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Halldor Bjarnason – it's “the best profession in the world”

by Toni Armano

Halldor Bjarnason didn't always want to be a lawyer. “But,” he says, “I knew I wanted to go into law since Grade 3. Before that I wanted to be a firefighter. In Grade 3, I realized that being a firefighter wasn't practical, and the only other job I could think of where I'd be allowed to wear suspenders was a lawyer.”



Halldor was born with athetoid cerebral palsy, which means that he is uncoordinated in some of his movements, and has a speech impediment. Because of this, Halldor began his education in a pre-school for children with disabilities. But his mother, herself a teacher, wanted him to be in the public school system. Back in the late '60s, Halldor says, “They just didn't put disabled kids in public school. It was unheard of. But she tried and they said, ‘He can't walk, we don't want him’. She said, ‘Fine, we'll be back next year’. She put me back in pre-school and every day we practiced walking. We would walk one house closer to the school. There were 50 houses between our house and the school, and each day we would get one house closer. When we finished, my mother went back to the school and said, ‘Now he can walk. What's your next excuse?’ So they agreed to take me for a 3 month trial period and, fortunately, I had a kindergarten teacher who adored all kids. At the end of 3 months, the school asked her what she thought and she said, ‘Of course he should be in my room, where else should he be?’”

Today, Halldor practices law with Access Law Group, a downtown Vancouver firm where a group of independent lawyers share common resources. He got there by a less direct route than the one that led him to public school. At the university in his home town of Winnipeg, Halldor earned an honours degree in political science. He went on to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where he received a Bachelor of Laws. His experience in law school was “positive”, he says. “If you go into the environment with the goal of making it work, wanting it to work, it helps.” That his disability is visible also helped. There was no question about the reasons for needing extra support, which amounted mainly to additional time to write exams. “I knew what I needed and why I needed it and they were very willing to cooperate.”

Halldor explains that it was harder for students with hidden disabilities whose needs, if they were expressed at all, were more likely to be questioned. For him, there was no debate. Neither did fellow students resent any special treatment he received. Far from it, he was fully accepted by them, even being elected Vice-President of the Law Student's Society.

After graduating in 1989, Halldor obtained an articling position with a large, established law firm in Toronto's Bay Street area. The economy was booming then and, Halldor speculates, firms were willing to take more risks in their hiring practices. They wanted to look progressive, he suggests, and they could do this by hiring people with disabilities. But getting kept on permanently was a different matter. "All prejudices and presumptions came out," he says, "and they hired other students whom they presumed could work longer hours and be more productive."

After being called to the Ontario Bar in 1991, Halldor came to Vancouver. To practice in BC, he had to re-article but, he says, no one wanted to hire him. It was a tough year and finally he decided to take a job outside of the law profession, as a program officer in the federal Department of the Secretary of State. He subsequently found articles, but halfway through the PLTC, the rules changed and he was no longer required to re-article. In 1993, he was called to the Bar of British Columbia.

With some work experience under his belt, Halldor got a job as a staff lawyer with the BC Labour Relations Board where he was able to develop his legal skills over the two and a half year term contract. Finding work after that was still difficult, however. "Again no one would hire me," he says, "so I had to be creative. I did freelance legal research for other lawyers, drafting, and opinion work part-time." His efforts to establish himself were eased significantly by the support he received from Manuel Azevedo, a Vancouver lawyer who not only let Halldor use his office, but also offered encouragement. During this time, over a period of 3 years, he also managed the Cerebral Palsy Association.

In 1999, he opened a sole practice in Vancouver, sharing common services with other lawyers. After a couple of years, Halldor developed a partnership with one of them and together they opened a practice in Vancouver's historic Marine Building.

In the fall of 2003, Halldor seized an opportunity to join Access Law Group. John Weston, one of the four founders of Access, says he presented the idea of bringing in Halldor to the other three founders of the firm with "tentativeness". "They were far less reserved than I anticipated and I was delighted with their response," recalls Weston. Their firm, he explains, was founded on values which promote service and fairness to individuals and society. Since Halldor has become an associate, Weston says, "He has only exceeded our expectations in terms of contributing to the community." And that is not surprising considering that Halldor is a winner of numerous awards, including the Governor-General's Medal in 1982, the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award and a Community Service Award from the BC Branch of the Canadian Bar Association.

Halldor's practice is thriving. About 80 per cent of his work involves wills, trusts and estate law. He also does family, personal injury and employment law. His assistant, Nicole Beaulieu, notes that many of Halldor's clients have disabilities or are the parents or guardians of people with disabilities, often wanting to make sure that their children are taken care of after they die. These clients, she adds, find in Halldor a lawyer who is particularly sensitive and knowledgeable about their situation.

Halldor needs little in the way of accommodation for his own disability. "The only thing I

have is this piece of plexiglass over the keyboard,” he says, pointing to a cover with holes drilled over each of the keys to prevent him from involuntarily pressing the wrong key. “This \$100 piece of plexiglass — the actual cost of my accommodation — is not expensive.” And, he adds, “I bought it myself and can take it with me so I can use it wherever I’m working.”

“The plexiglass doesn’t slow him down,” Beaulieu says, “He’s about the fastest two-finger typist I’ve ever seen, probably faster than a lot of lawyers; even his hand-writing is more legible.” And does he work shorter hours? Beaulieu laughs. “Not him. Sometimes I have to make sure he doesn’t sleep here.” The one thing Halldor dislikes is talking on the phone. So, he says, “I generally get Nicole to do that. I use Nicole extensively.”

Outside his legal practice, Halldor has been active in numerous organizations and initiatives. He is currently the Chair of the Law Society of BC’s Disability Advisory Committee, with which he has been involved since the Committee’s inception in 1995. He is also a member of the Law Society of BC’s Equity and Diversity Committee. As well, he is a legal advisor to the BC Sports Medicine Council. In addition, he sits on several boards, including that of the Neil Squire Foundation., which had given him the crucial help he needed as an articling student in Toronto, when he made the shift from his trusted Smith Corona electric typewriter, on which he had always relied for written communication, to emerging computer technology. Of his volunteer efforts, Halldor says, “I’ve been very, very fortunate to get where I am. A lot of people have helped me; I want to give something back.”

He gives back in no small way through the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN), an organization that primarily assists families to ensure on-going support for their disabled children by leading estate planning seminars. Every two weeks, Halldor shares his knowledge, explaining the intricacies and legalities of discretionary and non-discretionary trusts, the essentials of property transfers, and the nature of government benefits for disabled persons. People come from all parts of the province to attend his seminars and, not infrequently, some of them later approach him for his professional legal services.

Halldor is an educator in other arenas as well. He has taught at UBC, at the West Coast School of Massage and at Langara College, where he continues to teach 2nd year nursing students about attitudes, mostly to “convince students that people with disabilities are live human beings.” His talent for instruction extends to his own staff. Beaulieu describes him as an “amazing teacher”, bringing her to courts and seminars with him so she can learn first-hand how procedures work. He has also written a book. With co-author Lynda Cannell, he has published *Organizing Events: Avoiding Risk and Promoting Safety*, a reference text for non-profit groups about liability issues and special events.

It’s not surprising, then, that he is seen as a ‘leader’ by his colleagues at Access Law Group. Weston talks about the way Halldor showed them how “to deal patiently with people, to be forbearing and to destroy some of the presumptions that you have about other people. He’s opened our minds and created opportunities in terms of business and, I would say, social justice. In a couple of situations, I’ve worked with Halldor on some legislative reform issues that don’t specifically relate to his clients or his pocketbook but to what he thinks is right for the way society ought to be more just.”

“So,” Weston continues, “it’s wonderful to be led by somebody who, in the world’s eyes, has a deficiency. The obvious one is his communication.” On one occasion, Weston recounts, Halldor had asked if he could jointly give a presentation on wills and estates matters to a group of demanding business people. “I hesitated,” admits Weston, “knowing

the MC was himself very demanding and then I sucked in my breath and decided to give it a roll. Halldor stood up and he introduced himself saying, 'contrary to current impression, I'm neither drunk nor am I otherwise impaired, but I do have cerebral palsy, so you may have to listen more closely, and the rule is you have to either raise your hand or throw something at me if you don't understand. Is that ok?' And 70 hands went up in the room. After we co-presented, I can tell you that people were on the edges of their seats, clutching every word and clearly impacted by what he had to say, and remembered far more clearly what he said than what I said. He presents very well, he's disarming, he's brilliant and he's humorous."

Weston sums up the qualities that he finds in Halldor: "In terms of compassion, I would say he's a leader. In terms of communication, he starts off like the tortoise and eclipses the hare. And then in cooperation, he's direct and he really aspires to the greater good of the community. He's a team player and he's a good person to have on the team."

At Access Law Group, Halldor has succeeded in getting past what he believes is the biggest obstacle that lawyers with disabilities face: people's attitudes. "There is a presumption that if you have a disability, you aren't as competent as others," Halldor says. "If you can step back away from your own prejudices and have an open mind," he suggests, "you might be quite amazed at what you'd have." Halldor thinks that with modern technology — computers and email, in particular — things happen very quickly and people presume that attitudes will change as quickly. "But," he says, "attitudes take a long time to change. They take generations to change."

Some things could help to speed up changes and improve the hiring prospects for lawyers with disabilities. For example, Halldor suggests, law firms that have to make accommodations for a lawyer with a disability could be offered compensation for costs. That, he suggests, would "remove people's excuses, and most excuses are prejudices."

On the subject of recruitment, Weston adds that it's important for firms to be open, rigorous and ask tough questions. Before they agreed to bring Halldor into their group, they asked, "What can we expect of you? What special needs do you have?" Most people, he says, would be afraid to ask those questions. "But," he continues, "the reality is that ignorant people like me didn't know what cerebral palsy was or what it entailed and so I could either confess my ignorance and try and deal with it or pretend I knew and smilingly whisk away the opportunity — which is easier, in the short run."

The approach that Access Law Group took in recruiting Halldor could be a model for what Sandra Guarascio, who practices human rights and employment law at Fasken Martineau, thinks is increasingly necessary in the legal profession. Speaking about the responsibility of dealing with accommodation issues, Guarascio points out that "It's one thing to accommodate issues once they're in your door, it's quite another to look at your recruitment process and see that it's an open, inclusive process that will ensure diversity. So that's where I think the legal profession has its greatest challenge — in the recruitment side."

Weston recommends that firms exercise a level of patience for those with disabilities because, as he has found with Halldor, it can be highly rewarded. "Halldor has opened my mind to the fact that there are people with physical, emotional or mental challenges that could have a huge amount to contribute and those of us who are trained to aspire to excellence in the Olympian sense — you know, higher, longer, faster, brighter, whatever — have to temper that with something that may be a little bit foreign. And woe to the firms that fail to dust off the diamond and see what's there."

The irony is that Halldor is, in fact, an athlete of Olympian stature. The little boy whose capacity to walk to school was seriously doubted grew up to win a gold medal for being the best in the world in the 1500 metre tricycle sprint at the 1988 Paralympic Games in Seoul. "It was a pretty good day in Seoul," Halldor recalls modestly, "I broke a world record. It was a good day." It wasn't his best race though. That would come in Barcelona, when he competed in the 1992 Paralympics. "Interesting," he reflects, "it was my fastest speed ever. I felt great. But then there were three people faster than me that day. That's just life. The experience made me realize how focused people are on winning. It was my best race ever, but no one really cared because there wasn't a medal."

So how does Halldor Bjarnason the lawyer, find time to also be Halldor the educator, the advocate, the author and world class athlete, not to mention photographer and trekker of the Amazon rainforest? His answer is offered readily: "I don't like being bored." And he adds, "no kids, no TV." The characteristic humour in his response is part of the explanation. He himself attributes much of his success to having a 'big smile' and a sense of humour—for which he is renowned. "He brightens up the office and puts people in a good mood," says his assistant Beaulieu, beaming. "Everyone notices when he's not here; no one is around to make them laugh."

Beaulieu admires Halldor's intensity. "He seems to be more alive, with energy and passion for everything he does," she says. Halldor's office at Access Law Group is filled with the evidence of his passions. On top of bookshelves, on the floor and on the walls you will find memorabilia and objects of interest only to those with an unrestrained curiosity about fire-fighting and emergency response. His enthusiasm for the profession he didn't pursue has never been extinguished. If he comes across a picture of a particularly good blaze, his assistant says, he'll share it around the office. She points out that Halldor has connections with many fire departments and is a "walking encyclopedia" of the Winnipeg Fire Department, and he is just finishing writing a book about its history, which should be published soon. While writing it, he convinced the chief to let him spend a few nights on call at a firehall, so that he could better understand what the job was about. "I remember one night, we sat for six hours, waiting for something to happen," Halldor recounts. "The department is all computerized and I wandered over to a terminal that monitors 26 stations and 80 pieces of equipment, and there was nothing moving. It was dead! I realized that if I had to do that job, I would go nuts, just nuts!"

Reflecting on the choice he made in Grade 3, Halldor declares that "I've been doing law for 13 years, and I'm still convinced it's the best profession in the world. I love it. Some days, like any job, you get tired of it. But overall, I love it."