



Supper Time

Geoff Chaulk

Rich, full life for Peter Ralph

What strikes me about interviewing the generous people for this column is how interesting people's life stories truly are. Peter Ralph's story is no exception.

Peter is the son of two United Church ministers — his father is now retired, while his mother came to the calling later in life. Peter acknowledges the values instilled in him by his parents: “the need to challenge yourself in life and the importance of public service.”

In his youth, Peter followed his mother into the field of psychiatric medicine. His mother was, at the time, a psychiatric nurse. Peter worked at the Waterford Hospital as a male attendant, as they were then called, and his career interests were set in motion. Peter recalls a discussion with his mother about career choices — would he study law or become a psychiatrist. He chose law and went to study at Dalhousie.

Peter was drawn to the social justice side of law and was interested in the advocacy that lawyers practise, especially in relation to representing people plagued by life problems such as addiction and mental illness.

After a stint with a local law firm, Peter moved to the Legal Aid Commission. There, he recalls, “the learning curve was steep,” and the demands were very great. He persevered and became the lead lawyer for our province's first mental health court and the accompanying community support program.

Along with other justice officials, he pioneered a more just and humane approach to addressing the underlying problems that sometimes affect people with mental illness and can



Peter Ralph is now a partner at the Simmonds Breen Sullivan law office. — Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram

bring them into conflict with the law. The mental health court support program was effective, according to Peter, because of the vision of senior mental health staff at Eastern Health and the redeployment of resources to help and support those who found themselves in trouble with the law while experiencing illness, often because of a lack of community-based support.

Peter continues to live his own expectations of public service as the volunteer president of the Citizens' Health Awareness Network of Newfoundland and Labrador — a program offering support to people who live with a mental illness. Peter sees the importance of this work as simply helping people not suffer in silence or isolation.

Today, Peter lives a modern family life. He beams when he mentions daughter Rachel and son Ben, with whom he shares life with their mother Rosellen Sullivan, his wife of five years and with whom he now practises law.

Geoff Chaulk is executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association — Newfoundland and Labrador Division.