

**NAWL Feminist Leadership Summit
Ottawa, Ontario, February 12-14, 2011
Human Rights and Education Centre 5th floor, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa
Fauteux Hall, 57 Louis Pasteur Street**

Follow-up to the 2009 NAWL Think Tank: A Cross-Country Tour

In September 2010, NAWL travelled across the country to hear from law students and law professors (and some undergraduate students!) about obstacles faced in feminist organizing and equality rights law reform activities. Our goal was to gain a better understanding of law student involvement in equality rights work on campuses and to help revitalize local, feminist associations of women and the law. We spoke with groups of students at UBC, Dalhousie, McGill, Western, Queens, University of Guelph, Carleton, University of Ottawa and University of Toronto. We talked about NAWL's history and received feedback on the relevance and importance of equality rights advocacy today.

We learned that there is a need for feminist community and coalition building, as well as a real desire for leadership development in equality rights organizing and law reform advocacy. We also learned that many of the "feminist fantasies" of young women today echo those of NAWL's founders in 1974. The goal of the tour was to encourage the revitalization of feminist groups on campus.

NAWL Feminist Leadership Summit 2011

Following our tour across the country, NAWL hosted a Feminist Leadership Summit in Ottawa in February 2011. Students were selected to attend the Summit for demonstrated leadership skills and equality rights work on their campuses or in their local communities. Twenty-one women from eight different universities across the country attended.

The summit consisted of a series of workshops and discussions that drew upon the experiences and expertise of feminist legal advocates from different fields. There were segments on written advocacy, meeting with Members of Parliament and Parliamentary Subcommittees, staying on top of issues, decision-making processes, media-relations, and accountability in activism. The young women present engaged in activities meant to build their skills, but were also given opportunities to share their own knowledge and experiences.

The summit was launched with a dinner during which Martha Jackman, Suzanne Bouclin, and Karin Galldin shared thoughts on what it means to engage in feminist legal work. The fabulous meal was catered by a local vegan restaurant owned and operated by Chef Caroline Ishi who spoke about using food as a tool for social justice.

1. The Collective Skills and Experience of the Attending Women

When asked to speak about their experiences and skills, the women who attended the Leadership Summit were quick to claim that they had much to learn. However, after a roundtable it became apparent that an exceptionally skilled group of young women from across Canada were gathered in the room. They engaged in activism at all levels, from grassroots campus work to federal law reform. Some of the women concentrated on artistic and creative endeavours such as spoken word performances, the Vagina Monologues and zine creation, while others had experiences on the boards of organisations, policy campaigning for sexual violence, and governmental lobbying. This diversity of experience gave the conversation throughout the weekend depth and nuance.

Based on our cross-Canada tour and the information provided to us by the participants at the summit, we learned that there are several local Associations of Women and the Law operating under varying mandates, activities and names, with a lot of eagerness to connect with one another as well as with community organizations to work on equality rights related projects. Participants at the summit also included leaders from Black Law Students Associations, Aboriginal Law Students Associations, and Korean Law Students Associations. We learned that campus-based associations engage in a wide variety of activities including networking events, the organization of lecture series, community volunteering, clothing drives, fundraising, and letter campaigns.

2. Feminist Legal Careers: Talking about Choices

The summit's program introduced participants to different possibilities for incorporating feminist politics and identity into a legal career. Professor Suzanne Bouclin gave a talk on how academics can incorporate a feminist, social justice perspective in the classroom using her "feminist of legal pedagogy". Karin Galldin detailed the efforts and philosophies behind the opening of Galldinlaw, her feminist law firm, and spoke about the challenges and rewards of such an endeavour. Pam Cross discussed her experiences balancing front-line work with policy reform work, and about engaging at both individual and systemic levels. Most of the weekend, however, consisted of discussions surrounding feminist advocacy.

3. Advocacy in Action: Learning from Women in the Field

The Summit featured conversations with several women currently engaged in equality rights activism. Various members from NAWL spoke about the group's history and current projects.

Cindy Blackstock, the Executive Director of the *First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada*, addressed the importance of cooperation and collaboration across organizations. She discussed the realities of advocacy and the risks inherent in the process, as well as the effectiveness of personalising the fight for social justice.

Sheila McIntyre, a retired academic and equality law expert, stressed the importance of transparent advocacy and ensuring that individuals and organisations are accountable to the people they represent.

Nancy Peckford and Amy Kishkek from *Equal Voice* shared practical tips for lobbying on Parliament Hill. Their suggestions emphasized the importance of understanding the political process in order to gain access.

4. Advocacy Tools: Empowering the Next Generation

Lessons on concrete advocacy skills were a key component of the NAWL Summit as our campus tour taught us that these are important tools that young feminists have difficulty accessing. A workshop on transparent decision-making was given by Julie Shugarman, which focused on the need for clear processes, accountability and inclusion within organisations. Issue monitoring was another topic covered in order to help new feminist associations keep track of political and social trends, and to help them choose which issues to act on and advocate for. The importance of reaching out to other like-minded organisations at both the campus and national level was highlighted as well.

The summit also provided workshops on written advocacy. Anne Levesque spoke about writing *facta* and how to advance social justice aims in a manner that is compelling to the Court. Pam Cross gave a workshop on brief writing for political advocacy. She explained the elements of a brief, and how it can be an instrumental tool for informing elected officials on various law and policy issues. Shari Graydon from *Informed Opinions* provided a media relations workshop that included tips for building relationships with journalists as well as how to effectively write opinion editorials. The most important part of these sessions, however, was the idea that women can and must use their voices in pursuit of feminist advocacy.

5. Putting the Skills to Practice: New Projects arising out of the Summit

At the NAWL Think Tank in 2009, several new projects involving young women were discussed and the attendants of the 2011 Summit began to work on some of these ideas. A campus-organizing guide was identified as a useful tool to help students start their own local associations. One working group discussed a feminist mentorship programme that could partner feminist law students with like-minded lawyers and activists. Another working group arising out of the summit committed itself to the publication of a revised *Gender and the Law Manual* – an alternative orientation guide for feminist law students. The original publication of this *Manual* was released by NAWL in 1992. The new *Manual* will be the product of current feminist law students and a reflection of their present concerns and perspectives. While it is NAWL's hope that all of the working groups will continue their work from the summit, the *Gender and the Law Manual* group has a planned electronic release date of September 2011. Watch our website for the release!

Concluding Thoughts and Reflections on the Summit

The summit concluded with a round-table that allowed participants to share their thoughts about the weekend. The women involved expressed excitement about bringing the skills and

knowledge that they had learned back to their respective communities. Many stated that the summit had allowed them to grow as feminists and advocates in a space that was challenging, yet safe. Plans were made to allow the participants to remain in touch and to carry on the discussions and projects that had begun.

Following the Summit, some of the participants sent us their feedback – we have excerpted some of this feedback below:

Simone Samuels

“The NAWL conference was completely transformative for me. I hadn’t realized that I would be attending a conference on feminism, and by the end of it, I was not afraid to call myself a feminist. I hadn’t realized that I would be attending a conference about social activism, and by the end of it, I wasn’t afraid to consider myself a social activist. That’s precisely what I loved about the conference. It wasn’t about griping about women’s issues but it was about taking action to tangibly tackle those issues using the law as one of many avenues

The NAWL Youth Leadership Summit made me aware of all of the tools that are at my disposal – tools I can use in the fight for human rights. Most of all, I found a place where I felt safe to discuss feminist and anti-racist perspectives with other young women who shared my views. Such discourses are often marginalized in law school; being able to discuss them openly made me feel less isolated with my ‘radical’ views.”

Catherine Kim

“The NAWL leadership summit was unlike any other student summit I had ever been to before. I thought the entire weekend was extremely well organized with a great array of topics and areas of discussion. I also enjoyed the friendly and fairly informal tone that the discussions took and that all the speakers seemed so approachable and willing to provide us with as much information as they could.

Thank you again for putting together such an amazing weekend and learning experience. Opportunities such as these make me very grateful of all the doors that law school has opened for me and one of the things that really stuck with me from the weekend was a reminder that a legal education is a privilege and a tool and that with such an important tool should be shared and made accessible to those that may not share the same privileges as we’ve enjoyed.”

Tamera Burnett

“First year law school has been a very isolating and difficult experience for me. I came into the programme ready to change the world, but I was constantly told that my opinions were silly and idealistic. My foundational values were put on trial on a daily basis, and I often felt like one of only a few, lonely voices advocating for a better, more just society. I was on the verge of dropping out several times because it seemed as if there were no other options than to give into the call of Bay Street.

The NAWL Summit, however, offered me a different path. Not only was the conference structured to connect young women from across the country so that we could share our stories and experiences, but it showed all of us that being a feminist, an advocate and a JD candidate did not have to be mutually exclusive identities. Furthermore, the conference gave me important skills that I can use to be an activist in my school and community, and I hope to pass this knowledge on to the women in my campus association. Most importantly, the Summit gave me hope, encouragement and the strength to remember why I chose to come to law school in the first place.”