

# Bridging the gap:



## Mentoring works

When Ron MacPhee made the switch from the criminal bar to litigation practice with McGuinty & McGuinty, a small but busy Ottawa-area firm in his first year of practice, he knew his learning curve would be steep.

When one of his first files then involved difficult ethical issues and a difficult lawyer, he realized that his curve was steeper than expected, and turned to the County of Carleton Law Association's newly-minted mentoring program. One call later, he'd been linked up with Heather Williams of Nelligan O'Brien Payne LLP who herself was only five years out.

Their mentoring relationship was simple and straightforward. From time to time, when Ron needed a sounding board, he'd call up Heather and chat. Although the CCLA's mentoring guidelines suggested quarterly face-to-face meetings, the two met only occasionally over the next two years. "It's amazing the ideas and issues you can cover over a good pub lunch," quips Heather, who recently co-founded Cavanagh Williams Litigation Counsel, a new, Ottawa-based insurance defence boutique.

The issues they discussed centred around ethics and professionalism, and allowed Ron to tap into Heather's experience as a litigator. "It was never a question of Ron asking me to do his research for him or anything like that," emphasizes Heather. "It was more about strategies, tactics, professionalism – the kind of issues that I can



*Heather Williams*



*Ron MacPhee*

walk down the hall and talk over with someone, but that Ron, because of the practice he was in, could not.”

“I just did not have the experience at that point to trust my own gut instincts,” adds Ron. Nor did he have anyone in his firm who could mentor him. With Dalton McGuinty off to Queen’s Park to head the provincial Liberals and brother Dylan specializing in real estate, Ron was a prime candidate for a mentoring program.

“The substantive law issues are not the problem,” says Ron. “What you need as a young lawyer, especially in a small firm, is an avenue for brainstorming: Is this the right approach? Have you faced a similar file? What is this judge or this lawyer like in this kind of situation? I also got to see how a large firm does things and how they approach law practice. Having Heather as a mentor helped me get up on my learning curve as quickly as I could, and helped me avoid making a mistake.”

To her own surprise, Heather discovered that mentoring Ron took less time than she’d anticipated – as well as producing unexpected benefits. “A call or two a month of perhaps 10 or 15 minutes each,

a couple of meetings over the two years, that’s all it took,” says Heather.

Moreover, mentoring is, by definition, a time-limited relationship. “The playing field levels off pretty quickly; suddenly you realize your mentee has stopped calling because the job is done.” Today, Ron and Heather are professional colleagues, and although Ron is quick to say that he would not hesitate to call Heather if needed, he turns more often to his own peer network. “Once you have some experience and have established contacts in your practice area, they become your mentoring network,” says Ron. “For me, the CCLA mentoring program filled that initial gap.”

And as a mentor, Heather found her role equally rewarding. “Someone once said that to teach is to learn twice, and I think that sums up mentoring really well. It was challenging because the issues we discussed were often difficult and thought-provoking. Ron also brought his criminal law background to the various situations, so I found that interesting and novel.

“And of course the whole thing was flattering and a real ego boost. Here I was, a five-year call, and I was a mentor whose

experience could be valuable to someone else.” In practice, that small gap was an asset, not a liability: “I could relate to all of the issues and concerns you have as a first-year lawyer, yet still bring to the table experiences he could draw on.”

Their advice to young lawyers seeking mentorship opportunities: Participate in any mentoring programs available to you. Existing programs make that first contact easier, because, “the senior lawyer feels an obligation to take that first call, and the junior knows that he has a right to make that call,” says Ron.

But in the absence of a formal program, take the bull by the horns. Junior lawyers should not be intimidated by the prospect of making that first call. “New lawyers need to know that many senior lawyers would love to hear from them and work with them in some kind of mentoring situation,” says Heather.

“And as a new lawyer, you’ve got to get over the embarrassment factor,” adds Ron, “because there is nothing embarrassing about being mentored.”

