

My involvement with the Canadian Women's Foundation's Women Moving Women Campaign

Canadian Bar Association

The Common Room – CBA National Women Lawyers Forum Newsletter

By Janice Rubin

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Let me begin with a little personal disclosure. I have practiced law for nearly twenty years. I am a partner in a boutique employment law firm in Toronto, which, knock on wood, is doing extremely well. I have a wonderful husband, and three amazing children. Like many of you I suspect, I have a closet full of lovely things to wear, take regular vacations, and live in a nice house. Yet, about a year ago, facing my 45th birthday, I started to wonder whether having “made it,” particularly in the unforgiving legal world, if there wasn't something I should be doing to help women who hadn't been as fortunate as me. Perhaps it is a function of being middle aged now, but I have become increasingly aware of the many opportunities that have been sent my way, not to mention the good luck I have had throughout my life. One of them is to be a practicing lawyer. Shouldn't I be leveraging my own position in life to help others?

Isn't it funny how life works? Almost as soon as the thought crossed my brain, I was approached by the Canadian Women's Foundation (“CWF”) to chair its “Women Moving Women” campaign. The CWF is one of the best kept secrets in Canada. It was started 17 years ago by two women (who were sitting in lawn chairs at the time) who decided that they needed to do something to improve the lives of women and girls in this country. Their solution was to start a foundation that would raise money to fund various programs across the country that would provide lasting change for women and girls.

Seventeen years later, the CWF is the *only* national public foundation in Canada that is dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls. It does this by focusing on three program areas: preventing violence against women, building strong resilient girls, and economic development initiatives for marginalized women in Canada. Until I began work on this campaign, I did not know that 1 out of 7 women in Canada lives in poverty, and that she likely has children living in poverty with her. This is a truly shocking statistic in a country as abundant and decent as ours. Yet the numbers clearly show that many women need intervention and support in order to reach their full economic potential.

So here is where I come in. Prior to establishing the Women Moving Women campaign, the CWF reviewed its programming costs and determined that the average cost of a woman participating in one of its life altering programs was \$2500. Its research also showed that these programs were extremely effective in helping women to improve their economic status and in many cases, to move out of poverty completely. Frankly, I would have thought that this kind of intervention and support would have cost significantly more money. This \$2500 number is particularly impressive when you consider the cost of a year of university tuition, or even the cost of many continuing legal education programs. To me, it is a number that is disproportionately small compared to the power it has to change the lives of other women.

I know I am talking to lawyers, so let me present you with some “evidence” as to the effectiveness of the CWF. A woman named Alice grew up in a family atmosphere of violence in a northern Native community. After getting married, her husband abandoned her with three small daughters to raise. As a result, she was juggling single parenthood and a stressful full-time job as a treatment manager at an abuse centre. Overwhelmed with her job, her personal situation, and the demands of caring for her children, Alice had to give up her job. Her economic situation deteriorated rapidly and she started accumulating heavy debt.

Alice discovered an economic development program funded by the CWF. This program helped her realize her dream of starting a business while helping her community.

Alice now says, "I was so impressed and inspired by how (the program) brought women together. Now they are part of my family circle. They taught us to assess our strengths and weaknesses and then set goals," she explains. "That was significant for me. They helped me be a risk-taker. Now I feel I am only at the cusp of what I can do."

Alice has made huge changes in her life; she is more self-confident and now sees herself as a business woman and community leader. She developed Beedaubin (meaning Rising of the Sun), an arts and consulting business, and facilitates community development projects with Aboriginal youth. Four years ago, she had a huge debt and no income; now she has paid off her debt and her income is steadily increasing. The program inspired her to, "Think big, beyond what you know. I found it's important not to work in a box. Work in a circle."

For me, Alice's story is conclusive proof that these programs work and are truly life altering. It is women like Alice who motivate me to be involved with the CWF.

Our mission in the Women Moving Women campaign is to find 2500 Canadian women who will contribute \$41.70 a month over five years (\$2500 in total) to help other women, like Alice, in Canada on their journeys out of poverty. As women lawyers, most of us are sufficiently privileged that we would not notice this sum on our VISA statements each month. I certainly don't. It is less than the cost of a daily latte or a monthly pedicure.

I am so proud that of the over 800 women who have risen to the challenge since we started the campaign a year ago, many are lawyers. If you are hearing about this campaign for the first time, why not visit the [Women Moving Women website](#) and consider joining this groundbreaking movement to change the face of poverty in Canada.

This original article can be found by visiting http://www.cba.org/CBA/newsletters-sections/2010/2010-02_wlf.aspx#article3