Canadian Chapter of the IAWJ/NIJ Holds 2009 Conference

December 22, 2009

The following article is about the Canadian Chapter of the International Association of Women Judges/ National Institute of Justice's 2009 Biennial Conference in Ottawa:

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The CCIAWJ/NJI Biennial Conference

It was sleeting in Ottawa from November 3-5, 2009, but inside the Fairmont Chateau Laurier hotel it was all warmth as 85 judges from across Canada greeted each other at the 4th Biennial Conference of the CCIAWJ and NJI. Each biennial, the conference focuses on emerging issues in the law. It is always an engaging and thoughtful conference, which this year explored the argument, made by the Chief Justice of Canada, that to achieve meaningful equality, “the law must be infused with women’s realities”. Using a gender-focused lens, the program considered a range of topics from whether or not judges are “getting” gender in the law, to the diverse legal situations of unmarried spouses, the anguish of parental mobility, the feminization of poverty in Canadian insolvency proceedings, whether or not Domestic Violence Courts and processes cure social ills, the experience of women and children in prison, law reform in the area of sexual assault, and the legal response to the problem of sexual trafficking in women and children.

The Keynote Address, “Infusing the Law with the Realities of Women’s Experience” was delivered by the Right Honourable Chief Justice of Canada, Beverly McLachlin. The Chief Justice wove the elements of the program into the fabric of the law within the context and challenges facing judges making decisions in a contemporary Canadian society. She emphasized the need for justice to work not just theoretically, but “on the ground”, and be applied to take full account of the realities of women’s lives with a view to closing any justice gaps. The Keynote Address not only set the stage for the Program, but ensured the participants were mindful, that for the law to fully operate, there is an obligation to be aware and understand the experiences of those who appear before us. The CCIAWJ and NJI are grateful to, and thank, the Chief Justice for taking time from her busy schedule to open the conference.

BUT lest it seem the conference was all work, there was also time for relaxation, reflection, and meeting new and old friends. The Tuesday evening “Book Club” was memorable as Professor Constance Backhouse brought to life, with a skilled reading, one of the subjects from her book, Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada, 1900-1975. In setting the context, she read with engaging passion, compassion, and humour. Wednesday evening was a wonderful soiree. Its highlight was the address by each of our special guests, Joan Winship, Executive Director of the IAWJ and IAWJ President, Judge Leslie Alden, and the introduction of the new CCIAWJ President, Justice Petra Newton. A singular highlight of each biennial conference is the silent auction and this year was no exception. With the wealth of diverse items donated by the conference participants, over $4,000.00 was raised to bring two judges from Benin to the IAWJ International Conference in Seoul, Korea. As always, it was skillfully organized by Judge Barbara Beach and Justice Deborah Gass, who are becoming the CCIAWJ “silent auction specialists” as they volunteer their time for each conference. They are owed a debt of gratitude and thanks.

This successful conference was not by happenstance. Thanks are due to the Planning Committee headed by then CCIAWJ President Justice Lucie Lavigne and members: Judge Nancy Flatters, Justice Thea Herman, Justice France Thibault, Justice Brian Lennox and Professor Brettel Dawson from the NJI, Professor Jane Bailey, and our partners, the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

The CCIAWJ looks forward to planning the next biennial conference which has become known for its challenging, integrated and future-focused topics.

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