

Clinical success

Pam Kovacs made it her mission to get a free legal clinic off the ground.

Bill Rogers



The Regina Free Legal Clinic was not off to an auspicious start. Although the Salvation Army had agreed to provide office space in the city's downtown and the Law Society of Saskatchewan was on board, it was almost impossible to find volunteer lawyers.

Then along came Pam Kovacs, a newly minted lawyer at Regina's McKercher McKercher & Whitmore. She began working the phones and tapping into her vast *pro bono* network. Pretty soon, there were volunteers aplenty. "It's now a little bit of a competition," she laughs. "Most firms in Regina want to have one of their lawyers working there."

By all accounts, the clinic wouldn't have gotten off the ground without Kovacs, who received the CBA Young Lawyers' *Pro Bono* Award at the Canadian Legal Conference in St. John's last August. As Adam May, one of its volunteers and an associate at Kanuka Thuringer LLP, notes, "the clinic is pretty much Pam's baby. I volunteer once a month; she's there every Saturday. She puts in incredible hours, and the result is that a lot of people have benefited. It just wouldn't happen without Pam."

The clinic caters to people who can't afford a lawyer, but whose income is just high enough that they don't

qualify for Legal Aid. Kovacs recently spearheaded a similar clinic in Prince Albert, hosted by the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre. And she continues to work towards establishing other clinics in the province. This is all on top of working full-time at her firm. How does she do it? "I don't sleep sometimes," she says wryly.

More stressful than the long hours, however, are the accolades and publicity that have followed her. Kovacs is by nature very modest. As her law firm colleague Kara-Dawn Jordan, who also volunteers at the Regina clinic, says: "All this attention is actually quite embarrassing for Pam. What she does is truly altruistic. She seems so good, you almost want to resent her. But you can't, because she's too nice."

Kovacs admits she was shy about being nominated for the award. "I was pleased, obviously, but I was somewhat reluctant, because I don't see these things as individual accomplishments. Everything's a team effort. If there were no lawyers volunteering, there would be no clinic."

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Succès clinique

Une clinique juridique de Regina connaît un départ canon grâce à Pam Kovacs.

L'avenir ne semblait pas rose pour la *Regina Free Legal Clinic*. Elle possédait déjà des locaux, gracieuseté de l'Armée du Salut, et bénéficiait de l'appui de la *Law Society de la Saskatchewan*. Elle n'arrivait cependant pas à recruter des avocats bénévoles.

Vint alors Pam Kovacs, une jeune avocate fraîchement assermentée. Armée de son téléphone, Me Kovacs a fait appel à son réseau et en moins de deux, une vague d'avocats déferlait sur la clinique. « C'est presque devenu une compétition, déclare Me Kovacs en riant. La plupart des cabinets de Regina souhaitent maintenant que l'un de leurs avocats fasse

partie de la clinique. »

Depuis, Me Kovacs se rend tous les samedis à la clinique, en plus d'exercer le droit à temps plein au sein du cabinet McKercher McKercher & Whitmore à Regina. Pour tous ses efforts, elle s'est méritée, en août dernier, le *Prix pro bono* des Jeunes avocats de l'ABC. Selon Adam May, l'un des avocats bénévoles de la clinique, « la clinique juridique est le bébé de Pam ».

L'organisme à but non lucratif dessert une clientèle qui ne peut se payer un avocat tout en disposant de suffisamment de ressources financières pour ne pas être admissible à l'aide juridique. Une clinique satellite

vient d'ouvrir ses portes à Prince Albert sous les auspices du *Métis Friendship Centre*.

Me Kovacs n'est pas confortable sous le feu des projecteurs. De nature discrète, elle souligne que « le succès de la clinique est le fruit du travail de tous les bénévoles et que, sans eux, il n'y aurait pas de clinique. » Elle se réjouit toutefois du fait que l'on fasse la promotion du travail bénévole. « Lorsque quelque chose nous tient vraiment à cœur, on n'a pas l'impression de travailler, affirme-t-elle. Il m'arrive de me dire, lorsque je me rends à la clinique le samedi, qu'il s'agit du meilleur moment de ma semaine. » ■

— Mélanie Raymond

One of the reasons she agreed to be nominated was to promote *pro bono* culture. "I think it's great that the CBA Young Lawyers has this award, to recognize that *pro bono* is an integral part of the profession. Increasingly, young lawyers want more out of a legal career than wealth and long, long, long hours at the office."

The roots of Kovacs' commitment to *pro bono* go back to her childhood. She grew up on an acreage in the tiny community of Lajord, about a half-hour outside Regina. "It was a very small town," she recalls. "There was a neighbourly feel, helping out others and being helped out. I think that follows you through life. People get into the legal profession for various reasons, but it's an opportunity to help people, and assist them through what are often very troubling times."

Throughout her life, she has often worked several jobs at a time. While she was doing a Bachelor of Commerce degree at McGill, and all throughout law school, she worked as a waitress and bartender. That experience left an imprint.

"A couple of those jobs were at private clubs," she says. "You see the wealthy side of society. Not to say anything bad, but it was certainly a place of privilege — people who can afford to belong to a private club. That influenced my perception of society, understanding where the needs come from, in terms of poverty law clients and access to justice."

"A hundred dollars to someone who is very wealthy can seem like nothing, but to someone who literally doesn't have enough money to hop on the bus, it makes a huge difference."

Pro bono work is its own reward, Kovacs says. "Just knowing the person is comfortable in the resolution makes you feel good. And sometimes, the people literally have nowhere else to go. For them, just talking to someone, and having someone to tell their story to and to give some basic direction and guidance, is huge."

In the little free time she has, Kovacs enjoys camping, hiking, rock climbing, yoga and Ultimate Frisbee. She has always been an active person. "Being a lawyer is the first time in a long time I haven't had three jobs," she laughs. And the stress of the long *pro bono* hours is mitigated by the fact that she

believes in what she's doing.

"If you really care about something, it doesn't seem like work," she says. "Going to the clinic on Saturday morning is sometimes the best part of my week." ■

Avis



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L'ABC est à la recherche de candidats et de candidates pour ses comités permanents nationaux pour l'exercice 2007-2008. Tous les membres sont habilités à poser leur candidature pour occuper des fonctions au sein des comités suivants :

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- Développement international
- Rémunération des juges
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- Législation et réforme du droit
- *Pro Bono*
- Résolutions, Constitution et règlements
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Pour obtenir de plus amples renseignements et un formulaire de candidature, veuillez communiquer avec votre division. La date limite pour poser votre candidature est le 16 avril 2007, à midi.