

THE CANADIAN  
BAR ASSOCIATIONCBA/ABC  
**NATIONAL**

FRANÇAIS | SEARCH



People | Profile

# Fighting a tide of hate

Spurred back into action by an explosion of antisemitism, 'retired' lawyer Mark Sandler has launched an alliance of allies to educate, foster dialogue and change perceptions

BY [GAIL J. COHEN](#) | 8 NOV. 2024

Mark Sandler Photo

SHARE: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

Mark Sandler was just nine when his mother plopped him down in front of the television to watch U.S. President Lyndon Johnson sign the *Civil Rights Act* on July 2, 1964.

A few years later, as a Grade 6 student, Sandler chose discrimination and segregation as his topic when he took part in a city-wide speaking contest.

He'd go on to carve out a much-lauded 43-year career as a criminal and human rights lawyer. Now, in his "retirement," he's going all in on



## Fraud doesn't wait

Safeguard your business  
before it strikes

[Learn more](#)

Stay

up to



date

## EDITOR'S PICK

Workplace

### Beyond billable hours

Hot topics

### 'A huge leap forward for the entire justice system'

Hot topics

bringing people together to fight Canada's growing tide of hate and antisemitism.

Sandler credits his single mother, who had no formal education beyond high school but was an avid reader, for instilling in him the influences that led to his own activism.

"The roots for how I feel about this really came from her and the values that she gave me. It sounds really corny, but that's how it happened," he says during an interview in his Toronto home office.

Sandler is a veteran in the battle against antisemitism, racism and hate. His fight, which began in the early 1980s, has brought him before Parliamentary committees and the Supreme Court of Canada.

In addition to his law practice, he's a former member of the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, has served as national chair and senior counsel for the B'nai Brith League for Human Rights, and worked with police and various religious groups to combat hate. He's also been counsel or advised on more than 20 public inquiries and reviews.

Sandler was spurred back into action after seeing the explosion of antisemitism and anti-Jewish hate in Canada after Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas operatives stormed into Israel killing 1,200 people and abducting another 251 hostages.

"I was largely retired, but I couldn't sit back on the sidelines watching what was going on. The overt antisemitism, it just gave license to every hate monger to come forward," he says.

Sandler's often a harsh critic of the Israeli government's policies and is a proponent of a two-state solution, but he says he never expected to see people, including allies he'd previously worked alongside, out in the streets celebrating what Hamas did.

"That's what set it off for me."

## Concern for the future of the Charter

Hot topics

## Translation turmoil at the Supreme Court

Hot topics

## Can Big Oil be made to pay like Big Tobacco?

Sandler was appalled by the claims of pinkwashing by the LGBTQ community, by many feminists' disbelief of the rapes of Jewish women and children, and by the justification of murder and violence among social justice activists.

But it was a letter signed by 74 law students at Toronto Metropolitan University that declared solidarity with “all forms of Palestinian resistance and efforts toward liberation” and claimed “‘Israel’ is not a country, it is the brand of a settler colony,” that really lit the fire for Sandler.

The unrest on campuses across Canada moved him to create a National Respectful Dialogue initiative. Inspired by the efforts of the Muslim and Jewish law students associations at the University of Ottawa who shared a message of unity, tolerance and respect, Sandler wanted to bring the legal community together to unequivocally reject all manifestations of antisemitism and Islamophobia.

One of his earliest allies was Bonnie Goldberg, a former assistant dean at the University of Toronto law school now working as a presiding inquest officer with Ontario's chief coroner.

“Mark's approach recognized that our common cause is the promotion of the rule of law, respectful dialogue and critical thinking,” says Goldberg, who worked with Sandler to bring the initiative to law schools across the country.

While they didn't know each other before, Goldberg says she quickly learned “there is almost no one in the legal community who won't answer Mark's call.”

Equally as important, she also learned Sandler is a “master baker whose babkas are legendary.”

From the start, Sandler knew he needed allies outside the Jewish community to make a real impact. Among those who picked up when he called were Michael Osborne, chair of the

competition law group at Cozen O'Connor, and former Ontario Court of Appeal Justice Harry LaForme, both of whom he'd known for decades.

LaForme calls Sandler a "wonderful guy" and everything a lawyer should be. Appalled by the hate he was seeing unfold, LaForme, a member of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation who was the first Indigenous person to sit on an appeal court in Canada, says he understands the need for and the power of allyship. He was quick to get on board to work with Sandler by joining in meetings with law school deans, politicians, and others, and co-writing a deputation from his perspective for the parliamentary committee hearings on antisemitism on campuses.

"Now they call me an indigenous Zionist," LaForme says.

"I don't disagree with that, if Zionism is all about your own land and your own right to self-determine or self-govern that territory. That's what I believe reconciliation is about."

However, as pro-Palestinian encampments on campuses multiplied, street protests grew, attacks on Jewish business, synagogues and schools became more brazen, and misinformation escalated, Sandler saw the need for action focused more on Canadians outside the Jewish and legal community. His ultimate goal is to reach "unaffiliated" people who don't have set views on the Israel-Hamas conflict and those who "don't have an informed understanding around the nuances" of the situation in the Middle East.

To make his bigger-picture plan a reality, Sandler put his renowned networking skills to work. In a few short months he pulled together more than 30 groups to create the Alliance of Canadians Combatting Antisemitism, which launched over the summer. Initially coalescing around the May parliamentary hearings into antisemitism in Canada, the Alliance includes well-known Jewish advocacy groups like the Centre for Israel and

Jewish Affairs, as well as various legal associations, including Lawyers for Secure Immigration and Lawyers Combatting Antisemitism.

Also onboard are organizations from a broader spectrum, including academics, women, medical associations, and human rights groups. The Council of Muslim Against Antisemitism and the newly-formed Canadian Union of Jewish Students (CUJS) are part of the Alliance as well.

Sandler has reached out to the Sikh, Hindu, and Italian communities, among others, hoping to bring them into the fold.

The Alliance aims to educate and foster dialogue through blog posts, panels, and symposiums, as Sandler says that for perceptions to change, people have to start listening to each other again.

“You don't ultimately have to agree with it, but don't demonize your opponent. Let's listen to what they have to say.”

Osborne was quick to support Sandler's efforts, believing antisemitism is not just a Jewish problem, but a societal one that requires a broader response.

“For me as a Catholic, it's an expression of my faith,” he says, so it's not “optional” to stand by his Jewish “brothers and sisters.”

LaForme says Sandler has worked day and night on this.

“I don't know if he ever sleeps, he's so committed. He's the kind of guy that goes and he wants to get the facts behind it.”

Nati Pressman, president and founder of CUJS and a fourth year student at Queen's University, credits Sandler for bringing so many community organizations together. She says too many of them often work in silos and don't collaborate.

“That doesn't mean that we all have the same goal, or we all have the same approach, [but] we're all at least on the same page,” she says. “For Mark to create that culture is something that is really phenomenal.”

Sandler's help has also been key to launching her nascent organization, Pressman says, noting he's offered support on many levels, including hooking her up with another lawyer who assisted the group pro bono to get charitable status.

Sandler's also not shy about counselling governments at every level on what they can do to counter the rising tide of hate as people and organizations peddle extremism with impunity. He says governments need to treat this as an urgent situation and follow the money to put an end to funding and money laundering related to extremism.

If politicians or law enforcement don't know what steps they can take against radicals, they just need to ask and he'll show up with page of law-backed bullet points for them to put into action.

Says Sandler: “People have found it very refreshing when I come in and I say, ‘Here's the piece of legislation you can utilize, here's the section, here's what I suggest you can do, and here's the evidentiary support for why it should be done.’”

---

SHARE:



---

Gail J. Cohen is a Toronto-based legal journalist.

RELATED ARTICLES

Legal education

Re-educating law schools

While observers differ on how they think AI will ultimately shape the legal profession, they agree on this: how lawyers are educated, trained, and licensed must change to keep up

BY [SUE BAILEY](#)

Opinion

A guardrail of democracy

For anyone who believes in accountability, democracy, and human rights, what's happening south of the border drives home why Canada's Court Challenges Program is a worthwhile investment

BY [ANNE LEVESQUE](#)

In-depth

The rise of Section 107

The recent unprecedented use of the Labour Code provision to end disputes has prompted legal challenges and concerns about the power it grants the federal labour minister

BY [DALE SMITH](#)

National Magazine  
Contact Us  
Regional Editions



CBA Influence  
Policy  
Resolutions  
Submissions

Law  
Judiciary  
Rule of law  
In-depth  
Hot topics  
Ethics  
Opinion  
Business & corporate

People  
Profile  
Q&A

The practice  
Corporate  
Counsel  
Legal education  
New Law  
Small and solo  
Workplace



National Magazine is the official periodical of the Canadian Bar Association and covers the latest trends and developments affecting the legal profession and the practice of law, as well as the latest news regarding the association and its activities. If you have suggestions, ideas or requests concerning this Web site or the

	<div>Access to justice</div> <div>Legal market</div> <div>Regulatory</div> <div>Commentary</div> <div>Corporate</div> <div>Counsel</div> <div>Law Firms</div> <div>Legal Tech</div> <div>Partner Firms</div>	<div>Young lawyers</div>	<div>magazine, please send us an e-mail at <a href="mailto:national@cba.org">national@cba.org</a>.</div>
--	--	--------------------------	--