

# Actuaries as Parents with Kelly Lee

## Interview Transcript

**Julia Lessing:** Hi, everyone. Today, we're talking about a topic that affects most actuaries at some point, how do you combine an actuarial career with parenthood? Now, my children are all grown. I've got four adult children, so I have survived this challenging combination, this challenging juggle. And so, the early days of balancing a career and parenthood for me probably feels like a bit of a distant memory. So, joining us for this discussion is Malaysian-born Australian-based actuary and young mum, Kelly Lee. Kelly, welcome to the show.

**Kelly Lee:** Thanks for inviting me to be here, Julia.

**JL:** So, Kelly, we met last year when you applied and were the successful recipients of my company's sponsored position for the Guardian Actuarial Leadership Program. So, I'm looking forward to talking a bit more about that with you later in the interview.

But first, Kelly, how do you use your actuarial superpowers to make a difference in the world?

**KL:** That's a nice way of putting it. So, I use my actuarial superpowers to help injured workers and other stakeholders in Victoria through actuarial analysis. I'm currently working as a senior actuarial consultant in WorkSafe Victoria. In my role, I provide actuarial advice to the business, kind of like an internal consultant to various parts of the organisation.

We also work with the external actuary on half yearly valuations and premium calculations, and we assist with any scheme costing or ad hoc projects as they arise. And I've been here for almost two years now.

**JL:** Two years, yeah. What a great way to use your actuarial superpowers, Kelly.

**KL:** I hope so. And I guess to add to that, prior to that I was a consultant in PricewaterhouseCoopers for almost ten years, mainly consulting to accident compensation schemes. And my first job was actually as an actuarial analyst in WorkCover, South Australia. So, you could say that I've been in worker's compensation for most of my career, and I would like to think that I'm making a difference to my stakeholders through my work.

**JL:** I'm sure you are. And what an interesting diverse range of roles that you've had since you started your career as an actuary.

**KL:** Same but different. Same industry, but yeah, different roles.

**JL:** Different roles. Yeah. Because you moved from Malaysia to Australia to pursue actuarial studies Kelly, so what was it like getting your first job in Australia after graduating from uni as an international student?

**KL:** I still can't believe that it's been almost 20 years since I came back and took the 8 hours solo flight from Kuala Lumpur to Canberra. So, I did spend four years at the Australian National University completing my Bachelor of Actuarial Studies with honours. Getting the first real job, and I referred to "real" here as an actuarial related job and not just the casual job as an international student, is really, really difficult.

**JL:** Was it?

**KL:** So, upon graduation? Yeah. So, upon graduation, at least at that time, I did not have enough visa points to apply for my permanent residency. And you couldn't get a job without having a valid working visa. You couldn't get a job without previous work experience. So, it was kind of like a catch-22

scenario. Graduate programs were also impossible to get to for international students because you had to apply for them in your penultimate year of university, and we didn't have to buy visas for them.

So, upon graduation, even though I had my part one and part two qualifications, getting a job was really, really hard. So, I remember applying for any job which came up in every possible field, every possible location from Canberra to Newcastle to Perth. Even the ones just vaguely related to actuarial, such as an admin assistant in an insurance company.

**JL:** Really? Wow. You really broadened the net too, to be able to find something just to get that first job.

**KL:** I did. So, my logic was that I just needed a foot in the door. Then just when I'm in the company, I can move around. But of course, even for the admin assistant job, I was rejected on the basis that I was overqualified and leaving in a few months. So, you can't win.

**JL:** Wow. So, what happened?

**KL:** I ended up working as a shop assistant in a clothes shop for about seven months in order to pay rent and expenses and just applying for jobs whenever I was not working. So, I think initially my ambition was to find something investments related in a bank, but that goal and of course confidence just went away with time with all the rejection letters, I think I probably got to about 60.

**JL:** Oh, my goodness.

**KL:** My first big break...

**JL:** Gosh, we talk about failing actuarial exams as character building. But that I mean, what you went through with those initial rejections. That's next level.

**KL:** Yeah. But prepared me for the failure of actuarial exams down the track, but we wouldn't touch on that. So, I think my big break came when I was called for an interview in Adelaide with WorkCover, South Australia, or as they are known as Return to Work, South Australia now.

At that point I had never been to Adelaide or knew much about worker's compensation, to be honest, but it was definitely a turning point in my life which then influenced where I am today. So, I'll be forever grateful to the manager who hired me at that time, taking a chance on the fresh grad with no experience.

**JL:** Wow. So, what an important break that was. And now you've spent a long time of your career really working in that worker's comp space. And that was because of that first job that you were in.

**KL:** Correct, that kind of dictated my whole career.

**JL:** It's been a great platform. Okay. Wow. I can't imagine how challenging that would have been and managing those rejections and picking yourself up and still applying. And ultimately, it's worked for you.

**KL:** Character building.

**JL:** So, Kelly we're talking about parenthood, combining parenthood and actuarial careers. And I understand you're about to have your second baby at the time of recording. Congratulations.

**KL:** Thank you.

**JL:** So, with two small children, will this spell the end of your actuarial career?

**KL:** I really hope not. So, I guess to be honest, when I was in consulting, I had big ambitions of going back and aiming for a more senior role after my first child. I thought that I could work full time, juggle parenthood in a way that I could be a role model for others because I really loved my job. Like I enjoy

working with colleagues and clients and sometimes even the adrenaline rush you get by working through deadlines. So, working through a problem can be quite exciting.

I thought that, you know, it would be an easy enough transition going back after parental leave, but this is me from three or four years ago.

**JL:** Yeah.

**KL:** However, I did find going back a lot more challenging than I expected, and having a baby in peak COVID period did not help as well.

**JL:** Of course, we would have been in lockdowns, and everything was changing.

**KL:** Yeah. So, I struggled with trying to perform at my pre-parent level. I was not living up to expectations of myself and I was just a bit disorientated with the lack of control over my time by energy. I was probably not in the best place mentally and maybe needed the change with the trigger being childcare closures on and off for three months during that peak COVID period here in Melbourne.

We don't have family in Australia, so my husband and I were working in shifts to take care of the baby. I remember we were each working half a day between nine and five and then making up the remaining time when we can. So, we were just working or thinking about what every time I was, yeah, we were not with the baby.

So, you know, in hindsight, which is always 2020, I probably should have cut down my days because that was an option. But you know, I also wanted to challenge myself that I could do it. But I think that was just unsustainable.

**JL:** And sounds exhausting, it sounds like you also really enjoyed your job and you wanted to keep working and you were hoping that you would be able to juggle it. But sometimes the reality of parenthood is quite different from what we expect, and it can be a bit luck of the draw in terms of what's, you know, how that plays out, different babies. But also you didn't have the family support and we were in the middle of lockdown, and you didn't have childcare support either. It was probably an impossible task.

**KL:** Perfect storm.

**JL:** Perfect storm yeah.

**KL:** So, it's like never knew what would have happened if not for COVID, not for other things, but I guess...

**JL:** May've been different.

**KL:** Yeah, who knows. So, I guess when the job opportunity at WorkSafe came out on paper, it was a no brainer. You know, it was an organisation I was familiar with, having more regular hours being in industry rather than consulting and still being able to do the work, which I enjoy. Workers comp. However, I was also aware that there would be more limited opportunities for career advancement in the short term and it's more of a lateral move rather than a promotion.

**JL:** And I think that's an important thing to recognise too. You know, we can do everything, but not all at the same time. But also, careers aren't linear. It's not a linear projection up, that I often think of careers and talk about careers as being like more of a blob. So sometimes those lateral moves can really help us to build extra skills so that we can keep taking our careers in the direction that we want them to. Even if we're changing pace or changing direction or even just changing focus.

And I think those skills that we learn as parents can be very transferable to help us in our actuarial careers as well.

**KL:** Yeah, definitely agree, because I think that being a parent doesn't mean that you give up on your career aspirations. And I guess, just rephrasing what you say, I feel it's more of pausing and potentially developing other skills during this time so that you're in the best position available when the right opportunity that comes.

**JL:** Yeah.

**KL:** So, I did take my current job in order to have more time for my family, fully aware of the potential limitations on my career in the short term with this lateral move. But what I found was during this time I have been exposed to different skills and experiences and also finding other opportunities to develop myself. So, I guess if I can give you some examples.

**JL:** Sure, please do.

**KL:** From an actuarial perspective, like being able to see things from the client's point of view or just from a different person's point of view teaches you new ways of thinking. Just, you know, just a different way of looking at things. Working as an internal person in WorkSafe instead of being the client, of being the consultant sorry, opens your eyes to how things work in the broader organisation. Because now I talk to people which I wouldn't have the chance to talk to in the past as a consultant.

I've also been actively involved in the Women at WorkSafe employee network here in WorkSafe and I'm currently the secretary/treasurer/co-chair.

**JL:** Wonderful.

**KL:** So, I guess this this role has enabled me to develop other non-actuarial skills, soft skills, organisation communication, and it provided me with the opportunity to just connect and work with so many more people in the organisation who I now believe would not cross paths with, in my day-to-day work. Applied for The Guardian Actuarial Leadership Program, the parental scholarship, and I was successful. Thank you. And of course, if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be here talking to you today and I would never have expected to do a podcast. So, it wasn't in my goals or anything.

What else did I do? So, I presented at the Actuaries Institute, Injury and Disability Scheme in the last year. And I guess from a home perspective, being a parent to an active three-year-old boy has tested my patience in many occasions and also reminded me to be appreciative, even grateful for just the little things in life. And I think, as you would know, managing a little one at home with the level of organisation and focus required can be equally as challenging, as managing a difficult client or managing a team.

**JL:** Absolutely.

**KL:** So, I hope I've answered your questions somewhat in a bit of a long-winded way, but yes, I hope this doesn't spell the end of my actuarial career.

**JL:** Yeah, I'm confident that it won't. And it's really interesting to hear reflections, Kelly, about how you thought you were making kind of a lateral move career wise to make sure everything was a bit more sustainable in juggling your career and being a parent. But actually, it sounds like it's been a very valuable experience...

**KL:** Doing other things.

**JL:** Yeah, you've been able to add some other things and to use my terminology, I guess some other hexagons to your blob, your career, some different skills that maybe you hadn't even expected or planned for. Very good. So, okay, so it's been a good move for you then to change roles and you've learned a lot through that.

But I know that juggling a three-year-old and work is still very busy. And in fact, even before this podcast recording, I know you had the call from childcare at the last minute and had to go and pick him up. And so, there's these constant juggles when you're working parent and unexpected things that

come up through the day. But what else have you found most challenging about juggling parenthood and an actuarial career?

**KL:** I think the most challenging thing is just losing control over your time and your general circumstances. So, I guess today was an example of, you know, taking him home, but, you know, into more extreme examples, like kids don't think about whether you have an important meeting to prepare for the next day or if you have an early start. If anything, they probably choose that night to fight your sleep or wake up through the night, which means that you either lose the time which you originally planned to do something, or you end up with so little sleep that your brain does not function as well the next day. And we all know that you do need your brain to perform actuarial work.

**JL:** Yes.

**KL:** So, I just felt like because I'm quite an organised person, I like planning. So, you know, I like planning my day into little blocks. And I think having my son has taught me that you can do that. You just have to be a bit more flexible. And I think that's probably the most challenging thing I've faced, but also my biggest learning.

**JL:** Okay, it's hard to be flexible when you like to have that organisational control, and I think we probably have that in common. Kelly Because I like to know what's coming and to block that out.

**KL:** Yep.

**JL:** But like you, I have so many experiences that probably taught me very early as a mum that you can't leave anything to the last minute because there's always a good chance that something will go wrong. And often it's a baby being up half of the night or, you know, you've been too exhausted to do something. So, building in buffers as well as being flexible with timings, I think one of those things that we learn that can be challenging, but an important lesson for us as parents.

**KL:** Yeah, So I think I've been fortunate that both my current and former employer have been very understanding whenever I needed to take time off. But I think it does get mentally taxing if you are hard on yourself. Or when you feel like others are dependent on you to get stuff done. For example, if a junior staff member is waiting for you to review your work or you just feel guilty having to reschedule yet another meeting or just join with your little child in the background. But I think it's just a bit more mentally exhausting in that way too.

**JL:** Yeah okay. So, let's talk about juggling study because, you graduated from the Guardian Actuarial Leadership Program while you were also working full time and caring for your young son. How did you make time to complete the coursework?

**KL:** I think it started off being very manageable. So, like I said, I like to be organised and I do pride myself in getting things done when I've committed to them. So, I felt like the first half of the program was fine to me. I listened to the videos, worked on the coursework in my commute to and from the office, and did the occasional hour or two at night to catch up on any outstanding items.

But midway through the program I did fall behind due to some personal circumstances at home, and I think with a young son I found it a lot harder to catch up on things due to the limited time available. But you know, last time I could say that yep, I have the weekends, so I have at least 5 hours to catch up.

But it doesn't happen anymore, because you don't know whether you have one or five. And I think it just reiterates the importance of not procrastinating when you have to do something, finding little pockets of the day to do stuff, or that's where the planning becomes a lot more important.

**JL:** Because there's fewer opportunities for overflow of work when you've also got parenting commitments as well.

**KL:** Correct. And you never know what's going to happen the next day. You never know the mood of your little one.

**JL:** Yes, yep.

**KL:** There's just too many unknowns.

**JL:** Can be quite unpredictable.

**KL:** Yeah.

**JL:** Yeah. Okay. So, it's been great hearing your story, Kelly, right from being an international student and some of the challenges getting your actuarial career started here in Australia. But then how wonderful to hear your deep experience across worker's comp from different angles in different roles over your last couple of roles and then making that transition to parenthood and having to rethink what work looked like, even though you loved the work that you were doing before, but thinking, how can you re shape that to better support and be more sustainable while combining parenthood as well?

And you've shared some of the challenges and some of the learnings around being a bit more flexible with your time, but also doing things a bit earlier and not procrastinating, as you said. And how you've juggled work and study and a young baby and about to juggle another baby as well.

So, Kelly, I'd like to finish today's conversation with one question and it's this, what's one tip that you'd have actuaries wanting to combine their actuarial careers with parenthood?

**KL:** I should be asking, you that. So, I guess I'm still relatively new to this parenthood game. I love being a mum, but I'm still learning every day. I think you mentioned it well earlier. What you say is true. You can have it all, just not all at the same time. And sometimes accepting that is a step forward in itself. To have an open mind. You never know what you might learn, even though sometimes it seems like it's not the career advancement or you're taking some time off and of course be kind to yourself and try not to beat yourself up over everything. So, things will not always go your way, but will turn out in the end. Sorry, that was a bit more than one, but that's just too many.

**JL:** That's excellent, excellent advice. Kelly, thank you so much for your time today. I'm sure your reflections and tips and advice will be helpful for lots of other actuaries who are maybe already or aspiring to combine their actuarial careers with parenthood. Thanks, Kelly.

**KL:** Thanks for the opportunity.