



“Karen was a beacon in every room she entered.”

Karen MacKay, MBA
1955 - 2021

Karen Mabel MacKay, a 2009 COLPM inductee, passed away on January 11, 2021, at Hill House Hospice in Ontario, Canada.

Karen was recognized for her ability to assist law firm leadership and individual lawyers through some of their most difficult challenges. Her specialties: planning, facilitation and coaching skills; law firms and the professional talent within them; leadership and management; strategy and governance; crisis management, succession planning, and exit strategies.

A number of her colleagues, clients and friends described what made Karen so special.

Jordan Furlong, Law21 Principal, summed up her presence:

“ Poise, strength, grace, and command — those are the impressions that remain with me. How Karen would preside over and adroitly govern a gathering of unruly, ambitious partners at a retreat or strategy session and conduct their interchanges like a maestro with an orchestra. How she would bide her time while others said their piece, then quietly cut to the heart of an issue. How her genuine warmth and concern for others was girded with iron resolve, razor wit, and discerning judgment. There was no one like Karen MacKay in the legal consulting world, and there won't be anyone like her again. Our loss is great; but what we've gained, the wisdom we remember and the memories we cherish, are greater still. ”

Stephen Mabey, Managing Director of Applied Strategies, Inc., and a close collaborator of Karen's, wrote:

“ From smelly markers polluting hotels rooms, to trips to Ottawa, to Law Firm KPI, to leadership seminars she encouraged me to help with, to the great honor she bestowed on me by nominating me as a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and the wonderful socks she gave me on the night of my induction (and me rushing to the men's room to put them on with my tux), by just being present and listening to my questions — and yes, complaints — when I got sideways with a client, actively contributing to my client base, co-authoring articles that she could have easily written on her own, and many other memories too numerous to mention.

But my overriding memory of Karen will always be her being there for me. Never looking for anything in return — rather, just guiding and leading by her example of how to conduct a consulting practice, and more importantly, be a good person.

But there is solace in being reminded that, "Those we love never truly leave us. There are things that death cannot touch."

See you later, my friend. ”

Gary Luftspring, the Managing Partner at Toronto based Goodman & Carr during Karen's 10-year long career with the firm, says:

“ Karen started at Goodman and Carr LLP as director of HR. She quickly moved to COO and ultimately to CEO. Along the way she soaked up responsibility, did an Executive MBA at the University of Toronto, and managed to “herd the cats” with good humor and expertise. Karen was always a positive force, encouraging and optimistic. Although I personally was sad when she left Goodman & Carr, I was happy for her to explore the next chapter in her career as a consultant to the legal market. That was indeed the logical next step, and one which of course she excelled at, working for firms throughout North America. We kept in touch to the end, mainly because that is who Karen was. She would call when she was “in the neighbourhood.” We would get together and chat and it was always as if there had been no gap since our last conversation. We laughed and cried and commiserated. I will miss her in my life.

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Alex Overchuk

Ms. MacKay launched her own consulting practice, Phoenix Legal, in 2002, where she and her colleagues helped countless professionals with management, leadership and career challenges. Her colleague at Phoenix, Alex Overchuk, writes:

“ I had the pleasure of meeting Karen when I joined a law firm almost a decade ago, initially working with Karen as a client, then as her colleague, and always as her friend. Karen had an insatiable curiosity that she shared and encouraged with her clients. She created safe spaces for people to explore opportunities outside their comfort zone and inspired new ways to approach professional challenges both at the individual and firm-wide level. She was generous with her time in supporting young professionals as they embarked on new challenges, always available as they moved into more senior roles. It felt like she knew everyone -- a hello to someone at the coffee shop, a wave or quick embrace walking down the street, a raised glass at a restaurant, and even a quick chat at the airport. Karen was an amazing woman, and an awesome mentor. She influenced so many professionals, and her presence will be missed.

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Karen was a partner in Edge International, where she consulted with international law firms ranging in size from 30 to 3,000 lawyers on professional staff career development, from recruiting and mentoring to evaluation and compensation. She also provided leadership in the development of business plans and execution of strategy and gave counsel on operations and administrative management.

Gerry Riskin, Founder of Edge International, remembers:

“ Karen had a joyful spirit that enabled her to magically enhance the performance of her clients as well as her colleagues. She was a gifted member of Edge International, and then went on to create her own specialized boutique consultancy, Phoenix Legal. We all remained good friends, and at times we would include Phoenix on Edge assignments where her unique specialties were critical to great outcomes. I feel very fortunate to be among those who benefited personally and professionally from knowing and working with her. I will miss so much being able to reach out for her sage counsel.

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Karen’s special focus was on strategic planning, transitions, and building the next generation of partners and firm leaders. In 2004, she carried out groundbreaking research into the needs, aspirations, and values of the youngest in the profession and those who mentored them. She developed what she called the LEAD program for young law firm leaders.

Michael Bussman, a tax partner in Gowlings’ Toronto office, comments:

“ I was a participant in Karen’s first LEAD program at Gowlings. What I remember best were the several one-on-one sessions Karen held with us. She brought an intense engagement and interest to each discussion, always alive to the person sitting across from her. I could tell that she cared about us, and wanted to bring out the very best in us. I am saddened to hear that she did not have more time.

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Karyn Bradley, Toronto Office Managing Partner of Gowling WLG (Canada) LLP when Karen created a successful leadership programme for young leaders:

“ Shortly after my appointment as the Toronto Managing Partner of Gowlings, Karen MacKay invited me to a congratulatory lunch. During our lunch, Karen asked me what I most wanted to accomplish during my four-year term. Without hesitation, I replied that I wanted to ensure that the next generation of leaders at Gowlings was better prepared to assume leadership roles than I had been. Leadership training at most (if not all) large law firms used to consist of throwing the candidate into the deep end of the pool and watching to see if that person could thrash about and keep his or her head above water. If so, that candidate was destined for increasingly important leadership positions. If not, another candidate would come along eventually.

The problem was, as I explained to Karen, I really had no idea how to accomplish this goal. Karen's face lit up, she smiled broadly, and she told me that she just might be able to assist. That was the beginning of a fabulous partnership and journey into the world of leadership development and training for the next generation of leaders at Gowlings. Together with Susan Clarke, Karen and I developed LEAD, a unique and intensive leadership development course that ran from September to May every two years. Karen wisely insisted that all of the faculty be professional trainers and coaches, not partners at the firm.

LEAD was run by the external faculty (headed by Karen) and included personal assessments, lectures, an extensive reading list, presentation skills training, and both personal and peer coaching. Young partners with leadership ambitions either internal-facing (such as firm management) or external-facing (such as managing a firm client team) applied to join the program and had to undertake a commitment of time and energy, in addition to running their practices. Many of the LEAD participants became close to Karen and stayed in touch with her long after they had graduated from the program.

The LEAD program was a smashing success beyond our wildest expectations. To date, over 100 young partners at Gowlings have graduated from the program, and as one alumnus told me recently, leadership training is now part of the DNA at Gowlings. Karen's vision and commitment to the development of this unique leadership development program for future law firm leaders is an extraordinary achievement. I, along with many partners at Gowlings, will miss her terribly. Rest in peace, dear friend.

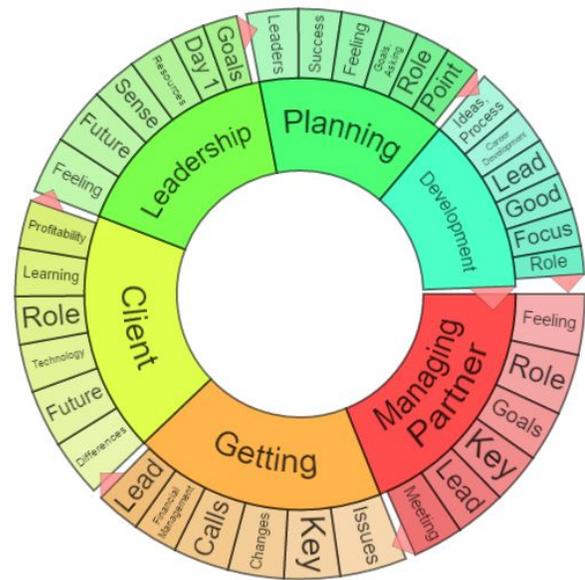
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Aviva Rotenberg, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Canadian Bar Association, comments on the work Karen did for the CBA:

“ Karen worked closely on several important projects with the Canadian Bar Association. Most notably, she lent her deep expertise, keen insight, and wealth of experience to our Law Firm Leadership conference and other programming designed specifically for managing partners. The feedback from any program that Karen was involved with was always stellar, with the audience joining the CBA in our appreciation for her ability to coax the best out of all of us. Her positivity, warmth, and commitment to excellence in our profession truly seemed to come from a place of genuine feeling, and it showed in everything she did. We will miss Karen and extend our deepest condolences to all who knew and loved her.

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Karen frequently offered insights to the profession through her contributions to the American Bar Association’s **Law Practice** magazine, the Association of Legal Administration’s **Legal Management** magazine, and the **Edge International Review**, as well as other publications and online resources. This word wheel powered by LegalTrac’s artificial intelligence graphically reveals the focus and spectrum of her work.



Joan Feldman, Editor and Publisher of AttorneyatWork.com and, previously, the ABA’s Law Practice magazine comments:

“ I first met Karen MacKay more than a decade and a half ago when we asked her to take the lead in writing a new column for Law Practice, appropriately called “Taking the Lead.” She had proven herself an insightful and prolific writer and a true joy to work with, and we were thrilled when she said yes. Over the next several years, she more than met the mission to provide tangible, intelligent advice from “inside the room” on leadership

and management issues. But Karen shone brightest as a selfless advisor and friend once she joined the Law Practice Magazine Advisory board, demonstrating the ability that made her an invaluable asset in law firm boardrooms across North America. Her uncanny ability to both read the room and guide the room was a true gift. On the personal side, Karen became a true friend and coach, guiding me through some dark times. Her light, her wisdom, her positivity, and her infectious smile will sorely be missed.

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Karen was inducted into the Class of 2009 at the first COLPM Futures Conference, which was held at the University of Denver. She was nominated by then-President Ed Flitton and seconded by Simon Chester. Karen attended Futures Conferences in 2009, 2013, 2014, and 2015. At the 2013 event, she served as a breakout session facilitator.

Maggie Callicrate, CEO of San Francisco law firm Coblenz Patch Duffy & Bass, and past President of COLPM, writes:

“ Karen was a most gracious and giving mentor to me when we worked together for a couple of years in law firm consulting. She had previously made the transition from in-house law firm management to acting as a consultant to law firms. She was so generous with her insights, a ready smile, and a can-do approach to anything and everything.

She was also a fantastic host who made visits to her home outside of Toronto special. I remember one evening in particular when Karen and her husband Ken invited a number of colleagues to their home. Not surprisingly, the evening included a Scotch whisky tasting, courtesy of friend and colleague to many in this industry, Scotsman John Plank.

And one more lovely memory (and teaching moment!). We once met up at Boston Logan Airport for a client meeting the next day. It was getting close to midnight, but Karen called ahead from the cab to ask the front desk to have warm cookies in our rooms. I was dubious, but sure enough, delivery happened and the cookies were excellent!

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Simon Chester, past President of COLPM and Counsel at Gowling WLG

in Toronto, writes:

“ Reading these tributes, I recognized all the ways I encountered this extraordinary woman, Karen. I treasure the memories of someone always in motion.

At her College induction, striding across the campus of the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, delighting in the stimulation of new friends and sharing ideas. Karen loved people.

Walking over from the W in the Loop to a College Futures Conference at Chicago-Kent, her energy — a magnet to her friends.

Helping me through career transitions, and sharing dreams and fears, as we hiked through the leaves of Stouffville woodlands. It was entirely apt that Ken and Karen lived next to a golf course.

In all her presentations and workshops, a mind in motion, opening eyes and sparking new insights.

A soul in motion. Who touched all she met. Dear Heart, rest well.

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Karen will be missed by her husband of 25 years, Ken MacKay and her son Adam (Mindy) LaFlor and her two step sons, Matthew (Theresa) and Timothy (Katherine) MacKay. She also had six grandchildren.

The global COVID response has limited the customary and comforting rituals of passage and farewell. A memorial service will be planned in the spring. In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to Hill House Hospice, 36 Wright Street, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 4A1.

