

# LEAFlet

RAISING OUR VOICES FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY



West Coast LEAF stands up for women's equality at the United Nations in Geneva / [page 2](#)



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555-409 Granville Street  
Vancouver, BC V6C 1T2  
t: 604-684-8772  
t: 1-866-737-7716  
e: info@westcoastleaf.org

[westcoastleaf.org](http://westcoastleaf.org)

## 2017 EQUALITY BREAKFAST KEYNOTE: DR. CINDY BLACKSTOCK

### A FIERCE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN

West Coast LEAF celebrates 30 years of the Equality Breakfast on Friday, March 10, 2017 with a very special keynote speaker. Dr. Cindy Blackstock is a fierce advocate for children and has been called the greatest civil rights heroine in Canada and a "relentless moral voice holding government to account." Her keynote will address the rights and well-being of Indigenous girls in Canada.

Dr. Blackstock is Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and a professor in the School of Social Work at McGill University. She has earned a Master of Jurisprudence in addition to a PhD in social work, and has been awarded four honorary degrees and nearly 50 awards and honours, including recognition by the Nobel Women's Initiative, Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, and Frontline Defenders. She serves as a commissioner for the Pan American Health Organization Commission on Health Equity and Inequity.

A member of the Gitksan First Nation, Cindy was raised in northern BC. After working for a decade as a social worker and witnessing the conditions of life for First Nations children on reserves, she understood that the entire system needed upending if First Nations children were ever going to be offered the same chance as non-Indigenous Canadian children.

"What I saw were children being systemically removed from these communities. And I'd go to these communities, and there was no running water, and people would wonder why the kids weren't clean, and I'd think maybe someone should do something about the water," she told reporters. "We would see the multigenerational impacts of residential schools, and there are no mental-health *continued on page 4*



**DR. CINDY BLACKSTOCK** will address the rights and well-being of Indigenous girls in Canada at our Equality Breakfast on March 10, 2017

## STANDING UP FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY AT THE UN IN GENEVA

In October, Kendra Milne, West Coast LEAF's Director of Law Reform, traveled to Geneva to attend Canada's review for compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a treaty enshrining women's equality in international human rights law. In partnership with the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, we worked to ensure that the review Committee truly understood the full impact of the lack of affordable and adequate child care on women's employment, economic security, family roles, education, and health.

Kendra reports, "The process was fascinating. The CEDAW Committee, filled with human rights experts from around the world, was charged with reviewing the progress of 11 different countries in a three week period. It was immediately clear that the Committee would have been unable to meaningfully review Canada's compliance without the help of the strong team of individual and non-profit organizations from Canada. We were able to provide crucial counter information to the federal government's often rosy report on women's equality in Canada by providing written submissions, providing information at their



**Melanie Anderson** representing the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and West Coast LEAF's **Kendra Milne** at the United Nations in Geneva.

request, answering questions and addressing areas of confusion."

On November 18, the Committee released its Concluding Observations on Canada's compliance with the international human rights obligations set out in CEDAW. The Committee expressed concern about Canada's adherence to its obligations in many areas, including child care, employment equality, violence, access to justice, and many others. More importantly, the Committee provided Canadian federal and provincial governments with clear recommendations that set out what must be done to satisfy our international obligations regarding women's equality. West Coast LEAF is rolling up our sleeves and ensuring that these words turn into meaningful action. ♀

## NEW YOUTH PROGRAM STAFF

West Coast LEAF is thrilled to welcome our two newest team members who will be coordinating and delivering our youth workshops in Kamloops and Nanaimo, respectively: Grace McDonell and Sarah Layla Robbie.

Grace and Sarah recently traveled to Vancouver for our youth facilitator volunteer training and an additional day of training here at our office, and we were inspired

**Alana Prochuk** with new youth program staff members **Grace McDonell** and **Sarah Layla Robbie**

## LAW SCHOOL BATTLE MOVES CLOSER TO CANADA'S HIGHEST COURT

Since 2014, legal battles over the accreditation of the proposed law school at Trinity Western University (TWU) have been winding their way through the courts in BC, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. What's at stake? Equal access to legal education for historically marginalized communities, particularly LGBTQ+ folks and women. TWU requires all students and employees to sign a Community Covenant promising not to have an abortion or engage in sex outside of heterosexual marriage. West Coast LEAF is not alone in questioning how a university with such a discriminatory admissions policy can train future lawyers to uphold the equality rights enshrined in the *Charter* and respect the constitutionally protected right to reproductive choice.

The bodies that regulate the legal profession in BC, Ontario, and Nova Scotia have all denied accreditation to TWU's proposed law school, arguing that to do so would run counter to their mandate to govern the legal profession in the public interest. TWU challenged the decisions of the law societies in all three provinces. West Coast LEAF intervened in the BC case to argue that withholding accreditation was justified because the university's Community Covenant violates *Charter*-protected equality rights. Courts in both BC and Nova Scotia ruled in favour of TWU on the basis that the law societies' decisions were procedurally flawed and failed to properly balance freedom of religion and equality rights. Although the Nova Scotia decision will not be appealed, the Law Society of BC recently announced its intention to challenge the BC court's disappointing unanimous judgment.

Now that the battle over TRU's law school seems headed to the Supreme Court of Canada, West Coast LEAF will seek to intervene again to highlight the unacceptable sex and marital status discrimination faced by students, staff, and faculty at TWU.

There is a strong possibility that the appeal of the BC judgement will be heard at Canada's highest court alongside TWU's appeal of the Ontario decision, which held that the law society there appropriately balanced the *Charter* values of equality and freedom of religion when it denied accreditation to the proposed law school. In stark contrast, the BC Court of Appeal's judgment focused on the harms to the minority Evangelical Christian community and took a troubling "separate but equal" attitude to law school admissions.

While the Supreme Court has yet to decide whether to hear TWU's appeal in Ontario and the Law Society of BC still has time to file its application for an appeal, the two cases – poles apart in their approach and analysis – will very likely be heard together. And when that happens, West Coast LEAF will again join the fight for substantive equality, fighting for a legal profession and legal system that everyone can access without fear of discrimination. ♀



**What's at stake? TWU requires all students and staff to sign a covenant promising not to have an abortion or engage in sex outside of heterosexual marriage.**

by their passion and impressed by their fierce performance in our employment standards *Family Feud* game! Here's what the two have to say about their experience with West Coast LEAF so far and their hopes for the months ahead.

"I had a wonderful time during our training this fall," says Sarah, "learning the material and getting a chance to know my colleagues. I am excited for the opportunity to engage with the education programming. The ball is rolling in Nanaimo for the youth workshops, and I am looking forward to the first scheduled workshops in the near future and

meeting with some representatives from the local school district to talk about future possibilities."

"My first few months with West Coast LEAF have flown by," says Grace, "but the first impression has not faded. Amazing and inspirational are just two of the many words I would use to describe the staff and the work they do. It's one thing to be learning the law, as I am now in Kamloops at Thompson Rivers University, but it's another to be using it to educate and facilitate positive changes in society. Being a small part of an organization that continues to push boundaries and advocate for those who have been historically disadvantaged is a great honour." ♀

## SPONSOR THE 30TH ANNUAL EQUALITY BREAKFAST

Attended by nearly 800 members of the legal, labour, social justice, political and academic communities each year, our eagerly anticipated signature event celebrates International Women's Day and West Coast LEAF's work to advance the full participation of women and girls in social, economic and political life. Becoming an Equality Breakfast sponsor is an excellent way to demonstrate that you value having women in leadership positions, are committed to corporate social responsibility, support access to justice for all, and want to see a more equal BC!



Find out more about the benefits of sponsorship by contacting Basya Laye, [development@westcoastleaf.org](mailto:development@westcoastleaf.org) or 604-684-8772, ext. 114.

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services that are culturally appropriate. So there were all these layers of inequality and I started to realize it was the system, in many cases, that was creating conditions where families were not going to be successful in caring for their kids. And nobody was really holding the system to account."

Dr. Blackstock resolved to do her part to hold the system to account and, in 2007, the Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations filed a discrimination complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission against the federal government for underfunding social services for First Nations children on reserves. She said, "For me, there was the *Indian Act*, there were these reserves, expectations that we were worth less than everybody else, we were the 'takers' of society – and there was no awareness of the other side of this reality. It was almost like we were screaming into silence. That injustice and that refusal to accept it was something that would just be a trajectory throughout my life."

The case, which was eventually heard by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, resulted in a landmark ruling against the federal government. The Tribunal found that the underfunding of social services on reserves constitutes racial discrimination against 163,000 First Nations children

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and their families "by providing flawed and inequitable child welfare services and failing to implement Jordan's Principle to ensure equitable access to government services available to other children."

After the ruling, Dr. Blackstock said, "I really believe that the greatness of the country and of our joint society ... is bound up in the possibility of raising a generation of First Nations who never have to recover from their childhoods, and a group of non-aboriginal children who never have to say they're sorry."

The 2017 Equality Breakfast will take place on Friday, March 10, 2017, from 7 to 9 am at the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver. Join us as we celebrate West Coast LEAF's achievements and International Women's Day. 

## INVESTING IN WOMEN'S EQUALITY

We are grateful for the ongoing support we receive from our donors, funders, members, and The Law Foundation of British Columbia. Thank you to our current project funders:



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