

## The 10 Faces of OJEN

### Madam Justice Sandra Bacchus



In 2005, as an assistant Crown attorney practicing at the Scarborough Crown's office, Justice Sandra Bacchus read a Toronto Star article about OJEN's justice education initiatives with youth in the Regent Park area. At the time she was looking for a way to give back to the community and decided to give OJEN a call. Seven years and countless volunteer experiences later, she is still a strong supporter of OJEN's outreach activities and enthusiastic about the work OJEN has done throughout Toronto's high risk communities.

Justice Bacchus grew up in the Eglinton-Birchmount neighbourhood of Scarborough. Her first volunteer assignment took her to a Toronto Community Housing justice education project in an East Scarborough neighbourhood. It was an eye opening experience. She realized quickly that it was a much different environment than the one she had grown up, lived and worked in.

"Twenty minutes into the Justice 101 session it occurred to me that none of the kids present at the session had any notion they could someday work in the justice system," Justice Bacchus remembers. "The questions they asked us all focussed on their perceived role as a potential accused person: they asked about bail conditions, how to get a lawyer and what to do if they were stopped by the police. It seemed that these kids, some as young as twelve, had already received the message that there was no place for them in justice sector careers."

OJEN has had an ongoing partnership with Toronto Community Housing since 2005 and delivers six week experiential justice education programs to four different communities each year. Each session includes an introduction to the roles in the court with a panel of justice professionals, a visit to a court house, coaching for a mock trial and finally the mock trial itself, with teams from two different TCH communities facing off against each other in a court room with an actual judge presiding. Justice Bacchus has been involved in many TCH programs.

"The whole point of the interaction is to personalize it," she says. "If you don't speak from the heart you will alienate them. I like to see that some of their preconceived notions about the inequities of the justice system are shaken up a bit."

Justice Bacchus is good at shaking up the preconceived notions of youth. As a newly appointed judge last year, she took part in a youth program with the Jamaican Canadian Association.

“One young woman was shocked that she was a judge,” recalls OJEN’s program manager, Einsone Kadiri. “She had to check to make sure she had heard correctly. When she finally realized she was seeing a black woman judge, she was so excited, she said, “If she can do it, I can do it!”

Role modeling is an important aspect of what justice sector volunteers contribute to youth. Justice Bacchus understands the need for volunteers to reflect the participants they worked with. As one of OJEN’s best recruiters in her past life as an assistant Crown attorney, Justice Bacchus was always on the lookout for other lawyers who had taken non-traditional routes to the legal profession willing to share their experiences with young people.

For the many hours she has dedicated to OJEN programs, Justice Bacchus feels she has received much more in return.

“A criminal justice practice could become a cynical experience if one is not careful,” she says.

“Volunteering in these programs is one way to remind ourselves to approach all members of the public with compassion. I feel volunteerism can enrich one’s role in the criminal justice system. Apart from that, I’ve enjoyed interacting with other members of the justice profession outside of the court room.”



Justice Bacchus continues to support OJEN as a member of the OJEN -TCH Sub-Committee of the Toronto OJEN Committee, one of thirteen local OJEN committees throughout the province carrying out justice education programs in Ontario.