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PERSPECTIVE

How one woman succeeded in a male-dominated profession

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When it comes to perseverance and resilience, no one knows the meaning of the words better than Lucie Barron, founder and president of ADR Services, Inc.

Born in Germany to Russian parents who were prisoners of war, Barron spent the first years of her life in a refugee camp before immigrating with her family to Australia in the late 1950s.

Although growing up in Australia was difficult, Barron reflects on the experience as one that made her stronger.

"I just tried very hard to fit in," Barron said. "I developed a very strong work ethic and this attitude that anything was possible. That was my philosophy. It wasn't that I really thought about it at the time, I just had it in my brain that you could do anything if you worked hard enough."

"I just learned that it was OK to be rejected, it was OK to not be part of a group that other people belonged to and it was OK to be an outsider," she continued. "And that is what probably strengthened me."

That same strength was what drove her to launch one of California's leading alternative dispute resolution service providers in 1994, although she had no legal background.

Coming from a business, real estate and psychology background, Barron was exposed to the legal industry, particularly the world of arbitration, for the first time when she was sued for wrongful termination by a former employee who helped manage one of her properties.

The case was resolved, but Barron was left with a \$85,000 bill from her attorney, while raising and supporting seven children on her own.

"I didn't have any money to pay him and so he took me to arbitration through the L.A. County Bar and they found that he had over-billed me by something like 58%," she explained. "That case in the end went away, but it just taught me a little bit about the whole business of law, and I thought, 'There's going to be a business in this.'"

Barron researched alternative dispute resolution at the UCLA business and law schools and began networking in the business and legal community to get her footing for the launch of her own company. She said she was met with skepticism.



Lucie Barron, founder of ADR Services, Inc.

Courtesy of ADR Services, Inc.

"Being a nonlawyer with lawyers is really difficult," she said. "Talking to judges when you're not a lawyer is really difficult. But I think what made it two, three or four times as difficult was the fact that I was a woman doing this as well."

"Women were not taken very seriously. It's not that there weren't women in the legal profession," she said. "It's just that they weren't in decision making roles."

After joining all the bar associations and trade associations she could think of, Barron was able to reach an agreement with a group of retired judges to resolve cases she sourced for a fee split. They became her first panel.

It took nearly nine years for the company to establish itself.

"I hardly ever saw my kids, I was just working day and night... it was very much survival mode," she added. "It was just very hard to get started. By that stage, because I was reading so much and talking to lawyers, I really started to understand the anatomy of a lawsuit and I could speak with lawyers about legal issues and their problems. I started to understand all of that, I think about two or three years down the line. So it wasn't so much at that point that I was ignorant of the subject matter, I think it was more the fact that it was just tough to get recognition."

Barron's story is particularly resonant as we near the end of Women's History Month and reflect on the contributions of women in the industry.

Starting out with just a couple of conference rooms in Los Angeles, the company 27 years later operates offices in Century City, downtown Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Orange County and San Diego with a roster of more than 130 neutrals, of which 36 are women. Of the seven offices, all but one are run by women and roughly 80% of her staff are women.

A source of pride for Barron is the company's commitment to promoting gender diversity in the legal industry and providing a platform for success for its female neutrals and staff.

Looking back, Barron feels that although the legal industry has changed and become more accepting, women still face difficulties.

"It's always been kind of like a battle because a man can be very assertive and if a woman does exactly the same thing she's seen as very aggressive. 'Assertive' is a very strong word. 'Aggressive' is a very negative one," she said. "So I think it has been hard for women. And I don't think they've got equal prominence even today." ■