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Everybody has a Story

Josh Greschner / Battlefords News-Optimist

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Eleanore Sunchild
Photograph By JOSH GRESCHNER

One generally expects law practices to be located in urban areas. Sunchild Law is located on Poundmaker land along Highway 4 near more treaty land, farmland, and the river.

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Sunchild previously worked for bands, and has practiced criminal and family law.

“Residential school claims are a specialized area of law,” Sunchild said. “It really takes all of the focus here to do that job effectively.”

There were a number of residential schools in Saskatchewan, including the former industrial school in Battleford. Sunchild said the province has the highest number of residential school survivors, although residential school claims can come from different places outside the province.

Sunchild is from Thunderchild First Nation, which used to be near Delmas but is now located near Turtleford. Sunchild said the First Nation was forcibly relocated in the early 1900s due to a vote achieved by manufactured consent.

“We had rich farmland close to the river,” Sunchild said. “[Settlers] wanted the farm land so they pressured the government to take the farmland and move us away so that farmland would be open to non-Indigenous farmers.”

She said Indigenous people at the previous Thunderchild location excelled at farming.

“There’s a whole piece of history around here that people aren’t taught,” Sunchild said. The story of Thunderchild can be found in the book *Outside, the Women Cried* by Jack Funk.

Sunchild attended the University of Alberta, and went to the French language Faculte St. Jean. She majored in political science and minored in Native Studies. She said Native Studies teachers were high caliber and very supportive of Indigenous students.

Law school was different because, Sunchild said, the law she learned was a total colonial system, and went against what she and other Indigenous students were taught.

“The first premise you learn there is the Crown owns all the land, but as Indigenous people we know that’s not true, there’s unfinished business there,” Sunchild said, adding the government has a history of not fulfilling its treaty obligations.

Sunchild said some students tried to fight against the conservatism of law school, but “you couldn’t change that institution no matter how hard you tried.”

Finishing law school required strength, Sunchild said.

“It depends how grounded you are and how strong you are. If you have a strong grounding and strong support you can get through law school,” Sunchild said.

“You just have to learn those things that aren’t true to you and carry on.”

Sunchild is the granddaughter of late Elder Norman Sunchild, who was very supportive of Eleanore and encouraged her to complete her education.

“He grounded me,” Sunchild said, “and taught me about myself and my culture and [to use] that as strength.”

In addition to practicing law, Sunchild also gives lectures, and has done so at the University of Saskatchewan, Windsor Law, UCLA, and in Norway.

Sunchild said she’s noticed some law schools have changed since the nineties, and are taking the history of Indigenous-Crown relations and Indigenous law more seriously than before.

Sunchild said each cultural group had their own pre-contact legal traditions, including laws based on land, kinship, and relationships with the Creator.

“The laws are still there, but they’ve been affected by colonization and all the trauma, all of the disruption that happened to our community,” Sunchild said, referencing residential schools in particular. “Those deeply impacted our communities and our families, because they were a deliberate attack on the family unit.

“Our communities used to be very strong, and they used to be very clear in what they could and couldn’t do, but because colonization occurred and there were deliberate attacks on our communities, our people now are hurt, and they’ve been affected by residential school and child welfare. Our communities have a lot of trauma.”

Sunchild said trauma in communities translates into things such as a high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and a high rate of Indigenous people being incarcerated and in foster care.

Returning to traditional ways is a means of healing, Sunchild said. Women, she adds, have an important role in communities., and have been the ones who've been saying "enough's enough, things have to change."

"The women have been the ones to step up and say we need to heal ourselves, and they've been the ones who've been doing it first because they have the role of lifegiver and caregiver of the children. It's a role they take very seriously."

Sunchild said a number of myths prevent non-Indigenous people from understanding the effects of colonization on Indigenous people and culture.

"There's this whole myth that [Canada] always tried [its] best for Indigenous people, we've always tried our best to give them a good life and they aren't appreciative of it.

"They made all these sorts of concessions they say to help us, and how do we repay them? We turn into thieving Indians or we can't get it together enough to take care of ourselves on reserves.

"What's failed to be taught is the true history of Canada, the true history of what residential schools did, what the sixties scoop was and what that did and how we have all these social problems today now, and how and why did that occur."

Sunchild said non-Indigenous people not knowing an Indigenous person can perpetuate myths. Non-Indigenous people being separated from Indigenous people, Sunchild said, is a continuation of the legacy of segregation, as seen in reserves, residential schools and Indian hospitals.

Education, Sunchild said, is a way for non-Indigenous people to understand the effects of colonization, and she said there should be mandatory inclusion of colonial history in the curriculum starting in elementary school.

"I don't like the word Indigenizing," Sunchild said, "I like the word education because who knows what Indigenizing means? Does it mean hanging up a few pictures of Indigenous people around your office, or does it mean changing the curriculum?"

Education, however, can be painful for both sides.

"For Indian people to tell them is painful, but it's also painful for the non-Indigenous people to hear because it goes against everything they've been taught about Indian people because they have to face stereotypes and their own underlying racism they may not have been taught directly, but through dinner conversations that aren't necessarily true."

Sunchild said, "I don't mind the word Indian," adding many people in the Battlefords area use Indian and Indian person. Sunchild said it can be used derogatorily, but it is also a legal term.

For those wanting to educate themselves, Sunchild said a good resource is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports, and its footage of people telling their stories. People can also invite residential Indian school survivors and elders to speak to groups. There's also an Indigenous section in most bookstores.

Sunchild's alma mater, the University of Alberta, offers a free massive open online course (MOOC) called "Indigenous Canada," which the student newspaper, The Gateway, called the most popular MOOC in Canada.

"I want people to become more educated about the issues around here, about how the eight men in Battleford were hung and why, and how that history of violence continues today."

Sunchild said she'd like to see more understanding in the community, including ideas such as systemic discrimination, which would allow people to understand "how all these pieces fit together," particularly in relation to understanding the complaints of Colten Boushie's family.

"At the moment I see a lot of polarization and backlash and there's been a lot of ugliness that's come to the surface," Sunchild said. "And maybe it's good that racism is coming out because at least it's out there, but once it's out there then we need to address it and move forward."

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The Chamber of Commerce is conducting a survey to determine if Chamber members are in favour of advocating to have the government liquor store moved from its downtown location. What do you think?

Yes. Having the store downtown contributes to problems in the city's core.

No. Moving the store won't make any

difference to addiction problems in the community.

Yes. SLGA would benefit from a location more accessible to tourists travelling through to lake count

No. Relocating would just be more taxpayers' money flushed down the drain.

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