

ON THE FRONT COVER



DEREK LACROIX, Q.C.

By James D. Vilvang, Q.C.

In the summer of 1968, I bumped into Derek, literally, at our first practice as members of the mighty UBC Thunderbirds football team. Both of us were keen on weight training, which was still relatively uncommon, even among football players, at that time. Because of our common interests in football and weight training we soon became good friends. That friendship continues today.

Derek was born in Vancouver on June 22, 1949. He attended Immaculate Conception Elementary School. Derek must have really loved that school. While Derek was in Grade 2, work began on a new school at the same site. In an early act of social activism, Derek removed all the surveyors' pegs in an effort to halt construction and save his beloved school.

After Grade 4, Derek's family moved to Prince Rupert for a brief stay while his father, Claire, rose in the ranks of Standard Oil. They then moved to Kamloops where they lived until Derek was in Grade 10. It was there that Derek really started to get interested in sports.

When the family returned to the Lower Mainland (North Vancouver), Derek enrolled at Handsworth Secondary. He immediately got involved in soccer, basketball, track and field, and, of course, football. He played football with the North Shore Wildcats along with a young Rick Peck, later known as Richard C.C. Peck, Q.C.

Derek continued his football career at UBC. When I called our team the "mighty" Thunderbirds, I might have been exaggerating just a tiny bit. The team did not produce many pro football players, but it did produce quite a few lawyers, including Paul Danyliu, Jim Nordquist, Bruce Grist, Dave Rice,

John Marquardt, John Rogers, Rick Peck, and Bill Grist (now the Honourable Justice William Grist). Derek now claims he had wanted to be a lawyer from a young age (which makes P.E. an interesting choice for an undergraduate degree), but I think he just copied me by going to law school. I do not think either of us had any clue about what our future would hold.

Derek articulated with the firm of Brawner Speton Phillips and Stinson, then moved on to the Provincial Crown office. In his three years there he prosecuted cases at all levels of court and had the opportunity to junior such counsel as Josiah Wood and Bill Deverell. Having gained a tremendous amount of experience in criminal law in a relatively short time, he decided to start his own firm doing mainly criminal defence work. With Ken Eberhardt and Al Caplan, he founded Eberhardt, Caplan and LaCroix in 1978. They were joined six months later by Arne Silverman (now the Honourable Mr. Justice Silverman). The firm was successful and Derek was doing well, but he was also drinking.

Derek was always the life of the party and lots of fun to be around. We had many great times together, but sometimes he would go over the line. When I look back, I regret the fact that I never spoke to him about his drinking. I suppose I was just naïve and did not recognize the signs of a developing problem. In those days, alcohol problems in the legal profession were just kept quiet. Eventually Derek recognized the problem on his own and tried to get treatment, but he did not even tell his closest friends and relapsed into drinking several times. Like so many alcoholics, he just could not accept the fact that he was one. He had a good practice. He had lots of friends. What could possibly go wrong?

Well things did go wrong. There is no point in going into detail, but eventually Derek did accept the fact that he was an alcoholic. He went into treatment in 1986, embraced a recovery program, and has maintained sobriety ever since.

Derek continued the practice of law with his new firm, Langdon LaCroix Davis and Toews, until 1993, but this was the height of the high-tech boom and Derek decided that the grass was greener in the high-tech field. He became involved with a small high-tech company based in Portland, Oregon, in 1993 and moved there to pursue his new career. The work of an entrepreneur was not challenging enough for Derek, so on the side he studied for and passed the Oregon State bar exam and he got his real estate licence as well, even though he never actually worked at either law or real estate there. The high-tech company did well. Derek did not get rich, but he was comfortable. Financially, that is. Psychologically, not so much. He never found the life of an entrepreneur to be rewarding.

After his recovery in 1986, his involvement in the process and 12 step programs triggered in Derek a strong desire to help others. He attended numerous courses put on by such organizations as Context Training and the Haven Institute, eventually getting a diploma in counselling, and subsequently a degree in Therapeutic Counselling. He was also very active as a volunteer in 12 step recovery programs.

In 1996, the Lawyers Assistance Program ("LAP"), which had been founded as a volunteer organization by Russ MacKay and Art Vertlieb, Q.C., was operating on a budget of about \$50,000. It had a handful of volunteers and was helping about 50 lawyers per year. Problems with alcohol were still being kept quiet in the legal profession. Lawyers were not getting the help they needed. LAP realized that much more had to be done. They knew they needed a full-time director who had the experience, energy, and smarts to develop the program to the point that it would be capable of providing help to all who needed it.

They decided to put a "help wanted" ad in the *Advocate*. The gist of the ad was that LAP needed a full-time executive director who had the following qualifications:

1. Minimum five years in recovery
2. Minimum ten years in the practice of law
3. Preferably had some education and experience in counselling.

Obviously, they were flooded with applications. Who doesn't have those qualifications?

In reality, what happened was that when I happened to read the ad, I immediately thought of Derek. He was still living in Portland but I told him, "LAP is looking for you". I knew he would be perfect for the job.

Needless to say he applied and got hired, and the rest is history. Thanks largely to Derek's efforts the attitude of the profession toward alcohol and drug problems has changed dramatically. People are more open about their problems and the problems of others and are much more inclined to seek help and deal with their problems. LAP now has a case load of about 500 people at any given time. It has approximately 300 volunteers and three full-time and one part-time lawyers/counselors. It has also opened a satellite office in Victoria. Derek's tremendous work in developing LAP was recognized in 2004 when he was appointed Queen's Counsel.

Derek believes that the next challenge facing LAP is to promote acceptance of mood disorders. Just as there was a stigma about alcoholism as late as the 1990s, today there is a stigma associated with mood disorders that prevents people from getting the help they need. Derek wants to change that attitude.

Derek is happily married to Maureen Jack LaCroix. She is at least as energetic as Derek and is the founder and leader of the Be The Change Earth Alliance. Both she and Derek are active in environmental, religious and spiritual endeavours and work to promote diversity and acceptance.

Derek still likes to read the cases and talk about legal issues. He treasures the traditions of the profession and takes every opportunity to promote collegiality and the sense of history of the profession. He believes that a collegial working atmosphere is vital to the psychological well being of lawyers.


I have always had a lot of respect for Derek. In the beginning, it was for his football skills, then his academic achievements, then his legal skills, then for his success in achieving and maintaining sobriety. But all of those accomplishments pale in comparison to what he has achieved as executive director of LAP. He is literally saving lives. I am very proud to have him as a friend. His contribution to our profession has been immeasurable. I am glad that the *Advocate* has chosen to honour him.

ARE YOUR CLIENTS SITTING ON UNCLAIMED PROPERTY?

If your client has abandoned or unclaimed property on their books, they have legal obligations under the Unclaimed Property Act and Regulations to identify the rightful owners of these funds.

The British Columbia Unclaimed Property Society is a not-for-profit society which administers the unclaimed property program in British Columbia. We work with companies and organizations to help them comply with the Unclaimed Property Act. We also help return owners with their forgotten money by administering a public database of dormant accounts and processing eligible claims to help put forgotten money back in the hands of the rightful owners.

If you would like more information on compliance reporting and remitting unclaimed property, please visit our website: www.unclaimedpropertybc.ca

 Connect with us on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/british-columbia-unclaimed-property-society



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