

Robert Morris—The Crown Attorney and The Man

by Carolyn Parks-Mintz

*Part 1 of a two-part series
about the links that connect us.*

Sometimes special people lead to other special people. So it was with my late, dear friend, The Honourable Mr. Justice Louis Fox of Goderich.

Through Louis, I had met two remarkable gentlemen, Bob Morris and Peter Baldwin. During the last months of Louis' life, Bob, Peter and I became Louis' team, arranging care for him and assisting with his affairs.

Robert N. Morris, Crown Attorney for the County of Huron, was born and raised in Toronto, Ontario—and through many fortuitous choices, has had a very interesting career—one that is making a difference.

His decision to enter law, rather than academia as a professor, led to studying at the University of Windsor.

And this led to his articling for the Crown Attorney in Windsor.

“The whole Windsor experience was wonderful. It taught me ‘real’ criminal law,” says Morris, “because it was such a high

volume place. We handled major crimes with a very small staff.”

“And being across the river from Detroit, Michigan,” he goes on, “meant that I developed relationships with prosecutors in that city.”

“I had the opportunity to go on Detroit homicide ride-alongs and sit in on American jury trials at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice.

“As an articling student there,” recalls Morris, “I was put right into bail court where I handled all sorts of cases, from robberies and domestic violence to attempted murder—everything that came through the door.”

Called to the bar on April 6, 1979, Morris was appointed Assistant Crown in Windsor and undertook his first murder case as a prosecutor when he was just nine months into the job—something unheard of at the time.

“After six years in Windsor,” Morris reports, “I’d pretty much done everything one could possibly do as a prosecutor—and it

was taxing because there weren't many prosecutors."

When Gary Hunter, the former Crown in Windsor, moved on from Huron County's Crown Attorney job, Morris applied for the position.

"I came up here and checked things out," says Morris. "Goderich seemed like a great town, a slower lifestyle, lawyers were good to deal with. After hectic Windsor, the pace here seemed more measured. I soon grew to love this place."

Morris subsequently prosecuted many high profile, complicated cases.

In 2002, he received The Doug Lucas Award given in recognition of the pursuit of justice through science, having obtained DNA evidence from an automobile airbag to prove his case, a first in Canada.

That year he was also awarded the Frank Hoffman Memorial Award given by the Ontario Crown Attorneys' Association to a Crown Attorney displaying extraordinary dedication, diligence and enthusiasm while a member of the OCAA.

A number of years ago, Discovery Channel's "Exhibit A" featured Morris's DNA based case, as did "Extreme Forensics" of California, and Discovery has expressed interest in covering a conspiracy trial he recently prosecuted.

But beyond his erudite capability in the courtroom, Bob Morris has affected change in an area that can destroy people and families.

"Domestic violence has always been part of my job," reports Morris soberly. "When I started in 1979, a domestic assault charge was handled through what was called Honeymoon Court, something like Family Court, rather than in a criminal setting."

"It was seen as a family issue, an area where the state should not intervene. And that didn't resolve much."

A 1992 trip to Minnesota to learn about the coordinated domestic violence system there opened Morris's eyes to the potential of improving methods in Huron County.

"That year we established the first Domestic Assault Review Team (DART) in Canada right here," says Morris. "Community based, multi-agency, meets each month."

“Every county in Ontario has DART because of what we did here,” he reports.

“And in 2004, we set up the High Risk Team comprised of justice partners, probation officers, police, victims, witnesses, and the Children’s Aid Society to identify high risk cases and manage them.”

The Huron Assessment Risk Reduction Team (HARRT) is an offshoot of these initiatives.

Morris also developed a questionnaire specific to domestic violence that tracks domestic history.

The questionnaire enables police to recognize an accelerating situation with a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic relationship and prepare an intervention.

“Huron County is ten years ahead of other areas,” states Morris. “The police department, the women’s shelter, CAS, and probation/parole agencies have gone out of their way to think outside the box, to go that extra mile. They’ve made it happen.”

Morris is involved at several levels in domestic violence issues and has become an expert on them. This dedicated interest means up-

to-date recommendations are brought to Huron County and constructive change is implemented to cope with this very sensitive and complicated problem.

So what characterizes this capable Crown Attorney? — certainly his sense of true justice, his creative solutions, his search for win/wins, his accessibility, his openness, and his unflappable nature.

Bob Morris looks for ways to rehabilitate people who run afoul of the law, people who have “done something stupid in a difficult situation” as he says, rather than putting them down, tearing at their already damaged self-esteem, taking literally everything from them.

“I have always treated people fairly,” he says quietly. “I don’t judge. And throughout my entire career, I’ve never had anyone threaten me. In fact, there have been times when an individual has come up to me in a store or on a street to thank me for how I handled his case, how I helped him.”

“I’m fairly laid back,” admits Morris. “I take one day at a time and don’t get bothered by too much. In this work, that’s important. Dealing with difficult

people in tense situations over serious matters comes with the territory.”

“Nonetheless, I cannot, must not make the problems of others mine, but I can help them by doing the best job possible, representing the Crown to the best of my ability. It’s not about the verdict. It’s about doing everything I can.”

And through it all, this busy and involved legal professional retains healthy perspective as he deals with the tough cases, the sadness his job entails—Bob Morris relishes life.

He enjoys travel, scuba diving, dancing, volunteering within his community, socializing with friends, and immersing himself in the joys of family life—which include a much loved family pet named Mitsou.

The Honourable Justice Mr. Louis Fox knew how to pick ‘em.

*Part 2 of this series will feature
Rev. Dr. Peter C. Baldwin.*