

Black History Month: Celebrating excellence in the Black legal profession
LawCast BC podcast
Law Society of British Columbia

Vinnie Yuen:

Welcome to LawCast BC, a podcast produced by the Law Society of British Columbia. The Law Society regulates lawyers in BC. Our mandate is to protect the public. I'm Vinnie Yuen, host and producer.

February is Black History Month. Every February, people across Canada participate in Black History Month events and festivities that honour the legacy of Black people in Canada and their communities. This month, we chatted with Cecilia Barnes, President of the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers BC Chapter. The Canadian Association of Black Lawyers, also known as CABL, was formed in March 1996 with a mission to uplift and celebrate the achievements of Black professionals within the legal field by offering its members access to job opportunities, mentorship and professional growth opportunities. Cecilia is a commercial lawyer at Lawson Lundell specializing in technology law and privacy within the corporate commercial group. Her expertise lies in delivering business centric legal advice to technology companies and identifying solutions and mitigating risks. Informed by her firsthand experience as in house counsel in leading companies, Cecilia advises a broad range of participants in the technology sector including early stage companies, growth stage companies, entrepreneurs and investors.

Welcome to our podcast Cecilia, it's so wonderful to have you here. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what inspired you to pursue a career in law?

Cecilia Barnes:

Hi, thank you for having me. So Cecilia Barnes, technology lawyer at Lawson Lundell. So what inspired me to become a lawyer I would say I always had a sense of fairness and justice. Being one of six kids on my mom's side she would call it me being mouthy but it was really me always advocating for all of my siblings. If I felt something was unfair, I would be the one to stand up to, to try to make things right. My mom always loves telling

the story of me, she even told it at my wedding, how I was going, I was really young, picking up my little brother at daycare and when I got there, he might have been four so I must have been around 10, I got there and he was put aside from all of the other kids and so I went to the teacher and I said why is my little brother separated from all the other children? She said well he was fighting with another little boy over a toy and to me, even at 10, that was unjust for him so I ended up you know going the length to advocate for my brother. It was unfair that if there was two kids that he was the only one punished, he had to be separated. So as I said, I had a strong sense of what's fair, what was just, I was always advocating and because of that, my parents were always saying oh, you should be a lawyer, you should be a lawyer and I kind of just ended up picking that route as well as having many mentors in law who I looked at how their careers really impacted the lives of others including my dad, having that influence also led me into law.

Vinnie Yuen:

And can you tell us why you decided to join the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers and how has joining the association made an impact for you?

Cecilia Barnes:

The decision to join CABL is not really a decision I remember making because it is, CABL's just so integrated in my family, it's like getting a driver's license. In law school, I was part of BALS, I graduated law school, I knew I was going to join CABL, that's how integrated it is in my family. But with respect to its impact, every year I see more of an impact on my life from CABL. It's been immensely impactful but the more senior I get, I definitely more and more benefits.

For example, CABL just brought the conference and gala to Vancouver this past October for the first time and I asked a colleague of mine, she's Caucasian, I would consider her a friend, if she wanted to come and support and be a part of it, she's also a lawyer, and she said well I, she didn't want to impede or she didn't want to, her exact words were would she be welcome, you know, she felt a little bit uncomfortable. I said of course you're welcome but if you don't feel comfortable I understand but of course you're welcome, I really hope you can come and join because I'm really excited about this.

She chose at the end not to come, she didn't feel comfortable, that's fine, but then it had me really thinking about how many rooms I walk into and I'm the only Black person in that room and if I just decided I don't feel comfortable going into these rooms, how problematic that would be for my life and career, right. So that got me thinking. Although I can't say, I, I don't want to go into these rooms because I'm the only Black person 'cause majority of the organizations I've been a part of or employed at I have been the only or one of two Black people, I couldn't just make that decision not to go into those rooms but it did show me what CABL does for me is I get to walk into this room with, where I see myself and I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel represented. I don't have to say a word and I have all those feelings. And I used to think the term Black excellence was kind of cringey to be honest, but, but that's where that comes from, right. You can see in the media Black people portrayed in a very negative light majority of the time but then you walk into, there were so many rooms with Black people that you walk into and it is honestly just Black excellence.

And so how CABL has impacted my life is being a place I can go to to refill my cup and to feel seen and also to be very inspired. This last conference, there was a panel of Black women and they were all either C-suite equity partners at firms, Black women, and they were mothers and they talked about microaggression, they talked about feeling othered, they talked about being unseen but at the same time being so seen for being the only Black person. And it showed me even though they went through all of those things and I have as well, they still made it to where they are and they achieved their goals so it was very inspiring. So that's what the impact that CABL has had on me in my career.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you for telling us about what impact it has had on your life. Can you tell us a little bit more about CABL and then also its history and mission?

Cecilia Barnes:

So I hope I do this justice. I will say there's a video on the CABL, cabl.ca website, under the 'about' tab if anyone wants to go see it in full. The co-founders go through the mission and history and everything like that, but at a very high level is it was started by Black lawyers, [inaudible 7:47] I mention Sandy Thomas, Patricia DeGuire, Chris Wilson,

Sonja Salmon, Michael Tulloch, I'm going to forget some others, but a group of Black lawyers who were inspired an organization Delos Davis Guild, it was an Ontario organization for Black lawyers and judges, as well as the National Bar Association, the US Organization for Black Lawyers and Judges. So they were inspired by these two organizations to create a national Canadian organization for the Black legal community.

Their mission, I would say, was to support Black lawyers and hopefully judges in the community but also to advocate for the overall Black community and the wellbeing of the Black community because they are still in a position of privilege being in law so they wanted to also advocate for the wellbeing of the Black community.

And from there, there's chapters including the CABL BC chapter that started and the history of CABL BC is after BALS, Black Association of Law Students, there was not really an organization for lawyers to congregate and support one another and their legal careers so some law students from UVic and UBC decided to start the CABL BC chapter.

Vinnie Yuen:

And what are some of CABL's main initiatives?

Cecilia Barnes:

We have quite a few, some pipeline development, helping Black lawyers and law students advance in their careers, community building As mentioned before to support broader, to support the broader Black community, mentorship, advocacy for raising awareness and fighting against inequality, racism and injustice in Canada, research, conducting independent legal research in topics relevant to the Canadian Black law community, and institutional resilience so ensuring the organization has resources needed to achieve all of these goals which is part of why we throw the conference and gala every year to raise funds.

Vinnie Yuen:

Which initiatives and programs have you been involved in personally?

Cecilia Barnes:

Personally mentorship and pipeline development. It's tied with mentorship. I heard at UVic they've just admitted 27 Black law students so mentorship for them to allow them to have the support in each stage of their career if they choose to go into a firm, summer students, getting that job, associate, helping support them and hopefully one day partnership or whatever it is that they, they want. Also from a firm level, now that I'm counsel at a firm, I have the opportunity to talk to people in the C-suite about hiring, showing them opportunities where they can come and support like at BALS, the conference and having those conversations that give them ideas of how beneficial not just for the DEI process but for the bottom line. It is to hire Black students after summering and help support them throughout the process to hopefully one day become a senior lawyer at the firm, whether it's counsel, partner, whatever it looks like for that individual.

Vinnie Yuen:

Can you share some of the primary concerns that Black lawyers have and issues that impact Black communities?

Cecilia Barnes:

So I'll start with the latter half of that question, the issues that impact Black communities, and I'll say it's they're so vast that I couldn't possibly touch on all of them but there is over-representation in the criminal justice system, there is economic disparities, educational inequalities, health disparities, racial discrimination, police violence, and within those, there's even a different Black experience for those who are different colours of Black. So if you're mixed Black, you have a different experience than a brown Black person from a darker skinned Black person. There's also, if you're an immigrant from a Black person living in Canada. So all to say there's so many issues that I couldn't possibly speak of them all but I can speak to my own experience as a Black individual in Canada and I want to touch on the education inequalities.

In high school, starting Grade 9, I don't know if it's the same now but there was two tracks. There's an academic track and a, what was it called, a applied track and so in my family, on my dad's side at least, you have to, the one thing is you have to go to university so I just checked off all my academics my first day I went to high school. I was, everyone had a talk with their guidance counsellor the, the first few weeks. I went

and talked to my guidance counsellor. She nicely told me that you know I could get better grades, I'd have a better opportunity to do really well if I was in the applied track and so to me, it sounded like a no-brainer, my, I need to get high grades go into the applied 'cause I didn't understand what that really meant. So I went home, told my dad happily, you know I'm going to go take applied, I'm going to get better grades, all is going to be well. Well he went to the school and talked to her, put her in her place, kept me in academic because what that was doing from day one, I hadn't taken a course yet so she wasn't being helpful. She was just trying to track me, the Black student, into applied. You can't go to university with applied, you go through the college stream, right, so day one she was streaming me that was which meant, which would have meant I wouldn't have been able to go to law school or get into university, go to law school, my whole career would be completely different if I didn't have the support of my dad who knew better. A lot of people don't know better and so I wouldn't have had him there to advocate 'cause I thought she was doing me that favour, right, so this is just a little example of how education inequality can show up in a nice way.

Another education inequality I want to touch on is now being a mother, my daughter came home the other day last week and said that a kid beside her told her she looked dirty because of her brown skin and that she, she probably smelled 'cause of her skin because it was dirty. And so to know I have to instill confidence in, she's four and a half, in this little Black girl, about how beautiful her skin is, while still wanting her to be at these certain schools where she is really the only Black girl there, it's not only from you know the actual educational system, but it's also the surrounding factors that can really lower confidence in Black students and kids that we have to stay on top of. And that is really of concern to me and so going there and having to advocate for her and having the whole class now talking to the teachers, having them all sit down and talk about this incident essentially and how they're all beautiful, they might look different but going through differences and the beauty in differences and all these things. These things that not every parent has to think of right, but it's, as a Black mother to a little girl these are things that I'm taking away from my billables to go and deal with at the school 'cause it's that important for her and for a lot of young Black children.

So that is issues that have an, have had an impact on me as a Black individual. With respect to concerns for Black lawyers I would say for me it goes, it always goes back to people think that there's no longer racism for some reason in Canada but the systemic racism in the legal profession is very much alive. I've experienced it, I've been at one point very broken by it and had to come back from it because it's so quiet and it's usually very polite and it's in microaggressions and it's just really making you feel like you don't belong. I think that's why it's so important to have pipeline development and mentorship and to have spaces like CABL where law students and lawyers can go to feel that support and feel like they're represented. And it's important for the firms or the companies to show their support to those individuals because it might not be the whole firm or organization who is showing these, like engaging in some type of systemic racism, it might be just an individual. But if the firm or the organization supports that person, it's extremely impactful and helpful.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you for sharing those stories. What advice would you give to a Black law student who's entering the profession?

Cecilia Barnes:

So it's funny, my little brother got into law school a few years ago and I remember writing him this basically book of all the advice I would give him I wish that I had to just read through that. But the one thing, a lot of people talk about getting a mentor or sponsor, being resilient, but the one thing I wish I did that I didn't do is realize the network you're surrounded by and really tap into that because what other time in your life are you going to be surrounded by soon to be lawyers, like hundreds and hundreds of lawyers?

This could be your network if you get involved, you go to the events, you join professional associations, have you know study groups, but you be present because this community you're building, yes it's helping support you now in law school, but also later on, if you're at a company and you're looking for legal counsel, you now have a wide network of people that you can work with or if you're at a firm and you're, you need clients, right, and you've built these relationships all the way from law school, these, lots

of lawyers go in house, right, and if you have that rapport with them, they can potentially become your client and what great way to work with each other when you're friends and you know now they're clients and you're building in that regard. So I would say build a strong network and really engage with your peers.

Vinnie Yuen:

What are some of the ways that law firms can get involved and how can they get involved with CABL or just how do, how do they uplift Black lawyers?

Cecilia Barnes:

There are many ways but I do want to give a huge shout out to Lawson Lundell because when the conference and gala came to Vancouver in October, I thought maybe someone would come to the gala, maybe, but I wasn't expecting that. Instead, what I got was they, Lawson Lundell was a gold sponsor, they sent someone to man the Lawson Lundell desk, every single day there was someone from the firm that was there engaging with all of the CABL community. They paid for Black law students to go to the conference and gala. They had Black law students at our table. They paid for clients of mine to join the gala and on their Saturday evening, exec C-suite partners all came in support of CABL and myself and really showed up for CABL and me.

So imagine the support I feel to have my firm behind me like that but also, it shows the whole community what type of firm Lawson Lundell is. And through that, I can see others, and it's already started to happen, take interest in joining Lawson Lundell and in fact some already have. So I think it's easy to say we support you but having that backing of support publicly meant everything to me and I think that's, that is something that law firms can do as well as I keep mentioning the pipeline building. It is making sure okay, if you're hired as a student or if you're hired in as an associate, is there a track to more senior roles, is there a track to partnership and supporting throughout that whole process.

Vinnie Yuen:

In addition to law firms, how can individual lawyers help advance diversity and help remove some of those barriers for Black lawyers who are entering the profession?

Cecilia Barnes:

I think just know that firms are a business, organizations are a business so it's good for business, right, so if you're a lawyer and you want to help support, the best way to help support is if you're in an organization and you have work, know that if you have a Black lawyer at a firm, maybe send them that work, you know, how beneficial is that to building their practice, building their business. There's a lot about being an ally, being a sponsor. Being sponsors are so important. To me I have many sponsors at Lawson Lundell or a couple of sponsors I should say, that without them I wouldn't be able to navigate my career as I have been able to do thus far. Sponsors speaking about you when you're not in the room in a positive way is so important and so impactful and a lot of Black lawyers don't have that so sponsorship and as well as mentorship of course.

Vinnie Yuen:

And just looking to the future, what is your vision for CABL's role in shaping the future of advocacy for Black lawyers and Black communities?

Cecilia Barnes:

We are working on something that is surrounded around advocacy for the Black communities and lawyers in BC particularly. It is so near and dear to my heart. It is, it's a passion project for all of CABL. We're still in the stages of information gathering and putting together the terms so I'm not able to announce it but that is, this thing that I'm speaking of is the future I see for advocacy for Black community and lawyers in BC. And I'm sure that we'll be able to announce it within the next three months and you'll be the first person I send it to.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you so much for your time today and thanks for sharing your story with us and as well as all the great information about how to get involved.

Cecilia Barnes:

Please join CABL BC if you have not already. We have exciting for 2025 coming up, February we will be doing a Black History Month event at the end of the month where we work with businesses and we provide, it's called Six Minute Lawyer and businesses can come and have questions for us and we can respond within six minutes and from then

we can continue the conversation if need be. And we hope to have a lot of Black artists being represented there so that we can see more of the, the artistic community come out, not just law and business. And we have a lot of other things coming up in 2025 so hopefully you can join and we are looking for new members all the time.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you so much for your time today Cecilia, it's been a pleasure to chat with you.

Cecilia Barnes:

Thank you.

Vinnie Yuen:

Thank you for listening. If you want to find out more about the Canadian Association for Black Lawyers and its priorities and initiatives, please visit their website at cabl.ca. Please also check the show notes for a list of resources on Black History Month.

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