

CAS seizes modern version of residential schools

By Donna Durie
Writer

Renowned social worker Dr. Cindy Blackstock says the disproportionate seizure of First Nations children is a modern-day version of residential schools.

Blackstock made the observation while delivering a lecture for a captivated crowd of over 200 people at Six Nations Polytechnic last Thursday night.

During her lecture, titled "Reconciliation - The Children's Version", Blackstock touched on the history of residential schools and the forced removal of First Nations children from their families and said those days are not over.

"They were practice rounds for what's happening today. Those mass removals are fueled by poverty, poor housing and substance misuse. That's what explains why First Nations children are 12 times more likely to be removed from their families than other Canadians."

Blackstock, the executive director of the First Nations Caring Society, has played an instrumental role in filing an historic human rights complaint for what she says is discrimination on the part of the federal government for underfunding child welfare on First Nations territories.

"We filed the biggest human rights case against the Canadian government in history. We alleged the federal government was

racially discriminating against (First Nations children) by providing flawed and inequitable child welfare and therefore denying these children a chance to grow up with their families (and) not giving them equal



Cindy Blackstock

access to health care and other government services for kids."

A verdict in the case is ex-



Six Nations Polytechnic was packed last week to hear Cindy Blackstock speak.

pected to be rendered soon, hopefully within the next few weeks, she says.

Blackstock is a renowned

child rights activist and hails from the Gitsxan Nation in British Columbia.

She spoke of the various roadblocks her team of lawyers have faced since filing the human rights complaint in 2007.

"For the first six years of this case, the Canadian government tried to derail it on legal technicalities before the facts could ever be heard."

Most notably, the federal government tried unsuccessfully to prevent the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal from hearing the case, which she finds odd, she said.

"That, in and of itself, is quite telling," she said. "If I was accused of racially discriminating and had nothing to hide, I'd want the hearing right away. That's not what we found with

the Government of Canada."

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal began hear-

ing evidence on the discrimination claims on Feb. 25, 2013.

"I really believe we are coming to a time of our ancestor's dreams, collectively, across the world and in Canada - the time when our ancestors dreamed for our children and imagined a world where they would speak their languages, where they would know their stories, where their heads are held high, instead of looking down."

She said moving forward with the case was only possible through the determination and persistence of several people who believed, "First Nations children could grow up and not have to recover from their childhoods and non-aboriginal children could grow up and not have to say sorry. That's the type of Canada we want to will to the next generation."

She said Gitsxan Nation teachings revere children because "they are the closest to the Creator and that's why they can say things that remind us about what is to be human, what it is to be in love, what is to believe in fairness."

She said there's no better place for a child to grow up than with their family.

"Only your family can tell you the story of the day that you were born. Only your family can pass down the different names and traditions and ceremonies that you've had in your family for years or in your clan."



Brantford Judge Gethin Edward takes a minute to chat with Cindy Blackstock at Six Nations Polytechnic Institute last week where she was speaking to a packed crowd. (Photos by Donna Durie)

She said, however, that in some families, children are not safe and that's where First Nations people, "need to embrace our own responsibility and self-government."

She rebuked the Canadian House of Commons for its treatment of First Nations children.

"For decades, that house has treated our children as though they weren't worth the money. They have given them less and raised a generation of non-aboriginal Canadians who judge them as if they got more. That's a society we need to work our way out of."

She said according to her group's research - based on actual government reports - kids on-reserve get less funding for various needs, including housing repairs and devices for special needs children, than children living off the reserve.

Blackstock told the sad story of Jordan River Anderson, a child from Norway House Cree First Nation in Manitoba who was born with health complications, and the fact he spent his whole young life in a hospital because nobody would fund his care at home after he was born.

He died in 2005 at the age of five having never left the hospital while the federal and provincial government argued about who should pay for his care.

She urged those at the meeting to join their "I am a witness campaign", by signing up online to follow and support the current case before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. "It is the most-watched human rights case in Canadian history," she said.

The case can be followed on their Web site at www.fn-caringsociety.com.