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“ Law students are our future, but they are also our present: In Calgary and Edmonton, the PBSC students who volunteer with the Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project make an enormous contribution to the justice system. Without PBSC or the student clinics, the system would go into crisis.



Tell us how you got involved with PBSC?

I left private practice in 2008 to take on the role of executive director of PBLA. But I also teach family law at the University of Calgary and so I'm heavily involved with the students there. I supervised some research projects with students through PBSC. Nikki and I connected. She wanted to create more hands-on practical experiences and we started setting up programs with them. And so we started working together, and we became good friends. We've been working together ever since.

Which projects would you say have had the most impact?

“I would say either the civil claims duty counsel project or the QB amicus project. The first was created together with PBSC and a number of the law firms. The students were involved from the start in the development of the program and they have a huge impact. Basically that program is geared towards helping people get ready to go to trial. If we could get the students and the lawyers on board the provincial court would like that to be running every day. What's hilarious is the lawyers want the students to be there. We get calls from them when there's no student available. As for the QB amicus, the Masters and the Court of Queen's Bench have told us just having the volunteers there whether they're lawyers or students, reduces the tension in the courtroom remarkably.”

Are you planning to continue working with PBSC?

Oh yes, I'll still be involved with them. I'm an advisory lawyer with Family Law Alberta so I advise students at the clinic right now, and I'll stay involved just as much as anybody wants me. I'm still doing outreach for PBLA, so when they need me they can call me and I'll come help.

What would you say your involvement with PBSC has given you personally?

It keeps me young because I love working with students. And it maintains my faith in lawyers. Because I do actually think that generally lawyers do what they do because they want to do good things. They want to help people sort out their issues and when I work with students I still see that, and I'm reminded that it's not bad to be a lawyer. It's a good thing. We're a caring profession.

How important is the role of the students in filling the access to justice gap in Canada?

They're extraordinarily important. I have some pretty intense discussions with other people engaged in access to justice issues who say they can't rely on students, they're not there all the time, we lose them during exams. And I tell them, these people are really important. They are the future. We need to encourage them and nurture that professionalism, nurture that wanting to help attitude, and give them opportunities to do so because in 5 to 10 years they're going to be the leaders in the profession and they're going to need to carry it on. I think if you took a look at what PBSC does and what the various university law clinics do, the courts would be much worse off as would the public without that assistance. I think if you just shut it all down the system would really go into crisis.

What stands in the way of access to justice in Canada?

That's a big question. In my view we haven't really addressed the fact that people are going to court over non legal issues. I think we removed the gatekeepers, which are the lawyers, and we made it really easy for people to go to court, instead of advising them not to go to court. Especially in family law and civil claims. We've created this arena that's really easy to enter, and now we bemoan the fact that people are flooding the system.”

What advice would you give newly graduated lawyers just starting out?

My view is it's our professional responsibility to give back to our communities. We have the privilege of being able to provide legal advice. You can let other people coach the soccer team, but only you can do that. And it will make you feel good.”

Is there anything you'd like to add?

I'd like to congratulate PBSC on its 20th anniversary and all of the wonderful things that it does across Canada. It truly represents a national approach to delivering pro bono legal services which I think is amazing and should be perpetuated in other organizations.

Madame Justice Gillian Marriott, Alberta Court of Queen's Bench
& Former Executive Director, Pro Bono Law Alberta