In the Spotlight: Michele Warner, CAMH

Michele Warner, BLG Alum and Director of Clinical Legal Services and Legal Counsel at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) virtually connected with Anna Marrison, BLG Health Law partner.

Michele was a lawyer in BLG's Health Law group from 2005 to 2013 as well as a summer and articling student prior to that. Their relationship goes back over sixteen years, when Anna was an associate mentor to her.

Building a career in mental health law

While Michele celebrated her eighth year at CAMH this year, she initially started working as external counsel for CAMH while she was at BLG. When the opportunity at CAMH came up, she was excited by the chance to translate her legal skills into an in-house environment at the largest psychiatric hospital in Canada. Not to mention that she had a chance to work with other BLG alumni who had moved in-house at CAMH, Kristin Taylor and Nyranne Martin.

"Once you move in-house, it's about coming to know the organization and the people that do the clinical work, and tailor the legal knowledge and skills to the landscape of a large hospital environment."

"And to do that in a hospital environment, you need to make sure that your legal advice is sound, practical and implementable," continued Michele.

She continues to learn at CAMH, even after 16 years of practicing law, and enjoys the fact that "every day brings a new surprise."

The role of legal advice in mental health care

The increased awareness on the importance of mental health has amplified the demand for mental health services. "The litigation team at CAMH has the opportunity to support the expansion and evolution of clinical services in ways that I don't think we would have foreseen occurring or being possible five, eight or 10 years ago," said Michele.

"People look to the lawyers more frequently, to initiate what can be quite urgent and complex legal proceedings, both to facilitate treatment and to help people through the healthcare system."

All of that is born from a positive awareness and "a recognition of the importance of mental health care and a reduction in stigma," concluded Michele.

In fact, this past month she has been focusing on recovery for her legal team at CAMH and has reflected on what it means to be a lawyer during the pandemic.

"Often in law we don't give ourselves permission to reflect and rest and recover, and I think it's particularly important right now," said Michele. "I've learned to give ourselves—myself and others—permission so that we can come at this again in the fall recharged."

The importance of meaningful relationships

Michele was initially attracted to BLG because it had the largest group of lawyers practicing in Health Law.

The BLG student program was invaluable to her. BLG works to "ensure that students from summer through to articling are assigned specific mentors that shift over the course of those student experiences," stated Michele. As associate mentors, Gregory Barclay and Anna Marrison were assigned to guide her through those early years.

For Michele, her formal BLG Partner mentors were Patrick Hawkins, Daphne Jarvis, and Barbara Walker-Renshaw, while Katharine Byrick and Cindy Clarke also became informal mentors as she developed an interest in Mental Health Law.

"Those individuals became the most prominent mentors and influencers of my career," recalls Michele.

She ultimately credits the collective of people from the Health Law group for supporting her development as a lawyer.

“I came to learn as a lawyer what it meant to lean on colleagues; to build a network; to tap into the wisdom and the expertise of others around you so that you can borrow from the best, their advocacy styles.”

Michele believes that her relationships with BLG lawyers has become even more important having left BLG.

Since she works in-house with a small team of lawyers, she turns to her BLG community “as sources of expertise in this field and as continuing leaders doing exciting work.”

“The lawyers that I have worked with at BLG are not just colleagues—they're also peers and friends that supported me, not just in law, but in life.”

Have a story you want to share?

Share an inspiring story about you, or someone in the BLG alumni community, for a chance to be featured.