

REFLECTIONS ON 22.2 YEARS AS RECEPTIONIST AT PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES®

BY DOROTHY LEATCH*

In the early days of Parkdale Community Legal Services (PCLS) we looked after a number of cases that we do not do now (*e.g.*, wills; debtor/creditor; consumer; and more family law where our students went to family court). We had a consumer section to deal with unscrupulous salesmen who were signing up women whose English was non-existent and had absolutely no use for the expensive pots and pans they were committing themselves for and no money to pay for them. Just as now, landlord and tenant issues were a major concern.

We had many more detox visitors in those days. They would come in off the street and talk to me first—lucky me! I would get a student (and, believe me, for a first time student who probably came from a middle or upper class environment this may, indeed, have been a shocker and an eye opener), to telephone one of the detoxification units to see if they had a bed so the visitor could get a meal and dry out for twenty-four hours. I might add this was a shock to me the first time I had to deal with this situation. Twenty years being out of the work force and in an insulated environment, I was not prepared for this. However, I was a quick learner. We would give them a car ticket and send them on their way. They were very particular where they wanted to go. Not to St. Joseph's Health Centre because St. Joe's insisted they stay seven full days and take treatment. With the way hospitals discourage long stays today they probably couldn't get in, but that would suit our detox visitor just fine.

We had one regular visitor who could be quite sweet or quite vicious depending on his state of health. He thought any girl wearing glasses was in league with the devil and was out to voodoo him. He would stand on the desk, dance around and wave his belt around, buckle end lashing out at anyone close to him. He was fine after he came back from visiting his home in the Islands. His mother would look after him all winter and fatten him up. He would then come back to Canada and

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be fine for a while then he would not look after himself and just deteriorate into this strange wild person with a violent temper. We would all say, “Oh! Oh! Time for him to go back to Mama for some home cooking and TLC.”

Another local character lived outside all summer and ran up and down Queen Street proclaiming himself as the “Mayor” of Parkdale. As soon as the cold weather came he would steal something, usually from the hardware store, and toss a brick or something through store windows thus assuring himself of three to six months in jail—out of the cold and with meals provided.

When some of our detox clients came into the clinic for help getting a bed, they were supposed to leave their bottles outside. One of these fellows came inside and flopped himself down on a couch we had in the waiting room. He was in a rough state, clutching a bottle in a brown paper bag as though it were Olympic Gold. I said, “Sir, I am sorry, but you will have to leave your bottle outside. You can’t bring it inside the clinic.” He slurred his reply: “Whatsa matter wit you? It’s okay to drink wine. Jesus drank wine.” However, he did attempt to put it outside and he dropped it. Whatever he was drinking was all over our front step. I felt badly, though, because he looked at me and cried like a baby. Poor fellow. I had shattered his whole world. He didn’t have a shred of comfort left. We did get him into detox.

As a receptionist, I have had some very strange questions asked of me, but probably the strangest came from a young woman over the phone who wanted me to tell her if she was pregnant. I told her I wasn’t a doctor and no doctor would diagnose something like that over the phone. She asked me if I had kids and I said yes—three. She said, “Well, you must know how you felt when you were pregnant. I’ll tell you my symptoms.” I could not get a word in edgewise. I finally persuaded her to call the Parkdale Community Health Centre.

We were at 1267 Queen Street West for ten years. It later became a Goodwill service outlet. We moved to 1239 Queen Street in utter chaos. They were still putting up drywall. Everywhere was drywall dust. I was enveloped in the stuff. So much so that my hairdresser asked me what on earth I was doing to my hair. The noise was intolerable. We were trying to service our clients, but it was not possible under the circumstances. Sometimes I would just put the phone on hold and go for a walk. There were no answering machines in those days.

The management at the clinic took a more pragmatic attitude towards instituting a dress code for staff and students in the early days. Students wore blue jeans and t-shirts as opposed to suits and ties. This was quite acceptable, as long as they were clean and not too ragged.

However, management did draw the line at students who came to work in caftans, sandals, and headbands. I only remember students dressing like that one time. I don't know what happened. Maybe someone got after them about it. All I know is that they never did it again.

It is one thing to "dress down" so your clients don't feel uncomfortable and out of place, but to come dressed in a disreputable manner shows a lack of respect for your client and was completely unacceptable. People were permitted to dress appropriately for the summer because there was no air-conditioning either at 1267 or 1239 Queen Street West. The heat could get unbearable. Today, our students dress casually, but respectably. We always knew—and the same is true today—when a student was going to court. Sometimes, we wouldn't even recognize when they were so dressed up, but as soon as they got back to the clinic, off would come their court dress or suit, and back into more casual attire. They looked wonderful all dressed up, but a little embarrassed too.

We moved to our present location at 165 Dufferin Street around 1989. This building is all cosmetic. It looks wonderful, but I never go to the second floor, because walking down the hall on the second floor makes me nauseous. It is very uneven. If anyone has been to Port Royal, Jamaica, and seen the "Giddy House" you will know what I mean. We do have air-conditioning in the summer, but it doesn't reach to the second floor offices and consequently people up there bake in the summer and freeze in the winter.

The present phone system is a joy. It is the fifth system I have had to learn and by far the easiest. Sometimes, clients and most people are exasperated with automated machines because they want to speak to a real person and are starved for personal service. We live in an automated world of buttons and numbers and it can be very lonely. When someone does get me on the other end of the line, they are so pleasantly surprised. I have had people ask me, "are you a machine?" I usually say, "No, I am not a machine. I am a real person." Their response is usually "Thank God."

We have computers and a network with e-mail. I am amazed at my own progress computer wise. A few months ago I was afraid of it and did not know how to turn the monster on. Now I am doing stats on it. I have learned so much from being at Parkdale.

Many of our students have really blossomed in the world. We have had many famous lawyers and some who have become judges come through the Parkdale experience. Of these illustrious people I can say, "I knew them when" Our present clinic director, Kevin Smith, came

through the PCLS clinic system. His expertise was and still is landlord and tenant.

When I started in 1975, Colleen Swords was the articling student at Parkdale. Colleen is now with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and has been stationed in many parts of the world. She is now living in Virginia, posted to Washington D.C. Patrick Sheppard (now the Honourable Mr. Justice Sheppard) was the LL.M. student in those days. It was almost a month before I got to meet him, even though I had been hearing about him and never seeing him. I was beginning to wonder if he was a figment of someone's imagination. Out of the blue, he turned up at the desk one day and announced, "Yes Dorothy, there really is a Patrick Sheppard!" Then I knew I was really a part of PCLS.

Mary Hogan, now the Hon. Justice Hogan, was the supervising lawyer in charge of the landlord and tenant division. She later became one of the clinic's directors. She also became Deputy Attorney General in the Bob Rae government. She and Diana Hunt, one of the L&T students were my mentors in those early days of my tenure. They were so wonderful and so supportive. I had been out of the workforce for such a long time raising kids, dogs, and cats among other livestock. I did not even have a social insurance card. I got one in a hurry. My hockey playing sons had one before I did. I had been doing some part-time work at City Hall for Anne Johnston, North Toronto's alderman at the time. Anne was paying me the grand sum of fifty dollars a week out of her own pocket. I think that the assistants get a little more than that now.

Then, lightning struck. My husband took sick with a terminal illness in 1974 and I had to do something to earn money. I had two older children and a ten-year-old son to think about. I worked with Anne for a while and then, when the receptionist's position became available at the clinic, I phoned the office manager. She asked, sight unseen, "when can you start? Can you start on Monday?" It was Thursday. I started on 20 October 1975. I think I was hired with the shortest résumé in the history of Osgoode Hall Law School. Leslie Johnston, PCLS's office manager in the 1970s, who hired me sight unseen, was a good friend to me. They were all so kind. They knew how nervous I was and were so patient and supportive. I can't thank them enough for giving me the chance to be a part of the Parkdale experience.

My first contact with PCLS was the Labour Day weekend that year. Ron Ellis, the clinic director at the time, heard from my daughter, who was a student at the clinic, that I had cooked at a Cub and Guide camp during the summers of 1972 and 1973. The clinic organized a family community weekend at a retreat in the Orillia area, and needed

someone to oversee the kitchen and order the food. My daughter volunteered my services. Thank you, Joanne!! It really went off very well. It was well attended and really a lot of fun, even though it was a very cold and wet weekend.

We have had quite a few romances blossom and flourish at Parkdale and a few babies—some who have almost been born at PCLS.

The students who have passed through the Parkdale experience have been as varied as our clients. We have had very young students who have been mature beyond their chronological years and more mature students, in age, who have had more than their share of life's experiences. These are students who are embarking on a second career. It can't be too easy going back to school after being out in the world or the workforce for a good number of years. Sitting in classrooms and listening to professors or teachers—especially ones who are younger than you are—going on about things in the world they know nothing about because they haven't experienced the things these students have must be frustrating. Even if a student has been working in a government office for the last decade and really does know the subject being taught better than the teacher, the student just has to keep his or her silence and remember that he or she is a student, and *can't* know more than the teacher. At least not until graduation.

I have a great rapport with the students, and years later, having made it in the real world, they still remember me and I remember them when they phone in for advice or information. In some cases, they are on the opposite side of the fence. Maybe they are representing the landlord and we are representing the tenant. Small world after all. From experience, it does not take long to figure out which student is going to really enjoy being at PCLS and which student is really unhappy and should not have applied to come in the first place. Poverty law is not for everyone. Some students who, in the beginning of their term at Parkdale, have been so overwhelmed by all the information they receive during skills training and orientation week have wondered why they came and wondered whether there is a way of "getting out" have really settled in once the newness wears off and grow to love the place. PCLS is addictive.

For a few years we had an exchange program with Dutch students from Amsterdam for the fall term. They were so much fun. They brought such exuberance and we really enjoyed their stay. Then it got too expensive and we could not do it any more. Our dear friend, Professor Zemans (Fred Z) used to arrange it.

In the early days of the clinic, we had a mentoring system for students and downtown practising lawyers. Our student would be

teamed up with a participating lawyer in the area of law in which the student was interested. For example, a student in the family law division would be teamed with a downtown lawyer expert in that field, and so forth. The student and downtown mentor would meet two or three times a month, time permitting, and discuss the student's caseload and the lawyer would give advice when needed. It seemed to work quite well. I don't know why it was discontinued.

Students always seem to be hungry. I remember two students who were always on the lookout for food of any kind. I felt sorry for them, so one day I brought in two loaves of bread made into sandwiches and I gave one loaf to each student. I thought they might share with their less fortunate colleagues, but no sir, would you believe they ate both of them themselves? I felt we had a lot of work to do in the realm of social sharing. These two had never heard that it is better to give than to receive. I hope by now that they are on the upper scale of income and will think of their student days at PCLS. As I stated above, I love those students.

The students are an inspiration. They treat their clients with dignity and respect giving them 100 per cent service and attention under some adverse circumstances. One is captivated by their boundless energy and enthusiasm. From this I find myself becoming as addicted to PCLS as they are. My love affair with PCLS is in its twenty-third year. I hope it can continue for a while longer, but, if not, then I am grateful for what I have had.

The students and clients ask me all kinds of questions and they think that I know everything, which is not true. I tell them that I know some things around here, but contrary to popular belief I do not know it all. I have absorbed quite a bit of legalese but I am not a lawyer or a law student, and therefore I am not qualified to answer questions about which I know little. About all I can tell a client is when the heat must be turned on or off in an apartment and what temperature the landlord is obligated to sustain for his or her tenants' comfort. This I know from being an apartment dweller; but I don't give out this information either, because, as I make perfectly clear to them, I am not qualified to give legal advice. Then the client asks me what I am doing here and, yes, sometimes I have to stop and think about that because it is a legitimate question.

In a perfect world it would be great if places like Parkdale could close their doors forever, but, until the wealth of the world is more equitably distributed it is not going to happen.

The staff and students of PCLS continue to be committed to outreach in the Parkdale community. Some of the students do

community work at the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre. Some visit patients at the Queen Street Mental Health Centre, while others do intake duty at the Corner Drop-In Centre.

Our students are here for as short as four months and as long as eight months. By that time I think they are ready to go back to school, but some tell us this is not the case. The student and client become attached to one another. A rapport and trust is built and I think the student will carry this for the rest of his/her life. Both client and student are sad when they have to part, but, that is life at PCLS. Life does go on and we are ready to welcome a new group of students three times a year. I have just completed my sixty-sixth orientation session.

The clients who come to the clinic are very real. They are very important to us and our first priority. We are their one beacon of hope in a very unkind world. They are as varied as the colours of the spectrum. They are squeezed by the system, which, to them, seems uncaring at times. Sometimes we are lucky and have some successes. Even small victories are sweet and both we and our clients share in the joy and happiness that comes with having something turn out right for a change.

Today, our clientele is quite different from what it was in the 1970s. Our clients have seen better days. Because of government downloading and downsizing they have fallen on hard times. They have sold everything sellable, used up all of their savings, and have nothing left. All they have left is their pride, and that isn't much good when you can't pay the rent or your children are hungry. It is especially hard around Christmas time for them. The winter is hard when they don't have proper warm clothing or the landlord won't provide enough heat for their apartment—which is often so full of cracks that they are really playing to heat the outside of the building. It is even too cold for the mice. This is when people come to PCLS for help. We try, but the system is so hard on them that it's an uphill fight for all of us. We had a drop box in one of the corridors at Christmas, where people could donate food and toys to be distributed as needed. It was very well received when you consider these are students whose finances are stretched to the limit.

We have some interesting staff at PCLS. Bart Poesiat, one of our community legal workers (CLWs), works in the area of landlord and tenant. Bart is a really remarkable fellow. He has been at Parkdale for a number of years. He does most of his work on the street with the homeless, going out on night street patrol to make sure some homeless person doesn't freeze to death in the cold winter months and to give them some food and a word of encouragement. He is a gentle soul, who

gives PCLS a human touch, and whose home is a haven for a number of cats, bunnies, and small amphibians. He lives in Parkdale and is truly committed to the spirit of the Parkdale Community. One of Parkdale's unsung heroes.

Originally, our CLWS were called lay advocates. I am not sure why the name was changed or why it just seemed to happen. One of the great lay advocates of the day was the late Nelson Clarke. He was champion of tenants rights and a tireless worker for the rights of workers. There were so many hard workers in those days, I can't remember them all. One lay advocate I do remember was Stan Pizans, who looked after workers' compensation problems. The rules seem to have changed in that area as well.

We have a couple of recent additions to our support staff. We have two women who started in 1982, but Judith Johnson, our senior secretary, has been here almost as long as I have. Judith started in April, 1979. In another year she will be celebrating her twentieth anniversary at PCLS. Judith has a very interesting history. Judith is a Native Canadian, and her birth family found her after thirty-five years. She found brothers and sisters she didn't know she had; or more correctly, they found her. Now she has an extended family. She volunteers at the Native Canadian Centre.

Rose, our landlord and tenant group secretary, is from Uganda. Rose went to school just as Idi Amin came to power in his reign of terror. It was so bad for Rose and her family that they had to take refuge in a neighbouring country. Eventually, on a government sponsored program, Rose was able to come to Canada. Even with the help she received, for which she is forever grateful, it was hard being on her own, *i.e.*, without family (because she had to leave her husband behind) and close friends. She was a young mother in a strange land with a son. Eventually, her husband was able to join her. They now have two children and have settled in Toronto. They have made friends here, but all of their families are still overseas.

I would like to pay tribute to the late Jacquie Greatbatch. Many of our CLWS have gone on to Osgoode Hall Law School and become lawyers. Some have retained their connection to Parkdale. Jacquie Greatbatch had been a CLW at another clinic. She was active in tenant issues and an activist. She was a great woman. Jacquie went to law school and eventually joined the staff at PCLS as the supervising lawyer in the immigration section.

While at PCLS, Jacquie worked towards her LL.M. Unfortunately, she died of breast cancer in May 1991, before she could complete her degree. However, Osgoode Hall Law School did a very

nice thing. Professor James MacPherson, then dean of the law school, conferred Jacquie's LL.M. degree on her in her hospital room. This meant so much to Jacquie, to her husband, and to her family and friends. Can any of us who knew and loved her ever forget her cheery "Hi sweetie" greeting? Rest in Peace, sweet lady. We miss you very much.

Parkdale has been so good to and for me. When my husband was so ill, they told me to take as much time as I needed. Often, I would get a phone call and have to take off. There was always someone to pick up the slack without a word of complaint. I am extremely grateful to Joe Bovard (now His Honour Joseph Bovard), then a student at PCLS, and to Kathleen O'Neil, also a student, who provided blood donations for platelets to fight the leukemia. This was no mean feat. They had to spend an afternoon at Toronto Western Hospital and then rush the platelets to Sunnybrook Hospital for injection within a very short time or the platelets would die. Such a generous gesture.

It has been such a pleasure to reach back into the past. I keep thinking of things and people I have not thought about in a long time. Who says you can't go back? In the twenty-two years I have been at Parkdale, I have worked with more than 1,200 students. Some I remember well. Some still keep in touch seasonally. I have rejoiced with them in their weddings and the births of their babies. I have comforted some and shed silent tears with them in their breakups. In all things, I have tried to be there when and if they needed me, just as PCLS has been there for me.

It would seem that PCLS is my whole life. It is a great part of it, but not everything. I do have other interests, not the least of which are my two delightful grandsons, Tim and Geoff, who will soon be seven years old and speak with all the authority of seven-year-olds. They are learning to ski and skate, and are quite sure they may be ready for the next Olympics. I also have three cats who let me live with them and I am an avid reader of mystery books.

As a volunteer, I am on duty one Monday evening a month at the North Toronto food bank, if you can imagine such a thing. This is a most sobering and humbling experience. Around Christmas one of our recipients brought in a cake for us that she had made. One gentleman, who had absolutely nothing, after I had interviewed him, wished me a "beautiful Christmas." It is hard to describe my feelings and I wondered what kind of Christmas he would have.

I have been involved in a "secret pal" project at my daughter's church. On a questionnaire they sent around, one of the questions was, "If you could wish for anything in the world, what would it be?" I thought for a while and finally answered:

I would wish for a little more compassion in this wonderful Ontario of ours. A little more concern for the poor, the destitute, the homeless, and the disadvantaged of our society. I would wish for the abuse and neglect of children to stop and that each child could be reared and nurtured in as warm and as loving an environment as my two grandsons, Tim and Geoff are.

Being at PCLS is more than a job. To me, it is a vocation but I really enjoy my time off as well. Working at Parkdale has given me security and the freedom to travel. Some might feel or think that being a receptionist is not much of a job and that it could get boring. Believe me when I say that this job is one of the most interesting things I have ever done and the most rewarding outside of raising my three children to be good citizens and outstanding human beings. I am very proud of my children.

We are very proud of our staff and students at the clinic, and I would like to invite any of you who are interested to come and visit us at any time.