

Vermont Lawyers Thaw Out in Montreal

By Ross A. Feldmann

Every year in mid-January, attorneys throughout Vermont venture to Montreal—one of the northernmost cities in the Western Hemisphere—to “thaw.” Odd as it may seem, Green Mountain lawyers have been following this tradition, courtesy of the Vermont State Bar’s Young Lawyers Division, for more than thirty years.

The Vermont Bar Association’s “Mid-Winter Thaw” conference, which was first organized by the Young Lawyers Division in 1977, is one of the most popular events within the state bar each year. Not only does it provide opportunities to socialize and obtain CLE credits, but the proceeds also fund the division’s entire budget for the year, making the Vermont YLD one of the few self-funded affiliates in the country.

Glenn Jarrett, who was a member of the Vermont YLD board that organized the first Mid-Winter Thaw conference in Montreal, explained that, at the time, the Division had no idea it would become the tradition it is now. “We just hoped someone would show up,” said Jarrett, who is a principal with the Jarrett Law Office, PLC, in South Burlington, Vermont, specializing in estate planning and elder law. “We figured it was a good way to get away for a weekend. We didn’t think it would go on for thirty years.”

But go on it has, becoming what current YLD Chair Michael Donofrio terms an institution. “We’re fortunate in that there is a large and loyal core of folks who count on it year in and year out—to have this unique social gathering in an exciting place outside the state,” said Donofrio, who is also an attorney with the Vermont Attorney General’s Office.

The structure of the event has remained nearly the same throughout its history. Programming begins Friday afternoon, when lawyers first arrive for an ethics CLE panel, followed by social events in the evening. Saturday morning programming includes additional CLE panels, as well as a brunch with a non-CLE keynote speech. Keynote speakers have ranged from politicians to movie directors to writers, but most have had some connection with Vermont. The conference ends with another reception Saturday evening. The YLD organizes the entire event, from lining up panelists and keynote speakers to soliciting sponsors to negotiating rates and services from the hotel.

So why Montreal in the middle of winter? As Ed Adrian, who was YLD Chair in 2003–2004, explained, the city is close by and has much to offer. “We are so fortunate to have Montreal as a resource, because we can live in a very rural, very small state and just drive less than two hours and there we are, the second largest French-speaking city in the world,” said Adrian, who is a prosecutor with the Vermont Secretary of State’s Office of Professional Regulation. “Montreal is really a world-class city.”

The dreary and dark month of January in Vermont provides one of the best reasons to have an event that lets people escape to a vibrant, foreign city. “For many of us, it’s just a wonderful getaway,” said Mark Oettinger, who chaired the division in the early 1990s and who is now General Counsel for the Vermont Department of Education. “One of the advantages of Montreal is that it’s close, comparatively speaking, but it’s other-worldly—it’s special, it’s romantic, it’s European. That special character that it enjoys is what I think has given [the Thaw] its longevity.”

As for advice to other affiliates, “the key is to somehow make the event unique,” Donofrio said. “We’ve been able to do that in large part because of the location, because it’s the only sizable VBA-sponsored event that takes place out of state.” Adrian said that the most important element in bringing the event together is having a good team in place. “You want to make sure that you have a strong team of people that you’re working with in your affiliate leadership,” he said. Oettinger stressed that any such event should have a “good balance between CLE and social activity.” To him, the Thaw “sort of harkens back to a period of civility within the bar and the practice of law that to some extent has been lost in the scramble.”

Past and present YLD members expressed pride in being able to have this institutional role within the bar association, with which the YLD has a strong positive relationship. Indeed, the VBA Board of Bar Managers has three seats reserved for members of the YLD board, and young lawyers frequently stay involved with the Board as soon as they age out of the YLD. Having an annual event that provides the Division’s entire funding helps cement this relationship, and Vermont young lawyers are proud to fulfill this role. “None of us thought it was something that was that revolutionary,” Jarrett said. “We just thought it might be a good idea. It worked out to be a great idea. I’m so glad that it did.”

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