



## *Alisa Noda:* **We Lead Every Day, by the Way We Live**

**A**lisa Noda is a Vancouver born-and-raised Canadian of Japanese descent.

Her mother immigrated to Canada from Japan after WWII and her father was born of Japanese immigrants in Steveston, BC.

“My parents met in Yokohama when my dad elected to be ‘repatriated’ to Japan,” says Alisa, “after being interned for over five years in a prisoner-of-war camp on Angler Island in Ontario. The Japanese-Canadians were not permitted to return to BC where my dad had made his living as a fisherman from the age of 9; his boat and the family home had been confiscated and sold, so there was basically nothing to go back to.”

She grew up on the east side of Vancouver in schools and neighbourhoods populated by all the peoples of the earth, it seemed to her. “I still feel most comfortable in the cosmopolitan world that is Vancouver, but I’ve lived in Manitoba and Ontario and have visited every province and territory (except Nunavut) of this wonderful country called Canada.

“Although my father passed away in 1992 and my first husband in 1993, I am still blessed with the presence of my mom,

two brothers and a sister, their spouses, and 10 fun-loving nieces and nephews. Two of those youngsters are courtesy of my husband’s family, who are also all living here and very close. My husband Mark is the best part of my life.”

**Well, I think it’s good you’re a lawyer. Now, go out and kick some ass.**

In 1980, Alisa began a teaching career just when teachers were being laid off. Demographics were such that she and her first husband, also a teacher, recognized it’d be at least 10 years before there’d be work for them. They decided one of them had to go back to school so she “haphazardly wandered into a profession that I knew absolutely nothing about.”

She loves to tell the story of her eventual call to the bar when she asked her dad, a man of very few words, what he thought of her becoming a lawyer. “I thought he’d comment about my being a girl in a man’s profession. Instead, he said, ‘Well, I think it’s good you’re a lawyer. Now, go out and kick some ass.’ It was the law that had taken away his rights as a young man and his daughter would now wield the law to protect others from similar abuses.”

When Alisa was assigned Aboriginal law work for the Crown, it was a time when “real” lawyers didn’t consider Aboriginal law to be “real” law. She saw it differently. “I knew instinctively that the First Peoples had rights, culture, and history that were valid and deserving of legal recognition. My research suggested that to acknowledge their claims, we would need to go to the very core of what the law stands for: justice. I believed successive governments had been wrong in the positions taken before the courts and that, eventually, Canada and the courts would agree. I wanted to be there when that happened.”

After articles and six years at the Department of Justice, she began private practice, working directly with First Nations and their members. Now, after nearly 19 years in this field, she is one of those lucky souls who get to do work they love—and be paid for it. “The best part is the people I work with and for, both Aboriginal and others. They are, without exception, visionary, courageous, practical, and inclusive. I am honoured to serve them.”

When asked what motivates her, Alisa says, “I am one of those people who can only do things I find meaningful, even if this sometimes means having to look for that meaning. I am also driven to be useful, which in turn can drive other

people nuts! It's a good thing I've become a lawyer, as this allows me to legitimately do meaningful, useful work while annoying others—hopefully not my clients.

“I would hope that any good I am doing today comes from a genuine desire to make a positive difference, whether big or small. I think a smile and friendly word can make all the world of difference because who we are will always be reflected and repeated from person to person, to the ends of the earth. I believe we are far more interconnected than we may know, spirits journeying in human or other forms who, by definition, have no boundaries.”

She has had the good fortune to be able to volunteer, she says. As a young person, Alisa volunteered at school, church, youth camps, and charities. That satisfied not only that “usefulness” urge, but also her curiosity. “I love to learn and experience because it leads to growth.”

As an adult, Alisa volunteered with West Coast LEAF, the BC branch of the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), from February 1997 to June 2004. LEAF is a national organization dedicated to improving women's equality rights, both legally and as lived experiences. “I am proud of the work it does before the courts and with partners in education and government.”

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It is also a wonderful place to connect with other women whose qualities of compassion, intelligence, and commitment “make them a delight to be with. I currently serve on the national LEAF Board, as I have since April 2003, and enjoy the challenges and opportunities that affords.”

The work Alisa did with West Coast LEAF has recently been honoured by a Canadian Bar Association community service award. “I'll accept it,” she says, “but only if I can share it with those who allowed me to serve with them. What I learned about leadership, friendship, and myself has been immeasurable.”

In June of this year, she returned to her “roots,” taking on a director's position with the National Nikkei Museum & Heritage Centre. “Our mandate is to educate and inform about the experiences and contributions of Canadians of Japanese ancestry and to document these for all of us. It has been thoroughly enjoyable to rediscover the community of my youth. My first language was Japanese, which I spoke until Kindergarten. Today, though, you'd think I'd never heard a word of it in my life.”

We asked Alisa what she sees for the future. “We usually understand time as a continuum, with a beginning, middle, and end, and a definite direction. But the future, to me, is the present. I learned a powerful lesson on this year's anniversary of my first husband's death. I always hike out to where his ashes were scattered and spend a few moments in silence, letting the sound and smell of the ocean wash away the world, my work, and my worries. (Other people do this sort of thing regularly. I think they call it ‘meditation.’)

“This year, I looked around at the enormous slabs of rock on which I sat and recognized that they were ‘perfect’ in time and space, exactly as they were. No one would say that the huge fissures, the scars of past battles deep within the earth, the clinging sea life and erosion by pounding surf, and even the seagulls squatting on them, detract from their profound beauty, completeness, and authority.

“If we accept our perfection in this time and space, then the future becomes the present and we are fully ourselves—profoundly beautiful, complete, and authoritative. I would like to live that way each day and, by example, encourage others to be ‘perfect.’ Then, if I'm right about our interconnectedness, our world will also be perfect. Talk about making a positive difference!” ▲



*Alisa and her dear Juba*