

Lawyer, law professor, & community builder

By Romeo Kaseram

March is the happiest month for lawyer and philanthropist Dhaman Kissoon, adding yet another growth ring in his career and his community outreach since he established his law practice in Etobicoke in 1992. Come March 22, Kissoon will mark yet another successful year of practice.

His journey as a lawyer started right after completing a law degree at Queen's University in 1989. Articling for a year with the firm Danson, Recht & Freedman in the early 1990s, right away Kissoon began swimming confidently in the deep end, the start of his career seeing him litigating on behalf of parties that were seeking to legalise Sunday shopping in Ontario.

It was a fast current for the young lawyer, his early exposure to Toronto's big city lights on Bay Street resulting in acquisition of experience that has rippled throughout his professional career, Kissoon says.

"I had the opportunity of appearing in all of the court houses in Ontario. I appeared in at least a minimum of 50 courts," he says.

In what would later come to define his multi-faceted approach to building up his holistic career in law, alongside a corollary of community outreach and charitable work, Kissoon was already overlapping different roles during his day job, and also at nights.

It was an energetic, early life for Kissoon, the fast, double burn in his emerging professional lifestyle seeing him articling with Danson, Recht & Freedman during the day, later as a lawyer with the firm, and then working nights as a Metro Legal prosecutor.

It was a busy, overlapping, and holistically formative period for Kissoon. From the multitude of these exposures, he says he acquired the skillsets and knowledge that prepared him for what was a next big career move, which was opening up a law firm.

A few factors gave him the impetus to make the move to establish an independent practice, Kissoon says.

"I saw a need in the community for proper representation. Then, working downtown presented clients with a parking problem. I also felt clients needed to feel comfortable when visiting a lawyer's office; and I wanted to make justice accessible to all," he says.

In 1992, Kissoon founded his practice as a partnership in Etobicoke. Following this partnership, he continued the practice with two associate lawyers until 2000.

Then came Kissoon & Associates in May 2000, and now over two decades later in 2021, it remains a thriving, well-established, and successful practice.

"Of course, as with all enterprises, there are peaks and valleys," Kissoon says. At its peak, Kissoon & Associates had six lawyers occupying its offices. It started out as a general practice, but grew to be more specialised in criminal and immigration matters.

"In criminal law, I have represented clients on the simplest of charges, from shop-lifting to murder charges," Kissoon says. Additionally, Kissoon & Associates covers family law, real estate, civil litigation, and impaired driving offences, among others.

However, Kissoon's versatility and skillsets have not all been about the law, court appearances, or litigating for significant alterations to Ontario's Sunday shopping laws.

In what was a parallel path of giving back to the community, Kissoon kept up his energy level with a second career that saw him contributing to his *alma mater*, Queen's University, notably its Faculty of Law.

He was not even out of Law School when he was given an opportunity to teach that led to him becoming a law professor, Kissoon says.

"I was a bit of an activist back then," he says, simply. However, his good work on campus was not unobserved, his commitment to ethical practices and judicial fair play noted, and which was later rewarded.

Says Kissoon: "The Law School's Dean had observed my activism, and noted my sensibility"; additionally, Kissoon was an excellent academic.

His mix of activism, that special sensibility for seeking out justice, along with his outstanding academic work, made him an ideal candidate. It was felt he was an adequate fit.

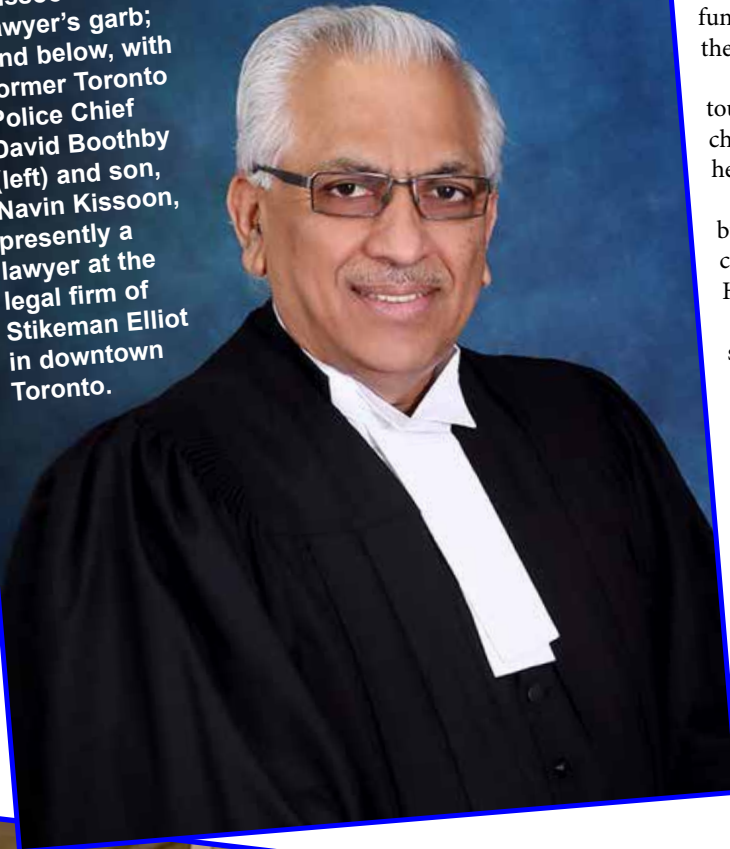
"I started teaching in September 1990. Even before I became a lawyer in March 1991," he says.

In hindsight, Kissoon notes that his second career move teaching at Queen's University was momentous, and that it now stands as a milestone in his professional path.

It was such that his entry into the hallowed law lecture halls of Queen's University was a first. Others would come along later to add to the seismic, cultural shifting of what was

Dhaman Kissoon marks his 30th anniversary of practice as a lawyer, law professor, and being a community stalwart.

Kissoon in lawyer's garb; and below, with former Toronto Police Chief David Boothby (left) and son, Navin Kissoon, presently a lawyer at the legal firm of Stikeman Elliot in downtown Toronto.



then the monumental hierarchies dominating the university's landscape.

What Kissoon accomplished in the early 1990s was the beginning of a realignment in the establishment, where his entry teaching law foregrounded merit, and so challenged what then was an elite and privileged bastion.

It was an historical first when Kissoon took up his milestone role at the Law Faculty. He says it was also a first he was teaching a course that focused on 'Race and the Law'. It meant the landscape was shifting, with Kissoon among the pioneers of an approaching sea-change.

It is decades later since 1992, and Kissoon is now a respected and successful university law professor.

"Teaching has gone well over the years," he says, simply. As incontrovertible evidence, since his approach is always a lawyerly one, he has won the Law Students' Teaching Excellence Award four times.

One award is especially dear and treasured, the Stanley Corbett Award for Teaching Excellence, which Kissoon received in 2018. The award was named after an associate dean who passed away, and saw Kissoon as its inaugural recipient.

"Corbett was a student of mine. As a result, the award occupies a special place," Kissoon says.

There is even more to the parallel career paths of law and teaching that Kissoon has followed since 1991. As he noted earlier, ensuring justice is available to everyone continues to reside at his core, but at the same time he is also driven by the desire to make a difference in our Caribbean community, and beyond in the wider Canadian landscape.

While 2000 remains a watershed year when Kissoon & Associates was formed, he fondly recalls it as the time when the young law firm absolutely got into the swing of things with what grew to become its successful annual golf tournament.

"What we saw was an opportunity to give back to the community. I realised golf tournaments could raise funds for community causes," Kissoon says.

"It was such a success, that for the first ten years the funds raised were devoted to the Devi Mandir in Pickering; they were given over \$200,000," Kissoon recalls.

Changing its drive from 2010 to 2015, the golf tournament was later positioned to bring to the fore more charitable and community needs, particularly for children's health and education.

"It was an easier sell to the community. We had businesses, doctors, lawyers come on board. We raised close to \$300,000, out of which \$200,000 went to The Hospital for Sick Children," Kissoon recalls.

And in what was a touching, legacy gesture, Kissoon says a plaque was put on the hospital's donor wall that celebrates his ancestral roots, and the commitment and hard work of a family member who helped pave his path. In recognition by the hospital for the charitable and volunteer work done by Kissoon & Associates, the plaque permanently displays the name of a close family member.

"[It] has my father's name on it: Sugrim," Kissoon says.

Kissoon kept reaching out to the Caribbean community throughout the years, alongside the outreach to the wider Canadian landscape through involvement in organisations such as the Rotary Club.

Working as a chartered member with the Brampton Flower City Rotary Club, and as its president for two tenures, Kissoon's efforts saw scholarships awarded to students from high school to university. His work with the club also supported breakfast programs to schools in the Brampton area.

Kissoon's success with the club is evidenced in him acquiring the Paul Harris Fellowship Award twice, which is the highest Rotary award. Also, in 2017, he received the club's Citizen of the Year Award.

As part of his parallel efforts in outreach, Kissoon's work also saw him starting a program, Advocates for Etobicoke Youth, a project initiated in 2004 alongside Police Superintendent Ron Taverner from 23 Division.

"We catered for underprivileged young people in the North Etobicoke area," Kissoon says.

He adds, "We touched the lives of over 1,000 young people annually for 15 years. There were youth conferences, and at the end, we awarded scholarships to kids from high school to college. We held an annual children's Christmas party, which would see at least 500 kids attending, along with a parent, or a guardian. There would be 1,000 people in the hall. We gave them a meal; each child received a gift-wrapped toy; and the family a food hamper."

Kissoon says AFEY's success was measurable and satisfying, with some of its young participants becoming doctors and lawyers after being enabled, inspired, and supported by the scholarships they received.

Kissoon was also instrumental in a partnership that formed the Scientific Cancer Research Foundation in 2013. Through golf tournaments, the foundation raised around \$1 million in over seven years.

"Out of this fundraising, a substantial sum was given to Princess Margaret Hospital, with the balance going to Camp Trillium," Kissoon says.

As Kissoon enters his fourth decade as a lawyer and philanthropist, he notes it has been an enjoyable journey, but at the same time, as he indicates early in his career, it meant constantly working during the day, and at times, staying up quite late at nights.

"I had to work twice as hard as the ordinary lawyer," he says about the well-earned eminence that the firm Kissoon & Associates now enjoys.

Additionally, he advocates the importance of standing out in a positive light, and doing so with confidence, style, and aplomb.

"To distinguish yourself is to be observed; and so, to receive its rewards. However, we have to give back to our own community; and not only to our community, but to the community at large," he says.

And conclusively, "I am thankful for my family's and community's support that I have received over the last 30 years."