

Roméo Dallaire on the Role of Peer Support

By John Gulak

Roméo Dallaire spoke to a Calgary audience of lawyers, judges, law students and other Assist supporters in early May. The humanitarian and retired Lieutenant-General of the Canadian Forces said peer support, along with medication and therapy, have been critical to allowing him to live with his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dallaire was commander of the United Nations peacekeeping mission during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Dallaire said we must do a better job of supporting one another in times of trouble - whether that's mental health issues for veterans after serving on the front lines of military conflict or lawyers on the front lines of legal conflict. Assist endeavours to support lawyers and law students with its Peer Support program. Established in 2010, the program has seen 46 matches of lawyers and law students with peer volunteers.

Support from a peer who "has been there" can have remarkable power. Sometimes it can be as simple as dispelling the notion that the struggling lawyer is alone with their problem or that they are the only one to have had this particular problem.

The fact that the peer is a volunteer can also be powerful. A peer volunteer acting with humanity and understanding offers a different kind of support from a paid professional. A peer more easily relates to the career stresses of another lawyer and has credibility. That the peer is volunteering their time also sends an important message that the struggling lawyer is worth another lawyer's time.

Asking for help is not second nature to most lawyers. Too many of us struggle to find the necessary humility to ask for help. On the other hand, offering to help others is second nature to most of us. Indeed, the opportunity for service to others was often a significant factor in choosing to become a lawyer.

As with Roméo Dallaire's struggles with PTSD, those who serve - whether in the military or the legal profession - can sometimes suffer wounds that are not visible. Sadly, the invisibility of these wounds makes them tempting for the individual to ignore or stuff down. Their invisibility can also make it harder for people close by to see that the individual is in fact suffering from a real problem.

Roméo Dallaire has been a tireless and outspoken advocate for helping the general public better understand PTSD and veterans' mental health issues. As part of Assist's mission to help Alberta lawyers with personal issues, the Peer Support program seeks to prevent small problems from becoming larger issues that affect a lawyer's practice and personal life. Our peer volunteers promote this by providing support and resources and by encouraging lawyers to seek help early.

Dallaire spoke of the challenges of military service in changing and often ambiguous political conditions. He drew on his experience on the front lines in political and military conflicts and challenged his audience to be mindful of the stresses of being on the front lines of a legal system that is itself changing and sometimes ambiguous.

John Gulak is on the board of directors of Assist. He recently wrote a book, *Sick to Death of the Silence: Stories to break down the stigma of mental illness*, available for purchase online at cmha.calgary.ab.ca