

# The Polar Barristers



## Nunavut Law Program Cultivating Home Grown Talent

**SEPTEMBER 11, 2017 – THE JOURNEY BEGINS**

*"Our vision is to have more well-educated and self-reliant Nunavummiut. We want a majority of youth to graduate from high school, college or university with the same level of capability as graduates anywhere in Canada."*

— Government of Nunavut's *Sivumut Abluqta* mandate

And so, a partnership was formed between the Government of Nunavut (GN), Nunavut Arctic College (NAC) and the University of Saskatchewan College of Law (College of Law). The goal was to develop and deliver a law program in Nunavut and have it accessible to Nunavummiut. The aim of the program was to increase the number of practicing lawyers in Nunavut and improve access to justice for all Nunavummiut. Students who successfully completed the program would receive the University of Saskatchewan Juris Doctor (JD) degree.



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LAW SOCIETY OF NUNAVUT  
BARREAU DU NUNAVUT

The program was delivered from Iqaluit. For many of the students, they never dreamed of going to law school one day, let alone having the opportunity to study right in their own territory.

While most law programs are three years, the Nunavut Law Program was a four-year program. The first year served as a "pre law" year for the students, focusing on preparing them for legal studies. One of the unique features of that first year was the type courses offered. Students studied the Nunavut Agreement, Inuit history and government relations, legal research and writing among other subjects. The remaining three years consisted of the same rigorous program delivered at the College of Law.

Cultural Advisors were also a part of the program, like Lew Phillip from NAC, who built a good relationship with the class by dedicating time to share knowledge, offer support and speak with the students. The Program had an Elder advisor, Okpik Pitseolak, who provided insight on traditional Inuit law and taught classes at the Elder's Qammaq. Unfortunately, Okpik passed away during the third year.

What made for an exceptional experience for the students was the dedication of the speakers and professors who often went out of their way to tailor the subjects to reflect

the reality of life in the North. For example, Cathy Bell, a professor from the University of Alberta who taught the students property law, made her own workbook to capture Nunavut property law. Many of the lawyers who taught put in dedicated effort to tailor their subject to be as Nunavut specific as possible.

"The best thing about the program was being able to study in Nunavut and being with fellow Inuit and Nunavummiut. It was so helpful because we know the realities of living in the territory. We understand what life is like in the North," says Nuka Olsen-Hakongak, a recent graduate. Like her fellow classmates, she also hopes to be able to practice law in Nunavut.

On June 2nd 2021, the online convocation for the Nunavut Law Program graduates took place. Unfortunately, like so many, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their ability to celebrate with a formal graduation as originally planned. Currently, it has been rescheduled to October.

The Law Society of Nunavut had a virtual sit down with two of the program graduates, Nuka Olsen-Hakongak and Pascal MacLellan, Co-Presidents of the Nunavut Law Students Society. The Law Society of Nunavut looks forward to continuing to support all of the graduates on their journeys to become lawyers practicing in Nunavut. 📌

## Interview with graduate Nuka Olsen-Hakongak Co-President of the Nunavut Law Student Society

### WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO APPLY TO THE NUNAVUT LAW PROGRAM?

Like so many graduating from high school, Nuka found herself undecided as to what she wanted to do next. Initially, she worked in a casual position for the Government of Nunavut but was soon hired at Canadian North as a Flight Attendant, where she ended up relocating to Edmonton, AB. Unfortunately, after two years in Edmonton, Nuka found herself laid off from Canadian North. Once again, she was faced with the question "what to do next?".

Nuka felt it was time to explore post-secondary education and started researching college and university programs. She initially looked at University of Alberta programs where her mother is an alumni, specifically their Faculty of Law. Not convinced this was where she wanted to start her Bachelor's Degree, Nuka moved back to Cambridge Bay to be closer to family. It was here that she started her studies in the Social Work diploma program offered through the Nunavut Arctic College.

It was in her second year of social work studies that Nuka heard talk of the upcoming intake for the Nunavut Law Program. She decided she wanted to

pursue her initial desire to be a lawyer and felt her current studies built a solid foundation. More so, the idea of being able to live and study law in Nunavut was appealing and an opportunity she didn't want to pass up; and so, she decided to apply immediately, letting fate determine if she was to be part of the Nunavut Law Program.

Four years later, Nuka is one of the graduates from Nunavut Law Program.

### WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE FOR YOU?

"My experience over the four years was great! Despite many hurdles, late night studying and some stressful days, the time went quick." says Nuka. "There was a wealth

because we know the realities of living in the territory. We understand what life is like in the North," says Nuka. Like her fellow classmates, she also hopes to be able to practice law in Nunavut.

### WHICH SPEAKER / PROFESSOR MADE THE BIGGEST IMPRESSION TO YOU?

"All of the speakers and professors were knowledgeable and wise. They were personable and some made a point to keep in touch with us – I learned so much from all of them!" says Nuka. "One that does stand out is Benjamin Ralston. He was with us for our whole prelaw year and returned this winter to teach Aboriginal Law and Environmental Law."

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**“All of the speakers and professors were knowledgeable and wise. ...I learned so much from all of them!”**

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of law professors that taught us over the four years; from our own University of Saskatchewan, College of Law, Queens University, University of Victoria, University of Alberta, as well as a nice mix of local lawyers and other guest speakers. Many even came on their own, paying their own way to visit our program."

For Nuka, the biggest challenge was the complexity of the law. "Developing good study skills helped and having a strong support network contributed to much of my success."

"The best thing about the program was being able to study in Nunavut and being with fellow Inuit and Nunavummiut. It was so helpful

"Glen Luther is also someone who stands out. He taught us our Evidence Law class and our Indigenous People and the Criminal Process class during our third year. Professor Luther came back to Iqaluit in April of this year to teach Law and Psychiatry, where unfortunately, our in-person class time was cut short due to the COVID outbreak."

"Our Dean at the College of Law, Martin Phillipson, was also someone who always gave great, reassuring advice. At the very beginning of our program, he said something that I tried to incorporate into my four years of study. He said that if we put in the work, treat it like a 9-5 job

(and more when deadlines persist) you will be fine. I always tried my best in school but didn't have my studies define my whole life."

### WHAT'S NEXT!

As of June 7th, Nuka commenced her articling employment with the Legal Services Board of Nunavut, commonly known as Nunavut Legal Aid, for the next 12 months. After completing her work as a Student-at-Law, Nuka will be called to the Nunavut bar sometime in the summer of 2022.

However, Nuka isn't quite ready to walk away from her studies. Recently the Nunavut Arctic College introduced a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program, the area of study Nuka was two years into prior to applying to the Nunavut Law Program. Once she has completed her articling and becomes admitted to the Nunavut bar, she is considering the option of returning home to Cambridge Bay to possibly apply back into the program and get her bachelor's degree.

For Nuka, she is looking to pursue work where she can help improve the health and wellbeing of Inuit and Nunavummiut. Obtaining her BSW is a goal toward enhancing her skills as she enters the legal profession and to ensure she conducts meaningful work.

### WHAT WOULD NUKA RECOMMEND TO SOMEONE IN NUNAVUT THINKING ABOUT BECOMING A LAWYER?

"If someone wants it, go for it – you are more than capable. Not everything is going to make sense, and not everything is going to be easy. But if you have the drive and motivation, go for it and give it your best." 🟩

# Interview with graduate Pascal MacLellan

Co-President of the  
Nunavut Law Student  
Society

## WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO APPLY TO THE NUNAVUT LAW PROGRAM?

Pascal always had an interest in law. He remembers a time during high school taking a course about law that was organized by the late Justice Beverley Browne. After receiving his undergraduate degree in 2009, Pascal returned to Nunavut and worked as a court clerk, where he held the position for nine years. From his experience as a court clerk, Pascal came to realize that he wanted more – he wanted to be a lawyer – and he started to actively apply to law schools in the south. Like so many Nunavummiut, he struggled with the notion of having to leave home and live in the south for school. Pascal was very involved in the community and didn't want to leave.

The solution Pascal was looking for – return to school to study law and stay in Nunavut – presented itself and he jumped on the opportunity.

## WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE FOR YOU?

For Pascal, the first year was key in setting him (and other students) up for success. "Typically, law



*Pictured above: Pascal MacLellan and Nuka Olsen-Hakongak*

programs are only three years. I know initially we were all thinking 'why four years?'. I quickly came to appreciate the foundational year as it helped me get back into good studying habits. I also learned about professionalism in the law and a comprehensive understanding of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. The courses offered the first year were amazing. They provided the history of Nunavut, the unique culture, and context for practicing law in Nunavut."

No surprise, there were challenges in delivering a program remotely. The biggest challenge was internet issues. Skype sessions with conferences in the south didn't always run smoothly because of the internet. The other challenge was the limited study space. "Universities in the south have big libraries with spaces dedicated to studying," says Pascal. "The University of Saskatchewan was super helpful. If we needed anything from the library, all we needed to do was contact our librarian, and they would do what they could to

get the material to us as quickly as possible. They really did such an amazing job."

"One of the best things about the program were the professors," says Pascal. "The College of Law sent professors from around Canada. You wouldn't necessarily get that at a university in the south. The small class sizes were also beneficial. In universities in the south, you would have massive class sizes. Makes it difficult to build a relationship with anyone, let alone the professor."

"After my experience in university, one of the things I really came to appreciate was how the program was set up. Professors were brought to teach a specific subject over three to four weeks. Having the work condensed like that meant you could really focus on that particular topic. You would learn the subject, write your exams, and move onto the next one. The condensed approach wasn't always great. There was a lot to absorb in such a short period of time. This also meant that the workload was much heavier – it was way more intense.





### WHICH SPEAKER / PROFESSOR MADE THE BIGGEST IMPRESSION TO YOU?

For Pascal, there wasn't one that jumped out – they were all memorable and each one brought something of value to the students. For Pascal, he really felt the professors were there for the students and wanted them to succeed. "I loved that they wanted to learn about Nunavut and learn about the students," says Pascal. The program offered both students and professors a unique opportunity to learn. "It was great to see the professors learning about the cultural aspects of law in Nunavut. As students, we embraced the opportunity to teach the professor's about the north. Students would take them on tours of the city (Iqaluit), or on the land, and show them around. From this, we able to build unique relationships with the professors."

### WHAT'S NEXT?

For Pascal, the next step is to article with Legal Aid in Iqaluit<sup>1</sup>. "I worked here as a summer student last year and I really enjoyed the experience," says Pascal. "For me it was an obvious choice. I get to work along side people I really respect, and I am looking forward to learning from them."

Pascal is now focused on getting called to the bar. "I am a GN employee and on education leave, so I have to return to fulfill work commitments. Beyond that, I am not 100% sure what is to come after articling. The law is so diverse, there are so many interesting areas you can work in. Right now, I am focused on my articling year in criminal, family and civil law. It's really hard for me to say".

"It was really intimidating at first to go back to school. It had been such a long time since I was in school," says Pascal.

When asked what advice he has for high school graduates thinking about what's next for them, Pascal says "You are never too old to go back into school. If that is your dream, go for it. Having an education, and in particular a law degree opens so many doors – different career paths and choices. It makes you analyze different subjects, to think quickly and think outside the box."

At the moment, Pascal is looking to stay in Nunavut. "Nunavut is my home; it is where I grew up. I would like to have a lengthy career in Nunavut."

### NUNAVUT LAW STUDENT SOCIETY

Many College of Law programs have a Law Student Society, and so it was that the Nunavut Law Program came to have one as well. During the first year of the Nunavut Law Program the Director, Stephen Mansell, mentioned that the class should form a student society. The purpose of the society is to provide support to students primarily by serving as a liaison between students and faculty. The first-year

<sup>1</sup> Maliiganik Tukisiinakvik Legal Services

“During our time as Co-Presidents, we worked together to organize student events such as Christmas gatherings evenings out, and other events to help boost the morale of students.”



cohort created the Nunavut Law Student Society (NLSS) and the roles within. The student society set up their rules and bylaws by adopting those from the University of Saskatchewan College of Law and tailoring them to meet the needs of the Nunavut Law Program – like creating a position as the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit advisor.

In the third year of the NLSS the call for a President went out.

For Pascal, he saw the role as an opportunity to work on his leadership skills. “I enjoy working on committees, but I knew it would be a lot of work to balance the NLSS, school and life,” he says. “I only agreed to take on the role if it could be shared.”

Nuka felt the same way. She too saw it as an opportunity to work on leadership skills but was initially hesitant to put up her hand. She was concerned with her ability to balance the workload, the role and responsibility of being President and her personal life.

At first, she recommended Pascal for the role, and Pascal recommended Nuka. In the end, both individuals came together and agreed to share the role and responsibility of President. They both saw the value of the

NLSS as well as the opportunity it afforded them to learn leadership skills.

“I really could not have done it without Nuka. She an excellent partner and I learned so much from her,” says Pascal. “I feel the same way about Pascal,” says Nuka. “I learned so much from both the role and working alongside Pascal and our other NLSS colleagues. I am very grateful for the opportunity to be Co-President and for his support and the NLSS as a whole. Together we were able to make it work,” says Nuka.

“During our time as Co-Presidents, we worked together to organize student events such as Christmas gatherings evenings out, and other events to help boost the morale of students,” says Pascal. “We also organized a clothing drive, but unfortunately it had to be postponed due to the COVID outbreak in April. All in all, it was challenging but fun.”

Now that the program has ended, Nuka, Pascal as well as the other NLSS members must decide the future of the NLSS – how can it be helpful to the graduates as they transition from students to lawyers? Or do they dissolve it? They are currently exploring options. ■

Please note that the Law Society of Nunavut is the governing body of legal profession in Nunavut and does not provide legal services or advice to the public.

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