It was a club that actually my mother felt strongly that I should have something to attend. And so she actually started a scout troop and got together ten or a dozen girls and their mothers. And and we started doing things together. I think it was the structure. You earned badges. You worked on particular projects. And so I think when you look at the US Congress, it was an opportunity for girls to see what women leaders looked like, even if you thought it was just the local scout troop. And I think that most of Congress would be from small town America. And so that probably is a connection. But I think it's a wonderful opportunity to feel that some self-sufficiency that you develop some skills. And it was when I was older in scouts, like high school, last couple of years of high school, that you got to go primitive camping and to go out with, you know, a tent and a couple of things and spend the weekend with a group of people cooking and walking and doing all that was great fun. I thought that was great fun. And because it had meant a lot to me as far as giving some focus and a feeling of of pride and accomplishing something, that when I first started practicing law, I volunteered to be a scout leader too, they were called the Cadet Scouts, which were the 13 year olds. I'd forgotten what it was like to be a 13 year old. There's not a lot of focus there, but I did that for a couple of years and then practicing law sort of took over and I didn't have the time to do it. But but I still think fondly about all the experiences I had there and the women who were the scout leaders, how much they influenced me.

Michael Green [00:07:10] Your tertiary education was Virginia Tech for an arts degree and the University of Virginia Law School for your juris doctor qualification. I'm assuming you were the first person in your family to go to university and obtain degrees.

[00:07:26] That's right. That's right. I was the first and my sister was the second. So my parents, even though they were not educated people in the formal sense, they really

valued education. And even in those sort of... Looking back, probably we didn't think that we were poor, underprivileged, but they worked really hard to embed in us the value of education. And there was never any doubt that we would go to school if we wanted to, and we would go on to university and we would not think that economics would limit what we would do. And when I think about it, I think what they gave up and what they sacrificed and how they save. And it was never in doubt that I would go and and I loved school. I always did. Always have I'd love to go get another degree now if I could find some time, just because I like the whole process of learning something new. And I don't like exams, nobody likes those. But it's sort of the the price you pay. But, uh, but maybe one day I'll go get a Ph.D. in something.

Michael Green [00:08:34] Your law degree was at the University of Virginia Law School, and that's one of the, I assume, oldest law schools in America, having been founded by Thomas Jefferson, who was a founding father of the US. And and it's third president. What did you have to do to move from Virginia Tech where you done your arts degree to gain admission into the University of Virginia?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:08:55] In America, there's an entry exam for law school because in America and a lot of Australia is going to that, you have an undergraduate degree and then you reapply for a law degree. A law degree is three years of just law subjects. So I took the test, applied to several schools and got in the University of Virginia. So I thought that's not that far away, about a four hour drive from where my family lived. And so I started started there and was completely overwhelmed with the history of the place and the caliber of the people that were there. It's, um, it's a wonderful place to go to school.

Michael Green [00:09:37] You mentioned the caliber of the people and you didn't immediately feel at home there did you you felt that maybe there was a difference between you and a lot of these other students. What was that about?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:09:46] Well, it wasn't just that I felt there was a difference. There was a difference. There was there's a lot of wealth there. And it's it's interesting the University of Virginia, despite it being a state school maintained its status as an all male school until 1974 and part of that was appealing to were like Harvard, which was all male. People forget these these times that when I was coming out of undergraduate school and looking at law schools, there were some that still wouldn't admit women. The University of Virginia had been taken to court and they had to start admitting women in undergraduate and in law school. And so I was part of that first substantial intake of women. It was just full of history. As you mentioned, Thomas Jefferson founded in 1919. He said it was the thing he was most proud of. Despite the Declaration of Independence, there were great family names that went to school there. The Kennedys went to school there, not John, but the two brothers, Teddy and Robert. And there were just reminders that a lot of great legal minds had come through and, well, what were you going to do? And so I think it was one of the first times if I ever needed a reminder that I was reminded of you do have limitations that you can study all you want and sometimes you're just not going to be as good as someone who has this innate way of reasoning problems, but doesn't mean you can't learn. And what I also found out is law school is one thing. And in the end, I got the hang of it and made good grades and all of that. But what I really liked was practicing law because there were real people and you're solving real problems and you're helping people, which was much more interesting to me than an answering questions on a legal exam.

Michael Green [00:11:40] So, Peggy, your legal career in America revolved around three firms in your area, Virginia and West Virginia, and it was at a time when women were a rarity in the profession. What was it like being one of the few women working in legal firms at that time?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:11:57] Well, my first job in Charleston, West Virginia, I was the first woman they had hired in their hundred year history. It was ... didn't seem like it should be a big deal to me, but obviously it was a it was a big deal to them because you just find yourself where you find yourself, you apply for a job, you go through interviews, and being a native West Virginian, I was born there. My parents were really proud that I'd gotten a job with what was then a big firm. It was the biggest firm in the state. There were three lawyers in the state capital. And I remember my mother, my grandmother going, you're going to the state capital, you're going to work in Charleston. But then, of course, you have to go to work and the routine starts and you're trying to find your way where no one has gone before and you're not sure exactly what that means. I remember we were required in in most American law firms to do a bit of pro bono legal practice. And and I had a court appearance and I walked in and the judge asked when the lawyer was coming. And at and at the time, you think, oh, well, I knew I was the lawyer, but nobody else did. And then you think, well, do I look the part? I went and got my ears pierced because I thought it would look better if I could wear earrings, that I would look older and I would look more authoritative. So it's all those funny little things that you don't think about. And it was very much a matter of do you fit in as opposed to belonging because you think this is my first job. I want to make a good impression. I know I know the law, what they don't teach you how to navigate through work life. And I remember that I was somewhat of a disruptor for Friday night drinks because here's this woman coming along and I felt as awkward as they must have felt, not been a drinker of any repute. I remember thinking, well, I'll stay for a beer. And and I stayed about half an hour and the comment was, well, now we can have fun. She's leaving. I thought, oh, they've been waiting for me to leave. You also, I think when you're the first of anything, you sort of wonder if how you act and react will make a difference as to whether somebody else gets a chance or will they judge everybody, in this case, women lawyers, by how they think about you? And I think that's after a while, You can't worry about it too much. But it's just an additional factor trying to navigate your way through as a 24 year old in a law firm of men. But for all of that, I learned a lot. I stuck it out. They kept me on.

Michael Green [00:14:31] It's interesting. And I might just jump ahead a bit here. But in many things you've done, you have been a trailblazer. You've been the first woman to do that. And obviously one of them is to be president of an AFL football club. In taking those positions of being the first, have you been conscious of the fact that you are blazing a trail for those coming behind you? And have you tried to do things in a certain way to ease that trial for those coming behind you?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:14:54] I think that. In most instances, I've been working in an organization for a while before you become the first, for example, Richmond, I'd been on the board eight years. So Richmond knew me and Richmond elected me to be president of the board. So I thought, oh, this will be a story for a week or two. And like everything in sport, it'll die down. Looking back, I realize that was naive. I didn't think it was a big issue because Richmond didn't. And my job was to be president of Richmond, not to have some place in the AFL and talk about my situation with every media outlet that wanted to talk about it. But I do think that if you're the first and you have any sort of self-awareness of that, you don't want to be the last. You want to make sure the doors are opened and stay open, sometimes the doors don't open fast enough for people subsequent to you. But I do

think, and I've said a couple of times that when you're the only woman in the room, you're all the women in the world in that moment that others get judged by how you act. And that's not fair. But somehow I remember early on hearing someone say, oh, well, we tried a woman on our board and she didn't work out, so we're just not going to do that again. I do find that you can't help but be a bit aware of what people are thinking about you. But in the end, you just need to know yourself and go for what you came to the organization for, which is to make a difference, to contribute in the way that you can. I also think it's important to understand that sometimes you want it to be part of something and in the end, it just isn't going to acknowledge your hard work or your contribution or they don't really want you to be there. And so it's also important to know when to leave, when to say, I want to go somewhere where I'm valued and where I can make a meaningful difference. And sometimes that's hard to know. Sometimes you keep beating your head against the wall thinking it'll just come around and they'll recognize merit. And sometimes just you just have to understand that I'd be better off somewhere else where I am appreciated.

Michael Green [00:17:01] You had an interesting case, speaking of interesting, interesting case involving coal mine or coal, coal mining companies and unions, almost sounds like a movie script what happened over this is just soon before you came to Australia. What was that case about?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:17:14] Oh, let me cast my mind back. It was a union case, the United Mine Workers, and it was a huge worker's strike over working conditions. So there's a history of union coal owner struggles through Appalachia, some very violent episodes. And while it had been calm for a very long time, the negotiations over the new working arrangements would be enterprise bargaining here had drag on for to the point that the mining company was bringing in outside workers. So, of course, that's a real flashpoint of what's going to happen. And the miners rightly saw, well, this isn't fair. You can't you know, that takes away a lot of power and bargaining. If you can still operate the mines, you don't have to deal with us. But basically, we had to get approval through all the health department's way out in the middle of the hills to bring in temporary housing to make sure all the health restrictions were there for food, for all of that. And and I was sort of in charge of getting that license. But that also involved having to go to the sites for inspections with officials from the mines. And there had been some violence. A couple of people were shot at in cars. There were guards around the house our law firm got swept for bugs every week. It's amazing in a town of five thousand people that this would go on. But I do remember going in the blackout vehicles and they would send a helicopter overhead so they could see who was on the hillside and we had to wear goggles in case glass shattered. But it was really something I never thought I would see, much less participate in. And it was almost hearkening back to old days where things were settled in a violent kind of way because people had lost faith in the system, basically.

Michael Green [00:19:07] So, Peggy, how boring was it to leave that and come to Collins Street in the city of Melbourne and work in a 30 story building doing superannuation and financial services?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:19:18] It suited me just fine.

Michael Green [00:19:24] So so how did you get it? I mean, first of all, to get a job as a lawyer here, obviously you have to be admitted. And although the US is a common law jurisdiction like we are, I'm assuming they'd be saying, well, you've got to do some subject about specifically Victorian law or Victorian procedure or something like that. So what did it take to get admitted?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:19:43] Well, I didn't know when I came here what it would take, but I found out. And also in that sort of bias, I think that you have from the northern hemisphere, you assume that the school year was the same as the Northern Hemisphere year. So I arrive in August thinking it'll be September. So and they go oh no, it's February and I think, oh, but it turns out it took me every one of those months to be able to get my credentials together in order to go back to law school. Basically, I found that you needed to submit all of the information about the schooling that you had had, where you'd gone to school, what courses you'd taken, what textbooks you used. But remember, this is in the days of no Internet. So it was a laborious exercise. And you submitted and you get a letter back saying you'll be required to take these subjects and you'll be required to do a period of articles of X, and I was required to take three, two semester subjects, trust accounting, which I thought, what is this? Don't we hire somebody to do these things, property and constitutional admin law at the University of Melbourne. And I had to do six months of articles, which I had no idea what articles were, but I figured I would learn. But because it was a common law jurisdiction, I didn't have to redo a lot of things that would have been required. I was talking to a woman who was from China and she just had to start all over.

Michael Green [00:21:05] So you started going to the big commercial firms here in Melbourne doing tax work.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:21:11] Superannuation work.

Michael Green [00:21:15] Had you done superannuation in the States?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:21:19] Yeah, I did over there it's it's called pension law or employee benefits, which is an element of tax law and sort of labor employer relations, because over there it's a benefit of employment. And so I had done some of that. And when I came to Australia, I thought, well, what's going to be the closest, I knew the tax system would be different. But I saw there was a couple of advertisements for superannuation lawyers and I thought, what's this superannuation? I never heard that term before. And I did some investigation. I thought that sounds closest to pension. And so maybe maybe that's what I can bring to a law firm. And sure enough, it was about to take off as a specialty. And a couple of law firms were sort of building departments around that at the time. And because in nineteen eighty seven was the first three percent productivity contribution that the the unions and employers had had negotiated, as I understand, I wasn't here at the time and that was going into sort of compulsory superannuation. And then in 1992, the Super Guarantee Act was passed and so it started become a big issue with all employers because suddenly everybody was going to have to contribute to superannuation for their employees, sort of right place, right time that it was becoming of interest to large law firms to develop departments like that.

Michael Green [00:22:36] Superannuation, to me, doesn't say on the most enthralling area of the law to work in. Clearly, I'm missing something. What do you like about it? What am I missing? What what makes you I mean, my view over the years has been that not even the superannuation specialists fully understand the area. It seems to me to be extremely complex, but it's something which you've done and done well and obviously enjoyed doing for a long period of time. What am I missing?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:22:58] Well, Michael, I think you have to remember that we all need it. It's part of everyday life. Everybody has a bank account and now almost every worker has a superannuation account of some kind. I think that if you're looking at representing

the little guy, the other side, usually the government. So you're always on the side of the little guy. Now, I think it's important to help people with to be secure in retirement. And it's not just retirement. Superannuation funds provide a great source of insurance to people who otherwise might not be able to get it. So so the total permanently disabled besides their house for most people would be the biggest asset that they have. The kind of superannuation I did wasn't self managed funds. I usually help large employers, banks, all of those who have big super funds with sometimes hundreds of thousands or a million members. So it affected a lot of people at one time. When I stepped down as a partner in 2009, I started working on the federal government's review of the super system as a consultant, and it was quite interesting to look at it after it had been in place for a while and say, well, what's the next revolutionary idea? What do we need to think about it? Forget what the law is now. What do we need to think about for the future? And that gave rise to what's now called my super, which means that it can't be eroded by excessive fees and up until then had been just left to the private sector. Sort of place itself, so you can tell I get quite excited about this, but it's it's something that means a lot for public policy in Australia. It's helping people have something besides the age pension. And it also is something that individuals need to think of, perhaps a bit more frequently than just when they retire, because their benefits all the way through. And you can see during the the covid crisis that people were allowed to take out ten thousand dollars from super because for most people, that was their only source of forced savings. Now there'll be repercussions for that down the track because they've lost compounding on all of that and some people depleted their accounts. But I think food on the table now, if we can't do that, I don't imagine you can think about retirement. So it's always a balance about what can it be used for? It's the current laws. It has to be there for retirement or for death or disability for come sooner. But because it's such a huge amount of money, there'll always be ideas about using it along the way.

Michael Green [00:25:26] We recently had a banking royal commission which highlighted shortcomings in our banking system, but also I think in the financial services industry and the superannuation industry as well. Are you happy with where our superannuation system sits at the moment in terms of, I guess, of the fees that are paid and the advice that people are given, investments that are made? Or do you think there are changes or more changes that still need to be made?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:25:50] Oh, I think there's still more that can be done. The Banking Royal Commission, I think we have to remember that the title of that was Inquiry into the Misconduct. So it was always going to highlight problems and it did, about people who took advantage of others, people who were in a position of knowledge or power who weren't as transparent as they should have been. It highlighted the conflict that lots of advisers have about commission based selling. So those sorts of things that got particular focus there, there's been some steps toward it. And this government has announced some legislative initiatives, not all of which have come to fruition, because covid sort of put everything on pause for a while. But I think there's more that can be done. I think our regulators always had the tools to do something, perhaps didn't have the resources or the funding to to pursue some of those issues as far as the public might have liked. But I think it does make people more aware. The community standards are different. And you don't just think about what the law says you can do. You have to think about; is it the right thing to do? The trustee companies for most of the vast majority of the funds are quite aware of their fiduciary responsibilities to members. But sometimes the people who aren't actually on the fiduciary board perhaps think about it as just a commercial opportunity. And when something is legislated that you must get super guarantee paid into an account. I think we need to protect that as much as we can. Additional amounts or people who are

sophisticated investors, people who have good advisors. You sort of think, well, that might be a bit different because they can inquire in a way that some people who have no say in where their money goes to because it is mandatory by the government, you know, by the legislation that they need to be protected and we still need to be alive to that issue.

Voiceover [00:27:41] William and Lonsdale is brought to you by Greens List, one of the leading multidisciplinary barristers lists in Australia. Greens List believe in promoting conversation around ideas and issues that shape not only our legal system but our wider community.

Michael Green [00:28:03] In having practiced in the US, in Australia for the last 30 years, are there any comparisons or contrasts you would make between the two systems in the way in which the law is practiced?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:28:14] Well, they're they're quite different. I mean, that might have the basis of the law the same. But over there with 50 states, there's also the state jurisdictions, a much bigger issue. Federal law is a bit more contained than it seems to be here to me. And I haven't done litigation, so I'm not across that. I still am getting used to the notion of barristers and that's..

Michael Green [00:28:36] I should say we're sitting in a barristers chambers recording this.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:28:39] I hesitate to say that because I thought, well, why aren't they all in one big law firm? I just don't get that notion. Most people who are the equivalent of litigation barristers here or QCs SCs would be senior partners in big law firms over there doing the giant litigation practice. So that's a bit different. The absence of so many frivolous lawsuits that get brought in America is, I think, welcome here. And I think I have to be careful to protect that. The rise of class actions here is of interest to me because it's sort of become everything in America, whether it's, you know, spurious claims or not. I think that there are things to like about both systems. But I think if I just putting the barrister issue that I can't quite understand, that's just my failing, is I think the Australian system has a lot to recommend. I think I'd prefer it.

Michael Green [00:29:40] I'd like to move on to a topic which I find very interesting and I hope everyone else does, too, and that is this idea about culture within organizations. It's a word that gets used a lot. I'm not sure many of us have got a clear idea of what it means. You've been a partner and a consultant at top level legal firms. You've been president of the Richmond Football Club for seven or eight years and on that board for 15 plus years. And that organization, Richmond Football Club, prides itself on having a good culture. Peggy, what do you understand culture in an organization to mean?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:30:12] Well, I've sort of thought about that a bit, too. And and because of Richmond's recent success, I've been asked that question before. And there was a definition that I have adopted. And culture is "the way we do things around here". It's it's the way you treat people, what you aspire to be as well. Are you moving toward that aspirational goal? And it isn't just a slogan, it isn't a mission statement. It's it's what you do every day. An example that every person in the organization sets. It doesn't mean you don't get it wrong sometimes, but it means that you get it right most of the time. And I think it just goes back to, in a way, treating people with respect and and giving them a chance to develop as people themselves.

Michael Green [00:30:59] I've always thought that in any organization, culture starts at the top and therefore, you know, legal firm in a business, in a sporting organization, it starts with the board or the committee or whoever the top body is. Is it something which you articulate as a board so that all of the people within the organization know the way you should they should be treating people?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:31:20] Well, for example, the Richmond board, we have our code of conduct to each other. What we've agreed that we will do. I think that whether you sort of appreciated or not, in smaller organizations, the boards quite visible, I mean, the board of Richmond would be more visible to the employees and the players and all that than the board of the Commonwealth Bank, because you just don't have that interaction. So when you're that visible, you think people do take cues from you about how we might act at a function and being short tempered with somebody on staff? Well, that means that we really don't respect that person because that's not the time or the place to take up an issue that you might have with them or the way we treat members or the way that we act ourselves. So I think that the tone from the top is right. But then, of course, the most important person in all of this is to be sure that your CEO and that executive team exhibit those same traits and they think it's important. And I think the best sort of situation that you can possibly have is that great alignment between the board and the executive team so that, you know, it's been lived every day in organizations because the board is only there for meetings and this year, not even for meetings and and certainly don't have interaction with a lot of people in the organization to tell them what to do. That's not our job. But if you can set the tone at the top and say that's what we want, but you've got to be sure that other people also agree. And that's why it's important to talk through what you want for an organization. For example, in Richmond, we've said our purpose is connecting to thrive and win, it was workshopped for many months across the board and the organization. And that isn't just a slogan, because you might hear often the word of connection, connection, so important, connection, so important, and that's getting to know each other and that's getting to know each other so well that you respect the difference. And it's important to think that the next word is thrive. So if you're connected, thriving, it's possible, thriving as individuals, thriving as a club, helping our community partners to thrive. And then the last part is the winning, because the other two things happen. The winning takes care of itself, whatever that might be, winning financially, winning on the ground. I think anybody at Richmond Football Club could tell you what our purpose is. And purpose driven organization seem to have a greater likelihood of success because you know what you're trying to achieve. So I think it's that reinforcement. Like I was saying, it's the reinforcement by everybody every day about the connection part. And we want to help you thrive as an individual and the winning will come.

Michael Green [00:34:07] And seems to me and please, I'm interested, of course, if you agree that could be applicable to legal firms?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:34:15] Absolutely. Absolutely.

Michael Green [00:34:17] Don't know if you'd use the word win, but certainly connecting to thrive, I guess a win might mean the best result for your client.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:34:23] And winning can have all sorts of meanings and winning financially, doing well, making a profit. So you can define that however you want. But I do think it's applicable to most any organization. But a lot of times the hard work is creating the connection. And we think that that allows the other things to happen.

Michael Green [00:34:39] It seems to me it's as simple, as difficult as what we've all known as the golden rule do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:34:46] Absolutely. And that creates empathy. And that's very hard to achieve for people to be able to put themselves in the shoes of the other person and say, how would I feel if that happened to me? Doesn't mean you don't demand excellence, but it means that you help people get to excellence. But allowing people to get to that point without prejudging who they might be or only one type of person gets there.... Only men can do this. Only women can do this. Only tall people can...

Michael Green [00:35:15] Play in the ruck.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:35:16] That's right. But now we've we've seen shorter people play the ruck now, Michael. That's right. Premierships have been won by short people in the ruck... part time, I must say. Um, but I agree. I think it all comes back to being respectful of others.

Michael Green [00:35:32] Your career has now moved you on to positions on many boards, not just the Richmond Football Club, but many more diverse boards. Before you did that, you did the Institute of Company Directors course. That's something I've heard about a lot over the years, but I've got no idea what the course entails and whether it's a worthwhile cause to undertake before anyone takes up a position as a director. What would you say about the course? Was it worth doing?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:35:55] This isn't a cash for comment thing, I found it very worthwhile. I did it some time ago. Now I've taken additional courses and I've actually become a fellow Institute of company directors. So I might be somewhat biased, but I thought the value was being exposed to all sorts of aspects of a business and things that might come across a directors desk or board meeting without having to wait for that issue to actually rise in real time. So there are certain things, it's a variety of subjects, and some things that are covered. I think I can't remember all of that. But now I know there's a measure for this in mergers and acquisitions or certain things that you need to look at. So it's more about just being aware of what issues are out there. And I think it's a good grounding. And more and more, if you want to serve on boards, people regarding that as just a sign that you're serious about being a good director. I think it's a good baseline to start with and to give you information that may take you many, many years to have come across in in most boards because you don't deal with every issue, every meeting.

Michael Green [00:37:03] You have been on many boards and you are still on many boards. And obviously you get asked to join many boards. What boards do you decide to join? On what basis do you decide, yes, I think I can make a contribution here? It's an organization that.. their values align with my values, therefore I'd be interested to do it. How do you assess where you'd like to use your limited time?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:37:24] Well, I was fortunate when I first stepped down as a partner that a couple of boards, or at least being part of the selection process for a couple of boards, came to me right away. And I've served nine years on both of those, so I didn't have a lot of spare time. And they were both in superannuation and financial services, which is what I my expertize as a lawyer had been. Richmond was the only one outside that. And I just did that because I love the club. And still, that's a true labor of love. But now for most every board that I'm asked to join, as you say, there's a there's a selection process, an interview process, there's a skills matrix is to try to identify skills you need

around the board table and where the gaps might be. And there used to be the usual.... You need an accountant, you need a lawyer. But now it's much more sophisticated, beyond that, you know, IT, cybersecurity, business background, generalists. So sometimes it's not what I might want to join. It's whether you're willing to go through the process and have the time to do so. Time is a big matter. I have never really aspired or wanted to be on a public company board. I like smaller boards that are small businesses that are a bit more agile. None of the super fund boards I've been on were you know, they're not listed companies. So I found myself in sort of highly regulated, which might be sort of my predilection in law as well. And then whether it's just something interesting and I've started thinking it doesn't have to be financial services. And I think Richmond showed that. So my initial reaction for one board that I'm on now was, well, no, I don't think I have anything to offer. They said, oh, we'll think about it again. They called me, would you at least go through the interviews? And now I'm really enjoying it because I'm learning something. And so now I'm thinking more about; I can contribute something but what can I get out of it in the sense of learning something new, meeting new people who have been doing exciting things in their lives that I would not otherwise have met in my legal career are just financial services. So some of the things I'm working on now, I would not have thought I would be involved with three years ago.

Michael Green [00:39:30] I read a biography actually about Bobby Kennedy, one of your former alumni of your law school, where he was quoted as saying that one of the keys to growing old, that's me, is continuing to learn, continue to learn as long as you can, and life remains interesting, vibrant and you make a contribution.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:39:46] Oh, I think so. If you have intellectual curiosity along the way, which is just finding new stuff that interests you, you'll never be bored and you'll never run out of things to do, whether it's as a volunteer or paid something or going back to school or meeting new people, it just makes life so much more interesting.

Michael Green [00:40:09] We've talked about culture. What is a good board need, is it does it need a matrix of skills, as you say, or is it really more about people with the right attitude towards culture, towards connection? Or is it a... you need the skills also?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:40:22] Well, I think more and more, it's given that you have the skill, it's those other things about board dynamics. I think it's important for people to really remember, and I've said this a few times, that a board is just a big committee. And if you don't like serving on committees, you're not going to want to be on the board. There's one decision, one opinion, and collectively, that's what is put out there as a decision. And if you can't get fully behind that, then it's not the right place for you. It doesn't mean you have to agree all the time, but it means that after you've had your say and after decision's been made that you can fully support it, even if it wasn't your decision. And sometimes people can't. And then I think that says, well, you probably this is the wrong place for you. And that goes back to what I've said earlier about sometimes you you need to know when it's your time to go, organisations change personalities all the time. So I, I think that that's important. Being able to disagree agreeably is important. I think a lot of good work on boards comes down to people being able to persuade others to their position if they feel strongly about it and taking time and not being in a rush. And a lot of it just goes back to how does the board work together? And there's a lot of effort put in now to ensure that you get board members who understand that working on the goals of the organization, which is why the board helps do with strategy and and picking the CEO and and being sure that the finances are right and all those sorts of things, that that's the most important thing. A lot of it is putting ego to the side. There's a lot of I want to be on this because it's prestigious or

that's prestigious. I don't know what that means because I think you want to find a place where you can do good work and contribute and learn from people along the way. So I think a good board is one that you don't really know who's necessarily on the board. They're all just working really hard and the organization is successful. It's not the board being successful at the organization's successful because of the things you put in place behind the scenes.

Michael Green [00:42:20] And that's a great lead into the most successful organization currently in Australian sport, or at least in my opinion, yours, which is the Richmond Football Club. Two questions for you there Peggy, one: Richmonds last four years have been the most successful four years in the history of the Richmond Football Club, which goes back, I think, about 135 years. What do you put that down to and what enjoyment do you personally get out of being president of Richmond beyond winning winning premierships?

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:42:50] What do I put down the recent success? A lot of hard work by a lot of really good people that even when we weren't successful, I think it's important to remember people were working really hard to do the best they could. Sometimes one opinion isn't the same as another. And we can look back and it's there's no point looking back. It's just what's happened now. There was that there's an alignment of the planets and a bit of mysticism and how it all happens. But I think the last decade has been a matter of people willing to stay the course to think about the club long term, to be patient within the club. I know there was a lot of impatience necessarily, maybe externally, but there was a great deal of effort put into planning. And planning is a bit of that boring stuff that happens that nobody wants to really hear about. But if you think your plans right, you aren't going to be chopping and changing all the time. And it doesn't mean you don't revisit it and you don't think about if circumstances change like now with covid what we thought we were going to be doing last year, we didn't do. We'll go back and think about what is this next year going to be. But circumstances like that make you have to revisit what your plan was. But I think that the individuals involved mattered a lot. I mean, it's an all of club effort. But the CEO and the head of football and the coach and the players and the captain and the goal was to to better the club and not necessarily to promote themselves. And it doesn't mean that was the way it was from day one. But over time, you realize that the only success in a football club is team success. It's not individual success. I'm sure that Dustin Martin wouldn't care that he won three Norm Smiths, if he didn't have three premierships. So I think that that takes quite a maturity of thought and understanding of each other. And I think the big difference is the... In recent years is just the way that the coach has been able to galvanize the team through his own personal storytelling and efforts and understanding the team so well because of that connection and the positivity that's brought all the time in the same way that Brendan Gale, as CEO, has brought that great leadership and enthusiasm for... It's all of us. We're all in it together. And the board, we've encouraged all of that. Because we value that as well, so I think success has come because everybody wanted success, but not for themselves, they wanted success for the club. Doesn't mean it always happens, but with a lot of effort and a lot of really good people, it has. And we don't take it for granted for a minute. But we'll take the premierships along the way. And you say, what personal satisfaction? I guess the lawyer in me love seeing a plan that's executed well because I've said, you know, we could have planned a lot, but somebody had to make it happen. And so the board can plan. But without the right people who implement the whole thing, it wouldn't have happened. I'd like to see the growth in people. I like to see the great joy that our community gets out of winning and the pride they take in the club and not just for on field, but for our community work and and the way that we've been able to provide an example sometimes in Australian life with the work

we do with indigenous community, Bachar Houli's foundation with supporting and promoting women and diversity and inclusion. All those things make me realize, too, that Australian Rules football gives you a great platform to make a difference. And when we have been able to make a difference, that's made me very happy.

Michael Green [00:46:19] Peggy, thank you very much for coming in this morning and talking to us. It's been absolutely fascinating and a great learning experience for me. And I think the others of us sitting around the table here, we can take a little away from it and a lot to think about and reflect on ourselves. So it's been a pleasure to have you. Thank you very much.

Peggy O'Neal AO [00:46:32] Oh, you're more than welcome thank you.

Voiceover [00:46:41] Show notes from episode can be found at [Greenslist.com.au/podcast](https://greenslist.com.au/podcast). There you'll find links to things talked about in this episode a transcript of the show and some wonderful photos of our guests. If you're enjoying Lives in the Law, please tell your networks and subscribe, rate and review the show. It really helps others find out about us. Your host, his former lawyer and greens list clerk Michael Green. Our show is produced by me, Catherine Green, mixed and mastered by Windmill Audio and recorded by Alex Macfarlane, who also wrote and performed all the music for the series. With covid restrictions limiting numbers inside the County Court of Victoria. We are currently recording our shows at Owen Dixon Chambers on the corner of William and Lonsdale Streets in our beautiful city of Melbourne. We acknowledge The Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respect to their elders past and present. There is no doubt that conversations about justice have been taking place on this land for thousands of years, and we are privileged to continue the discussion here today.