

Irene Peters

> Class of '88

by Heather Conn



SHE BARELY advertises. And if you want to see or talk to her as a potential client, be prepared to wait three to four months – if you're not a vulnerable child who needs legal help, that is. If you are the latter, she'll make an exception.

Irene Peters, a sole practitioner in Prince George since 2006 and in Prince Rupert before that, focuses entirely on family law. Few lawyers in her region, which includes Prince Rupert, Terrace, Kitimat and Smithers, concentrate on her legal area, offering little competition.

That's one advantage of practising law in a non-urban region, says this UBC law grad of 1988. Others include a familiarity with local Supreme Court judges, and the trust, rapport and communication established between her and other counsel when working on a

case. "Predictability is everything in family law."

When Peters does trials in Vancouver, she often doesn't know the background or the approach of the opposing lawyer. By contrast, in her northwest region, she can more easily strategize her advocacy role for a young client. She already knows the social workers and local judges, has good rapport and communication with the other counsel and can readily contact foster parents, family members and schools. As a result, she believes that she can make a greater impact in the life of vulnerable children – and her clients ultimately benefit. "I talk to people in the Lower Mainland," she says. "They don't have the luxury of that kind of access."

But easy access to a lawyer can backfire in a small community. While practising in Prince Rupert, Peters sometimes had clients stop her on Saturday morning at the local grocer, eager to discuss their issue over a shopping cart. Such familiarity with locals came with a sense of living in a fishbowl.

And geographical distance from BC's Lower Mainland results in fewer resources for her clients. Prince George is closing its holding centres, so young women, often under age 14, are sent to Burnaby, away from their extended families. Compared to the Vancouver region, there isn't the same support network of First Nations and grassroots organizations or government funding for children living in poverty. "Vulnerable women

have nothing in Prince George and Prince Rupert," she says.

That's one reason why Peters co-founded the Prince Rupert Women's Association and has provided legal workshops targeting economically disadvantaged women for the Terrace Women's Association. In 2001, the BC branch of the Canadian Bar Association recognized her with a Community Service Award.

On the home front, when Peters's husband Darrell O'Byrne was appointed provincial court judge in 2005 in Prince George, Peters was delighted to return to the town where she grew up. "It was like coming home," she says, noting that she can now have almost two dozen friends and family members to dinner when she chooses. ■