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News & Views

JUST CAUSE

Jane-Finch lawyer fights for his community

While many lawyers aspire to fancy homes in the upscale part of town, Roger Rowe is quite content to hang his hat and raise his family where his clients live – the Jane-Finch community in Toronto.

That comes as no surprise, since Rowe spent much of his life growing up in Jane-Finch, as did his wife and her family. They simply never left, opting instead to raise three children in a quiet part of the neighborhood while Rowe runs a nearby bustling legal practice that caters to immigrants and those who can least afford the services of a lawyer.

“I’m just lucky to have a good job that I like doing,” says the soft-spoken son of a retired Canadian Air Force officer.

Jane-Finch is considered one of the most culturally diverse parts of Toronto and one with pockets of poverty and crime. But it’s Rowe’s community and one that he works hard at improving.

“I love this community. There is really a strong need for good counsel at all levels.”

Rowe has made a name for himself not only for his advocacy work, but also for his dedication and commitment to making Jane-Finch a better place to live. In 2003, Pro Bono Law Ontario publicly recognized Rowe’s efforts, presenting him with a special award at a community forum appropriately titled How can lawyers make a difference in the lives of youth.

“I have always believed that those of us fortunate enough to get a legal education have a responsibility to give some of that back to the community,” he notes.

Rowe has done his share. He sits on the board of PEACH, a local agency whose objective is promoting economic development and community health. He’s also a member of the Mayor’s Advisory Panel on Community Safety.

His efforts and contributions have caught the attention of Toronto’s politicians and judges.

“He’s honest to a fault,” says Toronto city councilor Maria Augimeri, whose ward runs along Jane Street. “He’s very dedicated.”

Augimeri says that Rowe’s easy-going and informal ways can be disarming. “He makes you feel at ease.” However, she notes, “he’s no nonsense” and “a real straight shooter if he has a problem with you.”

Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry, who heads up the Mayor’s Advisory Panel says, “We’re very lucky to have someone like Roger Rowe. He’s a valuable role model because of the good work he does.”

McMurtry cites Rowe's work with PEACH, including programs designed to help young people that have been kicked out of school. "They try to reach out to kids."

Rowe got PEACH involved after the local school board introduced a zero-tolerance policy into its schools. The policy resulted in a number of neighborhood kids getting expelled and suspended from school.

PEACH worked with different agencies and raised funds to create various programs that are designed to support at-risk kids and help with job skills and study programs. Rowe says the goal is to keep the kids in touch with school and prepare them for re-entry. "We monitor them and give them ongoing support."

While his community endeavors are noteworthy, so are his lawyer skills. Rowe has taken on many pro bono cases, including two high-profile immigration matters. In the first, Rowe and fellow lawyer Rocco Galati took *Baker v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration)* to the Supreme Court of Canada and won. Rowe, who argued the case as lead counsel for the appellant Mavis Baker, says it's a precedent-setting case on procedural fairness.

Baker is a Jamaican citizen who came to Canada as a visitor in 1981 and never left. She supported herself working as an illegal nanny and later had four children, all of whom are Canadian citizens.

After the birth of her last child in 1992, she suffered from post partum psychosis and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. She applied for welfare and was later ordered deported. She sought an exemption from the requirements that she apply for permanent residency status from outside the country on human and compassionate grounds.

After an investigation by immigration officers, her request was rejected and she sought judicial review. The Supreme Court held that the immigration officer reviewing her case violated the principles of procedural fairness and that there was a reasonable apprehension of bias in respect of the officer's handling of the case.

Rowe says after 12 years living here, Baker "had nothing to return home to" so the deportation order was really a death sentence had she been sent back. "She would have perished," he says, adding the case "really has a lot of great pronouncements regarding the duty of fairness in legal proceedings."

In the second case, Rowe served as counsel for Benjamin Osei, a Ghanaian-born pastor who was educated in Canada. Osei returned home to Ghana after his studies and later fled back to Canada fearing death from militants. He became a successful Christian youth worker in Jane-Finch before he was ordered deported by immigration officials, despite the protests of the Jane-Finch community. He's now back in the country thanks to Rowe's assistance. Rowe credits the teamwork of community volunteers and the church, and views Osei's return as a "triumph" for the Jane-Finch community.

Rowe says the immigration department is "deporting the wrong people." He says Osei "has been doing wonderful work with our kids."

When it comes to fighting for your community, Rowe has a simple message for other lawyers who want to help. "I think lawyers should really take a look at where they can help out. There are lots of things they can do that don't necessarily take too much of their time but make a real difference to the lives of those who are not as fortunate."

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