

# Opal fever

**I was first introduced to the opal in** the mid '70s on an annual outback camping trip in far western Queensland with my father. He was a dermatologist with a lapidary interest and a love of the Australian outback. On this particular trip, to satisfy the lapidary interest of my father we visited the opal mine of a friend and bought a parcel of rough opal to cut into gemstones. I recall being fascinated by the colours of the spectrum emerging from the rough boulders that were spread out across the floor of a shed. It was a life changing moment for my father, my mother, and ultimately for me too.

**Opal was never seen as a career** path for me – opal was a hobby for my parents which unexpectedly turned into a successful business for them. I set my own career path, going to university in Sydney then onto a global career as a corporate lawyer before starting Venerari.

**I chose to go into Law because of** my aptitude for arts and humanities subjects, and moreover, my lack of interest in science and maths. This pointed me to an Arts/Law degree rather than Medicine, which was the other option presented by my parents. Like my siblings, I was expected to find my own career path after university. We were taught that we could do anything we set our minds to, so long as we had a university degree which would give us a career to fall back on if necessary.

**I worked in the criminal and civil** courts in my first year after becoming a solicitor, but I decided very quickly that it wasn't for me. I became a corporate lawyer rather than a litigator, having learnt the lesson that one should always try to agree to lasting mutually beneficial

commercial arrangements – and to resolve commercial conflicts – to determine your own destiny rather than 'roll the dice' by going to court. After finishing university in 1988, I travelled throughout Europe for a year, and came back to work as a solicitor in Sydney for five years before moving to London in 1994. Like many ex-pat Australians, I left home seeking to work in different cultural environments, and to establish a career in a bigger corporate pond.

**I think I was successful overseas** because of my ability to empathise with the people I was negotiating with and my ability to manage and motivate my team. Also, the ability to communicate in a meaningful way across language and cultural barriers added to my success.

**At the time of the sale of Optus to** SingTel, I had been travelling the world for three years, leading Cable & Wireless's London-based team of International Mergers and Acquisitions lawyers. Apart from the sale of Hong Kong Telecom, the sale of Optus was the biggest transaction in the group at the time, and the board asked me to move back to Sydney to manage the deal.

**I was Senior Vice President and** General Counsel of Cable & Wireless until I left after the sale of the US businesses. After leaving, I travelled around the USA and then throughout Spain, Portugal and Morocco. During this six month road-trip I reassessed my life goals and decided to leave the law and move back to Australia. I moved back to Sydney in 2004.

**In 2001, my passion for opal and** other coloured gems was reawakened while travelling around the outback. The opal industry had not progressed

From corporate boardroom solicitor to the oracle of opal, Kingsley Wallman's life has always been about meaningful communication.

from the early 1980's boom when the Japanese were the primary market for opal jewellery. After the collapse of the Japanese economy, demand dried up and opal steadily went downmarket and was relegated to the cheapest tourist souvenir basket.

**I sensed that opal was ripe for reinvention.** It was obvious that in Sydney, unlike other global cities, there was no jewellery of modern design. My wife, Genevieve Lilley, an architect trained in the modernist tradition, had the perfect skill set to design revolutionary Australian jewellery. I envisioned a collision of the colours of opal and other coloured gems with modern design, and the vision for *Venerari* was born.

**After I returned to Australia and decided to establish *Venerari*,** I suddenly knew, for the first time in years, that I was doing the right thing. That made working towards fulfilling the business vision easy. Going back to study gemmology however, nearly 20 years after finishing university, was at times a struggle. In addition to starting a new business and moving back to Australia after more than a decade away, we had two children under two-years-old, and Genevieve was re-establishing her architecture business. Our whole life was in a state of flux, and studying two nights a week was not always easy.

**In comparison to spending weeks away from home and working all night several times a week on deals,** launching *Venerari* was like taking a holiday. During my two years working in a senior management role on the merger and restructuring of three businesses in the US, I realised that as well as managing a team of lawyers, I'd learnt so much about business management generally that I was ready and able to leave the law and start my own business.

***Venerari's* pre-launch phase was easy for me.** I was able to draw on all my business skills to structure

“ I pride myself on having had the can-do attitude to launch *Venerari*, and having the skill and determination to make it successful. ”

the business, devise the strategy, organise business and marketing plans, secure premises, find and manage staff. But nothing prepares you for the day to day reality of retail. In Sydney, retail (especially jewellery) is going through tough times, so the first year was trying. But we survived and I'm sure the discipline learnt will be beneficial as the business continues to grow.

**I aim to establish *Venerari* as a global brand synonymous with Australian gems and modern design.** My aim is to put opal into its rightful place as a unique precious gemstone, which should be in the major global cities, worn alongside ruby, sapphire, emerald and diamond.

**I pride myself on having had the can-do attitude to launch *Venerari*,** and having the skill and determination to make it successful, as well as the guts to leave behind a successful legal career to follow my dreams.

**The key to business success is making your product and whole shopping experience so different that they stand apart from the competition.** You have to convey genuine passion for your business and its product, and have the utmost integrity with your staff, suppliers and customers so that you establish a lasting relationship built on trust and respect. [www.venerari.com](#)

