

The Polar Barristers

Interview with Sandhya Chari President of the Law Society of Nunavut

The Law Society of Nunavut (LSN) is pleased to announce Sandhya Chari as its new President. Sandhya replaces John MacLean, whose tenure as President concluded June 24th, at the end of the 2021 Annual General Meeting. John has served as President since 2019 and his achievements in this role were featured in the Spring edition of the Polar Barristers. The LSN is looking forward to the next chapter under Sandhya's leadership.

JOURNEY TO NUNAVUT

Prior to arriving in Nunavut and joining the LSN, Sandhya attended the University of Toronto as well as McGill's law program where she studied Quebec's civil law system as well as Canadian common law.

Upon graduation from law school, she found herself entering the workforce during a time when the market was a bit depressed; it was not a booming time to be a recent graduate of law.



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While looking for articles suitable to her interests, Sandhya successfully passed the New York Bar examinations and was called to that Bar. She then moved to Toronto to article with a boutique litigation firm representing First Nations and was called to the Bar in Ontario in 2013. She continued with that firm but was interested in finding an opportunity that was more solicitor-based to focus on risk management and growing wealth and opportunities for clients.

Sandhya also worked for a time as a sole practitioner, which saw her collaborating on estate and cross-border tax planning work with a colleague based out west. “I missed having someone to work with in person. More and more, it was becoming obvious this wasn't for me,” says Sandhya. After a year and a half, she started to apply for other opportunities.

In 2015, an old friend of Sandhya's who had moved to Iqaluit to work as a lawyer suggested she visit and try to time it for around Toonik Tyme using Aeroplan points. “On that basis, I was able to take a vacation for the low price of \$90, which was within my budget unlike a full fare price,” says Sandhya. “I had a great week! I was even an extra in a film! I couldn't believe how beautiful it all was.” Sandhya speaks of the landscapes surrounding Iqaluit as being wholly new to her. “I felt welcomed and I wanted to be part of the community.” Sandhya reached out to the Director of the Legal Services Division with the Government of Nunavut's Department of Justice. “I thought it would be a unique place to work—a microcosm of current political, social and legal issues,” says Sandhya. In a twist of fate, she had also previously studied Inuktitut during her undergraduate studies and was excited at the opportunity to work in Canada's largest and most recently created territory and practice her Inuktitut.

It wasn't long before Sandhya landed a position with the Legal and Constitutional Law Division of the Government of Nunavut. Since December 2016, Sandhya has served as in-house counsel with the

Government of Nunavut. She was also called to the Bar in Nunavut shortly after her arrival.

For Sandhya, working in Nunavut has afforded her a unique perspective on the territory as well as some interesting experiences. "Nunavut has a really small bar. For me, I am also not in court much. My work is mostly behind the scenes. I get to work with a lot of different people," says Sandhya. "What I've found most interesting, for its size, is that Iqaluit is just as multicultural as Toronto. There are people here from practically every part of the globe! It makes you appreciate that you may have to communicate in many ways to convey your message. You have to think about the different ways you need to communicate and work with clients. I'm always learning something new."

"There are no long commutes, and I am able to get out for long walks effortlessly," says Sandhya. "I'm even able to get out for a walk at lunch. There are views of mountains and sky as far as the eye can see. It is very restorative, which is helpful for all the time I need to focus on complex files."

When asked what prompted the transition from private sector and sole practitioner to public servant, Sandhya replied, "For me, it's about a person's individual mandate versus a broad public law mandate. You are engaged with the client in a different way and have added public law and public service duties."

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, engaging with the client has proven to be a greater challenge over the last year and a bit. Given Nunavut's vast geography, it had long embraced teleconferencing for those times when travel was not timely or possible. Nunavut was able to expand to videoconferencing, although there are limitations with the internet locally. Videoconferencing, however, still poses challenges. "Sidebar conversations—both for developing interpersonal bonds and coming to resolutions—that normally would be done in person, are impossible over videoconference. It is also challenging to

read the body language of someone over videoconference versus in person," says Sandhya. "But we adapt and we make it work. One thing about working in Nunavut is that you learn to pivot on the fly—often, you have to. In some ways, I feel, we were more prepared to deal with how to work within the constraints of COVID-19 than other parts of Canada."

GIVING BACK TO HER PROFESSION AND HER COMMUNITY

Throughout her career Sandhya has been an active volunteer. For two years, she volunteered on the Law Union of Ontario's annual Conference Committee, through which the organization offered financially accessible continuing professional development programming of current interest. Shortly after arriving in Iqaluit, she joined the Executive of the Canadian Bar Association-Nunavut Branch, which offers professional development in areas that are relevant to the North and promotes building relationships between lawyers, where she served as President between 2018 and 2019.

Sandhya has also served as a volunteer on the LSN's

Executive Committee, initially as Treasurer from 2018 to 2020, then moving onto the role of Vice President in 2020. During this period, Sandhya led an overview and overhaul of the financial policy, in collaboration with the other members of the Finance Committee. Changes identified through the overview and overhaul are currently being implemented.

"Volunteering provides for an opportunity to connect with lawyers from all backgrounds. Through my volunteering I have been able to meet so many practitioners from so many disciplines. Volunteering helped me grow as a person as well as professionally," says Sandhya. "I am a better lawyer from the experience and encourage my colleagues to volunteer and get out there as well. You and our community will be richer for it!"

"The total Bar in Nunavut is about 300 to 350 individuals and growing, but it is still considered small. The various committees are all run by volunteers and would not run without this very important volunteer base. There are lots of opportunities for someone to really carve out their engagement," says Sandhya.

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"There are lots of opportunities to have your say and make an impact."

Outside of work, Sandhya has also been keen to give back to her community. She has volunteered at the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre as well as with Iqaluit's Civil Air Search and Rescue Association.

In addition to giving back to the community through her time and volunteer work, Sandhya offers up her talents; one of which is calligraphy. Sandhya has calligraphed official documents for the Nunavut Legislature, including the book of official oaths of office for elected members and certificates of the Order of Nunavut. Sandhya also had a talent for linguistics and is fluent in both French and English and works professionally as a barrister and solicitor in both languages.

2021 UP AND COMER AWARD RECIPIENT

As a result of Sandhya's contributions and strong participation within the profession, she was recently recognized by the Canadian Corporate Counsel Association (CCCA) with the 2021 Up and Comer Award. The award recognizes an individual called to the Bar for less than 15 years who has shown leadership at any level within the profession and especially within the CCCA and the organization they serve.

Past President, John MacLean nominated Sandhya in recognition of her contributions to the practices of law. Members of the local bar, including Adrienne Silk, Director of Legal Services, Department of Justice with the Government of Nunavut supported her nomination. Both John and Adrienne acknowledged Sandhya's ability to tactfully and efficiently handle complex files by focusing on solutions and resolutions. They felt Sandhya exemplified the best of the legal profession and was the epitome of an up and coming lawyer.

Specifically, John called out her recent efforts whereby she provided advice to the airline industry in Nunavut on critical and urgent support related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sandhya was also acknowledged for her volunteer contributions, not only within her community, but for her time with the Nunavut Lawyers Assistance Program (a confidential peer support program) as a peer support volunteer.

PRESIDENT OF THE LAW SOCIETY OF NUNAVUT

As the LSN's new President, Sandhya is committed to creating opportunities for the LSN to meet the needs



of a growing membership in an efficient manner while ensuring that it meets its public interest mandate with high standards, and that it maintains a stable financial position.

In doing so, she is committed to continuing with the comprehensive review of the articling program. "Over the last two years, the LSN worked towards having systems in place that were robust, that were justifiable and that made sense," says Sandhya. "We are now focused on implementing those systems. With the recent Nunavut Law Program graduates, we have the highest number of articling lawyers compared to previous years; much more than in the past."

“Practicing law in the North has helped me (and other practitioners) develop skills and engage in opportunities that I may never have had working anywhere else.”

One of the recommendations already implemented is moving the membership application online. This new online platform allows current LSN members to conduct their annual reporting and renew their membership, and it allows for prospective new members to submit their applications as well. "I want to see this, and the other recommendations, through—to unfurl as they were intended and support them," says Sandhya. Another recommendation that is being implemented is that articling must now be paid and not done for free. Another area of focus is the overhaul of the bar admission exam. The revised Canadian Center for Professional Legal Education (CPLED) program makes sure that new practitioners have the right broad base of skills for entry into the practice of law. Also, a group of volunteers reviewed the current exam format and made a number of recommendations. "It is important to make sure the systems are in place and that we have volunteers to help support the Committees," says Sandhya. The Law Society is working towards implementing these changes for 2022—just in time for the Nunavut Law Program graduates to complete their articles. "We are really focused on this because we want to make sure the questions are fair and properly evaluate the needed base-level of knowledge of skills for a newly called lawyer."

NUNAVUT LAW PROGRAM

In addition to being a dedicated public servant, community volunteer and President of the LSN, Sandhya has also offered her skills and expertise to the Nunavut Law Program.

During the spring of 2019 Sandhya lectured at the University of Saskatchewan and taught a module on Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 as part of the Nunavut Law Program. Section 35 is the part of the Constitution Act, 1982 that recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and treaty rights.

Sandhya is committed to ensuring the recent graduates feel supported. "Practicing law in the North has helped me (and other practitioners) develop skills and engage in opportunities that I may never have had working anywhere else," says Sandhya. "The public here would benefit from a Bar that understands its needs and can service its needs. If we at the regulator do our job right, the Nunavut Law Program graduates will feel engaged and supported in their careers in law and, we all hope, stay working in Nunavut."



Please note that the Law Society of Nunavut is the governing body of legal profession in Nunavut and does not provide legal services or advice to the public.

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