

# Helping the helpless

*David Eby serves Vancouver's most vulnerable with Pivot Legal LLP.*

*By Ava Chisling*



David Eby, Pivot Legal LLP, Vancouver

**D**avid Eby doesn't work in a gleaming corporate tower, and his clients don't show up to meetings in expensive suits and sign off on \$500/hour legal bills. A partner with the social enterprise firm Pivot Legal LLP in Vancouver, he spends much of his practice representing the poor and disadvantaged in B.C.'s courts: Downtown Eastside addicts and alcoholics, the mentally ill, and the physically weak. He is paid less than half the average wage of a big-firm lawyer, even though he lives in a city with skyrocketing prices.

Most lawyers wouldn't want to trade jobs with David Eby. That's okay. He feels the same way about them.

At Pivot, which employs six lawyers and is devoted to social change, Eby's main focus is housing issues, mostly illegal evictions and the living conditions of Vancouver's Eastside poor. The firm takes on small business clients to

fund its social work. "Our goal is to improve the standard of living for so many people," he says, "and we *have* made a difference."

Among Eby's recent successes are keeping open five lodging houses, seeing a change in police policy over the searching of lodging rooms without a warrant, and helping to change the tone of the debate over homelessness. "The government recently bought 14 buildings to be run by not-for-profit organizations," he notes.

"This was a change from when politicians said they didn't want to deal with the homeless at all. Today, people see a \$17 million penthouse being built and wonder why some of that money or space can't be used to help the workers of this city, the nurses, the firemen ... those who actually built Vancouver."

Since the awarding of the Winter Olympics to Vancouver-Whistler, the debate over housing has heated

# À la rescousse des démunis

David Eby au service des plus vulnérables de Vancouver.

**E**n tant qu'associé chez Pivot Legal LLP, David Eby passe le plus clair de son temps à représenter les démunis devant les tribunaux. Idem pour les alcooliques, les toxicomanes, ainsi que les personnes atteintes de troubles mentaux et souffrant d'incapacités physiques de l'est de Vancouver. Conformément à la vocation sociale de Pivot Legal, il se consacre aussi aux problèmes de logement, aux expulsions illégales et aux conditions de vie des pauvres de la région.

Parmi les récents succès de M<sup>e</sup> Eby figurent le maintien de cinq logements

ouverts et le changement des perceptions à l'égard des sans-abri.

« Actuellement, les sans-abri ne peuvent dormir dans des parcs, dans des allées ou sur des bancs et les logements qui leur sont réservés sont bondés ». Il craint que les préparations pour les Jeux Olympiques à Vancouver en 2010 détournent l'attention des problèmes sociaux. Il y a beaucoup de pression pour que la ville affiche une apparence impeccable.

Le dévouement de M<sup>e</sup> Eby a débuté lorsqu'il étudiait à l'Université Dalhousie. Il y a fondé une association

pour les étudiants en droit et l'*Osgoode Law Activist Association*.

En outre, il siège au Conseil de l'Association de droit civil de la C.-B., de l'*Impact of the Olympics on Community Coalition* et du Réseau juridique canadien VIH/sida. Il copréside également le sous-comité juridique sur la pauvreté de l'ABC et il est bénévole pour la *UBC Law School*.

David Eby pourrait travailler pour un cabinet d'envergure et s'offrir un condominium. « Ma gratification ne réside pas dans l'argent », explique-t-il. « J'apprécie mes clients, je les respecte et je crois en leurs problèmes ». Si le chemin qu'il a choisi n'est pas le plus facile, c'est certainement le plus honorable. ■

— Yasmina El Jamaï

up. The international attention has brought money, enormous demand for housing, and intense pressure to make the host city seem immaculate. Against that backdrop, activists are finding there's little time or patience for social concerns.

"We are up against a \$1 billion Olympic marketing machine," Eby says. "We believe there is a constitutional right to sleep somewhere. Currently, people cannot sleep in parks or in alleys or on benches, and the shelters are full. The reality is that people are tired of homelessness. They are fed up with it, and there is strong support here for affordable housing."

Eby's dedication to social issues started in university, where he founded Dalhousie's Social Activist Law Student Association and the Osgoode Law Activist Association. He authored legal rights' guides, organized SPINLAW conferences, and spent his summer at the B.C. Civil Liberties Association.

"At university, I was exposed to lawyers who were doing great outreach work to protesters, telling them what their rights were, what freedom of speech is, and what is legal and what is not," says Eby. "I saw law as an incredibly powerful tool for social change, both to assist people who were working for change and to challenge laws in front of the court."

Eby is now on the boards of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association and the Impact of the Olympics on Community Coalition. He is a co-chair of the CBA's Poverty Law subcommittee, volunteers with UBC Law School, and serves on the board of the HIV/AIDS Legal Network, among many other activities.

His day-to-day work is not easy. Poverty, housing, addiction, and the marginalization of the weak are not subjects that Eby will solve in his lifetime, and he knows that this is an uphill battle. "I have days where I think about my choices," he says. "I work in a really small firm, with few resources, no administrative help, no law library, and think, 'God, it would be easier and nicer to make more money and live in a big condo....' But those days are few and far between."

Eby could have followed in his father's footsteps and become a personal injury lawyer or a big-firm practitioner. Instead, he chose to give of himself and at the same time, give lawyers a good name. "When my clients are in contact with lawyers, it is because something is going horribly wrong. They are being evicted or criminally charged, and the lawyer is the last person they want to see. This is a field that does not attract a lot of people, and those who do choose it don't stay."

But so far, Eby has chosen to stay, and his reasons have everything to do with the people he represents: "I like and respect my clients, and I believe in their issues," he says. "My rewards are non-monetary. There are lots of high-paying, boring jobs out there. I just don't want them." ■

Ava Chisling is a practicing lawyer in Montreal and the managing director of Strut Magazine.



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