

ATLANTIC

ARTISTS AND THE LAW UNITE

Between brush strokes, key strokes, and other artistic movements, legal issues often arise. In the Maritimes, the Artists' Legal Information Society is now here to help.

The volunteer group assists artists in several ways. First, it gets the word out. Lawyers in the community give talks to artists' associations, at conferences, and during events. Recently, for example, one lawyer gave a presentation on estate planning for members of Visual Arts Nova Scotia. "We find lawyers who have the expertise," says ALIS treasurer Kelsey McLaren. "You want to get the right information out there."

A helping hand is also extended in the form of virtual legal aid clinics. Artists write in with their issue, and the organization matches them with a volunteer lawyer. "We make the connection for them," says McLaren, a lawyer with Pink Larkin in Halifax.

For writers, one of the common issues they face is being asked to sign a contract that restricts their rights. "They don't realize they're giving up their copyright forever, or they are given ambiguous contracts," notes McLaren.

Musicians also face contract problems and grapple with unrealistic expectations, she adds. They tend to believe additional benefits will be forthcoming even though they are not included in the contract.

And for many in the arts community, as elsewhere, there is confusion. For this sector, the line between privacy, copyright, and contracts gets blurred. "The most important thing," says McLaren, "is educating people on their rights, especially what they may be giving up. A lot of these people are business people and they have no idea where they stand legally."

ALIS (pronounced Alice) offers up a find-out-for-yourself menu in the form of a legal information database that covers everything from freelancing to fair dealing to freedom of expression. And there's more information on the way. The organization is putting together a plain language guide to legal issues for artists in conjunction with the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia that will be available later this year.

Modeled after the Artists' Legal Outreach in Vancouver, the Clinique juridique des artistes de Montréal, and the Artists' Legal Advice Services in Ontario, the Artists' Legal Information Society was launched by Halifax lawyer Daniel Pink in 2010 when he was still a law student. Today, Pink and eight other lawyers are the heart of the organization, but their reach is long. So is their commitment.

"This is what motivates all of us," says McLaren. "It is an access to justice issue. Artists have real issues that affect them."

— DONALEE MOULTON

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WATCH AND LEARN

Canada's first observership program for internationally trained lawyers is now in place at the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society.

The goal of the newly launched program is both simple and complex. Internationally trained lawyers need a helping hand to navigate and learn about the legal system in this country. The society's latest initiative provides a way for the legal community to reach out to lawyers trained beyond our borders. "With our support, they can get experience in a law environment. As a result of that, they can understand what options they may have," says NSBS executive director Darrel Pink.

For many internationally trained lawyers, practising law in this country is not always an option. "They wouldn't be able to afford it," says Pink, referring to the cost of qualifying to practise here. There are, however, other jobs in the legal system that may appeal to them and for which they may qualify. First, though, comes familiarization with the system, legal workplaces, and Canadian norms, which is what the NSBS observership program is designed to do.

What it is not intended to do is fill in any gaps that may exist in substantive legal knowledge. Pink points out the program is also not a mentorship initiative. "An observership," he says, "is less than a mentorship."

Central to the success of the new program are law firms, justice departments, and other legal enterprises. It's here internationally trained lawyers will learn about law in their new land. There are several reasons why organizations may want to become part of the program, says Pink. "For law firms, the new Canadian provides a real marketing opportunity. It provides an opportunity to build connections," he notes.

For practising lawyers, active participation in the observership program may also qualify them towards the law society's continuing professional development requirement. And, of course, there is an altruistic reason to participate: It's a way for lawyers to give back to the community.

Pink is hopeful law and other professional societies in Canada may want to put an observership program in place in their province. "We think this is a model other professional bodies can adapt to their purposes," he says.

For NSBS, the observership program is not a singular initiative. It grew out of other work the society was doing to assist internationally trained lawyers. Among these, a pathway on the organization's web site that lays out what internationally trained lawyers would need to do to become a lawyer in Nova Scotia.

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