

Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler receives honorary doctor of laws

Gord Downie present for call to the bar at the Law Society of Upper Canada.



The Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Alvin Fiddler was granted an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by the Law Society of Upper Canada. (RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By [JACQUES GALLANT](#) Staff Reporter

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In his keynote address Friday to newly-minted lawyers at their call to the bar, Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of Nishnawbe Aski Nation gave a special shout-out to three men whom he described as his “brothers.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to this ceremony Mike, Patrick and Gord Downie,” he said to applause.

It was a rare public appearance for The Tragically Hip lead singer, who was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer earlier this year. He sat with his brothers in a box at Roy Thomson Hall, and departed after Fiddler’s speech.

He told a reporter he was honoured to be there and felt the ceremony was very symbolic. He recently got to know Fiddler [while working on his Secret Path project](#), inspired by the tragedy of Canada’s residential school system.



From left: Patrick, Mike, and Gord Downie attend the honorary doctorate of Laws ceremony for Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto on Sept. 23. (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR)

Fiddler, grand chief of an organization that represents 49 First Nations communities in northern Ontario, was one of two individuals receiving an honorary doctor of laws from the Law Society of Upper Canada.

Prior to his speech, he was praised by Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer for championing truth and social justice for First Nations communities.

Falconer highlighted that Fiddler personally advocated for the recent coroner's inquest probing the deaths of seven First Nations youth who were high school students in Thunder Bay. The jury at the long-awaited inquest delivered 145 recommendations, which the provincial and federal governments have pledged to address.

Fiddler also oversaw the advocacy that led to the creation of the Iacobucci Inquiry, which probed the systemic underrepresentation of Indigenous people on juries.

“Grand Chief Fiddler executes his duties with humility, intelligence, thoughtfulness, and respect,” Falconer said. “As Grand Chief, he continues to work tirelessly to improve the quality of life of the member citizens of Nishnawbe Aski Nation.”

The ceremony was even more poignant because among those being called to the bar were the first graduates of the Bora Laskin Faculty of Law at Lakehead University, whose dean, Angelique EagleWoman, is the first aboriginal woman to hold such a position in Canada.

In urging the new lawyers to work toward reconciliation with Indigenous communities, Fiddler drew their attention to the story of Charlie “Chanie” Wenjack. Later this month will mark the 50th anniversary of the death of the 12-year-old boy, whose body was found lying near railroad tracks in Kenora.

“Like many other children at that time (he) had been forcibly removed from his family in Ogoki Post and sent to Celica Jeffery Indian Residential School near Kenora. He was there for four years,” Fiddler said.

“We have learned from his family and former students that Charlie suffered horrific experiences, and that was why he was trying to make his way home. A journey that ended in his tragic death. Why, you might ask, am I sharing this story with you? The answer is because you, and all of Canada, need to know Charlie.”

Chanie’s story is the subject of *Secret Path*, a multimedia project announced by Downie earlier this month that will include a new solo album, graphic novel and animated film. The album and book will be released on Oct. 18 and the film will air on CBC on Oct. 23.

Downie spoke passionately about the challenges facing Indigenous communities at the Hip’s final concert in August in Kingston, where he urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was in the audience, to bring about meaningful change.

The singer is set to perform on Oct. 18 in Ottawa and Oct. 21 in Toronto to promote *Secret Path*.

Proceeds from the album and graphic novel will go to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba, which is dedicated to preserving the history of the residential school system.

“I never knew Chanie, but I will always love him,” Downie said in a statement this month. “Chanie haunts me. His story is Canada’s story. This is about Canada. We are not the country we thought we were.”

Fiddler accompanied Downie during a visit to Marten Falls earlier this month, where he met with Chanie’s surviving family members and visited the boy’s grave.

“I am grateful for Gord Downie’s determination to tell the story of Charlie Wenjack and all the children who never made it home,” Fiddler said.

“It is my hope that what started as a personal journey for my friend will become a call to action for all Canadians. We all know that achieving reconciliation will not be easy. But Gord is giving us the

tools and pointing the way forward. Now it is up to all of us to take this journey together.”

Fiddler received a standing ovation at the end of his speech.

With files from Tanya Talaga and The Canadian Press