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People's Law School of British Columbia

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COMMENT

The People's Law School of British Columbia

HOW OFTEN HAS the legal maxim, ignorance of the law is no excuse, frustrated a layperson in a society where the courts and legislatures move even deeper into new areas of social conduct? The legislature's role in the individual citizen's life expands daily and with it the role of the courts. And yet, the layperson's understanding of those roles has not increased, rather, it has decreased. The average citizen does not have a working knowledge of the laws that affect daily life.

There is a program in Vancouver, British Columbia aimed at correcting this ignorance. The People's Law School is an extraordinary non-profit society informing British Columbians of their rights and responsibilities under the law. The society operates under the proposition that an active and well-informed public is vital to a democratic system.

The core of the Law School's legal education program is the schedule of free evening courses. These courses are co-sponsored by the local school boards, community colleges, libraries and other community-based groups in over sixty centers across British Columbia. The courses cover (1) areas of law encountered in daily life, (2) new legislation, and (3) controversial legal issues.

Courses are presented in series of one to three consecutive evening lectures. Instructors are volunteers: lawyers, law professors, business people and government officials who have special knowledge or practical experience in the area of law being discussed.

The Law School provides the materials for the courses. These materials consist of booklets and video tapes. The booklets are written by lawyers and law students. They are edited and periodically revised by lawyers. The video tapes are made by an independent video producer. They are not lecture-format, but rather dramatically portray possible real life situations. The tapes are available on three-quarter inch cassettes and one-half inch reel-to-reel and are loaned out free except for postage charges.

There are two systems operating within the Law School to set up the free law classes: one for the city of Vancouver, and one for other communities throughout the province. Each of the systems is headed by a Course Coordinator.

The Vancouver Course Coordinator establishes three semesters, each semester has approximately twenty different classes. The Coordinator chooses classes that are popular and will attract an audience, classes that have been requested by the community, and classes on new legislation or controversial topics. Dates, times and locations of the classes are tailored to the needs of the audience. For example, a welfare rights class is more

successful if held in a local community center near the area of the city where many welfare recipients live.

Advertising for the Vancouver courses is done by the Coordinator. Prior to each semester, a brochure is printed advertising the upcoming classes. These brochures are mailed out to every student who took a class during the past year, and to a large number of community organizations. The Coordinator also prepares news releases on the classes. Often the media will contact the Coordinator to arrange for interviews of the instructors.

The Vancouver classes are pre-registered at the office. An individual is hired to attend the classes to introduce the instructor, hand out materials, and to provide feedback on how the class went.

The Vancouver Course Coordinator is also responsible for expediting any requests for speakers from community groups throughout the province. In such an instance, the Coordinator will contact a speaker, let the group know how to contact the speaker, and then leave the rest of the arranging up to the community group.

For the provincial course program, a contact person from a local community-based entity notifies the Provincial Course Coordinator of the course it would like to offer along with the dates, times, location, and estimated number of people who would attend. The Coordinator confirms all class arrangements with the instructor and contact person. All available course materials are sent to the instructor to aid in course preparation, and the instructor is asked to submit a course outline to the Coordinator.

The Provincial Coordinator aids in advertising the course by sending a news release to the local media and posters advertising the course offered with a short description about the contents of the course. The course can be advertised on radio and television as a public service announcement and in the newspapers as a news article.

The local contact person pre-registers the students if at all possible and arranges for someone to ensure that all is ready for each class, *i.e.*, video tapes, etc. The booklets are mailed to the contact person in one shipment before the first scheduled class. Finally, a short evaluation form is sent to the local contact person to provide the Coordinator with the results of the class.

In addition to its courses, the Law School produces a half-hour television show called *Law Talk* on a Vancouver cable station. The program features interviews with lawyers on new legislation as well as the legal topics that are covered in the booklets and video tapes.

Finally, a newspaper column, also called *Law Talk* is written by a freelance journalist. It presents similar legal information in a readable and well-documented series of columns. The columns are sent to 100 community newspapers across the province, with almost fifty running at least one series of the columns.

The People's Law School is intended to help laypersons learn about

the laws that govern their daily lives. Individual legal advice is not provided, but familiarity with the law enables people to understand their legal problems and to deal more effectively with lawyers and the court system.

The program is designed to go beyond merely informing people about the law. It is to provide them with the knowledge necessary to evaluate and participate in the creation of new legislation— in other words, to enable them to participate knowledgeably in a democratic system.*

* David Sprowls, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, J.D. Candidate 1982.

