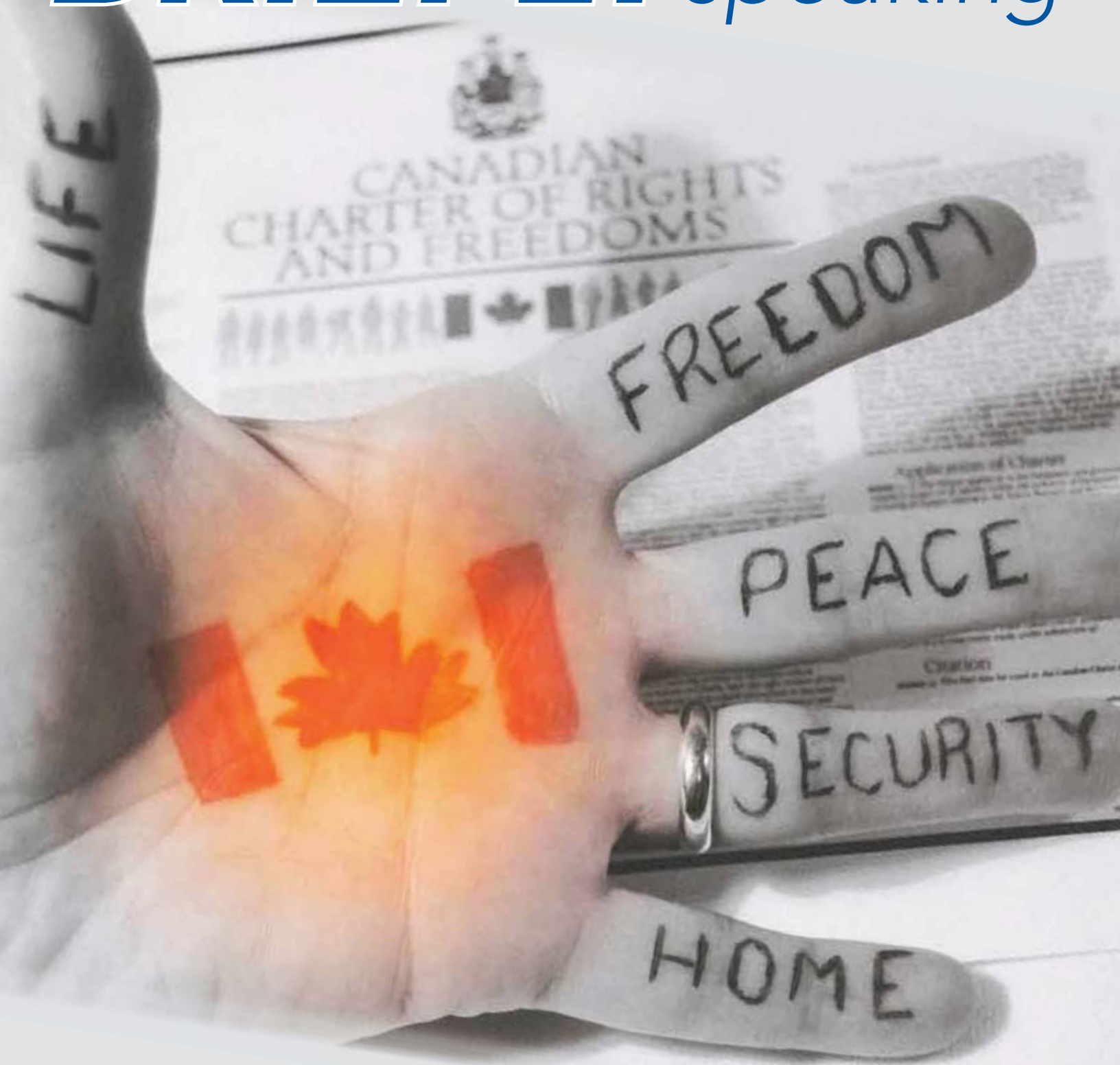


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Law Day 2010 Photography Contest submission.

The opinions expressed by the authors in Briefly Speaking are not necessarily the approved views of the OBA.

# A Plan For the Future: Challenges and Opportunities at the Wills Project

Maria Sagan

**O**ppportunity defines the Wills Project, a volunteer legal clinic directed by law students and affiliated with Pro Bono Students Canada.

At the Project, students and volunteer lawyers draft and execute wills and powers of attorney for low-income clients who are HIV positive. As the Osgoode Hall coordinator of the Project, I am exposed to all the challenges and opportunities confronting such a volunteer legal service.

Our primary challenge is client recruitment. The Project holds one wills education session per semester which is intended to be both an information meeting and a recruitment program. Without this session it would be difficult to attract clients as many people are unaware of the service or are distrusting of the legal system. Those who attend do not always qualify for the Project as the criteria for low-income designation is strict. It is difficult to argue that someone receiving multiple disability and government pension plans should be turned away, especially considering that he or she is HIV positive, and yet it happens every year.

The program's restriction to those who are HIV positive also ignores the needs of other communities. There is no similar service for the general low-income population, or for those who have low incomes and suffer from a different life-threatening illness, such as cancer.

Candidates who qualify for the Project are matched with two student volunteers, either from Osgoode Hall or the University of Toronto, and a volunteer lawyer. Appointments with the lawyers and students are an opportunity for the client to talk about his or her life while others are listening.

As communication is sometimes difficult, there are often waiting periods for these appointments. For example, clients do not always have voicemail on their phones. Further, scheduling two meetings between four people proves to be a challenge. Meetings are booked either at the volunteer lawyers' offices or at the 519 Community Centre, as the Project does not have a formal office space.

As the end of the winter semester is upon us, the Project is coming to a close. This exemplifies yet another challenge facing this service—because it is student-run, wills are not written over the summer. While seemingly unjust, this is the reality of a volunteer project.

The Project is fueled by the spirit of its volunteers. Without their enthusiasm and dedication, no wills would be written. Our success is dependent on the help of the lawyers who supervise the drafting of one will and set of power of attorneys

per semester. Their advice and flexibility are invaluable to the Project.

A lack of full-time staff and resources, and the unique issues of the community it serves, are genuine hurdles facing the Project. Yet, its existence impacts many lives, including those of the students and lawyers who work within its boundaries. Clients often return after many years to make changes to their wills. Despite its challenges, the Wills Project provides a small, disadvantaged group with peace of mind and the knowledge that they are in control of their future. This end result brightly overshadows most of the obstacles described above, making the Wills Project a vital and most worthwhile service.

*Maria Sagan is a third-year student at Osgoode Hall Law School.*

