

The Ron Ellis Award
for Contribution to Excellence in Compensation Law

June 5th, 2008

Steve Mantis

Steve is a treasure. Steve is a study in the art of the possible.

It was over twenty years ago that I offered my home as a billet for out-of-towners who wished to attend a conference in Toronto on the role of doctors at the compensation Board. I answered the expected knock at my door and encountered two unexpected characters from Thunder Bay: George Caisse, the poet and philosopher, and Steve Mantis, the builder, both leaders in the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group.

Little did I know or suspect that I was looking, in Steve, at a future member of the Board of Directors of the Workers Compensation Board, the leader of a national injured worker alliance, the make-it-happen person for numerous manuals, videos, and programmes for injured workers across the country, a Board member of the Ontario Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW), an executive member of ONIWG, the Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups, a member of the RAC-- the Research Advisory Committee of the workers' compensation system, the co-chair of the leading research project on worker compensation in Ontario--known as RAACWI, the person who would become one of the most sought-after spokespersons on compensation issues in Ontario, indeed, as one of my colleagues recently put it, I was inviting into my home the future Ambassador of injured workers.

Happily, I did not know all that or I might have been star-struck! But, really, with Steve, you can't help but get talking and thinking and doing. He has a passionate but friendly way about him that breaks through barriers and he can walk into a meeting of injured workers or the office of the President of the WSIB/WCB and get the best of conversations going.

Steve's fundamental motivation comes from wanting to see a better life for those who have been hurt through workplace accident or illness. He approaches this at many levels and in many ways at different times and even all at the same time, but I think we can see his principle contribution in two main areas: his recognition of the importance of research, and his recognition of the importance of the voice of the injured worker--and the integrity of that voice.

Steve had barely become the head of the Canadian Injured Workers' Alliance: CIWA, in 1990 when he organised a national study of the employment experience of injured workers. He found that across the nation, injured workers were experiencing high levels of unemployment. Well over 50%. He soon took note of the research done by Baldwin, Johnson, and Butler in the late 80's and early 90s based on a massive data-base of Ontario workers with permanent injuries: they also found very high unemployment rates of over 50%. Significantly they found that an initial return to work was not indicative of sustained employment. What became of these injured workers? Steve knew that a lot of folks in Thunder Bay were having a tough go of it--a lot of them were on welfare. What about others?

When he was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Workers' Compensation Board in January 1991 (to 1994), Steve was the voice for research. With these earlier studies before him, Steve insisted that the Board study its own data to discover what happened to these workers. What sort of compensation were they getting? Was the wage-loss system properly taking into account the narrowed employment field and reluctance of employers to hire injured workers? One study was done, which showed that wage-loss payments fell far short of actual wage loss. I am sorry to say the investigation was not pursued any further and a similar one has never been conducted. Steve has not stopped pursuing that gap and discusses it regularly with the WCB.

While on the RAC, the Research Advisory Committee. Steve worked hard along with some others to have more research encouraged and funded that looked into the actual situation of injured workers. His work bore some fruit, for example, in the important work in 2002 by Joan Eakin who examined the "Early and Safe Return to Work" strategy of the legislation in small workplaces. She uncovered what she named "*the discourse of abuse.*" The destruction of relations between employers and workers in small

workplaces which has done neither party any good and even caused additional health problems. Her paper has been very useful to the Board in its endeavour to change the policies around this aspect of the legislation. Since Joan's work there have been a number of other notable studies which look into the situation of injured workers and which Steve has practically memorized and uses at every practical opportunity.

Very recently under his guidance, the Thunder Bay Injured worker group, requested and received a report which might shed light on the situation of injured workers in Thunder Bay. This study: Poverty in Motion, the Rippling Effects was published in February 2008. Once again the astonishing level of unemployment and poverty of injured workers was uncovered. 63% of the respondents felt depressed. 15% had contemplated suicide.

Steve lets us know these statistics. (If he wasn't stuck listening to me now-- he would be using this opportunity to talk to all the illustrious people here-- to make sure they knew--and to discuss what can be done about it!)

Steve recognises that research is a critical element in understanding the effects of our compensation laws and in giving us tools to make changes for the better. His leadership in this area has led him to leadership of the RAACWI: The Research Action Alliance on the Consequences of Work Injury.

For those of you who may not know of this project, let me briefly describe that it is an exciting five-year Community-University Research project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research fund in Ottawa. It is looking at Ontario's compensation legislation and policy, financial and health issues for injured workers, and the history of the injured workers movement.

Steve shares the lead of this complex research project with Emile Tompa, a research scientist, of the Institute of Work and Health an internationally recognised workers' compensation research organisation.

Steve's role in RAACWI could be the subject of an evening discourse in and of itself--but his key role is to bring the injured worker community into the project and there to help injured workers feel comfortable with academics who speak such a different language; and for the academic researchers to be

able to hear the injured workers who also speak so differently and sometimes so emotionally. Then, along with Emile, to build a research community --where all participate in developing the ideas, giving input, and take the results where they can be used to make a difference. Steve and Emile are doing a wonderful job and themselves present a terrific example of learning from each other and working together.

It is in the context of this work of bringing these communities together that the idea of hidden treasures came up which Steve has developed as part of the meeting process: So much gets said--sometimes so unexpected, sometimes so poignantly eloquent, sometimes not quite on topic--but still so important, sometimes a bright new insight--these we call the hidden treasures--and at the end of the meeting we ask people to identify one gem of the day.

And this brings me to the other great contribution which Steve has made: The voice of the injured worker.

I have spent most of my time here to highlight Steve's contribution to research even though he is not an academic researcher, that there is little time to give justice to his work giving voice to the injured worker.

Steve's contribution in this area has been outstanding. He finds the opportunities to help people speak. He makes people feel comfortable. In the injured worker community he has coined the phrase "building on . . ." --building his idea, his input, upon what has been already said by others.

He has played an invaluable role in establishing Peer support groups across this country—where injured workers can come out of their isolation and find answers, friendship, courage—and their voices. He did much of this work while at the helm of CIWA and there also established a Speakers School for injured workers. This weekend school was held across the country and helped injured workers to *move from venting to convincing*. Something Steve nodoubt had first hand experience at. In these schools, injured workers learn to hone their experience into a compelling example of the need for a policy or for a policy change, or new legislation.

The Speaker School idea was picked up by RAACWI and along with Steve, Orlando Buonastella and Kate Lushington (theatre director and voice trainer), increasing numbers of injured workers with varying levels of

capacity in the English language and variable previous speaking experience, have become confident and eloquent public speakers.

Back in 1994, Steve was quoted in an *Our Times* magazine article as saying: "We have to have a system that values you as a person . . ."

This remains, along with the need to eliminate the poverty of injured workers, one of his key messages. The pursuit of this message, has brought together these two highlighted themes of Steve's contribution (research and the voice of injured workers), most recently in a series of *Blue Sky* meetings on *stigma*. Bringing a graduate of the Injured Worker Speaker School and two researchers from the RAACWI, Steve arranged two meetings with the top decision makers at the workers' compensation board (WSIB) to explore why injured workers are seen, so often, as cheaters and malingerers—and to explore how to change that. The result: the Board has agreed to incorporate this issue into its key document, *The Road to Zero*. If this is successfully achieved, a milestone will have been reached.

Steve does most of this work as Ambassador of injured workers on a volunteer basis. He sometimes gets a paid position which supports his efforts, but mostly it's volunteer. And this effort, can be better understood in its greatness, when you know where Steve lives. Most of us here are engaged from Toronto as our base. Steve is from Thunder Bay—not actually Thunder Bay—but quite a ways away—down that gravel road, and then this one, and now that one. When he participates in so many of the meetings—he is not hopping on the subway, or even his car and then returning home in the evening. He is leaving home for a week. And Steve sometimes feels torn—he does not really want to leave Barb, his kids and now his seven grandchildren, he does not really want to leave his garden—but the pull for justice keeps him coming back. So Thankyou to Steve's family for sharing him with us.

I am so pleased that Steve has been chosen to receive the Ron Ellis Award for Excellence in Compensation Law. He most assuredly deserves this recognition. And I will take this moment on the platform to say thankyou, Steve. I say thankyou for your work with the injured workers around Ontario for whom you provide such inspiration and such excellent leadership. I say thankyou on behalf of those of us working in the legal clinics for your steady and convincing work with us, and many others

including with members of parliament and with the compensation board. And I say thankyou, on behalf of those of us who work most closely with you, for your engaging, thoughtful, company, seeking and building the best possible system of workers' compensation in Ontario.

You are not a *hidden* treasure, but gem for all to see. Congratulations.