

Frontline advocacy

Ruth Williams helps South Africa's most vulnerable get the services they need.

By Bill Rogers

When Ruth Williams graduated from law school and began scouting for an articling job, her father gave her some memorable advice. She was gravitating towards taking a position at the HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic in Toronto. It was the kind of work she was passionate about, but the salaries in such jobs are not great. She was at a crossroads.

"I knew it would be a good experience, doing the kind of thing I love," she recalls. "But I didn't know about the money. I didn't know if it would work for me. Then my dad said: 'You have to be true to who you are. Be true to the gifts you've been given. The money will come. There are plenty of people around the world who dedicate themselves to these causes. They get by, and they are very happy.'"

So she went for it, and working at the clinic turned out to be a deeply satisfying experience. After it was over, Williams threw herself even deeper into public service law by applying for a CBA Youth International Internship, helping AIDS orphans and other struggling populations in South Africa. After nearly two years working in the Legal Resource Clinic (LRC) in Grahamstown, she has no doubt her father's advice was wise.

True, it has been challenging and even frustrating trying to prod the government to open its purse strings. "South Africa's constitution is one of the best constitutions in the world," says Williams. "It gives the most rights to its citizens. Even socio-economic rights are constitutionally recognized." But although people have a right to welfare and government assistance, the problem is implementation.

"There's a lack of capacity in government to roll out these programs that would allow people to access their rights," she explains. "At one point, there was such a backlog in spending in some government departments that there was a freeze in the release of services. They just don't have the base knowledge to create a budget."



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says. "That's what keeps me going. In spite of all the frustration, you feel you're part of a vibrancy. There's so much potential, so much energy. I can take the privileges I've had growing up in Canada and bring them here and help make concrete changes. For a lawyer, it's beyond exciting."

Williams has performed tremendously, according to Al Cook, director of the CBA's Youth International Internship Program. "Ruth is an adventurous, determined and intrepid spirit," he says. Unfortunately, adds Cook, the internship program was axed without notice in September last year by the federal government, on the grounds it was "not a core program" and not of prime concern to Canadians.

But Williams has made a huge difference, says Cook. "Ruth has been outstandingly successful in getting results. Her work and actions have forced South Africa's Department of Social Welfare to make payments to her clients — the poor, the old and the sick — totalling one million SA Rand since she arrived in Grahamstown. This has literally kept people alive."

There have also been administrative nightmares aplenty. "Sometimes it's as simple as getting someone to return your phone call or answer a letter without constantly nagging at them," she laments. "And what's frustrating, and sometimes drives me to tears, is this arrogance. The government seems to feel that it doesn't have to deliver the services that are constitutionally mandated."

The people Williams advocates for are in dire straits, and this has accentuated her sense of frustration. "I'm not working for the elite," she says. "I work for children. They can't afford to have their rights trampled on. The future of this country is in its children. Sometimes I feel disgusted."

Still, what causes these administrative problems is the same thing that makes the place exciting. "Here, you're dealing with a forming democracy," she

Sur la ligne de front

Ruth Williams permet aux Sud-Africains dans le besoin d'obtenir les services auxquels ils ont droit.

Ruth Williams n'oubliera jamais le conseil que lui a prodigué son père alors qu'elle était à la recherche d'un stage. Elle hésitait alors à accepter un poste à la clinique juridique de VIH & SIDA à Toronto. Elle savait qu'elle allait adorer son travail, mais ce dernier n'était pas bien rémunéré.

« Mon père m'a dit qu'il fallait être honnête envers soi-même et faire les choses que l'on aime », relate-t-elle. Elle a donc choisi de foncer et de se consacrer au service du bien public. C'est ainsi qu'elle en est venue à s'intéresser au programme de Jeunes stagiaires à l'international de l'ABC. Elle oeuvre depuis deux ans au sein de la

Legal Resource Clinic (LRC) à Grahams-town, en Afrique du Sud et elle n'a aucun regret.

Cela ne veut toutefois pas dire que tout est toujours rose. Convaincre le gouvernement d'ouvrir les cordons de la bourse en faveur de ceux qui en ont le plus besoin n'est pas une sinécure. « Le gouvernement ne dispose pas des ressources financières nécessaires pour mettre en œuvre des programmes qui permettront aux gens d'obtenir les services auxquels ils ont droit », déplore-t-elle.

Et c'est sans compter quelques cauchemars administratifs. « Ce qui me fruste, c'est l'arrogance du gouvernement qui semble croire qu'il n'a

pas à fournir les services exigés par la constitution », ajoute-t-elle.

Mais paradoxalement, le fait qu'il y ait beaucoup à faire rend aussi le travail terriblement excitant. « Il s'agit d'une démocratie en pleine construction, affirme-t-elle. C'est ce qui me pousse à continuer. Malgré les frustrations, vous sentez que les choses vibrent, qu'il y a du potentiel, de l'énergie. C'est très excitant pour un avocat. »

Lorsqu'elle compare sa situation à celle de ses collègues de la faculté, Ruth Williams reconnaît qu'elle a dû faire des sacrifices financiers. Le jeu en valait cependant la chandelle. « Je mets l'accent sur les aspects positifs. Les gens sont formidables et m'ont ouvert leur porte. Cet endroit est si chaleureux. J'ai bien fait de suivre les conseils de mon père. » ■

— Mélanie Raymond

Williams credits her upbringing for shaping her charitable ideals. "My parents had a socialist attitude," she recalls. "Although I'm sure they wouldn't call themselves socialist. But they had this attitude of promoting human rights. Growing up, it was almost a greater injury to disrespect someone else, or bully a classmate, than it would be to do something wrong in our home. My parents always drummed into us the importance of helping others and sharing our talents to improve our larger community."

Plus, she grew up in what she describes as a "vibrantly Christian" home. "My parents wanted me and my brother to contribute and make the world a better place," she says. "They taught us to practise the ideals of Christianity in our

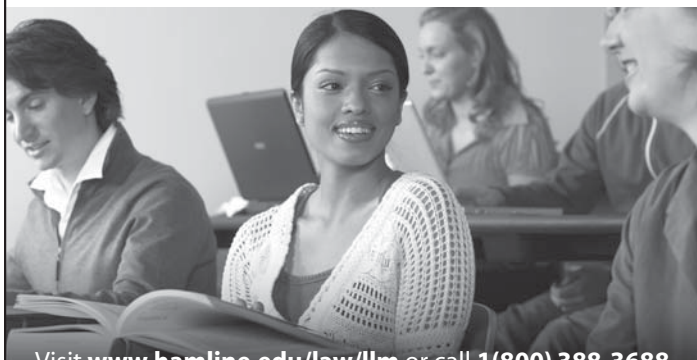
relationships with people. Not thinking of yourself first, but seeing the rewards in the advancement of others."

Yes, there have been financial sacrifices. "I catch up with law school friends who work at private firms," she says wryly. "They have two assistants and never type their own letters. Me, I stand behind the photocopier that always breaks down. I feed the pages through."

But she remains content. "I focus on the positive. The people here are absolutely beautiful. Everyone has opened their doors to me. This place is so warm. My dad's advice was very right." ■

Bill Rogers is a Toronto freelance writer and lawyer.

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