



Connecting Women Lawyers



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Remarks from the Chair

By J. Cherisse Friesen

I am pleased to be writing my first message to you as Chair of the BC WLF. Shortly after I initially joined the WLF Executive a number of years ago, I was a new parent of two young children and had a growing practice in litigation. I reluctantly concluded during that period that I had to, at least temporarily, shed many extracurricular projects or commitments. Knowing that I realistically had time to focus on only one volunteer role, I chose to keep my position on the WLF Executive, which at the time was Chair of the Education Committee. My rationale in maintaining the role with the WLF Executive was simple: I wanted to keep developing a connection with other women in law and I wanted to continue to support others in their efforts to do the same.



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Since that time, we have experienced a global pandemic that has changed how and when we connect with our colleagues and peers. In many respects it became more difficult for the WLF Executive to continue to support its members and we had to find creative ways to do that, including offering a series of remote coaching sessions.

For the better part of the last two years the BC WLF has offered all meetings and events by remote attendance only. At first, we worried this may mean that opportunities to foster connections would be lost in the absence of in-person attendance. Perhaps some opportunities were, but what we also noticed was that WLF members went above and beyond to show up and connect with their legal peers in different ways. Remote attendance for meetings and events was consistently high. What is even more impressive is that an exceptional number of you reached out to the WLF Executive to generously volunteer your time to support the WLF. We were grateful for this interest and support and hope all of you continue to reach out or participate in ways that work for you.

Thankfully, this year looks different than the last two. Although we are keeping a remote option for many events (we know how convenient this can be) we will also host several events that will allow you to re-connect with each other in person. We had the privilege of hosting one such event recently. In November, the Honourable Jane Dardi and the Honourable Sandra K. Ballance gave a powerful presentation in which they deconstructed the myth of the “superwoman” in law. Characterized by extreme independence and suffocating perfectionism (among other things) this “superwoman” alienates others rather than forging positive relationships. In a demanding profession such as law, we may find ourselves adopting some of these bad habits at times. This presentation was a good reminder of the importance of allyship in the legal profession. Building trusting relationships with others in the law – people who will listen to or problem solve with you - is a key part of finding enjoyment and building resilience in a challenging career.

We hope to continue to provide an avenue for people to connect and build those relationships. There are more things to look forward to in the coming year. The industrious Mentoring Committee matched a total of 75 mentoring pairs this year and will be offering a series of confabs for this group in which they will have a chance to participate in open and frank discussions. Also, after a three-year hiatus, we are excited to be hosting the BC WLF Awards Gala again in the Spring of 2023! More details on that are to come and we look forward to seeing you there.

I am often thankful that I chose to continue my involvement with the WLF Executive. I have no doubt that I made the right decision back then. I have made invaluable friendships and have witnessed others do the same. I very much look forward to continuing to work with this incredible team on the WLF Executive and to seeing some of you in person this year.

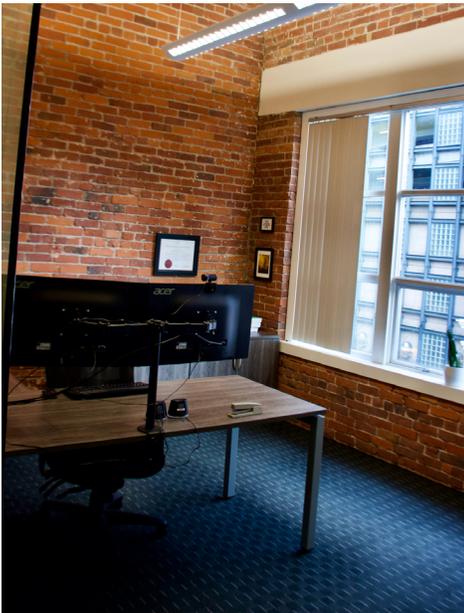


WLF Spotlight: Ashley Syer's Journey to Re-Inventing Mentorship

By Arshdeep Sandhu

I once took a cultural anthropology class that taught me how one's physical space can change their perspective and productivity. As a young articled student, Ashley Syer worked at a firm with a small windowless room as an office. I know what you're thinking – this isn't unheard of, but rather the norm. You start out in law and work your way toward that nice office with the big windows.

Unfortunately, Ashley was also dealt the hand of sub-par professional mentorship during articling which revealed itself while Ashley had been applying for new jobs. Coupled with immense personal loss, Ashley was convinced law was not for her. She applied to multiple jobs but was unable to secure a position. Eventually, Ashley's determination began to open doors when an old friend offered her a co-working space. Ashley took a chance on herself. She was unsure of how it was going to go, but sure that she would rather try and fail, than wonder about the possibility for the rest of her life.



Ashley built her law practice slowly with strong grit but also with help from others. She soon realized what it meant to be a good mentor and created a space where young sole practitioners can learn how to build their practice and participate in mentorship where questions big and small can be asked. This isn't your regular law practice where young lawyers work to become partner. Rather, she's created an incubator where young lawyers can grow their personal confidence along with their legal knowledge and skill before they fly away onto their own, and new young lawyers take their place. She's even made sure there's natural light in every work space because she knows the impact one's work environment can have.

Ashley Syer managed to take a difficult professional experience and not only help other young lawyers avoid what she went through, but change the landscape of how we can practice law. She is truly one to watch. For more details on the Lawyer Incubator, see: thelawyerincubator.ca.



An Interview with WLF Trailblazer, The Honourable Judge Stella Frame

By Grace Cleveland

Stella Frame is one of the founding members of the CBABC WLF. She currently serves as a judge in the BC Provincial Court and as a sessional instructor at TRU Law School teaching family law. She graduated from UVic law school in 1988 and practiced law in Vancouver until 2006 when she was appointed to the bench. She has lived in her hometown of Kamloops since 2007 with her daughter Maddie, their 15-and-a-half-year-old dog Sadie, three birds (Ash, Pepper and Charlie) and an assortment of fish (the bleeding heart tetras are collectively called One Direction). In her own words, “Life is good.”

What are some of the issues that led you and the other founding members to propose and create the CBABC Women Lawyer Forum?

When I was first asked to join the special committee tasked with determining if a conference for women lawyers was something the CBABC should establish, I thought they meant a conference like a convention. I was elated to find out they meant a forum like a large section. Keen to accomplish all the things I thought were missing (and much needed) for women in the profession, I was happy to combine forces with the likes of Kerry-Lynne Findlay and Jennifer Conkie. My vision was precisely what was set out in the resolution: support, camaraderie, mentoring, education and connection for women entering the profession, building up their practices and even exiting the workforce. To that point, I felt that the unique experiences of women trying to establish themselves under the law practice glass ceiling were ignored, dismissed and even roadblocked. We were not particularly included in the network of “old boys” who dominated the practice of law. We wanted something akin to that network that focused on the strengths and abilities of women, to support us in our own path to success.

Do you feel that these issues still exist for women in law? What has changed in the last two decades? What hasn't?

Absolutely these issues still exist for women in law. I still have women lawyers asking me how I approached my partners about taking maternity leave. I still hear concerns expressed about how maternity leave of any duration may impact their practices and their partnership track. I still see patronising attitudes from male lawyers to female lawyers. Even things like mental health issues are still viewed differently and more condescendingly when it is a woman suffering rather than a man. Language is such a key tool for inclusiveness but is also a weapon for exclusion. I still see it used as a weapon as much as I now see it used as a tool. What has changed in the last two decades? The appointment of more women to the bench, women serving as benchers in Kamloops, more women professors, clients who no longer seem concerned that they have a woman lawyer. Sometimes my courtroom has all women: judge, lawyers, clerk, sheriff and accused. I see more women in their own practices. Maternity leave policies are the norm where many firms did not even have them when I had my daughter. There has most certainly been progress but the road is still long.





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What would you like to see happen for women in law moving forward?

I would like to see the attitudes toward leaves (mental health, maternity, sabbatical) become more expected than tolerated or denounced. I would like to see less expensive opportunities for young and emerging lawyers to enjoy mentoring and educational conferences throughout the year. Allowing mental health days or breaks, or even sabbaticals, would help all lawyers be healthier and more productive in their careers. We've come through a very hard time with the pandemic. The silver lining is that we had to be creative in how we continued to practice. We should build on that so the traditional practice is brought into line with modern technologies, attitudes toward healthy lifestyles, and mental health concepts.

As a woman lawyer, professor, and judge, what are some of the biggest challenges that you have experienced over your career so far?

One of the biggest challenges in my career has been the stealth attitudes. These are the people who may not even know their attitudes toward women - whether they are judges or lawyers - are patronising, obstructive and harmful. As a lawyer, I had to deal with this from other lawyers who were dismissive of my role and my work without even realising they were doing it. As a judge, I have seen this from older lawyers. This put a strain on my equanimity. I see less of it now than I did when I was appointed but I still hear of it from other judges and lawyers. It behoves the profession to denounce these attitudes and behaviours. They (the attitudes and behaviours) have no place in law or anywhere else in society.

Do you have any tips for women lawyers looking to become a judge and/or teach in a university setting?

Becoming a judge and becoming a professor are quite different challenges. The judicial councils who are responsible for "investigating" the candidates are looking for people who are recognized by their peers, have a clean history with the law society, and are well connected in their communities. A lawyer should be experienced enough to be recognized in her field as competent and reasonable. She should also be well rounded outside the profession. The councils are looking for people who not only work in their community but reflect the bench back to the community. She should be at the bar long enough to have experienced the challenges of changing laws and of difficult clients and peers. Teaching is a bit different. I am a sessional instructor because the university was looking for another person to teach family law and one of my colleagues volunteered me. As a judge, I am expected to be knowledgeable in that subject. For a lawyer to become a sessional instructor, it depends on the needs of the institution. Some universities and colleges may have a full slate of professors or associate professors and don't look as much to sessional instructors. Other institutions avail themselves of the local bar on a regular basis. They will want someone experienced in the subject, recognized by their peers, and confident in their teaching skills. The lawyer will also need to be able to fit time in her schedule to prepare lesson plans, hold office hours and mark papers or exams. I don't know about the balance of professors or sessionals who are women to men, but I imagine it is less about proportion than it is about advancement opportunities, just as it is in law. TRU does have a lot of women who are both professors and sessionals. Also, the dean of law is a woman just as the Chief Judge of the Provincial Court is a woman. The three levels of court are pretty proportionate for women to men judges. Close to half of the 150 provincial court judges are women; the supreme court is closer to 40% women; and the court of appeal is roughly 50% women. This includes supernumerary judges.



Celebrating the Madam Justice Project

By Priscilla Padilla

The national section of CBA WLF, in collaboration with the CBA Judges Section, launched the Madam Justice Project (the "Project") in 2021. The Project is an online gallery that highlights and celebrates diversity on the bench by sharing the experience, perspective, and advice of exceptional women judges in Canada. Since its launch, the Project has continued to attract the attention of the legal community across the country, and was recently awarded a Clawbie (Canadian Law Blog Awards) in the category of Best Innovative Projects for 2022.

The Honourable Nancy Orr (right) is one of the several judges featured in the Project. While working as a staff lawyer at Prince Edward Island Legal Aid, Justice Orr established a family legal aid practice within the first half hour on the job. In 1995, Justice Orr became the first female judge to be appointed to the Provincial Court of Prince Edward Island. After 27 years on the bench, she still enjoys the challenge of her work.



The Project also features the Honourable Melissa Gillespie (left), who began her career as Crown Counsel working in British Columbia's Fraser Region. In 2005, Chief Judge Gillespie became the Regional Crown Counsel for the Fraser Region. In her role, Chief Judge Gillespie managed 115 Crown counsel and 90 support staff. Following her appointment to the Provincial Court of British Columbia, she not only served the Court as a judge but also assisted with judicial education and community outreach. As a member of the Board of

Directors of the Justice Education Society, Chief Justice Gillespie participated in an education project to strengthen the criminal justice system in Guyana. She is the second woman to hold the position of Chief Judge.

The Project features women judges of diverse backgrounds, such as the Honourable Ardith Walkem. Justice Walkem (right), a member of the Nlaka'pamux Nation, was the first Indigenous woman to be appointed to the British Columbia Supreme Court in 2020. Prior to her appointment, Justice Walkem worked extensively with Indigenous communities and organizations to support them in asserting their Aboriginal Title Rights and Treaty Rights.



Justice Walkem is also a mediator who works with Indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms, and focuses her work on the rights of children. Justice Walkem notes the juxtaposition between the Nlaka'pamux legal tradition in which she was raised, and the Canadian legal tradition she was trained in. For Justice Walkem, her Indigenous legal tradition is part of her everyday life, and impacts how she navigates her relationships with others. The Canadian legal tradition, on the other hand, comes into play when she is faced with people or organizations dealing with conflict.



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The Project has also featured the Honourable Justice Sandra Bacchus (right) who has a unique legal background. Justice Bacchus is a first-generation Canadian and born to Guyanese parents. As a young adult, Justice Bacchus aspired to be a midwife, however it was her parent’s hopes and dreams that led her to pursue a legal career. Justice Bacchus was appointed to the Ontario Court of Justice in 2011. Since her appointment, she has sat on various committees including the National Judicial Institute’s Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault committee and various New Toronto Courthouse subcommittees. In 2021, Justice Bacchus was appointed as the Regional Senior Justice at the Ontario Court of Justice.



If you haven’t already, be sure to check out this inspiring initiative, and stay tuned as more profiles are coming soon!

Rejecting the Myth of the “Superwoman”

By Sonia Athwal

The WLF hosted a section meeting on November 15, 2022 that focused on rejecting the myth of the superwoman, embracing ourselves and the sisterhood in law. Held in person at Fasken, the Honourable Jane Dardi and the Honourable Sandra Ballance, both mediators, retired Supreme Court of British Columbia Judges and also good lifelong friends, talked at length about friendship and allyship in the legal profession, as well as defeating the superwoman myth and its sidekick, the imposter syndrome. Lawyer coach, Paula Price, and family lawyer, Abby Pang, moderated the meeting, which was not recorded to allow for candid discussion among speakers and attendees.



The key topic discussed was how to liberate ourselves from the myth of the “Superwoman” – meaning the idea that women lawyers are supposed to be all-knowing and perfect. Buying into the superwoman myth risks suffocating us as lawyers, as well as stifling growth and creativity. The speakers were clear that in their experience, this is an unsustainable ideal that may not achieve good outcomes.

The group also talked about the superwoman myth’s sidekick, imposter syndrome – a widespread issue that causes us to overly filter or qualify our statements – falsely discounting the advice and unfortunately, the advice-giver as well. We discussed how accepting our own imperfections (and those of others) and learning to “surf the chaos” can help push aside this nemesis of the sisterhood in law. Friends and allies can help us safely reveal our fears or failures, but also celebrate our successes. Embracing ourselves as individuals can also help defeat the myth. Conversation flowed freely and we ended the evening in a warm collegial space.



Hot Tips from Top Lawyers

By Sonia Athwal

On October 18, 2022, the Women Lawyers Forum held our 14th annual Fall Launch with the always-popular speaker event “Hot Tips from Top Mentors”. The sold-out event featured three accomplished speakers sharing their experiences: Justice Jasmin Ahmad, of the Supreme Court of BC; Lindsay Taylor, Senior Director, Associate General Counsel at Lululemon; and Denise Nawata, partner in the area of mergers and acquisitions at Farris LLP. All speakers shared their experiences and “hot tips” for mentorship, both as mentors and as mentees. Hosted by Clark Wilson, it was a fun evening of learning and reconnecting in person.

Madam Justice Ahmad described herself as a big fan of mentorship. She spoke about her career-defining relationship with her own mentor, who guided her towards litigation by the way he practiced. Likewise, she explained that peer mentorship can encourage and support a legal practice in a unique way. Her top tips to both mentors and mentees are to be open and candid, understand yourself, and look for commonalities to build on.



Lindsay Taylor also echoed comments about peer mentors – her first mentor was a peer mentor who helped validate feelings about the profession, and work. Lindsay also stressed that all kinds of mentorship need to happen in an environment that values it, and that it may take time (it took her many years!) to find that mentor who will help nurture the whole person. Just like so many parts of our profession, you need a little perseverance to get what you’re looking for in a mentor.



Denise Nawata’s hot tips started with reminding us that the lawyer who trains you isn’t always the lawyer who is best to be your mentor. Training may come from a senior lawyer, but mentorship can come from anyone including junior lawyers depending on what you need. Denise also pointed out that not all mentors need to be lawyers.

The WLF would like to give a big thank you to all the speakers and attendees, as well as Clark Wilson for hosting.



CBA’s Monte Carlo Night Revived in 2022

By Leah Seneviratne

On October 27, 2022, the CBABC Women Lawyers Forum, Business Law, and Young Lawyers sections partnered with the Chartered Financial Analyst Society and the Chartered Professional Accountants, to bring back the much-anticipated Monte Carlo Night. This sold-out event returned in-person for the first time post-COVID at the Vancouver Club Ballroom to support charities Working Gear and Dress for Success.



Attendees at this year’s Monte Carlo Night had the opportunity to network with individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, while enjoying live music, light appetizers, and of course, an impressive array of casino games. Throughout the night, guests also enjoyed complimentary bourbon tastings with enlightening lessons from Micah Dew at Maker’s Mark Diplomat. Even those with little to no casino experience were able to find games and activities over which to bond with other professionals. At the end of the night, all gaming money won was put toward raffle tickets, and numerous prizes were awarded.



After years of being sorely missed, the Monte Carlo Night was a huge success. This unique event has long provided diverse networking opportunities for professionals in a genuinely fun atmosphere.

Stay Connected!

BC WLF membership is open to all CBA members.

For membership information call the CBABC at 604.687.3404, toll free in BC at 1.888.687.3404, or visit: cbabc.org/sections/enroll for a Section enrolment form.

We hope you will join the Forum!

Get Social!

Follow us on:

Twitter: twitter.com/CBA_WLF

Instagram: instagram.com/cba_wlf

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/showcase/cba-wlf for all things WLF.

Write Us

Are you interested in writing an article for the WLF BC Newsletter or do you have any comments or feedback? If so, please contact the BC WLF Marketing and Communications Committee Co-Chair: [Leah Seneviratne](mailto:Leah.Seneviratne).

CBA National WLF Newsletter

CBA National WLF Newsletter - The Common Room is available at cba.org/Sections/Women-Lawyers/Articles

The CBA National WLF is seeking article for its newsletters. If you would like to contribute, please contact: cbawomenlawyers@cba.org.



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OCC Walk of Hope

By Nicola Virk

On September 11th, members of the WLF braved the smoke and participated in the 2022 Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope.

The Walk of Hope is the largest event of its kind in the country. It is the only walk in Canada to direct all attention and fundraising towards helping women and all those affected

by ovarian cancer live fuller, better and longer lives. This year, the WLF raised hundreds of dollars to fund much-needed research into prevention, improved treatments and ultimately, a cure.

Following the event, members of the WLF who participated in the walk socialized over a delicious brunch.



WLF Vancouver Island Update

By Christine Murray

The Vancouver Island branch of the WLF enjoyed a kick off to the holiday season by hosting a social event in Nanaimo at the end of December. We were joined by our colleagues from the CBABC Family Law Section – Vancouver Island.

This social event was followed up with a holiday art event. Our instructor, Emily Grav of the Paint Box School of Art in Victoria, tutored us through a series of creative techniques including painting, collage and stamping to make lovely holiday cards. As a part of this event, members were asked to make donations to local community organizations to help those in need over the holiday season.



In the new year, we are looking forward to our annual social evening get-togethers on the third Thursday of each month, along with a fundraiser we will be organizing for Victoria Women in Need Community Cooperative.



WLF Spring Gala Returning this Spring!

By Sara Li

The WLF is pleased to host its biennial spring gala once again. This spring, we will honour recipients of the WLF Award of Excellence, the Debra Van Ginkel, Q.C. Mentoring Award, and the inaugural recipient of the Rising Star Award.



Our new Rising Star Award celebrates the accomplishments of a woman lawyer who has achieved tremendous professional success over the course of ten years of practice or less, and who has contributed to improving the legal community in BC.

The Debra Van Ginkel, Q.C. Mentoring Award honours the memory and accomplishments of Debra Van Ginkel, Q.C., an extraordinary woman and lawyer. Debra believed that all people, women lawyers especially, need a mentor. Debra was a committed, inspirational, and wise mentor. The Award recognizes a mentor with the qualities and commitment Debra demonstrated throughout her life and legal career.

The WLF Award of Excellence celebrates the accomplishments of a woman who has succeeded in breaking new ground for women in the legal profession in BC. The Award recognizes an exceptional woman who has taken risks, fostered change, and ultimately opened doors for women lawyers.

The BC WLF looks forward to welcoming and reconnecting with friends and colleagues at the gala in the spring of 2023!



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