The Secrets to IMLA's Success

By: Chuck Thompson, IMLA Executive Director



IMLA has much to celebrate as we convene in Niagara, Ontario for our 82nd Annual Conference. The organization envisioned by Charles Rhyne continues today as a source of learning, advocacy and commentary in support of the common purpose honored by municipal lawyers on both sides of our border—to serve the public interest. Whether we salute the maple leaf or the stars and stripes, we are all engaged in a mission to help our local governments to function—more effectively, more completely and more fairly.

Sometimes that objective requires that we speak loudly, taking a stand in opposition to national, state or provincial authority and fighting for the rights of our constituents against overreaching policies and mandates that undermine local autonomy. We are justifiably proud of that tradition, which has often placed IMLA and its members squarely within the weightiest debates challenging our countries. We have had the honor of adding our voice to the discourse at our nations' highest courts, drawing upon the skills of our own members--and those of many of the most talented appellate practitioners in the private sector, who feel compelled to support our cause. We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in such foundational issues, and to make a difference in their disposition.

But it is in a much more modest setting that IMLA and its members arguably make our greatest contribution. While the pronouncements from above--whether relating to free speech, gender-based rights, voting, firearms, privacy, search and seizure and many equally seminal principles--will no doubt influence our lives, there is important work to be done at ground level. Far from the high-profile questions debated within marble and granite at the High Court are myriad day-to-day issues which will never merit bolded headlines. These are the less-esoteric subjects—schools, zoning, code enforcement, traffic, public safety, and the like—for which our constituents most require rapid and effective solutions.

In that regard, IMLA and its members, through a remarkable spirit of cooperation and shared purpose, make available to one another our own best thinking, however obscure the subject. Through a vibrant listserv, through superlative webinars, articles and conference presentations, it is collaboration that, like a rising tide, lifts all boats. It is perhaps the best-kept secret about our organization: a genuine desire by each of us to see our colleagues succeed in providing for the citizens they serve.

This leads me to an inflection point of particular personal interest. Just as IMLA's best contribution to its members may be unheralded, that same dichotomy exists within IMLA itself. While I, and other Executive Directors before me, have had the privilege to be the public face of our organization, it is without doubt that much of the continuing success of IMLA is attributable to one singular individual. I am of course referring to Veronica Kleffner, our Deputy Executive Director, who has tirelessly worked for over 32 years to help IMLA function. After many thousands of hours devoted to us, Veronica's last appearance with IMLA will be at the upcoming Niagara Conference.

Every organization is merely a reflection of the attitudes of the people within, and Veronica's dedication, efficiency, humor, fairness and basic good nature have always shown through. None of our stability amidst changing environments would have been possible without Veronica. None of our seminars and conferences would have run as smoothly without her. I doubt that our current team, who is already taking up the reins and will move IMLA forward, would have joined IMLA to begin with, would have learned their roles so well and would have remained committed to IMLA throughout this transition without Veronica's efforts.

So she too has been part of the rising tide. She has helped all of us look better than we are. For most, she is as much a friend as a colleague. And although we share in her sadness on the recent passing of her father, Joseph Henneberry—a tremendously caring and dedicated healthcare professional from whom Veronica undoubtedly inherited some of her best traits—we take this opportunity to celebrate in the good fortune that befell IMLA on that day in 1985 when she decided to join our organization. Above all, we salute her for being a big part, understated and often unrecognized, of IMLA's success over the past four decades.

Sometimes the simplest words are the right ones:

Thank you, Veronica, for everything you have contributed to IMLA. We will miss you and we wish you the very best. ML