

Address by Pamela Cross to June 17, 2024 Afternoon Convocation, upon receiving the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa

Thank you very much to the Law Society of Ontario for honouring me with this doctorate. I am absolutely thrilled! And congratulations to all of you who are being called to the bar today – as well as to those who are here to celebrate this achievement with you.

A brief disclaimer before I begin. I'm a lawyer, in a room full of lawyers and those who know and (mostly) love them, so I think you can appreciate the dilemma I faced as I prepared my remarks for this afternoon.

I was told to keep my talk to seven minutes, and I'd like to comply with that request. But, as I said, I'm a lawyer. Seven minutes is barely enough time to get started. I've done my best; whittling my remarks down from 15 to 12 to 10 and, finally, to 7 minutes and 44 seconds, so I hope I will be forgiven for coming across the finish line just a wee bit late.

When I was nine or ten years old, I crouched behind the living room couch while my parents watched *Perry Mason*, confident that they had no idea I was there. As Perry, aided, of course, by his suave PI Paul Drake and his sultry secretary Della Street, managed to have one wrongfully charged client after another acquitted, my young brain thought: What could be better? Saving the innocent from wrongful conviction!

I would become a lawyer!

But my life headed in an unexpected direction—one that has brought me great joy but that, for many years, took me far away from any thoughts of heroic lawyerly acts—when, at the age of 19, I became a mother. Once my daughter was born – even though she was the most agreeable baby imaginable -- I quickly realized that we would both be much happier if I could return to school. However, no child care facilities were available, and I couldn't impose on my mother-in-law indefinitely, so, with my infant daughter strapped into her car seat, I joined a group of fellow university-student parents to advocate for an on-campus day care centre. Our efforts were successful and, within a year, a co-op day care centre was established. Fifty years later, it's still there.

Thus began my life as an activist, which came to include more and more acts of civil disobedience, arrests, criminal trials, and, almost always, guilty verdicts.

While I sat in courtrooms with my companions in crime, I watched, listened, and became seduced by the possibilities of law. Frequently, I took on the role of agent and immersed myself in legal tomes and cases to try to develop unique arguments in our defence. I can't point to a large body of legal successes over those years – Perry Mason would not have been impressed --

but I learned a lot, and realized I wanted to learn more. So, when I was thirty-five, and with a respectable criminal record on my resume, I applied to law school.

I had grand ideas about taking my activism from the streets to the Supreme Court, where I would argue persuasively on cases of great constitutional importance, playing whatever role I could to make sure that law functioned as a tool for social justice.

However, the first client who came into my office the day I opened my practice was fleeing an abusive husband who was still in their house, with a gun and their young son, and my path once again headed in a new direction.

I haven't argued mighty cases that have changed the world. I've never set foot in the Supreme Court. In fact, I haven't been in a courtroom of any kind for more than 20 years. Instead, my work has been focused on women and the legal systems they have turned to for help—systems that are largely ignorant of and even hostile to their lived realities.

I built a practice around women who had been subjected to gender-based violence, sometimes also representing the community-based services that supported them.

I learned how to bring a trauma-informed approach to my work by listening to the survivors who trusted me enough to come into my office. I set up my space so it felt safe to frightened women. I made my appointments long, to give them time to settle in and talk around the abuse until they were ready to talk about it. I learned to be patient. I bought boxes and boxes of Kleenex for my clients but, as it turned out, I needed them too. I went to where the women were if they were too scared to come to me.

Despite the assistance I was able to offer the women who sought me out, I began to realize that, however good a lawyer I might become, the systems they were dealing with were so flawed that the outcomes of their cases would rarely approach true justice.

This came as a bit of a shock to me – when I had started law school, I thought the law could right all – or at least most - wrongs. It was only when I began working as a lawyer that I understood the formidable challenges the structure of law creates for many; the ways in which the law itself – too often – serves as a barrier to justice.

And so the focus of my work shifted from representing individual women to working for change at the system level. That's where I've been ever since, without a single regret.

It's time for me to stop talking about myself and say a few words about and to all of you who are being called to the bar today.

First, this is a wonderful day for you. You've worked hard to get here, so celebrate yourselves!

Keep your minds open and keep learning as you move ahead.

Stay curious. Don't lose your passion for justice and don't confuse law with justice.

Challenge, question, push back, speak up and speak out, even when that's scary.

Say yes to anything that sounds interesting. Don't get so attached to the certainty of a regular pay cheque that you don't step outside your comfort zone to places and situations that challenge you.

Be bold. If I hadn't been bold (or, maybe, foolish) when that first client walked into my office 30 years ago, I would have sent her to see another lawyer. Instead, I invited her in and helped her get what she needed. In the process, I learned so, so much about the law, justice and the differences between them, as well as about myself, and I discovered the work I was meant to do.

Remember the privilege of being a member of this profession and the power and responsibility that come with it.

I wish for you what I have had: a professional life filled with work that you love. Work that has meaning for you. Work that leaves you feeling that you have contributed to positive change.

May your work interest and stimulate you, challenge your brain, let you think hard about hard things and allow you to learn and grow.

Above all, remember that you have a role to play in ensuring that the law, rather than being a weapon of oppression, is – indeed, must be -- a tool for social justice.