

Katrina Pacey

Katrina Pacey has lost a number of allies because of her activism. A passionate and dedicated feminist, some of her peers haven't been too comfortable with her fight to change Canada's prostitution laws. While many feminists feel that sex work is exploitive, and that johns and pimps need to be more heavily punished, Pacey is fighting to get sex workers more rights.

"It's hard and I have a lot of sadness about that, because there are people I considered allies who can't collaborate with me on other issues because of my position on this issue," says the 37-year-old Vancouver activist and lawyer. "So that's very difficult and has been exactly what I thought it would be, which is very divisive and isolating within the feminist community."

One of Pivot Legal Society's founding members, an award-winning Downtown Eastside legal advocacy organization, Pacey and her street-level sex worker clients are seeking to have Canadian prostitution laws repealed. It hasn't been an easy fight—for her personally and professionally.

Having launched the Charter challenge in 2007, the case has battled multiple appeals from the federal government, which has argued that former sex workers shouldn't have standing. It could be years before actual fight to change the laws are heard. But Pacey remains undeterred. Despite the enormous challenges, the fight for sex workers' rights has changed her life—and, she admits, her opinions on prostitution.

"I had a media driven, '80s-feminism type of analysis that all sex workers are victims and no one would do that work by choice—that sex work is always exploitive," she says. "I had a lot of pretty deep stereotypes and assumptions about what prostitution is."

But her views changed when she started hearing what sex workers themselves were saying. As part of Pivot, Pacey helped compile 94 affidavits with street level sex workers who unanimously agreed that Canada's current prostitution laws were placing them in danger.

"That changed me, going through that process and hearing those stories about how these women are victims to violence and unable to access police protection," she says about the interview process. "And the types of violence they were experiencing was unimaginable to me."

At a time, when Robert Pickton had yet to be charged for the murder of many of the 69 missing women from the Downtown Eastside, many of them sex workers, Pacey saw that the current laws were hurting, not protecting, women. She knew then that the laws had to change.

“Law reform is about saving lives,” says Pacey. “I am committed to the fight to end patriarchy and will always fight against violence against women and lack of housing and education, but while we’re fighting for those things, for the women in this community, I want them to be alive so that they can enjoy the benefit of all those social reforms when the day comes.”

As much as she may have given gives up personally to embroil herself in the battle, she would never concede to the idea that she has sacrificed anything all. This is where she belongs, she insists, listening to the voices of Canada’s least protected citizens and affecting real and meaningful change in Canada’s court system.

Pacey now has a family of her own—a daughter and partner to whom she credits much of her strength and motivation. And while she’s always been drawn to activism, from her first feminist rallies with her mom, to rallying on behalf of the environment, to fighting on behalf of the country’s most isolated, Pacey doesn’t waver for a second that she’s only doing what she’s capable of. Humble through and through, she insists that dedicating her life to activism is a combination of her own will power plus a little luck along the way.

Pacey has spent most of her life in Vancouver, born and raised in a loving and supportive, if somewhat unconventional west side family. That she was brought up with privilege is much of the reason she dedicates her life to others less privileged.

“I see myself as very fortunate,” she says. “Because out of the benefit of that and as a result, I hope I have a lot to give. That’s kind of how I see the equation.”

In the beginning she had little choice as her mom, psychiatrist and physician Ingrid Pacey, is a feminist activist herself. As the younger Pacey was introduced to protests at pro-choice and women’s equality rallies, she was nervous but excited at what the energy felt like for people who believed in a cause and worked together. “I knew there was something really important about the passion and the focus on women’s rights,” she says.

Despite her early learning and exposure to the women’s rights movement, Pacey found herself gravitating toward the environmental movement as a teenager and began organizing protests and rallies on behalf of the planet while she was in high school. “I was looking for something to do and I understood the movement,” she says—unlike the pro-choice rallies where she was too young to understand why women used coat hangers as symbols to sound off their message.

As her personal identity was forming beyond the boundaries of her upbringing, she decided to enroll at the University of British Columbia to embark on a political science degree with a minor in women’s studies.

Ever searching for a more complete worldview, Pacey had a coming-of-age experience that helped set her solidly on her course. She decided to take a year off mid-university to see what else the world had to offer. An avid sailor and mountain biker, her instincts took her to New Zealand and Australia where she spent six months biking around the two countries. The solitude and independence changed her, and so did her experience with those countries' indigenous populations.

"It was a really important moment when I kind of broke free and I decided that when I came back I wouldn't take any more jobs that didn't have a social purpose," she says. She made a decision that she would give up her hobbies that took up her time and focus on activism. "I was worried about letting others down, but I knew what I needed to do next," she says.

When she returned from her journey and completed her degree, she followed through with her promise to herself and began to get involved in projects that focused on feminism and women's rights. "I grabbed the Red Book [a listing of community, social and government services] and marked every organization that had to do with women's issues and I phoned them until someone said they might have a job for a third year undergrad," she says. One of the first was working with a program called Safe Teen, an initiative that teaches self-defense and safety to young girls.

Law school had always been on the radar but Pacey was apprehensive about the pressures that the schooling might take on her burgeoning convictions. So she enrolled to do a masters degree in women's studies. But she started spending more time within the Downtown Eastside community and less at school. "My masters was really hard because the concepts were too big and a friend asked, 'Why don't you drop out?'"

The simple question was a light bulb for Pacey as she realized that she had the power to choose where she focused her energy, and that if something wasn't working, she could change directions and the sky wouldn't fall on her. After that, she decided with certainty upon working toward a law degree.

After working on her thesis with the Vancouver Police Department's domestic violence and criminal harassment unit, her partner gave her a home printed pamphlet that introduced her to Pivot. And at her first meeting, the issue of police brutality was raised and the idea of a rights card was born. With a lot of hope and as much naiveté, Pacey approached the police department to see if they could work together to create a wallet-sized document that informed citizens of their rights when encountering the police.

An epiphany of sorts happened when the department practically laughed her out the door. "The police didn't seem to want people to know their rights," she says, not that they would say as much.

Opening the lid on police injustice was a courageous move. “People weren’t talking about police brutality in Vancouver,” she says. In fact, she often faced resistance and doubt when she would bring it up.

But that only strengthened her commitment to Pivot and its mission. “We work in collaboration with members of this community and rely on their expertise and their experience as evidence for the work that we do,” she says. “I wasn’t going to come waltzing in and somehow dictate what’s best for people in this community.”

Pacey has certainly made her mark within Pivot. Since she joined the organization she has won a YWCA Woman of Distinction award, a UBC Law Alumni award, and was named one of the top 100 most influential women in British Columbia by *The Vancouver Sun*.

Pivot’s founding executive director John Richardson has watched her transform over the decade from young lawyer to one of the “leading voices in Canada [on sex trade reform].”

“She’s become much stronger in her convictions,” he says. “She’s definitely a lot more rooted in the evidence. She’s very clear about what she thinks is right... An area where she’s really grown is really staying by her beliefs and not being afraid to speak out against people she likes and respects.”

It was while she was growing as an activist and a lawyer within Pivot that Pacey found there was still an essential voice missing—women’s voices were not being sought nor heard. And so Pacey held women’s only meetings to see what issues were important to them.

“I was hoping that we wouldn’t be asked to take on is the issue of sex work and law reform because coming from the feminist community, I knew that was a really divisive, difficult, complex issue,” she says. Despite this, sex workers’ rights were front and center of the dialogue.

Going through the process of listening to the stories of violence and abuse that sex workers encountered, due in part to the laws in place gave her a limited view. “It was not until I spent another year or two after I’d met with other workers from all aspects of the industry that I feel like the full picture sunk in, that I started to understand the diversity of the industry,” she says.

In August 2007, five years after she opened the initial dialogue with sex workers, Pacey and Pivot provided legal counsel to the Downtown Eastside Sex Workers United Against Violence Society to challenge Canada’s prostitution laws. They knew it wouldn’t be easy and that was confirmed when the Department of Justice, the defendant in the case, responded by throwing up as many roadblocks as possible.

“They could have said, ‘We want our laws to be constitutional and to have them be tested in a court of law when questions arise of their constitutionality and effectiveness,’” Pacey says. Instead the battle in the courts continues but Pacey has limitless hope that change for the protection and safety of sex workers will come.

Pacey shows no signs of slowing down. Having stepped into the role of director of litigation at Pivot, she and two colleagues recently opened up a boutique law firm (“I don’t mean to sound fancy,” she says) called Ethos Law Group. They offer pro bono work for Pivot and other organizations and they have an ethic for the files they take on. They also give a percentage of their profits to Pivot Legal Society. “I really believed that this town needed a law firm that identified as socially responsible,” she says. “We see ourselves as strong advocates but also legal educators to our clients.”

Her work with Pivot isn’t finished, not even close. Once there are some clear wins for sex workers’ rights and safety, Pacey will likely focus on drug policy. The InSite case will be heard in the Supreme Court of Canada in May and she is ceaselessly optimistic about the ruling and the positive far-reaching effects it could have.

As for the future of social justice, Pacey hopes that it will happen on multiple levels—that marginalized people will become more empowered and those with power will work to ensure those voices are heard.

“My hope is that at the grassroots level that there’s were the revolution will hopefully take place,” she says. “That’s where we need to provide whatever structures, support and empowerment to really allow marginalized people to mobilize themselves and amplify their voice... And that the people in positions of power also recognize that that they have a role in that movement.”

But she adds that everyone can be part of the social change just by understanding that they are impacted by one person’s suffering and by treating marginalized people, whether they’re homeless or a sex worker, with respect and dignity.

Pacey understands that the world isn’t black and white and that there are shades of grey in every situation, especially legal ones. And she doesn’t deny that sorting through legal situations is a difficult task when people’s lives and national laws are at stake. “It’s a challenge every day and if it wasn’t, I’d think I were asleep at the wheel.”