Bencher Election: Getting to Know You Questionnaire

DAMIAN ROGERS

1. What is your favourite song, movie or book & why?

It's hard to choose one particular work to reference, so I am dodging the question and focusing on a music event instead. During my first summer in Edmonton, I volunteered at the Edmonton Folk Festival (on the glamorous dishwashing, or "Plate", crew). Folk Fest became my favourite event of the year and I rarely miss it (though I now attend as a ticket-holder, not a volunteer). This year's edition included several favourite acts: Joel Plaskett, The Milk Carton Kids and Of Monsters and Men.

2. What was the most inspiring or rewarding volunteer activity you have performed?

I'm currently enjoying my volunteer work with the Edmonton Radial Railway Society; however, working as a volunteer firefighter from 2007 and 2011 was the most rewarding volunteer activity I've been involved with. The training was physically demanding, which was a good break from my mostly desk-bound job. I also worked with a supportive and diverse group of fellow volunteers who I came to trust when I was on a ladder, on a roof, or inside a fire-damaged structure. For me, the biggest downside of moving to Edmonton—a city served by full-time firefighters—was giving up that volunteer role.

3. How do you deal with stress?

I am now confident and secure enough in my career that I can say "no" (or at least, "not now") when I'm asked to do work that I don't have time to take on. I use my vacation time. Walking my dog, going for a bike ride, and cross-country skiing are all helpful ways to quiet my mind when I'm feeling stressed. Podcasts—at least ones not related to work—are also a good escape.

I have a supportive group of colleagues that will help me to unpack and cope with stressful files or courtroom events. I also appreciate the help I receive from my spouse. Though my spouse and I both have busy professional careers, we are rarely overwhelmed by work at the same time and one of us takes on more family responsibilities when the other is busy with work.

I haven't always been successful at managing my stress. During my first few years in practice, my health was impacted by long working hours and stress. At the time, I didn't

have the confidence to speak up. That experience has made me particularly concerned about checking in with my colleagues about their mental health.

4. What does lawyer well-being mean to you?

To me, it's about about ensuring that lawyers can be healthy, fulfilled and happy in their profession. Aside from the importance of this to individual lawyers—who face high risks of depression, addictions, and other mental illness—lawyer well-being is important to our profession as a whole. Lawyers who are unwell are at risk of serving their clients poorly and their relationships with opposing counsel and the courts can be difficult.

5. Do you believe mental health should be a priority?

Mental health must be a priority for our profession. I have seen excellent lawyers I work with become injured or disabled due to overwork and vicarious trauma. Usually, these were lawyers working at the highest level of competence, but they were rewarded for their hard work with more work and—over time—they became overwhelmed.

I speak openly with lawyers I supervise about the need to monitor our mental health and attempt to convey to them that there is no shame in asking me or someone else for help if their health is imperilled by work. I have recommended that colleagues seek professional counselling assistance. I am thankful that the organization I work for, the Alberta Crown Prosecution Service, offers 1:1 psychological counselling to our prosecutors that can be accessed anonymously on demand, as well as proactive mental resiliency training.

While the stigma around mental health in our profession is lower than it was when I started practicing law in 2002, we still have progress to make as a profession to ensure that lawyers have access to mental health assistance and seek it when needed.