

To mark the 20th anniversary of section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (the “Equality” section), West Coast LEAF recently co-hosted an international conference with the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) called *Women’s Rights and Freedoms: 20 years (in) Equality*.

Attended by approximately 340 delegates from across Canada and from countries including Australia, Finland, the United States and Rwanda, the conference was an eclectic gathering of community activists, artists and poets, as well as members of the legal community and academia.

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The event opened with a reception to honour women judges across BC. The reception was attended by approximately 150 people who gathered to honour our sisters for their tremendous achievements on the Bench. Words of tribute were expressed by two student representatives: Madeleine Alexander-Redfern, one of the first group of 11 Inuit law students to graduate from the University of Victoria and Tracy Knight, an exceptional second year law student at University of British Columbia.

The two full days of the conference saw 11 concurrent workshops running in four time slots. The opening plenary described the hopes and intentions which surrounded the drafting of *s. 15* and

## Equality Rights Conference a Roaring Success!

by Sabrina Ali

sought to evaluate its current efficacy. All of the plenaries included political theatre, so-called “rants”, which consisted of brief ironic commentary on various topics, providing both humour and poignant moments of thought. Although all were superbly performed, the highlight was Agnes Huang who, appearing in vacation wear, acted the part of the Charter and bemoaned her lack of, or inappropriate use by self-serving governments and plaintiffs alike, all the while scolding the audience for forgetting her birthday!

A full day of engaging workshops on Friday was relieved by a lunch time performance of anti-racist poetry slam and also a two-spirit narrative. Controversial and confrontational, the performances were thrilling, blunt and no-holds-barred – a refreshing change from some of stark reminders of how recently in our history (1970s) it was that women could not

obtain bank loans without their husbands approval as noted in one plenary.

The conference continued the following day with an opening plenary describing the persistent Equality Deficit. In “Action” workshops participants were encouraged to discuss and to produce concrete strategies for use in their respective constituent organizations. The conference concluded with a Woman’s Court, in which nine distinguished representatives revisited significant *s.15 cases* from the last 20 years and infused a feminist perspective in the decisions rendered.



## Women's Rights & Freedoms 20 Years (In) Equality

Keeping with the celebratory theme of the conference, each delegate was given a cloth square to decorate as a tribute to a woman of significance in their lives. A variety of art supplies helped release the artistic proclivities of many delegates who turned their fabric squares into beautiful canvasses. The resulting hundreds of squares will be used to make a quilt that will eventually tour women’s organizations around the country in honour of all our sisters.

*continued on page 4*

Justice Sparks,  
Margaret  
Meade, Mary  
Woo Sims,  
Bonnie  
Diamond,  
Sabrina Ali,  
Rosalind  
Currie and  
Audrey  
Johnson.



# INSIDE West Coast LEAF

## WELCOME SUMMER STUDENTS

West Coast LEAF has always been blessed with wonderful, smart and deeply committed summer students. Many stay involved in the organization for years after (WCL Board and National Legal Committee member, **Francesca Marzari**, was a summer student in 1995).

**Harsha Walia** is a second year law student from UBC. She brings a wide breadth of expertise in global human rights and racism, among many other things. Harsha will be working on the Family Law Legal Aid Campaign, women's equality and religious freedom, the Single Mother's Human Rights project and a variety of research, writing and community-based projects.

**Roshena Chatur** is an upper year Criminology student from SFU who has packed a vast amount of research into the few short weeks she has already been with us. Roshena is providing research support to the staff and Board on the sex-trade and trafficking, as well polygamy and the Criminal Code. Her marketing background is also providing much needed expertise to our educational programs.

And, for the first time in our history, we have someone working in Victoria, developing and implementing program work in that city. **Jessica Asch** is a UVic law student who is being supported through the generosity of the Victoria law firm Carr, Buchan and Company and the Coop program at UVic. Jessica is implementing the Family Law Legal Aid campaign, the Single Mother's Human Rights Project and the educational program *Transforming Our Future*.

## GOOD BYE TO STAFF MEMBERS

Thanks to former Office Coordinator, **Addy Kgomo**, for her service to the organization. Thanks also to Fund Development Co-ordinator **Chris Basque** who is leaving us to pursue other opportunities. She will be missed.

# Equality Breakfast thanks

The 18th Annual Equality Breakfast held in March 2005 was a tremendous success, raising nearly \$25,000 to support our legal work around the province. Thanks to the 640 guests who attended the event and to staff, volunteers and board members who sold tickets, solicited silent auction items and organized things behind the scenes. A special thanks to the following sponsors and contributors to the silent auction for their support.

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Thanks to Rebecca Darnell at Darnell & Company for sponsoring the Langley Person's Day Reception last fall.

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Jane Shackell, Q.C.

## An interview with Jane Shackell, Q.C.

# Poverty & Economic Equality

by Alison Brewin

“Economic equality was our main concern,” says Vancouver lawyer Jane Shackell in describing the LEAF submission to the Boyer Commission on April 17, 1985. “Pay equity, universal day-care, decriminalization of prostitution – poverty was the central issue.” Jane was an articling student at the time. Her law firm, then Ladner Downs, flew her to Ottawa where she joined Shelagh Day, Jan Hatch and Helene Lebel in presenting the first submission of the newly formed Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund. In fact, the day of their presentation marked the founding of LEAF and the coming into force of Section 15 of the Charter.

Like many of her legal colleagues and women’s advocates, Jane was concerned that the government had done almost nothing to address inequities in government legislation in the three year window the Charter had provided to them. When the Charter was enacted in 1982, the three year period was created before the equality rights section (15) came into effect to allow the federal and provincial governments to do a legislative audit. The audit was meant to ensure that the laws of the country reflected the new commitment to equality.

“The federal government had changed one thing related to discrimination against women: they changed the Canada Shipping Act to ensure women working on ships could send their wages home to their dependents on shore,” Jane reports. “The Committee agreed that this was unacceptable. We asked the Committee why the federal government

was waiting for litigation.”

That very same day, LEAF founding mother (and current West Coast LEAF Board Member) Eloise Spitzer was filing an action in the Yukon that demanded the courts strike down the Name Act. The Name Act in the Yukon, and in other jurisdictions, required that women change their name upon marriage. A second case was also filed that day, attacking the ‘Man in the House’ legislation in Ontario that made assumptions about women’s dependence on the men they choose to live with.

LEAF’s submission emphasized the importance of economic issues in women’s lives, of funding for equality

rights litigation, and of the lack of action on the part of governments in the three years. These issues continue to frame the discussion. How do equality rights advocates get cases before the courts? Why do Canadians have to use the courts when the Charter was meant to both protect disadvantaged groups from unequal treatment in the law, but also to oblige governments to address and end disadvantage? And why are the governments of Canada allowing women’s poverty and economic inequality to continue?

Have things progressed the way Jane and her colleagues hoped they would? “What I see is that we are still talking about the same issues. There is some building of national consensus around daycare that has great potential to resolve issues for women and I see other very positive potential. The Charter has contributed to that process, though one can’t draw a straight line.”

But Jane’s optimism, while recognizing the slow impact of the women’s equality efforts of West Coast LEAF and LEAF, centres on the ways in which

LEAF has helped change what equality means to Canadians.

“The concept of equality has become more ingrained in Canadians’ minds. There is a more sophisticated understanding of equality rights...there are things that one might not be personally attached to – say same sex marriage – but people understand the rightness of it. The nuanced understanding of equality allows us to get at the economic issues politically – issues that were hard for people to understand. Now there is a better climate to talk about them.”

“We have moved forward,” Jane says in conclusion. “Very incrementally and painfully slowly, but forward. Equality now is not about treating people the same way, but about producing results.”

*“We have moved forward, very incrementally & painfully slowly, but forward.”*

### JOIN WEST COAST LEAF’S MONTHLY GIVING PROGRAM!

West Coast LEAF is celebrating its 20th Anniversary in 2005. In honour of this achievement, we have launched the “West Coast LEAF is 20!” campaign to support the future sustainability of the organization for the next 20 years. Our goal is to raise \$20,000 in 2005 from monthly donors.

Monthly donations provide ongoing, stable funds that enable West Coast LEAF to respond quickly and effectively to urgent issues impacting equality rights for Canadian women. We invite you to join the Themis Club, West Coast LEAF’s monthly giving program and support the “West Coast LEAF is 20!” campaign.

Monthly gifts can be made by pre-authorized cheque or credit card. Monthly donors become members of the Themis Club and receive additional benefits throughout the year.

For more information, contact: Chris Basque, Fund Development Coordinator, at fundraiser@westcoastleaf.org or 604-684-8772. Thanks for your support!

WEST COAST LEAF  
**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**Thursday, June 16, 2005**

**6:00 pm – 8:30 pm**  
**YWCA Hotel Residence**  
733 Beatty Street at Georgia

**GUEST SPEAKER:** Fran Watters, Former WCLEAF President

*This year's AGM will be a celebration of our 20th anniversary. Join us as we recognize the achievements of West Coast LEAF over the last two decades and those who have played a role in our success.*

**RSVP by Monday June 13th**  
**to [info@westcoastleaf.org](mailto:info@westcoastleaf.org)**  
**or call 604-684-8772.**



*Gwen Brodswy, Shelagh Day and Pat Lane.*

**Conference continued from page 1**

The Women's Rights and Freedoms conference reignited a long-forgotten feeling of activism, camaraderie and shared passion most notably at the gala dinner on Saturday evening, which featured Judge Corrine Sparks as the keynote speaker. On a personal note, to say that I left this conference inspired is to grossly understate the impact that I believe it will have. The air was electric, the mood intense. I look forward to the next 20 years with, for the first time in a long time, anticipation.

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