

The gentle arm of the law

Sohila Zanjani's compelling story of determination and survival would make a compelling Hollywood script, writes **Liz Porter**.

IN LATE 1987, Iranian-born Sohila Zanjani was a pregnant mother of two trapped in a failing marriage and living in public housing in Frankston. Despite being the breadwinner, she was afraid to leave her husband because she thought she would lose her children.

Although well-educated in computer science and the English language, Ms Zanjani was ignorant about Australian family law. When her husband told her he could take the children if she left him, she believed it.

"In Iran they give the child to the father," she says.

A former computer programmer in the Tehran office of US company Bell Helicopter International, Ms Zanjani arrived in Australia in 1981, finding a job as a computer analyst within a month. Her first child was born in 1982, her second in 1986, and she soon was too busy working, running the house and supporting the family to inform herself about her rights.

"I was an educated woman," Ms Zanjani says. "But what an idiot I was."

Twenty years on Sohila Zanjani is a law graduate and the

owner and director of Prime Law Brokers (PLB), a national business that refers clients to the "right" lawyers.

Free to clients, her firm has 500 law firms on its books and takes 600 calls a month from people seeking lawyers. Now run from Ms Zanjani's Mount Eliza home office, the business is funded by monthly consultancy payments from law firms.

PLB has grown steadily since 1998, when Ms Zanjani took it over from Yuri Rapoport, the lawyer who started it in mid 1996. Now she is planning further expansion, formulating a new business plan with the help of accounting giant PricewaterhouseCoopers. "It is my intention to make Prime a household name," she says.

Ms Zanjani's journey from subjugated wife to confident businesswoman is a story of courage and determination.

While its heroine is Ms Zanjani, her parents also played starring roles. Arriving in Australia late in 1987, they encouraged her to leave her husband and stayed on to help when she prematurely gave birth to twins that year.

Credit would also go to the Centrelink employee who told Ms Zanjani to go to Legal Aid, where a lawyer helped her obtain an intervention order against her former husband.

With her mother to help with the four children, Sohila Zanjani set about building a new life. She embarked on a Victoria College graduate diploma in women's studies, completing it in 1990. "I realised that I had to know about my rights," she says. She also learned to drive, so she could attend lectures in Burwood.

Ms Zanjani knew a women's studies diploma was not a ticket to employment. Instead, a plan for her future came to her as she was changing nappies. "I thought: 'I'll study law,'" she recalls. But Monash University's law faculty



Sohila Zanjani's quest for a law degree began when she joined a class of teenage year 12 students at Frankston TAFE.

PICTURE: KEN IRWIN

wasn't impressed by her degree from the Tehran College of Insurance — or her women's studies diploma.

There was only one way in: through VCE.

"So I sat next to teenage year 12 students at Frankston TAFE," says Ms Zanjani. "They laughed at my accent — and mature age students always talk so much."

The then 37-year-old's marks were enough to get her into first-year arts. But her results in literature and philosophy were high enough to allow her into the law faculty.

By 1996 she was doing her final year of law, and sending out 52 applications for articled clerkships. But each law firm sent a polite letter of rejection.

In the meantime, she spotted an ad for a law graduate on the law faculty noticeboard.

It had been placed by Yuri Rapoport, who was setting up

shop as a law broker, finding lawyers for people who had legal problems but no idea about finding the right lawyer.

Ms Zanjani's memories of needing a lawyer to help her reclaim her life were still painfully acute. She jumped at the chance to join the new business, then still run from its founder's South Yarra home.

Taken on as a trainee rather than an employee, Ms Zanjani concentrated on mastering the art of interviewing new clients on the phone, while her boss dealt with the lawyers.

"It is crucial to be professional on the phone, especially if you have a strong accent. He was very harsh with me — and I thank him for that."

Then, early in 1998, Yuri Rapoport moved to Britain, leaving Ms Zanjani in charge of the business, by then based in the city.

"I was scared," she recalls. "I

had had no contact with lawyers, only with the clients."

But the new proprietor of Prime Law Brokers got busy meeting lawyers — and expanding the business interstate.

During the next few years she flew to Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and the Gold Coast, signing up lawyers with expertise in criminal law, family law, commercial law, employment law and personal injury.

The service is a huge help to law firms, she says, directing business to them, and saving them advertising and administration costs by weeding out calls from people who don't really need a lawyer.

Now, in her 11th year of taking client calls at any time of the day or night, Ms Zanjani relishes the satisfaction of helping people who need a sympathetic ear as well as a lawyer. One-third of clients are businesses, but most are people

in sudden need of legal help who are then stuck leafing helplessly through thousands of solicitor listings in the Yellow Pages.

"For them, a legal problem is always a sudden problem," Ms Zanjani says. "A death in the family. A business debt, an injury in a supermarket, a sudden dismissal." Or a family member arrested for assault or shoplifting.

"I can't give them legal advice, but I calm them down and reduce their anxieties." Calls also come in from Britain, from people wanting a lawyer in Australia. People often call about 10 at night she says, when their anxiety about imminent criminal charges, property disputes or medical negligence seems to be at its strongest.

Yuri Rapoport has been following her success from afar. "Now he is going to launch the same business in the UK," she says. "So we will be expanding there."

CV

Name: Sohila Zanjani

Age: 51

Lives: Mount Eliza

Family: four children

Education: Nasr High School, Tehran; Tehran College of Insurance; Victoria University women's studies diploma; Monash University law degree

Work: computer programmer-analyst, Bell Helicopter International, Tehran (1973-4); Integer, Melbourne (1981-82); Australian Wool Corporation (1984-85); joined PLB 1996; proprietor of PLB 1998-present