

Text of my speech to Nova Scotia Branch Council on January 22, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Je ne vais pas parler en français cet après-midi.

Yesterday, I was reminded why I enjoy being a lawyer. I was asked to speak at a lunch and learn seminar for the Canadian Mental Health Association Branch in Kentville. There were 25 participants and I was asked to speak for 20 minutes about legal issues for individuals with mental illnesses. I knew that was a tall order, so I wisely chose to speak about a couple of issues related to capacity and health care. The 10 minute "question and answer" session turned into 20 minutes and the Executive Director was concerned about cutting off the perceptive questions. Afterwards, I spoke for another 20 minutes with individuals on a one-on-one basis. The need for information and legal help was obvious and it reminded me how much education can do for someone's self-esteem. That is what I like about being a lawyer: helping people understand the legal system and giving them tools they can use to avoid legal problems and tools to solve legal problems if they arise.

Following my presentation, I returned to my office and was reminded about the realities facing a lawyer in private practice today. Yesterday afternoon, at our monthly partners' meeting, the agenda included a number of issues that I expect are common to other firms. We talked about lawyer recruitment (a problem in rural Nova Scotia), compensation for associates (they want more), advertising (how to attract more clients), the impact to our practice of the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the no-fault insurance regulations, succession planning, and the annual budget.

These are topics I did not learn about in law school. Nor are they issues I thought I would need to know anything about when I was in law school. However, they are the reality for practising lawyers. We are in the business of practising law and we need to educate ourselves in order to survive in today's business world.

I believe that the CBA does a great job of helping lawyers learn about the business of the practice of law. Tools are available to our members, either online or through conferences and section activities. Through networking opportunities, we also meet other CBA members who are willing to share their experiences and offer guidance to others.

We all know that difficult financial times will impact the bottom line in our practices. Financial instability certainly affects the bottom line for our clients. For some of us, there will be increased work because financial troubles lead to more lawsuits, more bankruptcies and more family problems and conflicts. However, it also means that more people will find themselves unable to afford legal services and others will be trying to reduce their legal costs. This will also impact our law firms. However, these are the times when individuals really need lawyers and the CBA cannot cease its efforts to lobby governments to provide appropriate funding for legal aid programs so that the people who are least able to defend their legal rights and pursue legal remedies have legal representation.

It is also a time when we must be vigilant in maintaining civility, cooperation and collegiality as lawyers. We need to work together, to help each other, to help our clients and to help those most vulnerable in our communities to receive legal advice and legal representation.

One person may not think he or she can make a difference but if all of us work together to give back to our profession and our communities, collectively we can accomplish a great deal. Let's start with something simple like being courteous to the opposing lawyer on a difficult file, mentoring someone new to the profession, volunteering with a local charitable organization, or doing pro bono legal work for someone in need. If each of us makes a difference in some way in our daily lives, we will change the perception of lawyers back to the caring and respected profession we know it to be. The rewards we will derive from giving of our time and skills to others will make us all more fulfilled in our personal and professional lives so we will all be able to say "I love being a lawyer." Let's make a difference.