



James and Peter Johnston

'We pride ourselves on our 'can do' attitude, and have employed lawyers who are all determined to deliver practical services that really add value to the business and personal lives of our clients'

– Alan Knowsley

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brothers in law

For brothers James and Peter Johnston, the legal profession is more than just a job. As two of the partners in Wellington legal firm, Rainey Collins, they live and breathe law, whether they are at work or at family gatherings.

"But it also works the other way around too," says older brother, James. "Our family and our inherited values are always present in our work and our dealings with clients."

Brought up in Gisborne, both brothers gained an early appreciation of the

effect law has on the daily lives of people. "We were brought up in a circle of 'bush lawyers' who would discuss the implications of court decisions on local issues with great interest and vigour," says Peter.

These discussions, as well as their Ngati Porou mother's determination that they appreciate the benefits of education, had an impact on them. Separately, the brothers studied law at Victoria University in Wellington, graduating in 1989 and 1992 respectively.

James went on to practise as a litigator

in Wellington, appearing in front of the District Court, the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Privy Council on behalf of private clients and organisations.

He has since honed and adapted his skills to head the commercial team at Rainey Collins where he is also chairman of partners. Earlier this year, James was elected chairman of the New Zealand Law Foundation, an independent trust established by the New Zealand Law Society to encourage research and training among its peers and to encourage public knowledge of legal matters. ▶

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– James Johnston

After graduation, younger brother Peter practised in Gisborne, where he also chaired a private training establishment, and was a member of the Tairāwhiti Maori Land Group, which advised the Government on legislation affecting Maori.

Peter now leads the Rainey Collins' Maori Issues team, which provides advice to government departments on legal issues relating to Maori, including Maori land, Maori land legislation, and governance. He also specialises in all areas of property and business law, which can involve advising and representing government departments, individuals, community organisations, health providers, private training establishments, iwi and private organisations on legal matters from Treaty of Waitangi claims to how best to utilise land and develop a business.

Recently, Peter also became chairman of the Wellington Maori Business Network (Te Awe).

James and Peter attribute part of their success to their ability to bring their family's values of respect, honesty and empathy to the working table.

"We both work very hard to ensure our clients' views, values and cultures are respected," says James. "By making sure they understand every step of the process there is a much more effective relationship. It is also important for us to have a full understanding of our clients' needs so that we can be of real use to them. Rainey Collins also sees itself as an interface between those wishing to do business with Maori. We are very aware of the cultural needs of others and it is this strength that adds value to our advice."

The brothers believe a further reason for their success is their ability to bring practical solutions to their clients' problems.

"Most clients don't want legal mumbo-jumbo thrown at them when they are facing the sack or their company is going down the gurgler," says Peter, "they want real solutions."

James adds, "We work with our clients to solve problems. We also work with them to prevent problems, so we provide advice on setting up good structures, acquiring commercial property and negotiating successful contracts."

The brothers' commitment to their family's values extends beyond the commercial sphere. With an ongoing interest in youth law, James has spent his spare time helping to develop countrywide best practice models for youth justice.

"The major issue for me is the disproportionate number of Maori youth within the justice arena," says James. "One

of my aims is to get to the bottom of the problem and endeavour to create solutions."

As a founding member of the New Zealand Law Society's Youth Justice subcommittee, he was so well-regarded that he was invited to the United Nations in Geneva in 2000 to deliver an address about the New Zealand Youth Justice system. He became the convenor of the subcommittee in 2003 and 2004.

In addition to spending time with family in Wellington and on the East Coast, James and Peter are both active members of their local marae committee and write legal articles for a number of publications. Peter also maintains the brothers' sporting legacy – both were keen sportsmen and swimmers in their youth, with James an age-grade representative rugby player – by contributing to New Zealand Fitness magazine's legal corner.

It is the brothers' unique balance of business and family values, as well as their combined knowledge of commercial, business, property and Maori law that contributes to the ongoing strength of the 86-year-old firm, says managing partner, Alan Knowsley.

"We pride ourselves on our 'can do' attitude," Knowsley says, "and have employed lawyers who are all determined to deliver practical services that really add value to the business and personal lives of our clients."

Rainey Collins' clients are located across the country, but have no trouble keeping in contact with the firm's 12 lawyers, who are based in the new Rainey Collins premises on Wellington's "golden mile" – Lambton Quay. Having adopted technology to benefit its clients, the firm provides a toll-free phone line, and a website containing considerable information and practical advice.

However, technology has not eradicated some traditions. Good, old-fashioned, face-to-face interaction is still the firm's preferred means of communicating with clients. Even people who are not clients benefit from this approach – they can attend any one of the free seminars that the firm hosts on a regular basis.

Good values, like good manners, never go out of fashion. And that means good business for Rainey Collins. **lsmr**

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