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## Transformational Leaders in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association: An Interview With Maria De Cicco

### Leaders transformationnels au sein de l'Association canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie : entrevue avec Maria De Cicco

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#### ABSTRACT

This article, the second transcribed interview (edited for readability) in a concurrent series highlighting leaders who have been instrumental in shaping the profession in Canada, is an interview with Maria De Cicco, a prominent leader in the Canadian counselling profession. This article focuses on De Cicco's achievements during her career and her recommendations for the future of the profession in Canada. In particular, the interview provides insight, guidance, and wisdom for ways to influence future leaders in counselling.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article, deuxième d'une série d'entrevues transcrites (corrigées pour en favoriser la lisibilité) mettant en lumière des chefs de file qui ont contribué de façon importante à l'établissement de la profession au Canada, consiste en une entrevue de Maria De Cicco, une remarquable leader au sein de la profession canadienne du counseling. Le texte porte sur les réalisations de Madame De Cicco au cours de sa carrière et sur ses recommandations pour l'avenir de la profession au Canada. L'entrevue fournit notamment un aperçu, une orientation, et de sages réflexions sur la façon d'influencer les futurs chefs de file du counseling.

This is the second interview in a concurrent series of articles focusing on counselling leaders who have been instrumental in shaping the profession in Canada, following an interview with Blythe Shepard published in *CJCP* in 2018 (volume 52, number 2). The purpose of the series is to describe the current state of the counselling profession in Canada and its future from the perspective of influential leaders in Canadian counselling. Our goal is to help readers understand

and appreciate the history of the burgeoning profession and to inspire their engagement in its future.

Maria De Cicco holds degrees in counselling psychology and andragogy. Prior to her retirement in July 2019, she had been counselling for 35 years in both English- and French-language education centres, working with youths, adults, and special needs clients. Her desire to connect with colleagues, collaborate on projects, and promote the counselling profession encouraged her to get involved at the local, provincial, national, and international levels.



Some of De Cicco's more noteworthy roles have included the following:

- president of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association
- president and professional development director of the Quebec Counselling Association
- Quebec coordinator for the Canada Career Information Partnership
- Quebec coordinator for the Real Game Series and Blueprint 4Life/Work Designs
- president of the Quebec Association for Adult Learning
- provincial representative for the Quebec Working Group for the National Symposium on Career Development
- Quebec director for the Comité avisur du Forum francophone sur le partage de produits et de ressources en développement de carrière

Maria has also worked on the editorial team for *Canada Prospects*, was the Quebec director for the Canada Career Week organizing team, presented at numerous conferences at the local and national levels, participated in a variety of pan-Canadian career development projects and symposia, designed career development courses, and provided professional development workshops for colleagues and clients in the areas of counselling and career development. She was selected by the People to People Ambassador Program to lead a delegation of Canadian counsellors to China. This provided counsellors from both countries opportunities to exchange ideas and to learn about their respective policies, curricula, services, and best practices in counselling and career development. Her contributions, leadership, and passion for counselling and career development have been recognized with several prestigious awards.

As of July 2019, Maria has retired to pursue a variety of personal projects and interests, although she remains committed to the promotion of the counselling

profession. She remains an avid ambassador for the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association. This includes continuing to engage in professional development activities and providing consulting services occasionally. The interview that follows took place in the months leading up to her retirement.

*Lindsay Morgan Kozak (LMK): Hi, Ms. De Cicco. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. To start, what important achievements stand out from your time as president of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association?*

Hmm. I have such fond memories of those years on the board of directors. Let me begin by saying that most of what I was able to achieve as president was because I stood on the shoulders of some wonderful, dynamic, and hard-working directors and staff members. I am delighted to share with you that many of those colleagues became and still are my good friends today. That, to me, speaks volumes as to what kind of special individuals they were/are and how fortunate I was to work with them. Nothing can take away the strength of the friendships forged while working and having fun together nearly 15 years ago!

At a professional level, I think everyone at CCPA would agree that an important achievement that stands out from my time as president was the historical name change from CCA [Canadian Counselling Association] to CCPA [Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association]. During the 2008 CCA conference in New Brunswick, the name change did not pass at the annual general meeting (AGM). However, it passed at the AGM at the 2009 CCA conference in Saskatchewan. It passed thanks to a proactive and engaging multimedia communication plan informing members of why we were proposing the name change. This included consulting with CCA members regarding the proposed name change. It was important to lead, but it was also important to listen and to reassure the membership about the changing landscape ahead of us.

I am proud to say that during my presidency, bilingualism was firmly established within the association. Our documents were professionally adapted in French; all written communication was available in both of Canada's official languages, and the staff at the head office were able to provide services to our members in both languages.

During my terms of presidency, we had a working board. We were preparing to become a policy board, and so a policy manual was begun but was finished with the next president. In 2007, there was a new version of the code of ethics and, in 2008, a new version of the standards of practice.

We changed the conference model in 2008, and that initially affected the 2010 (Charlottetown) and 2011 (Ottawa) conferences. The new conference model allowed the national office to organize the conference centrally with an experienced team and to reuse some of the planning processes and tools (e.g., registration system and website). The new model also allowed the local provincial organizing committee to select and oversee the conference's program and social

content. This ensured that each conference reflected the host province's rich cultural tapestry and offered social events with a local flair! CCA formed a committee in 2007 to review the implications of the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT). In collaboration with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), we held our first ever symposium on inter-jurisdictional mobility of the counselling profession in Ottawa in 2008. As a result, a new project working group was formed to continue the work and to address the issues of regulation and mobility of the counselling profession. The CCA Board unanimously approved establishing a legislative support fund to help provincial counselling associations in their quest for statutory regulation. As a result, the CCA has been supporting the various provinces in attaining regulation either through in-kind contributions or with financial support.

For the first time in the history of CCPA, directors completed a directors' self-evaluation of their role and involvement while on the board of directors. To facilitate the writing of reports submitted by members of the board and by committee chairs, I designed a template to use when writing their reports. This provided uniformity across the board, improved communication, and allowed for easier follow-up and accountability. During my presidency, we established an ad hoc committee to look at our strategy and resources that we were using to communicate with our members and with the public. This culminated, among other things, in designing a new logo, creating a new and up-to-date website, and going from print to digital with the *Cognica* newsletter, the *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, and various other resources. The aim was to present a professional image with up-to-date and enhanced technology and to support a changing landscape in how we connect and communicate with our members.

On a personal level, I worked hard to promote communication with the board members, the office staff, the various committee chairs, and our members across Canada. I made it my mission to make sure that we connected and stayed connected. I sought the collaboration of board members and our members to accomplish mandates. Back then, it was a working board, and oh my God, did they work! These key components became known as the three Cs of CCPA (*communication, connection, and collaboration*) and were used in our communications, conference booklet, and other media. I fondly referred to these C words as "Maria's C words" because I have three Cs in my family name.

This may not seem like a lot, but it is! For me, it was important that as president I remain someone the people could reach and that we could be open in our communications. Neither is everything built in a day nor can we accomplish anything by ourselves, so connecting with members and getting their collaboration was key. I began this communication-connection part when I decided to write an article as president-elect for *Cognica*, CCPA's quarterly newsletter. Initially, the goal was for the members to get to know me more and to share with them my CCPA vision, passions, and mandates. However, I quickly realized that in writing this

quarterly article, I had unintentionally begun paving the road for communication and connection and, one day, collaboration. Even if today, CCPA has a policy board, this tradition has remained. I am happy!

*Neal D. Gray (NDG): Could you share some background of your training and career with us?*

As I reflect on this question, I realize today that very early on, I felt a need to connect with others, to collaborate on projects, and to communicate to the world about our counselling profession. I graduated from McGill University with an M.Ed. in counselling psychology. A few years later, I went back to do a graduate diploma program in andragogy at Concordia University while working and pregnant with my first son.

I joined the Quebec Counselling Association (QCA) in 1990, where I served on the board of directors in several capacities. I began as a director at large to get my feet wet but quickly became director of professional development activities, followed by director of communications and co-editor of the electronic newsletter, and lastly served as president and past president.

From 1998 to 2005, I was the Quebec provincial coordinator for the Canada Career Information Partnership (CCIP) and the Real Game Series—both were pan-Canadian initiatives and thus involved travelling and working with colleagues from across Canada! In 2005, members of the CCA, now the CCPA, elected me as their president-elect. I served as president-elect from 2005 to 2007, president from 2007 to 2009, and past president from 2009 to 2011. Today, I am a CCPA ambassador and a CCPA senator on special projects. I help when I can.

I have been engaging in my professional development activities ever since I can remember. After graduating and while working full-time, I went back to university; I participated in seminars, workshops, and conferences, and I joined various counselling associations at a provincial, national, and international level. I wanted to connect with counsellors around the world!

Over the years, I have also received awards for my involvement and contributions from various associations. These awards include the Prix de la Corporation by the Corporation professionnelle des conseillers et conseillères d'orientation du Québec in 1993, the Professional Contribution Award from the Canadian Counselling Association in 2000, the Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Contribution from the Canada Career Information Partnership in 2003, the Justine Harris Award for Excellence in Counselling from the Quebec Counselling Association in 2003, the Certificate of Appreciation from the CCPA in 2011, the Robert Langlois Award for Bilingualism by the CCPA in 2009, and the Honorary Life Membership Award by CCPA in 2013.

I was always hungry for more knowledge. I wanted up-to-date information, and I wanted to keep on learning, especially about best practices in the counselling profession. I also wanted to share what I learned with others. Thus, I thrived

when I was working on pan-Canadian projects and committees and when I was presenting at conferences or giving workshops to colleagues. Early on, I felt the need to put the counselling profession on the map within my province, and so I decided to offer workshops to counsellors on how to market and promote the counselling profession within school settings.

I began my career working with special needs students. For most of my career, I worked with 16-year-olds who were attending adult education to complete their high school diploma or to obtain the academic prerequisites for a diploma of vocational studies or to prepare for a diploma of collegial studies. I worked in an English school board for the first 11 years of my career and a French school board for the last 24 years. Throughout my career, I have worked in various adult education centres with a multicultural and multi-ethnic population in both English and French.

Since 2012, I have been working at the SARCA (Services d'accueil, de référence, de conseil, et d'accompagnement), which is a listening, information, referral, and counselling service where the goal is to accompany adult students who wish to return to school to obtain a high school diploma. I also do a lot of outreach in the community and work on special school board projects, including chairing the adult education counsellors' table, the awards committee, and the marketing and promotions committee, as well as offering workshops to colleagues. The job description is vast, varied, and challenging but very rewarding.

Although the last 35 years have been rewarding and fun, I will be retiring from my work at the school board at the end of this school year. I am looking forward to beginning a new chapter in my life.

*LMK: What are your hopes for the future of the counselling profession in Canada?*

As I reflect on this question, a few ideas spring to mind. It has always been and continues to be my wish that the CCPA will continue to be firmly established as the national voice of the counselling profession across Canada. I welcome the day that the counselling profession becomes accepted, understood, and respected by the public, by governments, and by insurance companies dealing with third-party billing across every Canadian province and territory. In the same way that we consult a medical specialist when we have physical discomforts, people will consult a counselling specialist when they are questioning or experiencing life/work discomforts, questions, or transitions. CCPA has been working and continues to work relentlessly to promote the counselling profession and to address these issues.

Concomitantly, drawing from my experience working in different school settings, I feel that we, as counsellors, also have a responsibility to continue to promote our profession and to market our services better to the public. It is imperative that students and staff know, understand, and appreciate the expertise, the skill sets, and the array of services that a counsellor can provide. Its importance becomes evident when working with other student services professionals since



we want students to be clear as to which professional they should consult when in need of counselling services.

Being passionate about career development and career counselling, I would like to see a stronger emphasis placed on career counselling and career development/management offered by accredited counsellors in schools. Sadly, in some Quebec school boards, I have seen counsellors provide students with a variety of services while career counselling takes a back seat. In fact, in some school boards, there are no counsellors whatsoever! As a result, other, non-qualified individuals in the school give students some of the career information parts, without the crucial counselling aspect. In my opinion, this current format does a disservice to students, society, and the counselling profession.

I will complete my answer by drawing on some of the ‘high-five messages’ of career development that I think aptly apply to my hopes for the future of the counselling profession in Canada:

1. Change is constant! The counselling profession will keep evolving in its best practices to reflect up-to-date theories, practices, resources, and tools while responding to the current counselling needs of the clients or the work setting.
2. Keep on learning! Counsellors have a social and professional responsibility to participate actively in their professional development and to stay up to date with information, theories, studies, tools, and resources. We need to do this to address the ever-changing counselling landscape and the growing list of services that counsellors can provide.
3. Access your allies and be an ally! This speaks volumes on the importance of networking, joining associations, attending conferences, giving workshops, being a mentor for others, and of course being an ambassador for your profession.

*NDG: Do you have any final remarks for beginning counsellors in the field?*

Congratulations on being part of an important, dynamic, and evolving profession that extends beyond the boundaries of your work setting. I believe that when one begins working (whether it is in a brand-new position or replacing a seasoned counsellor), they start with a blank canvas, and it is up to them to choose their colours and proudly make that canvas their own. I would simply encourage counsellors to think about applying the three Cs—communication, connection, and collaboration—as they begin their new career path. Below are some strategies that have contributed richly to the colours of my canvas as a counsellor in Montreal. If you are not already doing this, consider this food for thought:

- Get involved with counselling associations at the provincial (QCA), national (CCPA), and international levels (IAEVG, IAC, etc.).
- Attend their annual conferences, monthly webinars, symposia, and so forth.
- Subscribe to their newsletters.

- Share your expertise by writing articles, presenting at conferences, and facilitating workshops.
- Join committees within the various associations.
- Join the board of directors of different associations.
- Collaborate on pan-Canadian counselling projects.
- Learn how to market and promote the counselling profession.
- Become an ambassador for the counselling profession.
- Be proactive in demystifying the counselling profession.
- Participate in your professional development activities.
- Meet colleagues you have read about in your textbooks. (I will refrain from name-dropping because it would take too long. What a thrill this was for me!)
- Start a committee, if none exists, to address a counselling need or a gap at work.
- Get supervision.
- Participate in case study groups.
- Seek out mentors.
- Be informed.
- Collaborate with other colleagues at work on projects that interest you.
- Make your presence as a counsellor known in your work setting.
- Promote your services.
- Find a balance between working and socializing with colleagues.
- Take the time to recharge your personal and professional batteries.
- Forge friendships.
- Most importantly, keep on learning, get involved, and have fun!

*LMK and NDG: Maria, thank you for talking to us today about your leadership experiences and hopes for the future of the counselling profession in Canada.*

### **About the Authors**

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