Sharon Morrisroe: An Expert in Securities and Skiing

Interviews and Profiles

Sharon Morrisroe, the general counsel and corporate secretary for Raymond James Ltd., a national brokerage firm, is an expert on securities and the slopes. The two forces have settled her in British Columbia where she has evolved with the securities market for over 30 years, while enjoying the runs at Whistler when she can.

“It’s quite Canadian,” Morrisroe says, when asked about her family’s background. Her grandparents coalesced in Alberta in the early 1900s from England, the United States and other parts of Canada. Both of her parents grew up on the rural prairie. Her father later moved to a small town where he built a hotel.

The Leduc oil well hit on February 13, 1947, and suddenly Alberta was transformed into a booming, oil-rich province. Her father moved the family to Calgary and ran an oil business. Her mother was a teacher.

Morrisroe was one of eight children. She always enjoyed school, and used to play school with her siblings. She thought she would be a teacher. In late high school she met her sister’s friend who was in law school. The woman was engaging, dynamic and an ace in the classroom. Any stereotypes or hang-ups about being a woman in law were cast aside.

She attended the University of Calgary for one year before moving to the older, more established University of Alberta in Edmonton, about 2.5 hours from Calgary. A lasting lesson from her law school education is preparation. “Prepare, prepare, prepare: it is something that was emphasized a lot and I’ve never forgotten,” she says.

Throughout her late high school and then college years, she was planning to move to British Columbia. Morrisroe had attended summer ski camp at Garibaldi, which later became the world-renown Whistler ski resort. “I think it’s the most beautiful place in the world,” she says with conviction.

She told friends about her plans for after law school on a ski trip to Vermont. One of her friend’s brothers was on the trip and was moving to Vancouver as well. They got together and have now been married for 31 years.

Morrisroe was called to the bar in 1980 as a solicitor and barrister, like all Canadian lawyers. At the time, British Columbia was known for its mining and forestry industries. Two security lawyers mentored her during her early years in Vancouver, the province’s largest city. The legal landscape was much different then. There were no national law firms. In-house legal work wasn’t as common as it is today.

She worked at Swinton & Company (now Miller Thompson) for 13 years. She highlights a dedication to teamwork, and a strategy of under promising and over-delivering with her success there and later.

In her early years as a lawyer, she created and organized national mutual fund financing income and growth funds. At the time, most mutual funds were offered on a provincial level. Morrisroe hopes that a cooperative national securities regime will happen within the next five years. Historical concerns from Alberta and Quebec have stopped a national securities regulator from forming.

When the national mutual fund was organized, Morrisroe had to make sure the prospectus was translated into French, the one official language of Quebec, before it was sold in that province. “The opportunity to be the lead on the deal was great work and great experience,” she says.

In 1993, now the mother of three young children, she took a sabbatical from her career. The economy was lagging, and there was talk about laying off an employee, who was single and had a mortgage. Morrisroe volunteered to take a year off because her three children were young and she didn’t want to see a colleague put out. A year later she negotiated a three-day workweek, for a three-fifth paycheck. But even her boss admitted that she would accomplish more in three days than anyone else in the firm in a full week.

Her old colleague, whose job she saved years earlier, recommended her for an in-house position in 1996 at Connor, Clark & Lunn, an investment firm. She had to go in and prove her value. The securities environment was changing and there were more rules and expectations for companies. Pension and trust law overlapped with securities and she continued to develop her skillset.

She moved to her current job in 2003. Raymond James is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the international Raymond James, which has its head office in St. Petersburg, Florida. Morrisroe oversees a small legal department of three lawyers and one assistant. She has been in her current role since 2006. She sits on the board of the company as the corporate secretary, and also the board of its foundation, the Raymond James Canada Foundation.

Morrisroe shows no sign of slowing down. She still skis as much as possible, and plays tennis several times a week. She attends events put on by the ACC British Columbia chapter and is hoping to be part of the cooperative national securities commission, whenever it happens. “Today I’m pleased to be in situation where I’m knowledgeable in a number of areas of law, and I am able to provide advice or at least to know when I need to seek expertise,” she says. “I can’t say I have any regrets. I have been very, very, very fortunate.”

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