

2017 YWCA TORONTO WOMAN OF DISTINCTION

# TRANSFORMING LIVES



**DENISE DWYER** B.A., L.L.B., M.ED.

*Law* – Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education

Denise Dwyer was raised in a home rich in robust discussion about justice, equality and race. The Canadian Constitution adorned the family room wall and her parents' message was clear, "Educate yourself to achieve – then no one can hold you back because of the colour of your skin." It is no surprise that Denise found her professional destiny in the law.

As an Assistant Crown Attorney, Denise prosecuted many complex sexual assault and domestic violence cases during a time when the criminal justice system was evolving to balance complainants' rights. She excelled in the public service to become a Deputy Director in the civil litigation division and eventually, the Legal Director for the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services. Denise was the first Black person to hold these leadership positions in the Ministry of the Attorney General. Her next promotion was to the role of Assistant Deputy Minister, advancing justice and public safety with a portfolio focused on the modernization of police education and training.

Currently, Denise is an Assistant Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Education promoting equity of opportunity, safe and healthy schools and enhancing well-being for Ontario students. She sees these critical initiatives as the true antidote to the youth justice issues she encountered as a prosecutor.

Denise's active support does not stop at the thresholds of formal institutions. In 2006, she founded the Black Female Lawyers Network by inviting women into her home to foster dialogue, professional development, and mentorship. It is now a thriving not-for-profit. The inaugural gathering has evolved into an annual retreat and fundraiser called Sistahs-in-Law, welcoming women from across the nation. The retreat has expanded in partnership with the Ontario Justice Education Network to include 10 high school girls from low-income neighbourhoods who are matched with lawyer mentors and develop skills to transform their futures. This work has been recognized with the Lexpert Zenith Award for Diversity and Inclusion.

Only her determination and courageous voice parallel Denise's legal firsts. As an advocate for an inclusive legal profession, Denise inspires other women to accomplish their goals and soar.



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