

Snakes & LADDERS

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THESE DAYS, 'WORKING YOUR WAY TO THE TOP' IS ALMOST UNHEARD OF, BUT NOT FOR CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT, TONI MCCULLOCH, WHO HAS JUST CELEBRATED HER 15TH YEAR WITH A LOCAL ACCOUNTANCY FIRM. GENINE HOWARD CATCHES UP WITH TONI TO DISCOVER HOW SHE BECAME A PARTNER IN THE RESPECTED FIRM, FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AS THEIR RECEPTIONIST.

TONI MCCULLOCH

They say that corporate life for many women is like a game of snakes and ladders; "Sometimes we find ourselves at the bottom of a magnificent ladder, but we must always be ready to slide down a snake," said Mary O'Kane, respected Australian science professor.

However, for Toni McCulloch, each rung of the corporate ladder has been climbed with passion and conviction, with very few snakes in sight.

At 34 years of age, Toni is at the top of her game. She is a qualified chartered accountant and partner in Coast firm, Accounting North, who were recognised as a *BRW Fast 100 company* in 2008. She is also mum to three-year-old Claire, wife to engineer, Richard, and surprisingly (sorry accountants), very funny and down-to-earth.

But Toni's rise and rise from receptionist with the firm back in 1994 is no laughing matter. What Toni has achieved is extraordinary and inspiring, to say the least. At just 19 years of age, Toni combined university study with reception work with Accounting North. With just three people in the company, her role encompassed everything from basic data entry to making tea. With a rare determination, Toni completed her degree and chartered accountant program while impressing principal, Matt Richards, along the way. In 2007, Toni was invited to become a partner and share in the business's vision and future direction.

profile: Did you always want to become an accountant?

toni: Bean counting wasn't on my radar until first year uni's 'intro accounting' module. It was quite hilarious getting up to speed with exactly what debit and credit was, but I found I enjoyed the study and I knew that this was for me.

profile: What was your first job?

toni: Many weekends as a cashier in my mother's TAB agency.

profile: What is the best part about your job?

toni: Being Coast-based and involved with an excellent network of people.

profile: Do you think being a woman has had any impact on your career achievements?

toni: I believe so. The most enjoyable parts of my career have been forming relationships and the distance we've covered, particularly over the past five years. I think women are naturally good at building solid relationships (by encouraging openness and being accessible) and can quickly adapt to new situations.

profile: Who inspires you?

toni: I don't need to venture far when looking for inspiration. My business partners' [Matt Richards and Grant Callaghan] strategic focus and strong family values often provide daily spurts of creativity and problem solving.

profile: What do you see as success and have you achieved it?

toni: I have received enormous pleasure from a variety of achievements (sharing a client's business success, becoming a chartered accountant, returning to work after my daughter, Claire's, arrival), but as the proverb goes, "success is a journey, not a destination", and I'm always looking forward to the next project, big or small!

profile: What advice would you give to someone thinking about entering your industry?

toni: Focus on joining a firm that has a culture that complements your personality. There are a lot of excellent firms on the Coast and the ones that stand out are those that promote an excellent, professional development program and use cutting-edge technology.

profile: What motto do you live by?

toni: As our mothers tell us, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well."

profile: What is one piece of advice you can give readers about their financial plans?

toni: Don't avoid situations, it only makes things worse. Be smart about your finances and take control of your money.

profile: If you had your time over again, would you have done anything differently?

toni: I would have joined Toastmasters (or the like) in my early 20s to improve my public speaking – it would have saved 10 years of unnecessary nerves and anxiety!

profile: How do you relax?

toni: We've just started a book club at our firm which I'm finding quite rewarding. I'm reading books I'd never have selected myself and our differing viewpoints provide an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

profile: What is your hidden talent?

toni: Being graded to 'superstar' in the entertainment genius that is *Singstar* (despite my husband insisting I'm actually tone deaf).

profile: How would your friends describe you?

toni: Likes a laugh, quick-witted and loyal.

profile: Can you share a piece of life advice with our readers?

toni: You create your own experience. Don't be afraid to try something new ... and it's never too late for change. ■