

Valerie Bonga

Growing up in a family of scientists in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Valerie Bonga wasn't always sure which career path she would take.

"I was so horrible at science and had no interest in it," the Penticton lawyer says with a laugh. "But I knew that I wanted to work with people so I ended up in law."

She moved to Vancouver in 1981 where she got an arts degree at the University of British Columbia. She found a job working as legal secretary for Bill Street, a Vancouver lawyer, for one year. Bitten by the legal bug, Valerie moved back to the east coast a year later where she commenced her law degree at the University of New Brunswick, graduating in 1989. She then moved back to Vancouver and articulated with Kevin Jarvis as well as her old employer, Bill Street at Street and Company. In 1991, Valerie moved to her current home of Penticton where she opened her own practice with her husband and fellow lawyer, Nick.

"It still works pretty good after 22 years," she says, chuckling. "I think we're a pretty good team."

As part of this team, Valerie has helped many people with low incomes in the Penticton area with their family-related legal issues.

"If you see something that's not right, you want to fix it so that injustices don't occur," she says. "And I really enjoy working with the people. You come across challenging issues at times, which are interesting trying to work them out. I like the daily contact with people — including my colleagues."

When she is not tending to legal aid and pro bono cases, Valerie is farming and visiting her four grandchildren.

"We have a hazelnut orchard and some fruit trees — it's our lame attempt at farming," she says. "I also travel a lot and hang out with the kids and grandkids in Alberta."

Valerie says she believes that legal aid helps create a better society.

"Having access to justice maintains a functioning society," she says. "If people didn't have access to justice, you'd be living in a sorry place, and it maintains a just society. If people in society don't get their basic needs, then you end up with a pretty unhappy place."