



The Wright Stuff: Human Touch Amidst the Highrises

Profile of a Notary: Patricia Wright in conversation with Brian Scrivener

Pat Wright was first forced to confront the real world at the age of three, when her father was killed in a logging accident. He and her mother had just started their own business in upcountry British Columbia, and now there were debts to be paid and no money coming in. Some of their workers absconded with equipment in lieu of wages. The bank came knocking. Pat's Mom, Dolly, was left alone to raise Pat and her sisters Eileen, then eight, and one-year-old Jackie. "And my Mom pulled through it," Pat recalls with a daughter's pride and affection. "She went out and worked at Fraser Mills, pulling lumber, and raised all three of us. From that point on I knew that, no matter what, a woman could do it."

Dolly put adversity behind her, married again happily and had another daughter, Pam. Shaped by her mother's example, daughter Pat has grown a booming Notarial practice deep in the cold, dark heart of downtown Vancouver. She has done it with a dauntless work ethic, an uncompromising attention to detail and, rare in that forest of tall towers, a warm heart. She told us her story in an interview held in her bustling Pender Street office.

Q: How did you get into this game?

A: Just out of high school I started working for a local lawyer in Port Coquitlam. He was a single practitioner and I was the only secretary, so I learned a bit about everything, with an emphasis on conveyancing, of course. I just carried on from there, working for lawyers. I worked for a firm of young lawyers in Delta—they had just been called to the Bar and were setting up their practice, so I was putting in very long days. Often I was still at the office at ten or eleven at night with little to show for my effort. Suddenly, it dawned on me that something was wrong with this picture! I came to the city to work for a while and soon thereafter made the decision to go for my Seal.

Q: Why would you not go to law school?

A: It would have taken me so much longer to get back into the workforce. I felt I already had a basic knowledge of the field. Working in such small offices I was used to taking files from start to finish. Besides, I was really only attracted to this one area of the law. So, I applied to the Society, took my courses and was commissioned in 1982.

Profile

Q: What is it about conveyancing that appeals to you?

A: Basically, what I really like is helping the first-time home buyers through their purchase. Often when they come into the office they don't know what to expect. It's very gratifying to be able to help them to understand all of the ins and outs of a situation that can be very overwhelming.

Q: So, here you are 15 years later, in a downtown highrise office building. How did you get here from there?

A: I liked working downtown, and when I opened up my practice I didn't really want to move. I like the hubbub of the city, but it is hard to get established downtown. The competition is fierce. I credit some of my success in this area to my teaching a Conveyancing course at the Robson Media Centre. Over the years many of the downtown law firms sent their legal secretaries to take my course. Apparently, they were pleased with my approach to conveyancing because I ended up getting a lot of referrals from lawyers.

I started working with law firms who were doing mortgages; I'd do the conveyancing. At the same time I was building a large practice of private mortgage lenders. If one of my files appeared to be heading for trouble I would refer it to a lawyer. So, rather than developing an adversarial relationship with the lawyers downtown, I managed to find some mutually beneficial common ground. I think it would have been much, much harder to have become established here otherwise.

Q: How did you develop your relationships with private lenders?

A: When I first hung out my Seal I tried to figure out how I was going to go about building my business. It's just you and the telephone when you start out. The referrals from lawyers were coming in, but that wasn't enough. That young group of lawyers I had trained with in Delta had built their business by working with a mortgage broker and private



lenders. They managed to create a pretty strong practice this way and I was paying close attention.

Still, it was hard work. Phone calls, presentations and follow up, then more phone calls, more presentations, more follow up. I hooked up with my largest client this way. We have a great working relationship due to mutual trust. As a mortgage broker he has a large client base and a lot of his clients have become like aunts and uncles to me. There are several of the private lenders whom I feel very close to.

Q: What do you think is the key to keeping that sort of business over the years, because these people, they could go anywhere?

A: Absolutely. I think it's because I'm very honest with them. I tend to treat my private lenders as if they actually are my aunts and uncles. One of my favourites even calls me "her other daughter." I watch out for their interests. As I do for all my clients. They make the decision on a loan of course—I don't see the financials, the credit reports or loan profiles—but I'll ensure that the prior mortgage balances

are correct, that they're not revolving lines, and I'll call if something doesn't seem right on the title—that sort of thing. I try to protect them. I guess you could say the key is respect, not just for the lenders but for everyone. You also have to always be aware of the very different pressures on everyone in this field, from brokers to bankers to realtors.

Q: Is that sort of business in some way a cult of personality, or is it something you could pass on to another Notary?

A: I think part of it is personality. I do tend to think of all my clients as friends. But I also know that it's a lot of hard work. If I did sell my business, I'd look for someone who had the same attention to detail, because, basically, it's hard work, it's long hours.

Q: All of which you do yourself?

A: No, no! Actually, I have a hard time delegating—that's one of my downfalls. But I have seven incredibly hard working people in my office. I have one conveyancer who works at home; she's like my right hand now after working with me for so many years. I have two senior conveyancers in the office, and one intermediate conveyancer. I also have a receptionist and a bookkeeper. My hubby also assists me with countless aspects of the business. Together we process 1,200 to 1,500 files each year and try to have fun at the same time. I don't think it's possible to have a successful business without great employees, and mine are the best.

Q: Did you ever imagine, when you stepped out of high school, that you'd end up at the centre of a going concern such as this?

A: No! In fact there are still some times when I think of it and gulp. But I always thought about what my mother had done. She has been a tremendous influence in my life, reminding me that I could do whatever I had to do. I remember when I got my Seal there was still a stigma attached, even then. The feeling was that female Notaries who had been legal secretaries would eventually go back



to being legal secretaries because, at least initially, you could make more money without the added stress of the insurance liabilities and overhead worries. You know, during those first four years, when I was setting up, that did look attractive. But I always knew I could do it.

Q: It's a heck of a competitive world out there. You tell me how competitive it is.

A: Don't get me started on this! That's one thing that really bothers me. For me to be able to put the amount of work that I do into each file, I have to charge a certain amount. I refuse to cut back on the time I spend with new clients or give up my attention to detail. If I lowered my rates I'd have to cut corners and I wouldn't be able to keep my staff. My staff are like my friends and I really like the work we produce as a team.

It's kind of juggling act right now. I used to be more aggressive and try to beat competitors on price, but now there are times when I will say no. I have a certain price and that's it. That's what it costs to get the job done properly. If someone says "I can go down the street and get a better price," I tell them that they are welcome to do that, but for the type of work I do and the amount of time effort I put into each file, I just cannot do it any cheaper. And that's the bottom line.

Q: Does trust enter into it? Even if prospective clients are price shopping,

when it comes right down to it do they want security more than a cheap fee?

A: I think so. I think they want to know that you are going to do the job right and that you are willing to spend the time with them. Even on your first phone contact, if you spend that little bit of extra time and really talk to them, it makes a difference. I remember working in the big glass-and-brass law firms and there is a certain amount of coolness there. I want everyone who comes through my door to feel comfortable. That's one thing I really try to impress upon my staff. Even if we have 18 files closing that day I don't want our clients to ever feel the pressure. I want them to be relaxed and glad that they have chosen us. I am finding, as time goes on, that more and more of my business comes from people referred to my office by former clients. I also get a lot of repeat business, so yes, I think in most cases service does win out over price.

Q: What's the profile of your average client these days, or is there one?

A: I don't think there is one, because we have such a broad base. Urban, suburban, rural. Realtor, banker, broker. Mostly residential, but some commercial. We've been lucky enough to get into some project work, which is interesting to say the least. That can also be very stressful, because you get it at the last minute, and away you go, but then that's the nature of the business, isn't it? So, we're doing downtown condos, properties in the Fraser Valley—all over.

Q: What future trends do you see in your line of work?

A: One current trend that disturbs me is the recent reaction to the rapidly expanding information technology. We are capable of processing documents very, very quickly and people are wanting things faster and faster without really understanding everything involved. My own personal trend is toward providing more service, not less.

Q: Does a commitment to a career as a

Notary have an impact on your private life?

A: What's a private life? Seriously though, you have to be willing to put in the hours. When I first started I was working seven days a week and sixteen hours a day. I still put in long days. Fortunately, I have an incredibly supportive husband, James. He's always there for me.

Last year we even managed to get away to Hawaii for a break. I had Earl Stewart, a Roving Notary, come in while I was gone. I admit it, that was a very big step for me. But I have great confidence in my staff and it proved to be well earned. When you're on the job the pressure is always there, but it's nice to know that I'm finally at the point where I can get away now and then.

Q: Some financial institutions are starting to offer their customers in-house mortgages. One-stop shopping seems to be the way the financial institutions are heading. What's the impact of that going to be?

A: Huge! That will effect everyone. Instead of going to a Notary or lawyer, people will just go to their bank. It'll be cheaper, quicker—they'll just sign and get their money on the spot.

Q: Do you see any ethical problems with that?

A: Huge ethical problems. People often have questions, about a penalty for example, or some other detail of the process. I think there is the danger that neither the banks nor their clients will get the full protection they require.

Q: What is it about being a Notary that you feel gives you an advantage in attracting clients?

A: I have a tremendous respect for lawyers, but I do think that some people are a less intimidated by the thought of using a Notary. Specifically, I like to think we're successful here because of our friendliness and our thoroughness. Our clients know they can just pick up a phone and call. It is difficult to keep that personal

touch during the frantically busy times, but I never want to lose that sense of access.

Q: If a new Notary came to you for advice on how to conduct herself in business, what would you say?

A: To make sure that they're accessible. To make sure that their clients know that they can just pick up a phone and call, and that they're going to get thorough, professional service. Another

factor that has saved me endless hours of grief is knowing when to say no. People will try to push you into things, pressure you into signing things that you shouldn't be signing. You have to keep your eyes open at all times. If you think a file is headed in the wrong direction, forward it to a lawyer you trust. Never try to handle something beyond your scope. It's not going to be worth it in the end. ▲

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