In the Spotlight: Isha Khan, Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Appointed by the federal government in 2020 to lead the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Chief Executive Officer Isha Khan enjoys the perfect convergence of her legal and human rights backgrounds in this role.

During a spotlight interview with BLG Partner Laurie Goldbach, a former law school classmate, Isha reminisced about the road traveled from her early days at our firm to her current leadership position. She also explored the Museum's ongoing contribution in sparking dialogue about human rights, including recognizing Indigenous culture in Canada.

At the helm of an establishment like no other

Isha had spent almost a decade at the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, including as Executive Director & Senior Counsel, before stepping up to her CEO mantle at the Museum. The role proved a great match.

By then, she had successfully advocated for impactful developments at the local and provincial levels, such as the implementation of audible signals at every crosswalk in Winnipeg, and the inclusion of a third gender option on birth certificates in Manitoba. She felt excited to join a young museum (est. 2014) on a mission to further advance human rights and engage people in taking responsibility for promoting respect and dignity for all.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights is one of Canada's six national museums, the first to open outside of the National Capital Region and the only one west of Ottawa.

"That means we have a national mandate to promote a better understanding of human rights with special, but not exclusive, reference to Canada," she explained. "But we are also very much embedded in the place where the Museum sits and building relationships with the communities around us—and those communities connect us to global issues and conversations."

Among other topics, current exhibitions connect music with cultural and political movements; explore youth activism and climate change; and shine a light on the abduction of women in wartime. Whatever the event or exhibition, social justice, inclusiveness and diversity are par for the course at an establishment that not only strives to be physically accessible to all, but has increased its virtual presence manifold these last few years.

"COVID had hit not long before I joined," recalls Isha. Classrooms all over North America and around the world soon engaged in our virtual field trips. Where physically we might have seen thousands of students in a year, since then we've been seeing tens of thousands of them. We see university students, we see adults engaging virtually with content about human rights. Having said that, some of my most meaningful work comes from seeing people go through the journey in person, and hearing from them how the stories in the Museum are impacting them."

Truth and Reconciliation: Spotlight on the Indigenous perspective

"The Museum is located on very sacred lands, at The Forks, where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet. This is Treaty 1 land, a place where Indigenous people have gathered for time immemorial, and the homeland of the Red River Métis," says Isha. "Museums should be truth tellers; we have a responsibility to honour that past, and to be part of the movement in Canada around truth."

With the importance of National Day for Truth and Reconciliation being recognized, Canadians have gone deeper into conversations about the harmful legacy of colonialism. Isha has been building relationships and collaborating closely with elders and communities from the start, and an important story to tell remains the one of Indian residential schools, something the Museum approaches in many ways, including through art.

"We worked with a master carver from the West Coast, Carey Newman, who put together 800 pieces gathered from residential school sites, each of them giving voice to a survivors story. This beautiful art installation is called the Witness Blanket, and the agreement that we have with Carey is called a *stewardship* agreement, because nobody owns these stories. It was a combination of traditional law, like common law, and Indigenous law that made the agreement possible," points out Isha.

An all-time favourite, the Witness Blanket is back in gallery for the first time since September after years traveling all over North America. It can also be explored online at witnessblanket.ca.

Fostering change: On becoming a human rights lawyer

It was general litigation, and then labour and employment, that first attracted Isha as a young jurist. Looking back, she credits the eight years she spent in private practice at BLG for much of her later success in public organizations.

"Private practice teaches you rigour and discipline, to be mindful about the impact of your work, even if just because of the billable hour. This was great training for going into public practice," she explains.

"As labour and employment law is a very human-centered practice, it also got me involved with human rights issues, and at that time, longer maternity and parental leaves had just been introduced in Canada. Doing education on these was a huge part of my work, and it was the same idea of protecting and promoting public interest that carried over when I shifted to human rights law." Advocacy skills Isha developed at the firm came in handy later on in representation matters, for instance.

To budding lawyers still contemplating possible shifts in their practice, Isha offers this: "Do the things you don't think will serve your personal goal. Get on boards; if you're a student, keep that part-time job; learn to work with different kinds of people. That's what lawyers do!"

Wise words, straight from the CEO.