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A long but worthwhile journey

Cindy Allen turns dissatisfaction with justice system into a law degree

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Northern News Services

Published Monday, June 9, 2014

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Cindy Allen has learned how to keep her life balanced. The single mother of two received a law degree from the University of British Columbia the weekend of May 24.

"It was a juggle, trying to balance it all because law school is really hard," Allen said. "I have free time now, but when I was in school every night I would be doing my reading until midnight and I wouldn't have a weekend because I was studying."

Allen spent four years studying aboriginal law to earn her degree. She said going to law school was a tough decision.

"It's such a big change to drop your career and go back to school," she said. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a student again."

Allen is an active member of the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board and mother to eight-year-old daughter, Kwan Sha, and 13-year-old son Sahcho.

While her family is originally from Ndilo, Allen grew up in Winnipeg and has lived in Fort Smith, Yellowknife and Norman Wells. She has travelled extensively throughout the North.

She was a band councillor with the Yellowknives Dene from 2001 to 2003 and worked with the territorial Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations for seven years.



Cindy Allen received her law degree from the University of British Columbia the weekend of May 24. - photo courtesy of Martin Dee

She was then employed as a treaty and implementation negotiator with the Government of British Columbia.

Allen said she had already earned a master's degree in Canadian Studies from Carleton University in Ottawa and had other post-secondary education before she decided to attend law school.

She said the decision was two-fold.

Allen's grandmother, 84-year-old Marie Adele Doctor, was attacked in her home in Ndilo in January 2009. Doctor later died from her injuries. The woman responsible received a 14-month sentence.

Allen said she was devastated.

"It was really upsetting to me, especially the fact that this person got, I think, a lesser sentence for the death of my grandmother than I thought the person deserved," she said. "It was just really tough for me."

Allen said the court process and the attacker's sentencing made her want to learn more about the law.

"I didn't think the justice system really helped anybody in that instance and it just made me want to actually learn more about our indigenous legal traditions so that maybe I can help others learn about them," she said.

Her work in treaty negotiations also prompted her decision to study law.

"Working in treaty negotiations, it's a lot about the law and what the words say in the agreement," she said. "The lawyers at the table weren't explaining it in a very good way, it didn't necessarily make sense to me and it definitely didn't make sense to the people we were working with. I thought, 'well I want to go learn'."

Allen said she hopes to find an articling position that will allow her to continue gaining experience working in aboriginal law. She said so far the search hasn't been easy. The GNWT doesn't have an articling program and other law firms are typically looking for younger graduates with fewer commitments. Regardless, Allen said she knows she wants to work with aboriginal issues.

"I want to work for an organization or a government that I can make the most use of my Northern knowledge and my skills in negotiations and my understanding of aboriginal people," she said.

Allen said while getting through school was a struggle, she found ways to stay positive through the support of her children, family and friends.

She was also a member of the Indigenous Legal Students' Association at UBC, which gave her a group of like-minded friends.

Allen said she knew, no matter how difficult situations became, she made the right choice.

"It's just been a lot of really believing in the fact that I can do it and knowing that in the future I can be a benefit to Dene people and Northerners is what kept me going," she said.

Allen said she hopes the same for others.

"I really encourage people to go for your dreams and get educated. There is a real need for educated aboriginal people out there," she said. "You just have to really believe in yourself and just keep going and work through the struggles."

Allen took out a student loan and received a number of scholarships and bursaries to pay for her education. She currently lives in Whitehorse, Yukon.



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