



Contributed by Kelly McDermott, OBA President

Lawyers are planners – we like to prepare for and build contingency plans around all conceivable outcomes – but there are times life throws us curveballs that we simply did not see coming.

Case in point: Just one day after the Ontario Bar Association (OBA) announced our new president, that president – known to us now as The Honourable Ranjan Agarwal – was appointed a judge of the Superior Court of Justice of Ontario. With the wonderful news of this well-deserved appointment, came the realization that we had a vacancy to fill – and fill fast.

What happened next was no surprise to anyone who has been involved in our professional associations: a community stepped up. Then President Karen Perron agreed to remain at the helm for another six months; Past-President Charlene Theodore committed to continuing in her role for that same period; and I – with the support of my incredible employer – answered the call to begin my term as president six months early, slightly daunted but fully determined to fine-tune a mandate that had been percolating ever since a pandemic swept in and threw us all for a loop.

I set a mission for my OBA presidency – which kicked off in March of this year – to ensure all lawyers can benefit fully from an engaged, inclusive and empathetic community that not only celebrates each others' successes but shows up for each other through life's challenges and unforeseen changes. This is an ambition borne of first-hand experience. Like so many of us, I found that during the rise of COVID-19, my workload increased rapidly and exponentially, all while I was dealing with significant life crises that upended a delicate balance and left me feeling depleted and depressed. But I endured – not because I'm particularly resilient but because I had support. The OBA was a key source of that support – not only offering pragmatic tools and resources to stay on track professionally atop much-altered terrain; but also providing valuable mental health offerings and vital connection that proved a lifeline for me during a tremendously trying, tumultuous time.

It struck me then that the power of the OBA, and other professional associations like DRLA, is that it is always there for members not just in their careers as lawyers but their *lives* as lawyers. The work we do as lawyers is frequently high-stress and high-impact; the stakes are great and the gratification we gain from making a difference even greater. But this is a profession that has traditionally, too often, demanded, perfection – or at least the appearance of unflappability – and that expectation can so debilitating and demoralizing; it can be difficult to be vulnerable.

As a lawyer living with a disability, a single mother, and a caretaker to someone with a disability, I know both how isolating it can be to feel alone in your struggle and how empowering it can be to connect with lawyers with similar lived experience.

With a motivation to make sure no lawyer feels they must hide what they are going through, I launched my PeerLink mandate to create more accessible networks and avenues for meaningful peer support and knowledge-sharing. Six months later, I'm proud to say that we've been able to translate the magic of the organic peer support that comes from the lawyer community into tangible benefits, including a newly launched Peer Support Network.

The Peer Support Network is an online portal that connects lawyers with resources and each other to share what they're experiencing with those who understand their specific challenges. It's where we're enhancing community connection for lawyers who are parents, caregivers, members of equity-seeking groups, and where we have created a first-of-its-kind network for Lawyers Living with Disabilities, providing them with helpful links and resources, sorted by region, a discussion forum, and a calendar of peer support meetings. (please visit https://www.oba.org/OBA-Peer-Support/Home?_zs=sh6tN1&_zl=6qmd2).

I had the honour of facilitating our very first Peer Support Meeting for Lawyers Living with Disabilities in September, and I was so inspired by the engagement of members who came together in a safe, judgement-free space to share and grow.

The ongoing give and take – the drawing from and contributing to community – is integral to my own personal and professional fulfilment. It's part of what attracted me to my role at the Regional Municipality of Durham, where I derive enormous satisfaction from serving the community where I live and seeing my work affect projects and public policy close to home. And I believe it is our professional community – our peers – that will carry us through when things come at us out of left field and buoy our success as in law and in life and as leaders in justice, exceedingly intrepid but entirely human. If I can make it any easier for lawyers to access that support – to find exactly what they need to endure, adapt and thrive when life shows up – I'll consider it an outcome worthy of this incredible platform I've been given.

Ontario Bar Association (OBA) President Kelly McDermott is a senior solicitor at the Regional Municipality of Durham specializing in labour and employment law. She became president of the OBA in March of 2023 with a mandate focused on creating reliable, accessible support networks to assist lawyers facing challenges and changes in their careers and lives.

