Bruce Lasky and Wendy Morrish:

Strengthening Access to Justice and the Rule of Law in Asia and Globally

Asia Pro Bono Conference, Laos, 2012

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We are often described as the "inspirational dynamic justice duo", being the co-founders of the Access to Justice organisation, BABSEACLE. We have moved forward together, both professional and personally, for more than 15 years. In doing so we have helped to ensure greater access to justice and a strengthening of the Rule of Law in the Asia region and globally.

While we started out with different backgrounds and geographic locations, Bruce coming from the USA and Wendy from Australia, over the years these experiences and influences have provided a diverse harmonisation in both working styles and values.

Bruce began his professional career as a Public Defender/Legal Aid lawyer in Florida, after graduating from the University of Florida law school in 1991. He was always driven to become a lawyer as a means to help fight injustices and to try to do something to help level the legal playing field. In 1999, Bruce left the United States for a temporary trip to Asia, and has remained there since, being the co-founder of a number of not-for-profit organisations, including BABSEACLE, and a Partner and Pro Bono Head with the Lanna Lawyers Law Firm, located in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Wendy's path was initially a different one. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree from the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education in Queensland, Australia, she began her career in the field of business development in the private sector of corporate Australia. She did, however, have a connection to justice, having worked as an active Justice of the Peace for over 18 years.

Our paths merged when Wendy, who at the time was managing the largest commercial crocodile farm in Australia, came to Cambodia as a volunteer for organisations co-founded by Bruce. The first was Sustainable Cambodia and then Bridges Across Borders, the predecessor to BABSEACLE. Wendy went from a volunteer, to a full-time team member, and then a co-founding Director of BABSEACLE in 2010.

Throughout this whole period of time, with Wendy and Bruce's guidance and dedication, along with an amazing team of persons from the Asia region and an incredibly supportive and wise Board of Directors, BABSEACLE has gone on to see great achievements.

BABSEACLE collaborates globally in the development of justice education and access to justice initiatives while simultaneously fostering generations of pro bono minded champions. BABSEACLE works collaboratively with lawyers, members of the legal community, justice-related organisation partners, universities, law students, law faculties, government and the private sector to develop pro bono, legal aid and justice education programs throughout Asia and globally.

BABEACLE Team

”BABSEACLE works collaboratively with lawyers, members of the legal community, justice-related organisation partners, universities, law students, law faculties, government and the private sector to develop pro bono, legal aid and justice education programs throughout Asia and globally”

These programs assist in providing access to justice services while simultaneously helping to build the next generation of social justice, pro bono minded champions.

One of the many core initiatives that BABSEACLE is constantly credited for is being one of the co-founding organisations, and the Secretariat, of the Asia Pro Bono Conference and Access to Justice Exchange (APBC & A2JX). The APBC & A2JX is a trademark of the Asia region. Beginning in 2012 in the Lao PDR, the APBC & A2JX is held each year to emphasise and celebrate pro bono and access to justice-related work being conducted throughout Asia and globally.

The APBC & A2JX has become the largest annual gathering of persons supporting or engaged in access to justice, pro bono and public interest law in Asia. The event provides a key opportunity for stakeholders to develop, explore and share pro bono and access to justice initiatives and projects that strengthen justice and the Rule of Law in Asia and internationally.

Each year, the APBC & A2JX relocates to a new Asian country, with the most recent two Conference and Exchanges having been held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including: Vientiane, Lao PDR (2012); Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (2013); Singapore (2014); Mandalay, Myanmar (2015); Bali, Indonesia (2016); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2017); Hong Kong (2018); Kathmandu, Nepal (2019); Virtually (2020) & Virtually (2021).

The 11th APBC & A2JX will return to its roots, and once again be held both in the Lao PDR (and virtually) in September 2022.

From the APBC & A2JX’s inception, we, along with trusted friends and colleagues, were convinced that “from little things, big things grow” and that if many came together, this event would result in overwhelming success and impact.

To date we very much believe this has been achieved, and we are also mindful that this has been assisted, in-part, by both of us providing strong value and ethical input. We made it clear from the beginning, that while BABSEACLE was to assist in the organising of the event, this was not to be solely a BABSEACLE event, but rather BABSEACLE would be one with many. This was based on the realisation that in order to effectively grow pro bono, doing so with many was the answer.

Furthermore, it was mandated that the conference sessions would be fully participatory and interactive, and not just a bunch of “talking-head” sessions. We

Bruce (far left) and Wendy (second from right) with Queensland University of Technology students at the Asia Pro Bono Conference, Nepal, 2019

Asia Regional CLE MT Hearing Event, 2021

decided that we also wanted the Conference and Exchange to be fun and inspiring.

When asked if, to date, the APBC & A2JX has successfully grown from being little to big, all one has to do is ask participants who have attended one or more of the previous events. It is undeniable that the above and so much more has been, and keeps being, achieved. One constant piece of feedback we get from so many event participants is that the APBC & A2JX is both unique and one of the greatest events they have ever attended.

All of this brings us much pride and happiness, with our happiness coming from many other ways and means, including our being married in 2015. We have many other passions, and often intertwine them into the justice work we do. We recognise that to be effective in the justice work we do we must be both mentally and physically healthy. We are runners, or at least "finishers" as Bruce would say. Over the years we have completed numerous marathons, and inspired others to take up running. We have used this active health platform to raise awareness, promote and support the work of BABSEACLE and its partners, including the Virtual Global Pro Bono Move, which is held between 1 Jan and 31 Dec each year. This virtual event enables persons around the world to move for Justice and support the work of so many pro bono and access to justice providers globally. This awareness-raising event works hand-in-hand giving the opportunity for participation to persons across all continents to move in so many ways, including running, walking, biking, skiing, swimming, etc. People can participate from anywhere and whenever they want.

We also love to travel, although we regularly admit that most of our travel is work related. Even so, our travels ensure that we visit dear friends and family living across the globe.

We also enjoy delicious foods and wines. In fact, BABSEACLE has been known to hold many a wine tasting fundraiser over the years. Wendy is also an avid gardener, and no matter where we are living, even temporarily, her green thumb is applied to create a beautiful, comforting space for us.

When we reflect back over the many years we have been together, filled with successes and challenges, we are mindful that we are each other's soul mates. Knowing this enriches us with such energy, and assures us that we never walk alone, but do so side by side. ■

Bruce Lasky, *J.D.; LL.M. is the Co-Founder/Co-Director of the international not-for-profit,access to justice/legal education organisation BABSEACLE, and a Partner and Pro Bono Head of the Thailand based law firm Lanna Lawyers, which has a strong and fervent pro bono focus and practice. He is a Co-Founder, and International Organizing Committee Member, of the regionally and globally led Asia Pro Bono Consortium and Conference annually held: Laos (2012), Vietnam (2013), Singapore (2014), Myanmar (2015) Indonesia (2016) Malaysia (2017), Hong Kong (2018), Nepal (2019) Globally/Virtually (2020), Globally/Virtually (2021), and upcoming in Laos/Virtually (2022).*

He began his career in 1991 as a practicing criminal legal aid attorney and has more than 22 years of experience working in developing countries and countries in transition.

He is also a Steering Committee member of the Global Alliance for Justice Education(GAJE), SEALAW, and a Co-Founder/Director for the international not-for profit organisation, Sustainable Cambodia.

Wendy Morrish *is the Co-Founder/ Co-Director of the not-for-profit organisations BABSEACLE [www.babseacle.org] and BABSEACLE Foundation (Thailand). A core part of her responsibilities includes providing technical and education advisory support for pro bono and justice education programs throughout the Asia region, and globally. Wendy began working in countries in transition in 2006, after working in the field of business development in the private sector of corporate Australia, where she also worked as an active Justice of the Peace for over 18 years.*

She is a Co-Founder, and International Organizing Committee Member, of the regionally and globally led Asia Pro Bono Consortium and Conference, annually held: Laos (2012), Vietnam (2013), Singapore (2014), Myanmar (2015) Indonesia (2016) Malaysia (2017), Hong Kong (2018), Nepal (2019) Globally/Virtually (2020), Globally/Virtually (2021), and upcoming in Laos/Virtually (2022).

Wendy also currently serves on the Steering Committee of GAJE (Global Alliance for Justice Education).

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