

This Man's Life

Greg King's death in November shocked the country and devastated those who knew him. In 2004, Mike White was the first journalist to write a major feature story on King and worked closely with him on many articles for this magazine, including two on the Scott Guy murder trial.

So the unmannerly adjectives flowed as people caricatured him as truly a devil's advocate.

But anyone who knew King, from the country's top judges to the most miserable, shithouse criminals he represented, knew he wasn't greedy but one of the most generous people imaginable; knew he wasn't arrogant, but always keen to spread acclaim; knew he wasn't disgraceful or perverse, but the ultimate upholder of justice; knew he wasn't twisted but someone who put a premium on honesty and loyalty; knew he wasn't evil but did incredible good as a lawyer and community member.

King, of course, was used to being branded and scorned and generally let such attacks pass. But this one went too far, he decided, to the point he had to respond. "[Sir], I resent that. I am not little! I am 6 foot 2 inches tall and 104kg. Regards, Greg."

In 2004, I phoned King and asked to write a feature on him. At that stage he was a rising legal star, someone who'd already featured in several high-profile cases and begun to make headlines. He'd helped Judith Ablett-Kerr with Peter Ellis' appeals and the acquittal of Vicky Calder in the "poisoned professor" case. He'd made legal history with his appeal on behalf of Janine Rongonui, successfully arguing she was provoked, despite stabbing her neighbour more than 150 times. And he'd unleashed enormous opprobrium when he took the appeal of Bruce Howse, convicted of stabbing his two step-daughters to death, to the Privy Council. So concerned was King that legal rules had been bent and ignored in Howse's trial, he spent \$50,000 of his own money to take the case to London. Most chose to see this not as principled, but despicable support for a despicable man.

But when I first met King in his insalubrious Lower Hutt office, with its entrance between the sweet shop and the poster shop, he was completely unapologetic. To King, it didn't matter who you were or what you'd done, you deserved a fair trial. And if you ignored standards and rules for one case, where would it end?

Preparing that first story, I met King numerous times, at his office, home and at court. He even insisted we do one interview over dinner at his local Chinese restaurant along

A few days after Ewen Macdonald was acquitted of murdering his brother-in-law Scott Guy, his lawyer Greg King received this email: "Dear Sir, you are a fiend, a pirate, an unconscionable, contemptible, greedy, arrogant, proud, disgraceful, thoroughly contemptible, grimy, slimy, perverse, twisted, evil little man."

It was typical of the abuse King received following the high-profile trial. While there was much praise for his work, many saw King as having got a guilty man off and loathed him for it.

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MIKE WHITE 2010

with wife Catherine and best mate, former All Black Bernie Fraser.

One of the other people I went to was Sensible Sentencing Trust spokesman Garth McVicar. "We basically feel that Greg King's another defence lawyer with his snout in the trough," railed McVicar, who went on to express his belief King was motivated by money and say he had no respect for him.

King countered, offering to go toe to toe with McVicar any time in a debate.

McVicar took up the challenge and the pair developed a great friendship, with King becoming a regular speaker at Sensible Sentencing Trust conferences, even though many of his views conflicted with those of the hard-line trust.

Another unlikely friend was Gil Elliott. In 2009, King helped defend Clayton Weatherston, who'd stabbed Elliott's daughter Sophie more than 200 times. There was public revulsion at Weatherston's claim he was provoked

and King was tarred by the backlash.

But despite being on opposing sides of the court argument, it was King who befriended the Elliots, explained the trial process, and immediately sought them out after the verdict to check how they were. Some months later, King and Elliott attended a conference and as King lay in bed listening to Elliott snoring through the wall, he turned to his wife and said: "Well, who'd have ever thought this would happen?"

And it was this ability to get on with anyone, no matter where they stood on a debate, and to get co-operation across polarised issues and political divides that was a mark of King.

His habit of reaching out to the other side during a case was something I'd heard about when I first met him.

In 2003, King defended a woman who'd stabbed two children, including her stepson, who was left paralysed in a wheelchair. She was charged with attempted murder, but

King successfully argued she be acquitted due to insanity.

The boy's father believed she was guilty and wanted her sent to jail. But he told me how, after the verdict, King approached him to ask about his son's welfare, gave the man a lift back to his work even though it was miles out of King's way, and then gave the man money for the boy's Christmas present.

"What lawyer would do that?" the man remarked. "He didn't have to speak to me after the trial, but he did – shook my hand. We both knew there were no winners."

Over the past eight years, King helped with and contributed to many *North & South* stories. From the case of Scott Watson (who he represented at appeal) to stories on wrongful conviction and the murky world of jailhouse snitches, King was an eloquent and ardent voice for fairness in our justice system.

My most sustained involvement with him was during the last 18 months. When Ewen Macdonald was arrested in April 2011 for murdering Scott Guy, I approached King to see if he'd allow me to follow the preparation of the defence case. After gaining consent from Macdonald and his family, I met with King countless times.

During the trial I'd see him daily at court and every weekend I'd phone him at home to get his summary of how things were going. It didn't matter how busy he was or what I was interrupting, there was always time to talk.

Macdonald's acquittal shocked many because, on the surface, he seemed guilty for all money. But anyone who attended the trial realised what a remarkable job the defence team of King, Peter Coles and Liam Collins had done, undermining and unpicking virtually every aspect of the Crown case. And it was King, with his mix of logic and passion as he addressed the court, who'd ultimately convinced the jury Macdonald should be acquitted.

I sat directly behind him throughout the four-week trial, watched his body language, admired his sharp shoes and quick wit, saw how committed he was to Macdonald, despite most of the country believing he was an irredeemable bastard.

And afterwards, in the chaos of the verdict, with people's emotions running extraordinarily high, there was King, exhausted, drained, relieved, aware of what he and his colleagues had achieved, but again, also aware this wasn't a case where there were any winners, nor room for gloating.

Quote Marks

Greg King on law and justice.

“People are quite happy to pay anything for the police or prosecution to put the buggers away but not a cent on defending them – until they're falsely accused of a crime, in which case their view changes fairly significantly.”

“Everyone thinks they can tell when someone is lying. History and experience show that no one can. The reality is there's no human lie detector – you can guess but no one can get it right 100 per cent of the time.”

“People who talk about trials as theatre or 'the best show in town' need to remind themselves that this isn't a flippin' game and it's not a performance. This is real life and these are real people who are affected in real ways. And it annoys the hell out of me when it's cheapened. For myself, I don't act, it's not a dramatic performance, it's just how I am – I wear my heart on my sleeve.”

“At the end of the day when the state comes against you, you'd better hope there's someone in your corner who's prepared to fight for the underdog because,

believe me, you are the underdog. If the justice system decides to come knocking on your door, by god you'd better be ready for them because man, if you're not, it doesn't matter what you've done, it's what they can show you've done.”

“The right to a fair trial is as fundamental as it gets for me. That's what thousands of New Zealanders died for in two world wars – to fight for our system of justice, that's democracy, that's everything.”

“I certainly believe people get convicted for crimes of which they were innocent – in New Zealand on a far too regular basis.”

“We have a system of justice that values finality of verdict higher than correctness of verdict. People are interested in having cases closed and the door nailed shut on them... and change will only come with the exposure of serious miscarriages of justice – more of them – the ones we've had aren't enough obviously.”

“I believe there's no greater sin that a state can commit than to wrongly convict and imprison an innocent person. And the enduring sense of injustice that that person must be going through sitting in a prison cell in the middle of the night when they are innocent – it's too sickening to even contemplate. So we've got to get it right.”

Weeks later, he acknowledged the case would be one he'd remember when he retired, for its complexity and the vastness of the evidence. And for achieving what he truly believed was the correct result in the face of extraordinary prejudice against his client.

When our story about the case came out, he texted me to say thanks for capturing what really happened during the trial. "I will ensure my girls each have a copy so they know I wasn't all bad. Thanks so much Mike. Greg."

Anyone who knew King knew he worked ridiculously hard. I'd often ask when he was going to pull back and give himself some more time off with his family. He'd shrug and just say, "It's what I do." A few weeks before he died, I discussed his workload with his wife Catherine and his junior counsel, Liam Collins. They both described how King found it virtually impossible to say no to people who asked for help. He was always in demand, and his success in Ewen Macdonald's trial increased that tenfold. Often Catherine or Collins would put through a call to him, knowing how stretched he already was, only to hear King going, "Yep... yep... all right mate... yep... no worries..." and taking on another case.

Several years ago King admitted his work rate had a downside. "A lot of other things in life fall by the way – exercise, eating healthily, you don't get out and do things – you're constantly working on the next case. Surviving on adrenaline and junk food." In the last months of his life, the physical price was evident, with side effects of his diabetes beginning to cause pain and problems.

He didn't work for the money – King's life was comfortable – he did it because he really wanted to help people, perceived an injustice, and worried other lawyers wouldn't care as much.

His belief in justice began early. At school he memorised James K. Baxter's chilling poem *A Rope for Harry Fat*, about the controversial hanging of 20-year-old Edward Te Whiu in 1955, and could still recite it 30 years later.

Throughout his working life King was guided by a line from Martin Luther King Jr's letter from Birmingham Jail in 1963: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

He never judged anyone. He'd grown up in a state house in Whanganui, in a cheeky-by-jowl street where kids leant out their bedroom windows swapping stories with



MARK MITCHELL, NEW ZEALAND HERALD

Judith Ablett-Kerr, QC, with her then junior counsel Greg King in February 2000, after meeting with Justice Minister Phil Goff to request an inquiry into the Peter Ellis case. A ministerial inquiry was conducted by Sir Thomas Eichelbaum the following month.

their neighbours about what they got for Christmas. His dad, Jeff, was a shearer and freezing worker who became a prison officer when the family shifted to Turangi. Jeff's alcoholism (now overcome) caused problems at home that meant King understood where many of his clients came from and the troubles they faced.

So King defended those accused of murder, rape, child molestation, kidnapping, grave robbing, blackmail and bank robbery. He stood up in court on behalf of a friend accused of the mercy killing of his dreadfully ill five-month-old daughter; a 90-year-old who killed his wife as part of a suicide pact on their 60th wedding anniversary; the man who attacked the virgin in a condom display at Te Papa; protesters who painted "No War" on the Basin Reserve before a cricket test match and paedophile priests extradited from overseas. He did everything he could to help prostitutes and pornographers, burglars and boy racers, drunk drivers and drug dealers.

Often they were cases with odds overwhelmingly stacked against him, the police and Crown having virtually unlimited resources and the defence having to go cap in hand to get funding for every hour spent on the case. But King didn't waste time or energy on accounting shortfalls and frequently did cases for free, for a favour, or a feed of fish.

"I can never get excited about a case involving someone's money but I can get absolutely passionate about a case involving someone's liberty," he said to me.

He was tenacious as hell, always showing the same stubborn character in court that he had in the boxing ring as a kid where he once got punched out of the ring but clambered back in to win the fight.

"God made me a keen boxer but a very bad one and I used to get a hiding on a regular basis. But it hardened me up for law. It taught me not to back down when you need to dig your toes in."

When King was admitted to the bar on May 14, 1993, at Dunedin's High Court, Justice Hansen told the young lawyers arrayed before him that the profession's image was at "a very low ebb", and exhorted them to improve it.

After 19 years practising and becoming one of the country's most skilful and successful lawyers, King still wasn't sure if he'd lived up to that command – many just thought he was scum for defending criminals. But he didn't overly care about their opinions and didn't live life in order to leave a sanctified, sanitised legacy.

"Graveyards are full of people who thought they were indispensable," he told me once. "I'm very much 'live and do what you can now, and don't expect anyone to remember it later.'"

Given what he achieved, there seems little chance King will be forgotten, such was his impact on those he befriended, the people he represented, the justice system he upheld so passionately and the country he loved dearly.