

For immediate release

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Canada's first Indigenous Law Dean Sues Lakehead University for Constructive Dismissal and Discrimination

Well-respected Indigenous legal scholar Angelique EagleWoman is suing Thunder Bay's Lakehead University for constructive dismissal and racial discrimination. The lawsuit follows a difficult two years as Dean of Law at the University's Bora Laskin Faculty of Law that was marked by a toxic work environment, lack of resources and under-staffing, and demeaning and paternalistic micro-management by the University's senior administration.

When Professor EagleWoman's appointment as Dean of Law was announced in January 2016, she was celebrated by Lakehead University and others as Canada's first Indigenous Dean of Law. The University's Bora Laskin Faculty of Law opened its doors in September 2013 with a focus on Indigenous law as part of its core mandate. The new law school was endorsed and supported by local Indigenous leaders as a way to advance the goal of Reconciliation called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through producing lawyers who were capable of analyzing the law from an Indigenous perspective.

Lakehead University was quick to publicize Professor EagleWoman's appointment with donors and the media, but was less active in actually supporting her in the position. Dean EagleWoman faced opposition and hostility from some within the University not long after she assumed her duties in May 2016. She tried to manage this resistance through direct dialogue and recommended cultural competency training, but she did not receive support from the University's senior administration. Instead, Lakehead University micro-managed her and repeatedly undermined her authority, making it difficult for her to command the respect of faculty and staff and to advance her efforts to address the many challenges of the new Bora Laskin Law school.

"I moved my family to Thunder Bay and was looking forward to a long and productive career as Dean and Professor of Law," says EagleWoman. "This was an exciting opportunity for me to work in a law school committed to legal education that emphasizes Indigenous law and perspectives. But I found the reality at Lakehead University did not match its many promises, to me or the local Indigenous communities. The law school is under-resourced and has never reached the full

complement of faculty required by the regulatory bodies. I was forced to carry nearly a full teaching load while still fulfilling my duties as Dean. And I can say from painful experience that it is not a welcoming atmosphere for Indigenous legal scholars.”

Professor EagleWoman’s ability to lead the law school was continually undermined by the University’s senior administration, regularly making decisions about the law school without consulting her and going around her to deal directly with faculty and staff without her knowledge. “No other law school Dean would be treated this way,” says EagleWoman. “It was demeaning and disrespectful and placed me in an untenable position.”

Professor EagleWoman announced her departure as Dean of the Bora Laskin Law School in April of this year, citing systemic discrimination and a hostile work environment. Indigenous leaders from the Anishinaabek Nation, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the Grand Council Treaty Three and the Metis Nation of Ontario reacted with shock and disappointment at her treatment and called upon Lakehead University to take positive measures to eradicate the discriminatory barriers complained about by Professor EagleWoman.

Professor EagleWoman is suing in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice for loss of income for the remainder of her term as Dean and compensation for losing a lifetime position as full Professor in the Faculty of Law. She is also claiming for damages under the *Human Rights Code* for discrimination as well as moral, aggravated and punitive damages. The total claim is for \$2.67-million. The claim was served on Lakehead University’s legal counsel on November 20, 2018.

Ms EagleWoman is a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota Oyate Tribe and has since found a position as Visiting Professor of Law at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Professor EagleWoman is represented by the law firm, Champ & Associates in Ottawa, Ontario and Indigenous law firm, Nahwegahbow, Corbiere in Rama, Ontario.

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