

I'm In! *This is my story*



‘*I have been a carer since I was 12, looking after my disabled mum and taking care of my sister so my dad could go to work’*

Karen Clarke
Partner

Q: Tell us a bit about yourself

A: I come from a very ordinary working class background. Both of my parents worked until my Mum suffered a spinal injury and was paralysed from the waist down whilst cleaning a bathroom during a family holiday in 1988. Our lives changed in a matter of seconds and I suddenly became a carer at the age of 12, taking responsibility for the daily care of my bedridden mother, my eight year old sister's upbringing and running the household so my Dad could go out to work and support us. This continued until 1994 when we finally managed to get my Mum a place in hospital to be physically rehabilitated to a point at which she could sit and get into a wheelchair. My family were insistent that I go to University (I am first generation to go to University) and with their unswerving support and belief in me and my ambition to become a lawyer I juggled my law degree course with supporting my family during my four years at Warwick University. I have been (until my Mum's very recent death) a carer for thirty years and weirdly, I feel that I have learned a great deal about responsibility, accountability, teamwork and multi-tasking because of my family situation. This has been of great help to me in my legal career, but it has not always been easy. I have at times struggled with the weight of responsibility and the pressure of competing demands. Although I

think we should have asked for some help back then, I would never give up the closeness which our shared experience has engendered in my family and can only hope that my own children will grow up with that kind of close relationship – just without the stress!.

Q: What does diversity and inclusion mean to you?

A: Diversity and Inclusion means to have an inclusive culture which values what each individual, can bring to the table so that from the outset people feel comforted and supported. This is not only critical for us to promote as firm, but is also important for our relationships with clients, as it enables us to relate to a client, and also allows us to maintain a degree of individuality, which is greatly valued by clients.

Q: How do you balance it all? What compromises do you have to make?

A: CMS is a great supporter of agile working, which provides me with the flexibility to not remain desk bound and allows me to work from home at least one day a week. My husband also helps a lot, and has taken a three-year career break to manage our home and take care of our children. Despite the challenges of balancing competing responsibilities, I genuinely enjoy my job, which is my main driver and helps me to not allow myself to be brought down by my many responsibilities. It also provides me with a greater understanding of my colleagues and how they all have a life outside of work.

Q: Do you believe CMS is a diverse and inclusive firm – how could it improve?

A: I believe that CMS is a diverse and inclusive organisation and that the 'best of three' approach we took after our merger is working, however, I think it could do a better job in promoting what we do for our people. Communications is key and it is important that we ensure that information is accessible and visible so people know what is available to them and have the confidence to ask for more support and flexibility.