expect it to happen. He was an already-committed idealist and activist. He worked for Greenpeace "knocking on doors and harassing people at dinnertime, looking for money to save the world." He got to the point, he says, where he was burning himself out as a volunteer and working full-time at things that didn't help the environment one bit. So he thought he might as well go to law school and "be an environmental activist from that point of view."

I ask Houlihan how she got into environmental law, half expecting a response similar to Duncan's. "Well," she says, "my Mom used to make us pick up garbage at the beach before we'd go swimming." Apart from that general stipulation, her parents did not particularly emphasize getting involved in a particular area of study or work, or even necessarily getting a formal education. "But they did focus vigorously on the idea that you had to love what you do."

As an undergraduate at Simon Fraser University, she studied psychology and criminology. Afterwards, she worked with street kids and thought that she might do a graduate degree in psychology. "But my Dad really wanted me to go to law school. So there I went." That was it? I ask. "Doesn't every Dad want his daughter to go to law school?" she responds. In fact, Houlihan says he would have been happy if she'd done an M.A. "But he thought: given that I liked to speak continuously [she laughs], perhaps law would be good."

Houlihan is, indeed, fluent in her speech, the stereotypical trait of the Irish from whom she is descended, by way of Newfoundland — her father, who became an engineer and then a businessman, was born there. "Cathleen Ni Houlihan" is one of the old poets' names for Ireland and a romantic symbol of the nation's sovereignty. Houlihan says she would like to visit one day. I'm originally from Ireland myself, and I think that she would be at home there, with her confident vivacity, her wry humour and her eloquence.

When she was at law school, she didn't know whether or not she'd actually go into practice; and if she did, she thought it would be criminal law — doing good work for the underprivileged. There were no courses in environmental law then. When she came back to McCarthys from Japan, her language skill helped the firm with one of its clients, a large Japanese company involved in a pulp-and-paper file. "That got me into the environmental law side of things," she says.

Her commitment to becoming an environmental advocate, and her progress in the field, has remained low-key, restrained and realistic — one might say, lawyerly. "I'm not a rabid environmentalist. I eat meat; I go shopping. We need industrial operations. We need to do certain things that have environmental impact. Everything has an environmental impact. But I do believe that in most cases, industry can operate to a fairly high level of environmental protection. It's just a matter of making best efforts to try to do what you can. I find that most clients will do that."

Her moderate and practical approach is "the only way to practise without jumping out the window. You can make a difference. You can even inspire change, to a certain extent, in major corporations."

A lot of her clients are medium-sized developers who have acquired contaminated sites. Houlihan advises them on what they have to do — the various steps and permits required — to move the noxious material and dispose of it. Sometimes she works for small owners whose property has been contaminated. Some polluters are great, she says. They save themselves a ton of money by cleaning things up quickly and without fuss. "But there are others — a few big oil companies come to mind — who absolutely refuse to negotiate. Their attitude is: 'Take us to court.' When you get there, it's like David and Goliath; they try to overwhelm you with material. If people don't have the dollars to fight them, they're out of luck. Unless they can get legal advice for free. Fortunately, there are a lot of us around who will do that — on principle." Some clients don't pay her because they can't afford to; some do pay because they can. "But they're all doing what I believe in."

She won't work for Goliath. Numerous clients have fired her, or not hired her in the first place, because she refused to do their dirty work for them. "What's the point of working on your own if you don't get to choose who to work for? It's a good way to wake up and love your life and love your job."

Numerous clients have fired her, or not hired her, because she refused to do their dirty work for them. 'What's the point of working on your own if you don't get to choose who to work for?'

Houlihan sees her teaching as another way to nudge things along in the right direction. She doesn't try to brainwash her students about environmental issues; that would be unfair. "I give them a balanced view. I tell them: here's my spin; and here's the other side." But a teacher always has the opportunity for a little subtle indoctrination. Her own views are persuasive just because she's the teacher. It all helps when she deals with former students who go out to work and become her clients.

Environmental problems seem so intractable, so immense. "Lots of environmental people are very depressed all the time," says Houlihan. She's not that sort of person, but on bad days, she sometimes thinks: it'll never get better. Corporations don't care and the government is too lame to commit resources and to enforce its own environmental regulations. We have good laws here, she says — many countries do — but they're just paper if they're not enforced.

But there are better days, too, when she has her modest victories: perhaps when she manages to induce the Greater Vancouver Regional District to prosecute a big mushroom grower for its repeated odour violations; or when she convinces the government to stop aerial spraying of pesticides in part of the Fraser Valley. Maybe she realizes that she has convinced a large corporation to move towards doing what it can to clean up its act. That can have a big impact, says Houlihan. "I have concerns about the future of the planet, but some effort is better than none. We do what we can; that's the best we can do." CL

Derek Lundy is a journalist and author who lives on Salt Spring Island, B.C.