

Changing the landscape for the better

Warren Creates on the joys of making a difference and the restorative power of lumberjacking.

By Brad Mackay



Warren Creates is a whirling dervish of a man. Perched on his chair in his downtown Ottawa office, the immigration lawyer is brimming with energy even before our interview starts. When he gets talking about a topic he is passionate about — and there are plenty, whether it's the recent crackdown on immigration consultants and the plight of aboriginals in Africa to the health benefits of racquet sports and the joys of Vespa scooters — he becomes a veritable cold-fusion reactor of enthusiasm.

Sporting a salt-and-pepper beard and a Timex wristwatch, the head of immigration law at Perley-Robertson, Hill & McDougall radiates the kind of wide-eyed energy that is often mistaken for naïveté. But it's actually his secret ingredient — and the key to his reputation as a guru in the byzantine field of immigration law.

During his 27-year career, Creates has helped thousands of people successfully navigate Canada's

complicated immigration system, and he's also helped put the nation's capital on the vanguard of immigration law. He is the only Ottawa lawyer certified by the Law Society of Upper Canada as a specialist in citizenship and immigration law.

Outside the office, he is chair of CBA's legal aid liaison committee, a committee member, a media spokesperson, pro-bono advocate, outspoken humanitarian, compulsive athlete and devoted family man. So, what does a guy like this do in his spare time?

"My favourite thing to do is lumberjacking," the 51-year-old explains. "To start a chainsaw up, go in a forest and cut some big trees down. It's exciting, it's dangerous, it's thrilling; but I need to do it."

That may sound capricious, but to those who

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— Warren Creates, Perley-Robertson, Hill & McDougall LLP, Ottawa

know him Creates' eccentric hobby makes absolute sense. After all, lumberjacking is one of the most dangerous jobs on earth; it has to be done with a balance of raw strength and attention to detail or it can turn bad in a heartbeat — but if you do it right, it can change the landscape for the better. And that's something Creates has been doing for most of his life.

Warren Leonard Creates (pronounced "creets") was born in Montreal in the summer of 1959 and raised by his stay-at-home mother and salesman father in nearby Pointe-Claire. The youngest of three children, his youth was spent in something of a cultural and social bubble.

"I grew up in a middle-class family in a suburb of Montreal where we would eat hamburgers and spaghetti and

meat-and-potatoes every night. My parents didn't even speak French," he explains. "I have undergone this incredible transformation and adventure, from a very sheltered middle-class background to now feeling very comfortable anywhere in the world."

That transformation began when he was 16 and met Michael Phelan, a lawyer in his twenties who was dating the older sister of a good friend. Curious, Creates inquired how somebody went about becoming a lawyer. Phelan, who is now a Federal Court judge, grabbed some paper and wrote down a list of the courses he took to get him where he was. That piece of paper became Creates' *Polaris*: a steadfast guide that would steer the next decade of his life.



L'aventurier au grand cœur

Le parcours d'un battant.

M^e Creates a quitté la maison familiale à 19 ans pour étudier à l'Université de Western Ontario où il a excellé en sports. Il est devenu capitaine de l'équipe de soccer à la faculté de droit de l'Université de Windsor. Depuis, il joue au hockey, au tennis, au squash et pratique le vélo et la voile.

Sa collaboration avec l'ancien avocat Colin McKinnon, spécialisé en immigration, avait donné l'envie à Warren Creates de se centrer sur ce secteur du droit. Colin McKinnon est maintenant juge supernuméraire à la Cour supérieure de l'Ontario et il a qualifié M^e Creates de personne aventureuse, curieuse et impartiale. Selon lui, traiter chaque individu avec respect est une qualité que tout bon avocat en immigration comme M^e Creates a.

Colin McKinnon a ajouté que M^e Creates a réussi à éviter le cynisme qui caractérise beaucoup d'avocats en immigration. Selon lui, M^e Creates a la capacité de voir les gens et la vie de façon positive tout en restant lucide.

En effet, l'avocat traite chaque client avec le même enthousiasme: le dentiste américain qui veut ouvrir une entreprise à Ottawa, l'homme d'affaires asiatique qui veut investir à l'étranger, le Somalien sidéen qui veut échapper aux autorités éthiopiennes corrompues, etc.

Au cours de la dernière décennie, le nombre d'immigrants a tourné autour de 24 000 personnes par an, proportion la plus élevée au monde. Selon M^e Creates, le Canada a un programme d'immigration robuste qui aide un individu, une famille ou une

organisation, voire la construction même d'une nation.

En 2008, il a même contribué à fonder Can-Go Afar, un organisme de charité au bénéfice des Afars, peuple à l'intersection de l'Érythrée, de Djibouti et de l'Éthiopie dont la culture est l'une des plus anciennes de la planète.

La fondation Can-Go Afar a permis l'installation de systèmes de filtration d'eau et la création d'un programme de bourse pour des jeunes voulant étudier à l'université. Chaque cent des 70 000 \$ du budget annuel de la fondation est alloué à l'Éthiopie.

S'occuper de la fondation n'a pas été facile. M^e Creates a même envisagé de se dégager des opérations quotidiennes après un an. Les Afars font face à des problèmes sérieux : mariages arrangés et mutilation génitale des femmes, des coutumes communes à des tribus africaines, ce qui en aurait découragé plus d'un.

Mais M^e Creates a persévéré. Pratiquement rien ne le met à bout, grâce à son mode de vie actif.

Le rituel suivant qu'il entretient depuis son enfance y est également pour quelque chose.

Avant de se coucher, il se remémore les éléments très positifs de sa journée, soit des choses banales comme le fait d'arroser les plantes, soit de grands événements comme une victoire juridique inattendue. Habituellement, il répertorie 10 à 12 éléments positifs par jour. Il compte également les 2 ou 3 événements qui l'ont contrarié et les éléments pour lesquels il aurait aimé avoir une seconde chance. **N**

— Yasmina El Jamaï

At 19 he left home to attend the University of Western Ontario, where he excelled in sports, a touchstone throughout his life. Later, at law school at the University of Windsor, he was the captain of the soccer team and has since thrown himself into a rotating list of athletic activities from hockey, tennis and squash, to elite cycling and sailing.

“Sports are a big outlet,” he explains. “It fuels me; I need to drive myself physically.”

During his studies Creates wanted to be a litigator. But he quickly changed course after he started articling at Beament Green in 1984, where he found litigation too “adversarial” and “acrimonious.”

“Luckily there was one lawyer at the time, Colin

Asian businessman looking to invest more than \$1-million abroad, or a HIV-positive Somali man fleeing from corrupt Ethiopian authorities, Creates speaks about each client with equal enthusiasm.

“I had no idea, until I was doing it, how much fun it would be,” he adds. “When you help clients achieve their goals it is immeasurably rewarding.” And there’s no shortage of clients.

Over the past decade Canada’s immigration rate has hovered at around 240,000 people a year, the highest per capita immigration rate in the world.

“Canada has a robust immigration program,” says Creates. “Every political party, every stripe, supports a broad, robust immigration effort. So you’re actually helping a person,



In 2008, Warren Creates helped found Can-Go Afar, a charitable organization dedicated to helping the Afar, one of the planet’s oldest — and most neglected — aboriginal cultures. The organization has helped install water filtration systems and establish a scholarship for Afar youth to attend university.

McKinnon, who had one of the better immigration law practices in the city,” he explains. “I had the good fortune of representing with him on his immigration cases. I really loved that line of work. It was creative, files didn’t go on for years, and money had nothing — or very little — to do with the outcome.”

McKinnon, now a supernumerary judge with the Ontario Superior Court, recalls Creates being immensely curious about the world and its people.

“He is highly adventurous, non-judgmental and unbiased in his world-view,” says McKinnon. “This has got to be a quality of any good immigration lawyer: you treat everyone you meet as an individual.”

Decades after he served as his mentor, he says Creates has managed to avoid the cynicism that marks many seasoned immigration lawyers.

“I’m continually amazed at how he can maintain this youthful passion for what he does. It’s quite remarkable. It’s just part of his character; he’s one of those rare characters who looks at life and human beings in the most positive way. He’s not naïve; he understands people’s foibles, but he prefers to accentuate the positive.”

That positivity is evident in his daily activities. Whether it’s an American dentist looking to set up a practice in Ottawa, an

or a family, or a company — but at the same time you’re helping build a country.”

And his engagement is not limited to his job. In 2008, he helped found Can-Go Afar, a charitable organization dedicated to helping the Afar, one of the planet’s oldest — and most neglected — aboriginal cultures. According to ethnographers, the nomadic pastoralist people have lived in the Horn of Africa region for more than 2,000 years. Many believe the word Africa is derived from their name.

With a population between three and five million, the Afar roam on ancestral land that currently intersects Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia — countries with a history of tribal and ethnic clashes. As a result, they are often the subject of persecution. In addition to this, they face environmental changes and increasing HIV rates. Yet the Afar name barely generates a response from international aid organizations in the Western world.

“Forget Western standards: even by African standards our names don’t come up when you look into aboriginal history,” says Ahmed Youssef Mohammed, an Afar who has lived in Canada for 23 years.

In 2008, Creates accepted an invitation from Mohammed to fly to Ethiopia to live among the Afar for 16 days. “They are incredibly sharing; they look after each other in periods of

devastation and plight,” he says. But, he adds, their humility is both a blessing and a curse.

“They’re not very good advocates for themselves,” he says. “They’re not assertive. That caused them all kinds of hardship, because contiguous tribes have taken advantage of them.”

After returning to Canada, Creates and Mohammed formed Can-Go Afar, a non-profit charity dedicated to helping the Afar people. With an annual budget of \$70,000 — “every cent of it spent in Ethiopia,” says Creates — the organization has helped install water filtration systems and establish a scholarship for Afar youth to attend university.

Mohammed says Creates was the key to getting the charity off the ground.

“Advocacy is very important, and that’s where I see Warren fits. The more people that know about you, your culture, your way of life and the challenges you have, the chances are greater that people want to try to help you. ... One thing led to another and he’s our man now. Whatever problem we have we go to him; he’s been great.”

But it hasn’t been easy. A year into it, Creates considered just writing a large cheque and stepping away from the day-to-day operations. The Afar face serious problems. They are

also a staunchly patriarchal society which entails such culturally queasy customs as arranged marriage and female circumcision; customs common in many African tribes, but distressing — maybe even depressing — to Western eyes.

“I’ve never been depressed,” Creates says. “Almost nothing gets me down.”

He credits part of this to his active lifestyle, but more important is a daily ritual he’s maintained since he was a boy.

“Every night the last thing I do before I fall asleep is count on my fingers in the darkness of my bedroom the very positive things that made me feel great during that day. This is without my wife even knowing. They can be tiny things, like watering my plants in my backyard, or they can be big huge things, like winning a big case that I had no right to win. I usually get up to about 10 or a dozen.

“And then I count on the fingers of that same hand the things that sort of rubbed me the wrong way; the things that didn’t work so well — that I wish I had second chance at. There are usually two or three: just little things.”

He takes a rare pause to consider what he’s just said.

“What can I say? I’m a lucky guy.” **N**



Brad Mackay is a freelance writer based in Ottawa.