

# Extraordinary night for human rights and the rule of law

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Photo caption: (left to right) Law Society Treasurer Paul B. Schabas; award recipient Cindy Blackstock, PhD; Gail Davidson, Executive Director, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada who accepted the award on behalf of recipient Waleed Abu al-Khair; Teresa Donnelly, chair of Law Society's Human Rights Monitoring Group

It was an extraordinary night for human rights at the **Law Society's 2016 Human Rights Award** ceremony last week.

Human rights defenders **Waleed Abu al-Khair** and **Cindy Blackstock, PhD**, were honoured at the February 22nd event for their outstanding contributions to the advancement of human rights and the promotion of the rule of law provincially, nationally and internationally.

## **Treasurer's remarks**

"We are extremely pleased to honour Dr. Blackstock and Mr. Abu al-Khair, both of whom have shown remarkable courage and conviction in their tireless efforts to promote human rights, said **Law Society Treasurer Paul B. Schabas** at the evening ceremony.

"Through Dr. Blackstock's efforts to address systemic discrimination of First Nations children, she has made a significant and lasting contribution that will have a powerful impact on generations of First Nations children," he said. "Mr. Abu al-Khair has sacrificed a great deal. In honouring him with the Law Society's Human Rights Award, we say to him, and to others like him, your sacrifice does not go unrecognized," said Treasurer Schabas.

## Greetings from Ogimaa (Chief) Duke Peltier



The ceremony began with welcoming remarks from **Ogimaa (Chief) Duke Peltier of Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve** on Manitoulin Island. “It is with great pleasure that I come here and bring greetings on behalf of the Anishnawbe peoples in celebrating the accomplishments and the achievements of two warriors: Dr. Cindy Blackstock and Mr. Waleed Abu al-Khair,” said Ogimaa Peltier. “I’m humbled to have the opportunity to stand in front of Dr. Cindy Blackstock for her work in elevating the issue of equality for all children and I’m extremely proud of her in receiving the award from the Law Society. To the Law Society of Upper Canada, Meegwetch for inviting me her today. It is indeed a great honour. Chi Meegwetch to the two award recipients for your commitment, your tireless work and sacrifices and determination. You have given hope to humanity,” he said.

### Message from the Chair

The Human Rights Award was established in 2013 by the Law Society as part of its long-standing commitment to human rights, the rule of law, and access to justice. It is granted every two years to individuals for their devotion to these principles either over a long term, or for a single, outstanding act of service. The Law Society’s Human Rights Monitoring Group (HRMG) selects the award nominees. The inaugural award was presented to The Honourable Irwin Cotler in 2014.

**Teresa Donnelly**, chair of the HRMG, said at the event: “When the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law is threatened, either at home or abroad, it affects us all. The Law Society of Upper Canada and the Human Rights Monitoring Group speak out against injustice perpetrated against members of the legal profession and judges in the discharge of their professional duties. This injustice includes harassment, intimidation, threats, unlawful detention, unlawful house arrest, torture and even death.”

## Waleed Abu al-Khair – Human Rights Defender



Recipient **Waleed Abu al-Khair**, 37, has been arbitrarily imprisoned in Saudi Arabia since April 15, 2014. He is a prominent human rights lawyer, activist and founder of the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA). He has worked tirelessly to defend human rights and the rule of law for all — in the face of extreme adversity and at the cost of his own freedom.

**Gail Davidson, Executive Director of Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada**, accepted the award on his behalf.

“Waleed can’t be here in person because he is serving a prison sentence that won’t expire until 2044,” she began. “He has asked me in his absence to extend thanks to the human rights defenders jailed in Saudi Arabia...and to everyone around the world who has stood by him and not forgotten him, to his family — especially to his sister and his mother — and to all the people in Saudi Arabia who continue to want to change the society in Saudi Arabia for the better,” she said. “Waleed began practising law in 2007 and since then he has used the written and spoken word coupled with his legal knowledge to fearlessly advocate for reforms to improve the lives of all in Saudi Arabia by calling on the government to allow its citizens to enjoy internationally protected rights such as rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly and the right to participate in public affairs. He has also advocated passionately for the equal rights of women and on behalf of prisoners of conscience,” she said.



## Dr. Cindy Blackstock – First Nations Advocate



Blackstock brings Spirit Bear to all the hearings to represent the children.

Recipient **Dr. Cindy Blackstock** is a highly respected and outstanding advocate for First Nations children and youth in Canada working to address systemic discrimination in the child welfare system. She is the **Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada**, and a **professor with the School of Social Work at McGill University**. Dr. Blackstock is a member of the **Gitksan First Nation**, and has 25 years of social work experience in child protection and Indigenous children’s rights.

In her acceptance speech, Dr. Blackstock told the story of filing, along with the Assembly of First Nations, an official complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Canada against the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 10 years ago in February 2007. The complaint was based on “the inequitable levels of child welfare funding provided to First Nations children and families on reserve.” They won the long case in January 2016, however, to date, the Canadian government has not complied with the landmark ruling. “There have been two ‘fail to comply’ orders against the Canadian government and further orders will be coming in March,” said Blackstock. “As the people of this period,” she continued, “we cannot allow the Canadian government to spend over a half-a-billion dollars on a birthday party while subsidized on the backs of racial discrimination against this generation of First Nations children.”

She also paid tribute to “a hero of mine,” Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, a pioneer in public health, who in 1907, wrote a report on the extremely high death rates among First Nations children in the residential school system in western Canada. His research report found the children dying from tuberculosis and poor health conditions within the schools. When the government of the period took no action, Dr. Bryce leaked his report to the press and the story was widely covered for a number of days. Although the government continued to ignore his findings and recommendations, Dr. Blackstock praised Bryce for doing the right thing in the face of adversity and challenged those in the audience to do the same.



Following Dr. Blackstock's moving words, the **Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre Youth Drum** performed two honour songs in celebration.

## **Learn about the Law Society's Human Rights Award**

*To learn more about the Law Society's Human Rights Award, please visit:*

[www.lso.ca/about-lso/medals,-awards-and-honours/law-society-awards/human-rights-award](http://www.lso.ca/about-lso/medals,-awards-and-honours/law-society-awards/human-rights-award)

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