



Duncan First Nations Court celebrates 10th Anniversary

This summer the Duncan First Nations Court held an uplifting community celebration. There was a lot to celebrate. Not only does 2023 mark the Court's 10th anniversary but this year saw the Court move to a new sitting location in the Cowichan Tribes' building, Si'em Lelum.

Opened in May 2013, the Duncan First Nations Court is one of the BC Provincial Court's eight Indigenous criminal sentencing courts. It incorporates restorative justice and Indigenous practices focused on healing and reparation. In a sentencing hearing, offenders generally sit in a circle with the judge, lawyers, elders, and perhaps victims and support people. After hearing from these participants, the judge imposes a sentence that usually includes a healing plan. Offenders receive monitoring and support from elders as they work towards their goals. They attend court regularly during their sentence to report their progress.

More than 100 people attended the anniversary event held on July 21, 2023. They heard from numerous speakers, all honouring the success of the First Nations Court and its participants and the profound contributions of the Court's elders. Guests enjoyed traditional food and the elders received gifts including a carved paddle engraved with the words "Vision", "Love", and "Strength".

Chief Judge Melissa Gillespie, Judge Roger Cutler (who regularly presides in Duncan First Nations Court), and University of Victoria Chancellor Marion Buller (a former judge instrumental in establishing the Court) all expressed their gratitude to the elders for enhancing the Court's ability to provide a just and inclusive justice system. Other speakers honouring the elders included Deputy Attorney General Barbara Carmichael, KC, Assistant Deputy Attorney General Peter Juk, KC, and the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of BC President Hugh Braker.

The Court's move to Si'em Lelum, the Cowichan Tribes' building, was another reason for celebration. Since the Court began sitting there in April Indigenous people attending court have told Judge Cutler how much they appreciate being able to attend court in their own building.

Judge Cutler has said that presiding in First Nations Court is his greatest honour as a judge. He added, "When we first went to visit the Si'em Lelum building to assess its viability for court hearings I was struck by the sentiments of the marquee: "Most honored house where we meet in respect of one another". I said, "That's who we are and what we do!"

Everyone attending the celebration was proud of the accomplishments of the Duncan First Nations Court and excited for its next decade of working together to help those struggling in the community.

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