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Pamela Kovacs, Officer, International Development Law Organization,
Founding Director, Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan & Former PBSC Program Coordinator

Tell us about your involvement with PBSC?

Studying law at the University of Saskatchewan was a return to my home province and an opportunity to pursue an interest (and later, passion) for social justice. In the midst of first year, I was drawn to the then relatively new PBSC program at the College, coordinated by Amanda Dodge (who has since gone on to do important work in Saskatchewan and nationally on access to justice issues). For my PBSC placement, I was matched with an upper year student and together we worked on a project for the Alzheimer Society of Saskatchewan. Not only interesting law-related work, but also a means to connect law and social justice issues, at a time when law and helping people seemed farther apart than I would have liked.

In my second and third years, I was a director of the PBSC program in Saskatchewan with two excellent co-directors. During these years, we witnessed several trends: an increase in the number of students wanting to volunteer; an increasing range of opportunities for placements as the scope of access to justice issues garnered attention; and lawyers willing to step in and support the program. We also witnessed an increase in people seeking legal assistance dropping by our basement office, having heard that there were some “law students that could help”. While we couldn’t always help in the way those individuals needed, together we did launch a number of new projects - a legal show for community radio, supporting a northern fly-in court circuit, support for a free legal clinic, and assisting court-workers and community organizations across the province.

How has PBSC influenced your career?

My legal education provided a solid grounding for the rest of my legal career, but PBSC provided the connection to why I was inspired to study law in the first place and helped develop skills that have served me well in first practicing law, then setting up and heading Saskatchewan’s first pro bono clearinghouse (Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan), and now working in international development on rule of law reform and access to justice issues. Currently, as an Officer of the International Bar Association Pro Bono Committee, I continue to see the need to support access to justice, not only in Canada, but globally. Canada, like many jurisdictions, is struggling to realize the promise of equal justice for all.

Why is PBSC important in light of the access to justice crisis?

Well-run and effective networks like PBSC contribute to larger access to justice solutions, but also provide a direct link to why law matters at the earliest entry point to the legal profession – law school. Access to justice is a human right and can be a mechanism of empowerment, but this has to be realized – through justice systems that work for people and by justice actors that understand and do their part. Twenty years later, the growth of PBSC is both promising as a signal of the commitment of graduating law students and cautionary as a signal that complacency towards justice should not be an option.