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20 voices for 20 years

To mark PBSC's anniversary, we've gathered reflections from 20 friends and alum.

20 voix pour célébrer 20 ans

Pour célébrer l'anniversaire de PBSC, nous avons recueilli les réflexions de 20 ami(e)s, anciens et anciennes.



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“PBSC trains a small army of law students to provide thousands of vulnerable Canadians with vital legal assistance in almost every area of law. There is no other student organization in the world of this size, with this kind of impact on access to justice.



When Pro Bono Students Canada was founded at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law in 1996, it was the first pro bono organization to set up shop in this country.

The growth of PBSC has been staggering. What started as a local program with a few passionate law students and a handful of community partners has expanded, 20 years later, to include 21 law schools in eight provinces in Canada.

Each year the program trains a small army of law students to provide thousands of vulnerable Canadians with vital legal assistance.

And yet, two decades after PBSC was founded, the access to justice crisis remains more dire than ever.

While the poorest among us suffer the most, middle-income Canadians increasingly find themselves shut out of a system that is too expensive, too slow and too complex to navigate.

Family law is often cited as an example of where the system touches many of our lives, and for good reason: divorce is both common (4 in 10 marriages will end) and expensive (the average two-day trial is \$30,000).

According to the Canadian Forum for Civil Justice (CFCJ), every three years fully 12 million Canadians will experience a legal problem.

Despite the urgency of the situation, most Canadians don't give much thought to the justice system. It's only once they bump up against the law in their own lives do people quickly realize how ill-equipped the system is at resolving everyday disputes.

Litigation is stressful at the best of times, and yet half of Canadians try to solve their legal problems on their own. Without a lawyer to guide you through the process, it can be downright harrowing. Research conducted by the National Self-Represented Litigants Project has shown that once their legal issue is finally resolved, some litigants show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

While the problems faced by the justice system are too great to be resolved by any one solution, law students are an incredibly valuable

resource in these efforts. Law schools support a number of initiatives that aim to match talented and motivated students with individuals that need legal assistance, and none has more of an impact than PBSC.

Last year, over 1600 PBSC students filled gaps in the legal system by filling out forms for litigants in family courts, helping low-income taxpayers appeal decisions made by the Canada Revenue Agency, drafting wills and powers of attorney for LGBT and Two-Spirited clients, and assisting homeless people in securing the legal identification they need in order to receive health care and social assistance.

Those students provided over 130,000 hours of free legal services to over 14,000 low-income Canadians. There is no other student organization in the world of this size, with this kind of impact on access to justice.

It is increasingly urgent that the legal profession recognize not only that students can play an important role in meeting legal needs, but that more resources are required for them to do so.

A number of reports, including one commissioned by Canada's top judge, Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, have called for the expansion of student pro bono programs.

Yet last year, PBSC turned away 900 students, for no other reason than lack of capacity to run more placements. That's 65,000 hours of free legal services squandered.

Leveraging the skills and talents of the next generation of lawyers, placing pro bono at the core of the legal profession – these things require more than reports and good intentions, they require resources. And we are confident that initiatives that enlist the help of law students, like PBSC, provide more bang for the buck in the battle for access to justice than any other plausible alternative.

As we mark PBSC's 20th anniversary, let us all come together – governments, the bar, law schools – and commit to making a plan for moving this remarkable and vital organization forward.

This article was originally published in the *Ottawa Citizen*.

Edward Iacobucci, Dean, University of Toronto Faculty of Law &
Nikki Gershain, National Director, Pro Bono Students Canada



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“ Pro Bono Students Canada is one of the most important undertakings I have seen in my years at the bar. Today, because of the efforts of the PBSC students, thousands of Canadians are better off, and believe in justice. ”

PBSC is fortunate to count Madam Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella as a longstanding supporter of the program, benefiting immensely from Justice Abella's unabating drive to promote the value of pro bono and public service among law students. Speaking at PBSC's 15th Anniversary celebration in 2011, she described PBSC as “one of the most visionary undertakings I've seen in my 40 years at the bar.”

Since that time, Justice Abella has continued to serve as a prominent ambassador for the program. In the last two years alone she has visited five PBSC chapters across the country, meeting with volunteers and sharing her wisdom, with more visits in the works for 2016-17.

Justice Abella's ability to connect with students is palpable, and they give her a “rock-star” reception wherever she goes. Using humour and colourful anecdotes, she implores students to use their law degrees to serve those in need. As she remarked at the University of British Columbia in 2014, “pro bono introduces you to the humanity and dignity of people who deserve justice, but don't always get it.”

Justice and dignity are two themes that are woven through the fabric of Justice Abella's life. Born to concentration camp survivors in a displaced person's camp in Germany, Justice Abella grew up to blaze a trail in every aspect of her career. Her fierce commitment to justice led her to attend law school when few women did. She was the first pregnant lawyer to be appointed to a court and the first Jewish woman to sit on the Supreme Court of Canada. She is the architect of employment equity in Canada, which in turn led to the Canadian understanding of substantive equality.

For Justice Abella, “the status quo has always been merely the beginning of a conversation.” PBSC is extremely lucky to count Justice Abella amongst our friends. She, in turn, lauds the contributions of our student volunteers, and has told our students: “Because of your time, your commitment, your generosity, and your tenacity, thousands of Canadians are better off, and believe in justice.”

The Honourable Madam Justice Rosalie Silberman z,
Supreme Court of Canada



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“My experience as a PBSC Coordinator shaped my career. It allowed me to learn about the challenges facing vulnerable members of the community and connect to local issues. I wouldn’t have gotten elected as a Member of Parliament in 2008 if I didn’t have such a strong connection to the community.”



Megan Leslie – the bright and progressive rookie NDP MP from Halifax, who rose to the ranks of deputy party leader before losing her seat last fall in the Liberal tide – started on her path to Parliament as a law student at Dalhousie. There, Leslie joined PBSC in her first year and worked as a student coordinator for the next two. During that time, participation in the program ballooned. With Leslie’s dedication and commitment, one thing literally led to another. It wasn’t too long before she landed in Ottawa.

“As a PBSC coordinator I was incredibly connected with what was happening in the community,” she says. “That work led me to a career as a community legal worker at Dalhousie Legal Aid. I was really embedded in the legal issues in our community and would not have gotten elected in 2008 without the community connections I developed first at PBSC.”

Every year since law school - except for one, when she just couldn’t get to Halifax - Leslie has returned to Dalhousie to speak on behalf of PBSC at the start of the school year. She even showed up last year, in the heat of her campaign for re-election.

“I talk about PBSC as a way to give back,” she says. Leslie shares real stories of how community action - no matter how seemingly insignificant - can snowball and lead to meaningful change.

“When I meet with PBSC students I make a point of describing examples where groups have done incredible things to make the law better for people,” she says. “And it wasn’t that ‘aha’ moment or the smoking gun. It was because we put up some posters and encouraged people to come to a meeting.”

Leslie is proud of her longstanding connection to PBSC and PBSC, in turn, was delighted to welcome her as a guest at a celebration of the program’s 20 years in Toronto, that was held in May 2016. “PBSC was an opportunity for me to put theory into practice in a way I have since tried to do in every job I’ve had since. It was for me the launching pad to a career dedicated to public service, and I’m grateful for the leadership skills and opportunities it gave me as a young law student.”

Megan Leslie, Senior Advisor, WWF Canada,
Former Member of Parliament for Halifax & Former PBSC Program Coordinator



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Le temps que les bénévoles de PBSC ont sacrifié pour aider autrui à se battre pour défendre une cause que PBSC a trouvée juste, la spontanéité avec laquelle vous avez, pour ainsi dire, volé à notre secours, le professionnalisme dont votre équipe a fait la preuve dans une harmonie remarquable ..., le tout servi de façon on ne peut plus généreuse et bienveillante, voilà autant d'attitudes et de nobles gestes que Rahim et moi ne saurions oublier.



Rahim-Philippe et Abdoulaye Baldé, Clients

Projet de représentation de contribuables, Montréal

« Belle photo souvenir, du beau monde que Rahim et moi garderons en mémoire pour toujours.

Le temps que vous avez sacrifié pour aider autrui à se battre pour défendre une cause que vous avez trouvée juste, la spontanéité avec laquelle vous avez, pour ainsi dire, volé à notre secours, le professionnalisme dont votre équipe a fait la preuve dans une harmonie remarquable ..., le tout servi de façon on ne peut plus généreuse et bienveillante, voilà autant d'attitudes et de nobles gestes que Rahim et moi ne saurions oublier.

Mille fois MERCI à toute l'équipe!

Et que le bon Dieu guide vos pas vers la réussite et l'excellence! Amen.

Pour notre part, nous vous assurons de notre profonde reconnaissance et de notre disponibilité entière en toute éventualité.»

Rahim-Philippe and Abdoulaye Baldé, Clients

*Tax Advocacy Project,
Montreal*

“A beautiful souvenir photo of the lovely people whom Rahim and I will remember forever.

The time you sacrificed to help others and to fight for a cause you thought was just, your unhesitating decision to come to our rescue, so to speak, the professionalism and exceptional harmony with which your team did its work, and the unparalleled generosity of the volunteers who did all this – Rahim and I will never forget their kindness and fine deeds.

THANK YOU to the entire team from the bottom of our hearts!

May God guide you on your path to success and excellence. Amen.

We want to assure you of our deep gratitude, and let you know that we are entirely at your disposal should the occasion arise that you need us.”

Rahim-Philippe et Abdoulaye Baldé,
Clients Projet de représentation de contribuables, Montréal



“ PBSC’s Tax Advocacy Project has shown me that pro bono can be part of a mainstream legal practice. Even though my skills may seem rather niche, I can help vulnerable taxpayers who don’t have the means to pay for counsel. Thanks to PBSC, I know I have something to give back.



How did you get involved with PBSC?

I had the good fortune of being selected for the PBSC Tax Advocacy Project when I was in law school. What inspired me was the uniqueness of the opportunity to unify my interest in tax law with pro bono priorities and access to justice issues.

How are you involved now?

When I joined Dentons in Edmonton, I asked the tax partners how they would feel about bringing the project to Edmonton. The reception was very positive. I became the project coordinator here for our pilot year. It was always a goal of the office to get on board but they didn’t necessarily have the manpower. When I came here, with the willingness and interest to pilot the project, they were happy to give me free rein to implement the project here.

How has it unfolded?

In our very first year, we had more applicants than positions. We ended up taking two teams of students who each took a couple of files that were destined for the tax court. All the students received accolades from the bench and from the clients. The level of appreciation was phenomenal.

What does your involvement give you personally?

I think the Tax Advocacy Project has shown me the power of innovative and transformative work. A lot of commercial lawyers leave law school with a desire to do pro bono work, but without any clear idea of how to apply our skill set to pro bono issues. Thanks to this project, I have an understanding that access to justice isn’t just about wrongful conviction or criminal defense. It can be about helping someone review a lease or draft a contract. Everybody has something to give back, and even though my skills may seem rather niche, they might have applicability to taxpayers who don’t have the means to pay for them.

How would you describe the role of law students in filling the access to justice gap?

I think it’s one of the greatest untapped resources the legal community has to offer. If you contrast the amount of enthusiasm for pro bono initiatives, the thirst for experience that law students have, with the number of opportunities out there, I think there’s a disparity and I think organizations like PBSC really help connect litigants who need assistance with students who are keen to help them. To the extent that this is a multifaceted problem with multipronged solutions, law students are going to play a fundamental part in correcting the problem.

What advice would you offer new graduates about making time for pro bono work?

Be innovative. Sometimes people are too apt to assume that their skill set doesn’t apply. In reality, everybody has something to offer. When you start to view it through that lens, it enables you to devote time to access to justice initiatives without learning an entirely new skill set.

Ashvin Singh,
Associate, Dentons & Former PBSC Coordinator, Tax Advocacy Project



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“ Law students have endless energy; they’re very smart and they’re eager to apply the theory and knowledge they learn in law school to real life issues. Through their work, they have helped many people who otherwise would have been denied access to the justice system. For the lawyers who work with these students, it is profoundly energizing to see what some of the best and brightest students across the country can achieve.



How did you get involved with PBSC?

I became Managing Partner for Ontario at McCarthy Tétrault LLP in 2002. Sometime after that PBSC approached me looking for a law firm partner. I thought it was a terrific idea. I’m a strong supporter of pro bono, and I understood that law students were looking to make a contribution of some kind. I knew how important this was.

What did your involvement look like at the time, and how has it changed?

I assisted in securing a financial commitment from the Firm to provide a solid basis of funding for PBSC. It wasn’t a hard sell – my colleagues were all impressed with the PBSC model. We thought it was a terrific way to help law students gain some leadership and skills that would be helpful in their careers. It was also very energizing for our lawyers to get involved in PBSC projects and work with some of the best and brightest students at law schools across the country. McCarthy Tétrault continues to serve as PBSC’s National Law Firm Partner, so I’m pleased to see that the partnership continues to thrive. Under Nikki Gersh bain’s leadership, there has been a real maturing of the relationship. I’m amazed by the kind of work I’m seeing coming out of PBSC, and proud to have been there early on to provide some support.

How would you describe the contributions law students make toward filling the access to justice vacuum in Canada?

Important! Law students are chomping at the bit to apply the theory and knowledge they acquire in class. They have endless energy, are very smart and really want to make a difference. To be a law student and meet a real client, understand their problem, and try to deliver a solution, these are the building blocks of a lawyer’s career. That students can do this right from the start of law school through a program like PBSC is remarkable.

Who bears the brunt of what the Chief Justice of Canada has called an access to justice crisis?

The public. We have a very old system that is ill-adapted to the kinds of issues that come up today. It has to be a shared burden. There is a lack of government funding, and Legal Aid is inadequate. Legal services are expensive, and law firms are stepping up with organized pro bono programs, but we have to do more to reassure lawyers that if they do pro bono work they’ll get credit and won’t be punished for it.

Is there anything you’d like to add?

I’d like to congratulate PBSC on driving the very important issues of pro bono and access to justice, and becoming a real force to be reckoned with over the last 20 years! PBSC is a well-oiled machine that benefits so many people across the country.

Kirby Chown,
Former Ontario Regional Managing Partner, McCarthy Tétrault LLP



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“PBSC’s Family Law Project is one of the most important access to justice initiatives of the last 20 years. The North York family court is one of the biggest and busiest family courts in the country. Without the assistance of the PBSC volunteers, it would literally implode.”



Trailblazing and innovation: these have been the hallmarks of Justice Harvey Brownstone’s illustrious career. From pioneering new support enforcement tools while Director of the Family Responsibility Office for Ontario, to being Canada’s first openly gay judge when called to the provincial bench in 1995, to writing a book to help families get through divorce without harming the kids, Justice Brownstone, the first and only sitting judge in the world to host a public education television show, has never stopped promoting access to justice in new ways.

In 1997 Justice Brownstone opened the door to the creation of PBSC’s Family Law Project (FLP) by speaking at the University of Toronto law school about the “major problem with access to justice in the family court”. He explains: “The judges were all aware that we were drowning in self-represented litigants. But at that time, nobody was talking about what to do about it.”

In response to Justice Brownstone’s speech, PBSC – which at that time was in operation only at U of T – formed the FLP. Today, it is a multiple-award winning project that operates in dozens of schools and courts across Canada.

Justice Brownstone describes the FLP as “the most important initiative in the last 20 years that has made a direct and positive impact on access to justice in family law.” Having spent many years presiding at the North York Family Court, he says: “this is one of the biggest and busiest family courts in the country. Without the assistance of the PBSC volunteers, it would literally not be able to function. It would implode”.

Now a justice on Ontario’s criminal court, Brownstone is determined to blaze yet another trail. With almost half of all cases in family court involving a criminal component, he has a new goal. “We need an integrated system for cases where families are involved. I’ve got five and a half years left and that’s going to be my next mission,” he says. “One judge. One family. That’s my motto.”

In May of 2016, to mark the occasion of its 20th anniversary and to honour all that he has achieved in promoting access to justice, PBSC presented Justice Brownstone with a PBSC Supporter Award. The award is given out once every 5 years to an individual who has gone above and beyond in their support for PBSC. The inaugural award, presented during PBSC’s 15th Anniversary celebration, went to PBSC’s founder, Ronald J. Daniels.

The Honourable Justice Harvey P. Brownstone,
Ontario Court of Justice & Recipient, PBSC Supporter Award



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« Sans aucun doute, avoir l'opportunité de voir évoluer et grandir ces étudiants impliqués et d'observer l'impact de leurs actions dans la vie de citoyens me donne grand espoir envers une future génération de professionnels engagés, sensibles et conscients de l'importance et de la valeur de la pratique pro bono.



J'ai le privilège de superviser depuis 7 ans l'équipe pro bono (PBSC) à la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Montréal.

En tout état de cause, j'ai pu constater l'impact considérable de ce programme à travers le cheminement de nos étudiants très dévoués et engagés. En effet, ils acquièrent de nombreuses habiletés pratiques qui leur seront utiles tout au long de leur carrière de juriste. Au surplus, les valeurs transmises par le biais de multiples projets—du leadership, en passant par la créativité, la curiosité intellectuelle ou encore l'esprit d'équipe—leur permettent de se démarquer sur le marché du travail. Et encore davantage, leur participation au programme de PBSC permet aux étudiants de mieux saisir, comprendre, explorer, valoriser et promouvoir la justice sociale.

Sans aucun doute, avoir l'opportunité de voir évoluer et grandir ces étudiants impliqués et d'observer l'impact de leurs actions dans la vie de citoyens me donne grand espoir envers une future génération de professionnels engagés, sensibles et conscients de l'importance et de la valeur de la pratique pro bono.

Pour terminer, selon l'artiste Michel Bouthot, le meilleur ami de merci est beaucoup : Merci beaucoup PBSC de nous soutenir, merci beaucoup d'être là.

Aminata Bal,
Superviseure locale, Centre de développement professionnel, Université de Montréal



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“ We started PBSC because, at that time, there was no formal organization in Canada to champion the profession’s commitment to pro bono service. I’m proud that PBSC became one of the key galvanizing organizations for *pro bono* practice in Canada. ”

Why did you think that an organization such as PBSC was needed in Canada?

We were struck by the lack of any formal organization in Canada to champion the role and value of the profession’s commitment to pro bono service. The lack of awareness of the role of pro bono was particularly troublesome given my role as a legal educator. By championing the value of pro bono service, we were able to remind students, the profession and the public at large that there are many opportunities for public interest work in the profession, including in traditional practice settings.

How did the idea for PBSC originally come about, and then develop into a pilot project?

PBSC was modeled on several different organizations that operated in the United States. But, whereas the American model required participating schools to pay an overhead fee, we went at this a different way, and successfully sought start-up funding from two visionary benefactors: the Kahanoff Foundation and the Law Foundation of Ontario. As a result of their early support, we were able to enlist the involvement of schools across the country. From the get go, the program was extremely well received, and provoked considerable interest from law students and community organizations, which benefit enormously from the passion and service of students.

What was your vision for the organization at the beginning? What were your expectations for its reach and impact?

In truth, there were lots of naysayers at the outset. Some members of the profession criticized the commitment to pro bono as being inimical to the need to ensure governmental responsibility for broad access to legal aid. Others felt that community organizations wouldn’t welcome support from law students. Still others saw the organization as unlikely to have any impact on the profession. Of course, they were wrong on all counts, but we weren’t so sure at the time!

How do you feel about the growth of PBSC, and the fact that a program you started is now established at almost every law school in Canada?

Enormously proud. I’m proud of the fact that PBSC became one of the key galvanizing organizations for pro bono practice and organized pro bono organizations in Canada, proud of the impact it has had on the culture of the profession, and proud to see that it is one of the leading voices for law students in Canada. Today the organization is benefiting from the inspired leadership of two dear friends of mine: National Director Nikki Gershain, and U of T Law Dean Ed Iacobucci. I couldn’t be happier to see how PBSC has grown and thrived over the last 20 years.

Ronald J. Daniels,
President, Johns Hopkins University & Founding Dean, Pro Bono Students Canada



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“Through PBSC, law students learn that clients are experts in their own experience. Legal solutions are often limited at best. In exposing law students to the systemic barriers faced by clients, PBSC helps build the competence of students to serve underrepresented populations. This simply can’t be taught in a classroom.”

As PBSC’s first National Director in 1997-1998, I am proud of what PBSC students have been able to achieve over the last 20 years and pleased to have an opportunity to reflect on what I value about the program.

In 1997, after a talk by Justice Brownstone on unrepresented family law litigants in his courtroom, a law student walked into my office and asked “is there something law students can do?” From that question sprung meetings with Ontario Court of Justice judges, communications with the Family Lawyers Association in Toronto, and a massive volunteer commitment by the family law bar and UofT students to an in-court pilot at the 311 Jarvis Court. This was the start, in 1997, of the Family Law Project, which has now won many awards and grown exponentially. PBSC offered the creative space and institutional support for the seed of that idea to grow. All that was needed was one physical office, staffed by one part-time national director, where a student could ask the question: “what can we do?” Over the last 20 years countless ideas have flourished because there are PBSC offices in law schools across the country.

By virtue of legal education, law students are, relatively speaking, in a position of influence. While some law students identify as members of one or more excluded groups, many do not. Working with community organizations that serve underserved populations is an essential component of law school education. For many people, accessing law and legal remedies is often at best a questionable or partial response to a problem, and sometimes even risky or disadvantageous.

Joanna Birenbaum,
Lawyer, Ursel Phillips Fellows Hopkinson LLP & Inaugural Director, Pro Bono Students Canada



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<< À travers mes expériences en tant que bénévole et Coordonnateur de programme, je me suis rendu compte que les services *pro bono* jouent un rôle central dans une société fondée sur l'intégration et l'égalité des chances. Comme acteur social, je me sens fier de contribuer aux structures de soutien dans ma communauté.



Dès mon arrivée à la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Moncton, j'ai saisi l'occasion de participer au programme du Réseau national d'étudiant(e)s pro bono (PBSC) parce que je voulais accomplir mon devoir de citoyen. J'ai vite réalisé qu'il s'agissait là d'une occasion de mettre à profit mes connaissances juridiques et de me familiariser avec les enjeux juridiques auxquels font face les organismes communautaires dans leur quotidien. Toutefois, j'ignorais que ces activités allaient influencer sur ma carrière.

Grâce à PBSC, j'ai eu l'occasion en tant Coordonnateur de programme de mettre en place avec la collaboration des avocat.e.s de la région et du Doyen de la Faculté de droit la Clinique pour les réfugiés du Nouveau-Brunswick (CRNB). La Clinique a comme but de fournir des services juridiques à ceux et celles qui ne peuvent pas s'en procurer.

Lorsqu'on participe au programme de PBSC, on réalise combien les organismes ont vraiment besoin des services juridiques pour mieux desservir leurs communautés respectives. Face à cet enjeu, en tant que bénévole, on joue un rôle primordial. Par le biais des services juridiques pro bono, y inclus la vulgarisation de l'information juridique, on permet à ces organisations et, par conséquent, à une bonne partie de la population d'avoir accès à des services juridiques de haute qualité. À travers mes expériences en tant que bénévole et Coordonnateur de programme, je me suis rendu compte que les services pro bono jouent un rôle central dans une société fondée sur l'intégration et l'égalité des chances. Comme acteur social, je me sens fier de contribuer aux structures de soutien dans ma communauté.

Jules-César Katagurutse,
Coordinateur de programme, Université de Moncton



PBSC instills in students the importance of public service. It teaches that being a lawyer is not just a job, it's not just a paycheck. Being a lawyer is about membership in an honorable profession that has an obligation to serve the public. This is the power of PBSC.



How did you become involved with PBSC?

I supported PBSC when I served as Dean of the University of Victoria law school from 2008-2013. The mission of PBSC fits perfectly with the law school's commitment to public service and social justice. After I finished my term as Dean, I was keen to continue lending a hand, and thus I was delighted to become the faculty adviser of the UVic chapter.

What is your role as faculty adviser?

My first priority is to be an on-site resource for the student volunteers, ready to answer their questions or point them to people who can help them. The second is to be an ambassador for PBSC generally and my chapter in particular. Since PBSC couldn't operate without local lawyers who volunteer their time and expertise, it's important for PBSC to maintain good relations with the bar.

What kind of role do you think students have in addressing the access to justice gap?

The crisis in access to justice is enormous. The law students who volunteer for PBSC are one part of various programs in BC that are grappling with the huge need for legal assistance. While the students' efforts may seem like the proverbial drops in a bucket, every drop does make a vital difference to the specific client, and thus should not be discounted or dismissed merely because the bucket is large. More importantly, PBSC instills in students the importance of public service. It shows them that being a lawyer is not merely a job, it's not only a paycheck, it's about membership in an honorable and learned profession, one that has an inherent obligation to serve the public. This message is the power of PBSC.

What advice would you give young lawyers about making time for pro bono work?

I would tell them to imagine that they are celebrating their 70th birthdays, and are looking back on their lives. What do you want to remember? That you drove the swankiest Mercedes, or that you did something to make the world a better place? I would remind them of Winston Churchill's justly-famous statement: "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."

How does your involvement with PBSC benefit you personally?

I enjoy becoming better acquainted with the talented students who are involved with PBSC. Moreover, I get the satisfaction of knowing the community is being well-served by UVic Law students.

**Professor Donna Greschner,
University of Victoria Faculty of Law & PBSC On-Site Supervisor**



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“ 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. The program provides a direct link to why law matters at the earliest entry point to the legal profession – law school. ”

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.



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There was no way I could have afforded a lawyer on my own, and the thought of appealing a decision in the Tax Court of Canada was very overwhelming.



I am profoundly grateful to Pro Bono Students Canada for having selected my case for inclusion in their Tax Advocacy Project in Edmonton. There was no way I could have afforded a lawyer on my own, and the thought of appealing a decision in the Tax Court of Canada was very overwhelming.

The two law students who directly helped me prepare and present my case, Brad Angove and Anthony Morrish, were outstanding. They were courteous, patient, respectful, intelligent and professional. The fact that these students took so much time to work on my case, while still attending law school, reflects their charitable spirit.

Brad and Anthony researched my case under the supervision of a lawyer from Dentons Canada. Brad presented my case in court logically and in a very skilled and capable manner. Even the presiding Judge remarked on how professional Brad had been. I felt that through PBSC I was given an opportunity to put my best foot forward, and to be heard.

It is refreshing and encouraging knowing that philanthropy still does exist, particularly in the legal community. The experience of being supported by PBSC has lifted my spirits immeasurably and is an experience I will never forget.”

**Helen Ilijoic,
Tax Advocacy Project Client, Edmonton**



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“ I think the work PBSC does with law students is a critical part of the solution to improving access to justice. Not only for the students, as part of their legal education, but more importantly in serving the needs of the public which are huge and growing. I'm proud to be a supporter of this very important program.



I'm the current President of the Federation of Law Societies of Canada. I'm very familiar with PBSC's work across Canada, both as chair of the Federation's Standing Committee on Access to Legal Services, and as a member of Chief Justice McLachlin's Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters.

I have another recent connection to PBSC. My son is in first year law school in Winnipeg and has been actively involved in a public legal help clinic – the Legal Help Centre in Winnipeg. I like to think I may have passed on to him an interest in improving access to justice, but even more grateful to PBSC for the work it does to expose law students to the value of pro bono service, which I personally believe is a responsibility of every member of our profession.

From my experience as a sessional lecturer at the law school in Manitoba, I'm reminded of how critical it is for students to be engaged in access to justice at an early stage of their careers. Students need to understand that the justice system exists to service the public, many of whom have impeded, or no access to proper representation. PBSC plays a critical role in ensuring that students understand the reality of the world they're about to enter.

There are, however, more students interested in pro bono work than there are opportunities. The challenge for the profession and legal academy is to figure out mechanisms that will permit students to have greater opportunities while they're in law school to do pro bono work. We need to work with the law schools, PBSC, and the other clinical programs to give students more opportunities to make a difference.

Most Canadians don't think of access as a social justice issue, and even fewer people think of it as something that's relevant to them. But it's not just an abstract concept. It is in fact a very serious problem that affects all of us. We have a justice system that's paid for by the public that the public cannot effectively use.

I think the work PBSC does with law students is a critical part of the solution to improving access to justice. Not only for the students, as part of their legal education, but more importantly in serving the needs of the public which are huge and growing. I'm proud to be a supporter of this very important program.

(As told to Karen Gross)

**Jeff Hirsch, Partner, Thompson Dorfman Sweatman LLP &
President, Federation of Law Societies of Canada**



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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



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“Over the years, I have noticed that law students are less focused on using the law to make money, and more focused on using it to create justice. I have no doubt that the presence and efforts of Pro Bono Students Canada has had a concrete impact on this important cultural shift.



“Bring your values to the practice of law”, was the advice former Supreme Court of Canada Justice Claire L'Heureux-Dubé gave over 120 PBSC volunteers in Toronto on International Women's Day in 2013.

Madame L'Heureux-Dube, who celebrated her 89th birthday in September, rarely accepts speaking engagements these days. However, she is a longstanding supporter of PBSC and has travelled to Montreal, Kingston and Toronto over the last few years to meet with our volunteers, as well as in her home town of Quebec City. She remarks: “I am always inspired by meeting young law students who want to change the world.”

On each of these occasions, Madame L'Heureux-Dubé has made a point to emphasise the importance of pro bono, which she believes is “the soul of justice and the nobility of the legal profession.”

On the occasion of PBSC's 20th anniversary, Madame L'Heureux-Dubé spoke about the role PBSC has played in creating a generation of law students committed to the public good:

“Over the years, I have noticed a change in mindset. Law students are less focused on using the law to make money and more focused on using it to create justice. I have no doubt that the presence and efforts of Pro Bono Students Canada has had a concrete impact on this important cultural shift.”

Thank you Justice L'Heureux-Dubé: we could not agree more.

**Madam Justice Claire L'Heureux-Dubé,
Supreme Court of Canada 1987-2002**



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“ The first client I worked with as a PBSC volunteer had a really compelling story to tell, but wasn't able to communicate the facts she needed to get across to the judge. I was confident I could help this woman tell her story. It was the first time I ever felt like a real lawyer, and it opened the door to my future career in family law.



What's your fondest memory of PBSC as a student?

It was the first time I got to work with somebody who was self-represented as a volunteer with the Family Law Project. It was a case and there was a significant custody and access issue. The woman came to speak to duty counsel at the Court because she did not have the resources to retain a lawyer. The client had a really authentic, compelling story to tell, but did not know how to navigate the court process or how to tell her story in a way that would best communicate the facts she needed to get across. I had received really great training from PBSC and I was confident I could help this woman tell her story in an effective way. It was probably the first time I ever felt like a real lawyer, and it was sort of a watershed moment for me where I realized that going into family practice was what I wanted to do. My work with PBSC opened the door for me to my future career as a family lawyer.

What has your involvement with PBSC given you personally?

I had a budding interest in family law but had never actually worked with clients before joining the Family Law Project. A lot of the learning I did on the ground I did through PBSC. The skills of human interaction and good client service can only really be learned by doing, so those early opportunities were really valuable. When I eventually joined a family law firm, I was so much better equipped having gone through the PBSC program.

How important are the contributions of law students, in filling the access to justice gap in Canada?

PBSC volunteers are providing legal services to a lot of vulnerable people who otherwise would not have access to any support. Even more important, PBSC is training the next generation of lawyers to have a commitment to pro bono work, to see its value. It's this systemic contribution to the profession that makes me most proud of being a PBSC alum.

Is there more that law schools can do to support PBSC?

I think instilling the pro bono ethic in students early on is quite important. I'd love to see law schools implement mandatory pro bono service as a graduation requirement. There's such a wealth of talent out there and we should be working to harness it for the greater good.

Joanna Hunt,
Associate, Epstein Cole & Former PBSC Program Coordinator & Volunteer



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“PBSC gave me an opportunity to contribute to people’s lives in a tangible way, and to make a difference. As a law student, it was nothing short of exhilarating. It was why I wanted to be a lawyer.”

Born and raised in Saudi Arabia, Noorain Shethwala had her eyes open to injustice early. After immigrating to Canada, she saw the challenges associated with coming from a racialized background.

Now 23 and graduating from Osgoode Hall law school, Shethwala says “There are a lot of systemic issues that perpetuate inequality among certain groups of people; whether they be women, immigrants, visible minorities, or those from a lower socio economic background. I think as a lawyer, you have a professional responsibility to help those people get access to the justice they need...to foster a culture where we give voices to the marginalized.”

As a result, Shethwala plans to pursue a career in immigration law after she acquires some experience in litigation. She decided to start her career in access to justice early. “I really wanted to get practical experience and I wasn’t going to get that from learning abstract theories and reading case law,” she says. “When I started law school, I immediately saw PBSC as an amazing opportunity for me. The program welcomes first years into the fold and provides concrete experience working in the community with organizations that serve vulnerable populations.”

After concluding her placement at the Afghan Women’s Organization, Shethwala took a position as a PBSC coordinator at Osgoode, setting up placements for other students during her second and third years. “PBSC was an amazing leadership experience. Working for PBSC taught me the valuable role law students can play in fixing a flawed justice system, and how to set up programs that can actually help.” Emails from grateful clients reinforced her faith in PBSC’s mission and her dedication to its cause.

PBSC is proud to attract the best and brightest students – ones like Noorain Shethwala.

Noorain Shethwala,
Articling Student, Lerner LLP & Former PBSC Program Coordinator & Volunteer



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“ At its heart, PBSC’s project is a campaign against apathy and in service of optimism. Its premise is that each law student can make a positive difference in the legal system, even (and especially) if that occurs by coming face to face with the complexities and limits of law.



I first stumbled on PBSC in its fifth year, when it was located in a garret loft in Falconer Hall at the University of Toronto. When I started teaching there, I happened to be assigned the office just next door. Pam Shime, PBSC’s then Director and I became fast friends, and she in turn introduced me to Harvey Brownstone, among many other PBSC fellow travellers. That kindred relationship continued with Noah-Aiken Klar and now, of course, is stronger than ever with Nikki Gersh bain. As PBSC has moved from strength to strength, it has also moved from school to school, covering the whole country, in both official languages, touching diverse areas of law and allowing scores of law students to become problem solvers and to see law through the lens of its impact.

At its heart, PBSC’s project is a campaign against apathy and in service of optimism. Its premise is that each law student can make a positive difference in the legal system, even (and especially) if that occurs through students coming face to face with the complexities and limits of law. Legal education is at its best when it brings together ideas about law with law in action, and this aspiration lies at the heart of every PBSC program.

I think it is fair to say I have seen first-hand the transformative potential of PBSC from more perspectives than most. As a law professor both at U of T and Osgoode, I have seen the benefits of engaged law students, drawing on PBSC experiences in their understanding both of substantive legal fields and of legal ethics and professionalism. As a Dean, I can attest to PBSC’s regenerative ability to bring the best out in Osgoode’s students, faculty, staff and the many collaborating organizations who participate in its programs. I have seen its return on investment as a funder during the years I spent as a Trustee of the Law Foundation of Ontario (which from PBSC’s inception to the present has provided its largest source of financial support). Further, as a Vice Chair of the Health Profession Appeal and Review Board, I have witnessed the effect of PBSC on clients and the quality of dispute resolution as part of the Health Law Advocacy Project. By any of these measures, PBSC has been a striking success.

On a more personal note, over the past two decades, I have had a chance to regularly take part in PBSC events, whether to join the annual PBSC volunteer appreciation reception in the Spring or the summer training events, or just to Flip My Wig for the cause. PBSC has become for me a community – populated by legal education, public interest and access to justice aficionados of all ages and stages of career.

I had the good fortune to be on hand in June of 2011 at PBSC’s 15th Anniversary when Justice Rosalie Abella presented former U of T Law Dean Ron Daniels with an award for what he helped set in motion. Over my years in this community, I have been privileged to see the fruits of extraordinary commitment and passion from PBSC’s leadership and staff, to the dozens of student coordinators at all Canadian Law Schools. For an organization still less than a generation old, it has set in motion generations of graduates convinced law can be better, and that those with a legal education can make it better. I have no doubt the best is yet to come!

Lorne Sossin,
Dean, Osgoode Hall Law School

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