

**CHIEF JUSTICE OF ONTARIO'S  
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**EIGHTH COLLOQUIUM ON THE LEGAL PROFESSION:  
*THE CHALLENGES OF LEADERSHIP***

**PANEL: LEADERSHIP IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR**

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## **PANEL: LEADERSHIP IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR**

**By Judith M. Potter**

This colloquium is intended to promote professionalism, civility and a spirit of community and collegiality in the legal profession. The task of this panel is to address “spirit of community.” This term describes an element or quality found not only within the profession but which extends out into the wider community. Another way of characterizing “spirit of community” would be volunteerism as a form of leadership.

Volunteerism is a term we are familiar with in North American society. It is a part of our culture that has benefited our quality of life and our economy. Few of us could afford many of the things we enjoy if it was not subsidized by the unpaid labour of volunteers. Whether it is the arts, children’s athletics, health care, education, social causes, they all depend heavily on volunteers.

So, where do lawyers fit into this picture?

It may interest you to know that among the various professions, including doctors, accountants, engineers and others, lawyers are well in the forefront of volunteerism. Lawyers are in the service business by the very nature of their work representing clients. Volunteering is an unpaid form of providing service - to individuals, to organizations to groups, to communities.

Why should you as lawyers, with heavy professional demands on your time, share any of this valuable commodity on volunteering? Simply put, it is the price you pay for the space you take up on earth. No matter where you fit in the overall spectrum, we lawyers are a privileged group.

Lawyers have much to offer non-profit boards. Trained to be analytical and pay attention to detail, lawyers are relied upon to apply their knowledge of the law and the ethical standards required by the Rules of Professional Conduct. For example, lawyers on the board are helpful in interpreting by-laws, letters patent and policies and how they relate to actions the organization is proposing to take.

As individuals, what you give in time and effort as a volunteer is rewarded by what you receive back. On a skills level you learn to develop or enhance abilities such as organizational skills, how to run a good meeting, or improve your public speaking, all of which are confidence builders and transferable to your work life. Moreover, the trust and respect earned from others may provide important networking and business opportunities.

On a more personal level, you broaden your awareness of how others live, dream and survive, often in very different environments from your own. The self knowledge that you are making a difference to their lives, however incremental, can be gratifying and humbling.

Lastly, your volunteer activities are a powerful legacy. You are setting an example for your colleagues, your community at large and, most important, for your children or those whose lives you directly influence.

From my own perspective, volunteering is what motivated me to become a lawyer, which I did much later in life than most of you. My own volunteerism started essentially with getting involved with clubs, organizations and committees related to the activities in which my children were involved. As they grew my volunteer activities evolved, eventually including politics. I joined my local riding association and took on various duties, including the presidency. I worked on federal, provincial and municipal campaigns and eventually ran for city council. During this time I developed a growing interest and volunteer involvement with agencies working with issues of woman abuse. The latter was my motivation for becoming a lawyer. My law practice focussed primarily on representing abused women in family law matters and representing children through the Office of the Children's Lawyer.

As a lawyer I served on boards that reflected those interests such as the Children's Aid Society, Merrymount Children's Centre, The London Abused Women's Centre and others, along with serving eight

years on the Board of Governors of this university. My husband and I and one of our three children attended the University of Western Ontario. We have had a long-standing interest in and commitment to staying involved as supporters and volunteers.

Running for and being elected a bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada was for me, a natural progression in my own evolution of “getting involved,” of helping to make a difference in the areas involving my work and my interests. Currently I hold a paid position as a lawyer member of the Consent and Capacity Board dealing with mental health issues and end of life decisions. I have always had an interest in mental health and I like to think of this work as coming full circle from the time, as a young married woman living in a new city, I spent one evening a week as a White Cross volunteer at a psychiatric facility, dancing with patients during their weekly social event.

Some of you may be wondering “how do I get involved?” If asked to participate, just say yes. Or, seek out something that reflects an area of interest to you such as helping to coach a sports team, being a Big Sister or Big Brother, serving on a charity’s board of directors or getting involved politically or in an organization within the legal profession - and the list goes on. As the saying goes, “If you leap, the net will appear.”

A word to law firms. Studies show that businesses that encourage employees to volunteer report higher morale, job satisfaction and increased pride and positive feelings about their employers. For big law firms hours dedicated to pro bono work, with the hours credited to billable requirements, is one way of encouraging volunteerism within the firm. It has all the positive spin-off effects previously outlined for individual volunteer efforts.

Fundamentally, your volunteer activity as lawyers, whether on a large or small scale, sends an important goodwill message. It serves to counter the negatives we all too often hear about our profession. It speaks volumes about lawyers caring and lawyers committed to making their community a better place.

Service and leadership are the hallmarks of the legal profession. Each of us has an obligation to ensure that we never lose sight of that reality. We have many fine examples of lawyers who are seen by their peers as great legal minds or litigators and we applaud their efforts to advance the law and make the justice system a better one for all. However, we must equally applaud those whose service to the profession is less obvious and rarely in the limelight, those who volunteer their time, their legal talents and frequently their resources in the pursuit of community service. All it took was one small three- letter word - yes!