



## This judge brings wide-ranging experience to the Court



*Judge Wolf swearing in the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation Council)*

Many Provincial Court judges bring a wide range of life experience to their work in the Court. It can help them understand the circumstances of the people they judge and appreciate their diversity. But Judge Alexander Wolf's experience before he was appointed a judge must be among the most varied and wide-ranging.

He worked stocking store shelves, building windows, and as a dishwasher, ditch digger, desk clerk, sandwich maker, janitor, machinist, and assistant funeral director. He did legal work in both northern and southern Canada, the Philippines, Fiji, and India. As a lawyer he was called to the Bar in Ontario, British Columbia, the Yukon and Republic of Fiji.

Judge Wolf is one of six judges in the BC Provincial Court as of May 2024 who self-identifies as

an Indigenous person. He is a member of the Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis First Nation, located just off the coast of Vancouver Island on Gilford Island, British Columbia. He received his Kwak'wala name "Abatzagee" after participating in a three-day Potlatch ceremony. It translates roughly to "Worldly Essence". Judge Wolf says, "While I'm still working on it, it is a tough name to live up to."

Between the ages of two and nineteen, he lived in foster homes or with different family members. He explains that no Indigenous person is free from the impact of residential schools. Even though he did not attend one, many of his family members did. As a result of the intergenerational trauma that his mother went through, she grew up in a complicated time and struggled with addictions to alcohol and illicit substances. Judge Wolf says, "It was tragic that my mother committed suicide in Oakalla prison when I was fifteen, because the trauma she suffered through her life was not her fault."

At 19, after dropping out of college because he could not afford the tuition, he left BC on a motorcycle and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Two years later he attended university in Ottawa and then went on to Dalhousie law school. "Oddly, from a young age I always wanted to be a lawyer, an insurance litigator, to be exact." he explains.

In law school, he was chosen to spend a summer working in a Tribal Legal Aid Clinic in the Philippines. He loved the experience so much that he accepted an internship to study the Indian legal system in New Delhi and Gujarat state. There he worked on cases described as "atrocities", often tragic crimes committed with an underlying cultural intent.

Eventually, he articulated in a Toronto insurance litigation firm. He then joined the Federal Department of Justice because he enjoyed being in court. Working in Yukon, he saw the benefits of "peacemaking circles" (then called "sentencing circles") being used there by some of Canada's most creative legal problem solvers.

Then, as he says, "I did what any responsible, well educated, career-minded lawyer would do. I moved to Fiji and worked with Fijian Legal Aid for the better part of two years. Nothing stimulates the legal mind more than landing in a new country and being faced with many serious cases, including manslaughter, murder and treason. I was at a slight disadvantage as the language of the accused in court was either Fijian or Hindi Fijian. There were no interpreters and my language skills, while always flexible, couldn't be called fluent."

Tired of wearing wigs in court and basking on beaches, Judge Wolf then returned to BC to start private practice in North Vancouver. In 2014 he became the Legal Director of the Indigenous Community Legal Clinic at UBC's Allard Law School. For over twenty years, upper year law students have helped thousands of Indigenous people with legal problems in this law course program.



Judge Wolf speaking at the 2023 First Nations Justice Summit

Since being appointed a Provincial Court judge in December 2015, Judge Wolf has presided in about 25 courthouses, including the New Westminster, North Vancouver and Prince George Indigenous courts. He is now the resident judge for the west coast of Vancouver Island, which includes 14 First Nations communities, Port Alberni, Ucluelet, Bamfield and Tofino.

He is a frequent speaker at provincial, national and international conferences. Speaking from personal experience, he regularly tells young people wanting to study law, “Keep an open mind, because you never know where you are going to be in twenty years. Imagine the possibilities.”

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