

A successful 2014 National Aboriginal Law Conference held in Iqaluit

By Gloria Song

Nunavut's young capital saw an influx of lawyers from across the country when Iqaluit hosted the Canadian Bar Association's National Aboriginal Law Conference on June 19 and 20.

Held at the Frobisher Inn, the conference was attended by over 140 participants from all Canadian provinces and territories. In addition to practicing lawyers, the conference also featured high-profile participants and speakers, including judges from the Federal Court and the Nunavut Court of Justice, Senators, politicians, and prominent Aboriginal leaders. Some of the notable speakers included Grand Chief Matthew Coon-Come of the Grand Council of the Crees, BC Treaty Commission Chief Commissioner Sophie Pierre, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Nunavut the Honourable Paul Okalik, former Auditor General of Canada Sheila Fraser, and the Honourable Bob Rae.

The Honourable Paul Okalik, Nunavut's Minister of Justice, made a statement to the Legislative Assembly about the conference on June 12. "This year marks the 15th anniversary of the creation of our Territory," Minister Okalik announced. "It is very fitting that the Canadian Bar Association should choose to hold this conference in Nunavut."

It was from this 15th anniversary that the organizers developed the theme of the conference, "Nation-Building under Land Claims Agreements, Treaties and Self-Government Agreements". "The story of Nunavut is but one of the many examples of how Aboriginal groups in Canada are pushing the envelope in developing and shaping the relationship between the Crown and its First Nations," remarked program co-chairs Cindy Kieu (Department of Justice, Government of Nunavut, Iqaluit) and Kathryn Deo (Arbutus Law Group LLP, Victoria). "With this backdrop, we developed a conference agenda that would look at nation building through the challenges and achievements of numbered treaties, self-government agreements, and modern treaties." The conference covered a diverse range of timely topics in Aboriginal law, including the Nunavut Land Claims agreement, social issues, revenue generation, governance, ethics, and resource management.

According to program co-chairs Cindy Kieu, the conference took three years of planning, as the organizing committee faced intense challenges in making the first national aboriginal conference in Nunavut happen. These challenges included funding, such as finding the funding necessary to assist many of the speakers to come to the conference. According to the program co-chairs, the cost for the conference was double or triple the price of a conference in any other major centre in Canada. In the end, the majority of the speakers and moderators attended on their own or through the support and contribution of their employers, and fundraising efforts made by the hard-working organizing committee made the conference a reality. Thanks to funding from the Nunavut Law Foundation, the committee managed to raise funds to assist eight students to attend the conference at a subsidized rate.

"Given the CBA's recent commitment to improving equality and diversity in the legal profession and within the organization, this conference is an example of how to effectively put these principles into practice," commented program co-chairs Cindy Kieu and Kathryn Deo.

Also unique to the conference was the decision to package it as part of a travel experience for those who had never visited the Canadian Arctic, partnering with experienced local organizations such as the Nunavut Arts and Crafts Association and Alianait Arts Festival, and featuring cultural events, entertainment, and tours. "It was important and necessary for the conference attendees – many of whom are Canadians – to gain exposure to the reality of living in remote and northern communities," explained program co-chairs Cindy Kieu and Kathryn Deo.

The conference also raised close to \$11,000 and over 400 pounds of donations for the Nunavut Food Bank, allowing the conference attendees and law firms to give back to the community.