A Day In The Life

The Lure of New Horizons

By: Monica Ciriello, Ontario 2015



Janice Atwood-Petkovski
City Solicitor, Hamilton, Ontario

When asked to reflect on a single most memorable aspect of an illustrious legal career, Janice Atwood-Petkovski, the current City Solicitor at the City of Hamilton, has a difficult time narrowing it down to just one. Not that this is surprising, as Janice has spent 30 years practicing municipal law, holding a variety of positions in multiple cities across southwestern Ontario. After an extremely successful career Janice has set her sights on her next challenge, a transition into a new career as an Integrity Commissioner.

Municipal Lawyer recently had the opportunity to sit down and find out more about Janice's journey before she closes this most recent chapter in March 2017.

Never one to turn down an opportunity, Janice left her budding corporate career to study for the LSAT in early 1981, recognizing at a young age the invaluable advantage that a legal degree would provide. She began her studies at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto. When asked about the typical struggles of adjusting to first year law, it was clear Janice was a natural multitasker, applying that skill in unusual circumstances: she even studied her law notes and read textbooks at concerts while her musician husband (now of 33 years) was on stage performing.

As much as she loved classroom learning, she could not wait to get out and apply her developing legal knowledge. In second year she was in court almost everyday as she began work at Parkdale Community Legal Services, which paved the way to becoming an advocate. All of that in-court experience paid off when she was hired by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing–and her career in the public sphere was off and running. Always up for a challenge and wanting to expand her municipal understanding, Janice talked herself into a new position at the Ministry, representing them at Ontario Municipal Board matters.

When queried about her prior planning experience, Janice laughs. "I had hardly any." But that was not a barrier because she was ready, willing and able to learn directly from the planners in the field. Looking back, she still impresses even herself with the number of hours she dedicated to mastering this new and highly valuable discipline. And she is quick to encourage young lawyers to do the same: "Never turn down an opportunity, even if it is out of your comfort zone–you need to be willing to take on challenges."

Following her own advice, Janice again moved beyond her comfort zone when she left the Ministry and went to the City of Brampton, her hometown. There, she served for 15 years, in the process raising three daughters in the same municipality where she grew up. Janice also had the opportunity to work at the City of Mississauga and the City of Vaughan before finally joining the City of Hamilton in 2013.

Looking back at her career, Janice recalls the days before case law was online, where cities would fax another cases or outcomes to ensure that counterparts across the province could rely on the most recent decisions. What remains true today, she says, although the faxes having long since disappeared, is the cooperation among lawyers across the municipal sector. "Despite being located in separate cities many miles apart we are always working together. And a special thanks to IMLA for linking us and ensuring that we do cross paths."

Janice may be stepping out of her current role, but she is not going far from our municipal circles. She will be transitioning into an Integrity Commissioner position to ensure greater governance and accountability of municipalities. Her rich and varied career path clearly demonstrates the many opportunities available to those so lucky to have chosen to practice in the field of municipal law, if they are up for the challenge!

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