

Thornhill hardware store owner-turned-lawyer wins Jubilee honour

By Simone Joseph

Local wills and estate lawyer Les Kotzer has something in common with teenage superstar Justin Bieber.

Both were selected The Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

Mr. Bieber received his in November before an Ottawa concert. He was criticized for wearing overalls when he received the honour from Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Mr. Kotzer, a Thornhill resident, is to receive his medal at an upcoming ceremony. The date is to be announced.

He has penned books relating to wills and estate law including, *The Family Fight: Planning to Avoid it*, *A No Nonsense Guide to Wills & Estates with Barry Fish*, *The Family War: Winning the Inheritance Battle — What You Need to Know About Estate Disputes with Jordan Atin and Barry Fish* and *Where There's An Inheritance: Stories From Inside the World of Two Wills Lawyers*, which he wrote with Barry Fish.

Mr. Kotzer, 57, has spoken about his books on TV and radio stations throughout North America.

He has received calls from producers in Hollywood, New York and throughout Canada asking if they can use stories from his *Where There's An Inheritance* book as part of a movie screenplay or TV series. But he has received no formal offers yet.

A woman he mentions in this *Where There's An Inheritance* book taught him a life lesson, he said.

Mr. Kotzer tells the story of a woman named Rachel who was in poor health and wanted him to draw up a will.

She travelled to his office in a van. A family friend came out of the van and spoke to him before he met Rachel. The friend told him Rachel was dying. Mr. Kotzer went over to where Rachel was sitting in the van and noticed her hand was stretched out the window. He realized after months of being cooped up inside, after staying in a hospital for two years, she was enjoying the feeling of the rain on her outstretched hand. Rachel said to him: "Isn't it a beautiful day outside?"

Mr. Kotzer tells another story from a soon-to-be-released book, called *The Wills Lawyers: More Stories from Inside Our World*. Mr. Kotzer wrote this with law partner Barry Fish and believes it will be published in the next six to eight months.

The book tells the tale of a man who has just lost his wife. After his wife dies, he vows that he will give his relatives a year to prove themselves. He gives them a year to see which of his nieces and nephews will care enough to phone him. Only one relative calls, so he decides to leave everything in his will to that one caring relative.

Mr. Kotzer also likes to repeat the story told to him by a woman on a U.S. radio station and is repeated in his *Where There's An Inheritance* book. She told him about her uncle who had no children. Her cousins would visit uncle Fred. Then, suddenly on his 89th birthday, uncle Fred started losing his hearing until it seemed he was deaf. Some of her cousins would say, "We don't want to be here" and shout all sorts of horrible things at him. On his 90th birthday, Fred stood up and declared that he was not deaf. "I know everything you said. Now I know who I will be leaving my stuff to," he told them.

Locally, Mr. Kotzer regularly appears on Breakfast Television and is also a regular on AM640. He has also appeared on CBC and CFRB radio.

Mr. Kotzer has also appeared on CNN's program Dollar Signs.

But his beginnings were modest.

Mr. Kotzer ran Eglinton Paint and Hardware with his brother for about five years.

Then, he reached a turning point and decided to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer.

He went to the University of Windsor law school in 1984 as a mature student at the age of 28.

But he believes his experience running the hardware store later helped him as a lawyer.

"It taught me how to deal with people," he said.

Mr. Kotzer now does wills, reviews and consultations as a lawyer with Fish and Associates in Thornhill. He has been with the firm since 1989.

He takes pride in not sounding like a lawyer.

"People have said 'I never understood wills before, but now I understand it'," he said.

Mr. Kotzer tries to speak plain language when he talks about the law.

"I vowed when people come in for wills and estates, I would speak plain language," he said.

Wills and estates used to be an area of law people did not talk about, he said.

"People were confused and afraid to talk about it."

Mr. Kotzer wanted to give the public more information about it.

He has developed power of attorney packages for people who cannot afford legal fees. He created this because many clients were coming to him and saying they could not afford the lawyer's fees.

"We are trying to give people access to this information," Mr. Kotzer said.

Mr. Kotzer offers a free will review and consultation.

"We want people to be inspired to think about this before it is too late," he said. "I am trying to get people to recognize the greatest asset they have is family."