

Heather Stewart

LAWYER

*LLB, Windsor 1997
BAH History, Queen's 1992*

In her own words: "We all have unique, God-given talents, but it's only through hard work and determination that we can maximize our talents."

Heather Stewart is a big believer in choice. By the time she hit Grade 7, the Oshawa native had set her sights on becoming a lawyer, just like her two uncles. From that moment, she began consciously carving out a career path that led her straight to her current — and highly satisfying — position with a Brampton, Ontario law firm.

"I've been very, very lucky," she admits. "There hasn't been much zig-zag in my career. I set my mind to accomplishing certain things — getting the law degree, working on Bay Street, doing court work, moving to a suburban practice — and I got what I wanted."

What she wanted also included continuing a family tradition — coming to Queen's for an undergraduate degree. Her father, brother and sister are all graduates of the university. "I like the sense of tradition that runs in my family. It feels as though Queen's has worked its way into the fabric of our lives."

Opting for a liberal arts degree, says Heather, was an excellent choice for a prospective lawyer — or, indeed, anyone headed into a professional career. "My history degree

helped me develop a broad understanding of the liberal arts. When I got to law school, I could quickly grasp lots of things — for instance, the role of the Napoleonic code in the evolution of law — that my peers with Engineering or Commerce degrees had to go and check out. I think my broader knowledge base gave me more options in terms of the kind of law I could choose to practice."

While avidly pursuing intramural sports and indoor field hockey, Heather also found herself a niche in the political arena at Queen's, working in various capacities to understand the nuts and bolts of a big institution. She served as an elected member and representative of the Alma Mater Society, the Arts and Science Undergraduate Society and Queen's Senate, and also chaired the

Senate Committee on Student Affairs. "Working within the student government was a thoroughly satisfying experience for me. It helped me to understand the inner workings of the university."

If choice played a big role in steering Heather towards the door of law school, then a bit of chance pushed her over the

doorstep. After finishing her history degree in 1992, she applied to a handful of law schools. Only the University of Windsor gave her the thumbs-up, but it was exactly what she wanted. Windsor's international law program had long intrigued her, but in the end, she elected to stick with Canadian law. "I gave some serious thought to pursuing the

"The law firm was fantastic, but I felt that my initial hopes of interacting with people while working weren't being met...I could feel my priorities changing...I decided that a suburban practice probably better suited my lifestyle."

American law degree, but I decided against it. I wanted to practice within Canada.”

downtown lifestyle. That’s not where I’m at now.”

To help pay her way through school, Heather worked during the summers for the City of Oshawa, prosecuting parking tickets and bylaw offenses in the lower courts. When the time came to do the articling component of her law degree, she stuck to her original choice of a Bay Street law firm. It was a choice, she soon realized, that needed re-visiting.

“I love my work,” she says, “but I’m certainly not where I thought I would be several years ago. Then I was planning a career in international law. But the reality of that work is a corporate-based, fast-paced, downtown lifestyle. That’s not where I’m at now.”

Instead, some flexibility on her part has landed her in the right job at the right time. “What they don’t teach you in law school is that the study of law and its practice are two very different things. I could be making twice as much money in the corporate world of Bay Street, but my work lets me deal with real people, real personalities. I’m helping people trying to cope with real-life problems. That’s very important to me.”

“The law firm was fantastic, but I felt that my initial hopes of interacting with people while working weren’t being met. Plus, I was working from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, with little time for the things I love doing, like sports and community work. I could feel my priorities changing during that time. I just decided that a suburban practice probably better suited my lifestyle.”

Any changes she has made bring no regrets. “I know it might sound corny, but I don’t regret anything I did or didn’t do both personally and professionally over the years. All my different experiences, both good and bad, have just made me a better person in all facets of my life.”

After she was called to the bar in February 1997, Heather made the transition to a general practice law firm in Brampton, joining Prouse, Dash & Crouch to handle family law and personal injury cases. She is also in the courtroom two or three times each week. In 1998, she married an economics graduate from the University of Western Ontario.

Along those lines, she advises undergraduates and the new graduates alike to seek out plenty of life experience. “That’s the best way to ensure that you know what you want to do. Then, when you discover what you want, be prepared to dig your heels in and work for it. By the same token, remember that sometimes you may have to acknowledge and accept some alterations to your projected course.” ❖

In hindsight, Heather questions whether her life has been such a straight path after all. She claims a willingness to change — to swerve from a seemingly fixed direction — was vital to her finding satisfying work.

“I love my work,” she says, “but I’m certainly not where I thought I would be several years ago. Then I was planning a career in international law. But the reality of that work is a corporate-based, fast-paced,



flash!

Heather claims that a willingness to change — to swerve from a seemingly fixed direction — was vital to her finding satisfying work.

