

Phil Fontaine Citation, June 9, 2017

On the occasion of his honorary degree from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law

By: Dean Edward Iacobucci, Faculty of Law

Larry Phillip Fontaine is an historical figure in Canada, changing forever Canada's relationship with its Indigenous peoples.

He was born on the Fort Alexander reserve in Manitoba into the Ojibway First Nation.

As a child, he was taken from his family to a residential school where he suffered physical, psychological and sexual abuse.

While the injustice of his early life left its mark on him – he has movingly spoken about being damaged by the residential school experience – it did not destroy him.

Rather, he has spent his life in pursuit of justice, not just for himself, but for all Indigenous people in this country.

He began by serving his local community in different ways, including becoming Chief of the Sagkeeng First Nation.

He later became Manitoba Regional Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and then Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

His leadership as Chief, and his leadership since then, has been remarkable for his strategic and relentless advocacy for greater self-determination for Indigenous peoples within the Canadian constitutional system.

His public service includes many accomplishments that alone and together justify today's honour, but his efforts around residential schools and reconciliation mark him as one of Canada's most important public figures of the last 50 years.

He was one of the first people to speak publicly about the horrors of residential schools, and it is this courage, I submit, that changed Canada forever.

It was only after he started speaking that most non-Indigenous Canadians became aware of the tremendous injustice of the residential school system.

But he not only created awareness through his courageous candour, he personally and effectively led efforts to address this shameful aspect of Canada's history.

He successfully urged the federal government to take responsibility for a legal landscape that included dozens of class actions and thousands of individual law suits regarding residential schools.

As a consequence of Phil Fontaine's leadership throughout, there was a multi-billion dollar financial settlement reached for residential school survivors; Prime Minister Harper apologized for the schools; and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was struck, and its influential report released.

I believe that Phil Fontaine's leadership has permanently changed Canada's relations with its First Peoples.

Here's why: the non-Indigenous community cannot unlearn what we have learned in the decades since Phil Fontaine started speaking out.

The injustices suffered by our Indigenous peoples at residential schools, and at other points in Canada's history, are now living parts of our public discourse.

At risk of over-personalizing this, I want to invoke a family member now – not the one you may be thinking of, though my dad is one of the legions in the Phil Fontaine fan club, but rather my daughter.

When she was in Grade 8, she heard that Phil Fontaine was speaking at the law school – for the first and only time in her life, she asked to come to a law school event – she had read about Phil Fontaine in school and wanted to hear him speak.

She was blown away – “How is he not angry?”, she asked afterwards.

I didn't have a good answer to that question then or now, and mention this only to illustrate the influence Phil has had: millions of Canadians, including school children, are because of Phil Fontaine aware of his and his people's suffering, and his and their nobility in the pursuit of justice, and this knowledge will stay with them forever.

While the path to reconciliation will be far from smooth, or short, I believe that because of Phil Fontaine, we are on that path today.

As said by my colleague Professor Douglas Sanderson, who will hood Mr. Fontaine today, Phil Fontaine is a hero.

Mr. Chancellor, on behalf of the Governing Council, I ask you to confer the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, upon Phil Fontaine.