LISA BILDY has always avoided fitting herself into an institutional mould.

As a law student, Bildy found law school classes a bit dull but loved working at a legal clinic. “I really loved helping people and solving their problems.”

So, when she started to look for articling positions, working at a large law firm did not appeal to her. She wanted something more practical that gave her more independence. “I did not want to be carrying a briefcase for a senior lawyer for five years,” she says.

Bildy ended up articling at Seabrook Epstein Ste. Marie & Miller in London, Ont., where, she says “there was just so much autonomy and so much opportunity to get on my feet in court from a very early stage in my career.”

While the firm historically did not hire back its articling students, Bildy broke the mould and joined as an associate after her articling term.

Bildy was then on a track to a successful career as a litigator. She recalls a case of hers that went to a full jury trial as a high point in her initial career trajectory. “I had a courtroom full of senior counsel watching me do my first jury trial. . . . And after I cross-examined one doctor, he got down off the stand at the recess and he shook my hand and thanked me for the great sport. And I had a lot of positive feedback from the lawyers in the room.”

“So, Bildy just assumed her career would be her focus in life, even though she was six months pregnant at the time of the trial.

“Three months later, I had a baby and I never went back. And that surprised nobody more than me.”

Bildy decided to pause her career and look after her child. As a career-minded lawyer, Bildy says, the fact that she eventually homeschooled her first and second child and only did part-time work for over a decade and a half was an about-face.

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Name: Lisa Bildy
» Staff lawyer, Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms: 2019-present
» Lawyer, Libertas Law: 2019-present
» Campaign manager, StopSDP: 2017-present
home mom in the first place.”

In 2017, when Bildy’s children were approaching adulthood and she was ready to re-enter the profession full time, her anti-establishment views started to coalesce into a world view that she was ready to share more publicly.

The impetus for Bildy was when the Law Society of Ontario announced its “Statement of Principles” requirement for all lawyers in the province.

“When I saw it coming out . . . I could recognize it for what it was, which was not benign. It was basically requiring the profession to state its loyalty to a political principle, to an ideology.”

While the StopSOP debate and its result are well known — a slate of benchers elected to the LSO who made it their mission to reverse this requirement — Bildy’s role may not be.

Since she had not been practising full time for many years, Bildy did not feel she would have the credibility to run as a bencher, so her role was behind the scenes as the campaign manager. But having been outside the profession, she says, allowed her to see more clearly the changes that had occurred in the profession that she did not like.

“Those enlightenment values as they evolved just seemed to me to be not perfect but the best system that we had come up with over time. But I was seeing that eroding, and things like what the law society was doing were hastening the demise of those liberal principles.”

Bildy initially organized the StopSOP campaign with a small group of London lawyers, but it soon grew to encompass lawyers across the province. She says she knew there were risks involved but that she had less to lose than other lawyers who quietly supported the cause.

“Part of the consideration for me was, I’m just coming back in, I don’t have a career to risk. I don’t have staff counting on me. If I don’t speak up, I don’t know who else can as easily as I can.”

Once Bildy had put her name to such a public political debate, her career moved in that direction as well. She launched a law firm and hoped to promote the traditional liberal values of individual freedom that she felt were at risk.

“I was on a freedom kick, so I went out with the name Libertas Law.”

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After Bildy launched her firm, she called Jay Cameron, the litigation director at the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, to congratulate him on a recent case he won and to offer her pro bono services to the JCCF.

Cameron told her the JCCF could use a lawyer in Ontario and offered her a job, which she started in August 2019.

While the JCCF represents plaintiffs in various Charter challenges, Bildy says the COVID lockdowns have created a new urgency for the group’s work.

“I am of the view . . . from a historical perspective, that the fabric of society is very delicate,” Bildy says. “And if you are going to try and shut down a complex society, the way that has been done, and not expect there to be repercussions that are extremely damaging and extremely long-lasting, I think [it] is crazy.”

While her StopSOP advocacy and the work challenging lockdowns are controversial, to say the least, Bildy is quite comfortable challenging large institutional interests and accepted norms.

“The lockdowns have mapped on to a similar political kind of division [to StopSOP], which is really interesting, but it’s also keeping us extremely busy.”

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