

Supreme Court Justice Thomas Cromwell visits Iqaluit for high school mock trial and discussion on access to justice

By Gloria Song

Supreme Court Justice Thomas Cromwell made a visit to Nunavut's capital in May this year. A joint initiative of the Law Society of Nunavut and the Canadian Bar Association's Nunavut Branch, there were multiple purposes to his visit. One was to address the members of the Nunavut Bar in a discussion about access to justice. Another was to act as a guest judge for the annual mock trial for high school students, which was a thrilling honour for all of the students involved.

The high school students, all in grade nine, went through extensive preparation for the mock trial in their respective roles as lawyers, court clerks, witnesses, and sheriffs. They started their training in March, beginning with an orientation session on how the court works, and finishing with a dress rehearsal at the school library on the weekend before the trial. For the date of the actual mock trial, the court staff kindly provided the use of the courtroom at the Nunavut Court of Justice.

Some of the students' parents came to watch the students present their case before Justice Cromwell, a civil dispute between parties regarding the sale of a faulty skidoo. In the end, Justice Cromwell gave a split decision, with the plaintiff winning on one point and the defendant winning on another. Justice Cromwell commented that he was very pleased with the students' performance and could see some potential lawyers in the room.

Afterwards, many of the kids had questions about how to become a lawyer, and what lawyers did. One student even asked if they thought she could get into law school. "If we get one kid interested in law, then we've won," commented John MacLean, incoming president of the CBA's Nunavut Branch and one of the organizers. "This is the phase where you start thinking about what you want to do in life. If being a lawyer isn't your thing, how about being a court worker? There are guaranteed to be vacancies in all sorts of positions here in Nunavut, and if we can get someone who grew up here to be interested, that's a great thing."

Many lawyers also volunteered their time to help with the event, including lawyers from the Crown, the Legal Services Board of Nunavut, and the Government of Nunavut.

Members of the bar also had a chance to hear Justice Cromwell speak on access to justice at the event held at the Frobisher Hotel. Known for his passion about access to justice and law reform, Justice Cromwell gave an enthusiastic talk about the various studies that have been conducted, and the work that the CBA and the Federation of Law Societies have been doing on the topic. He highlighted the need for more collaboration between regions, pointing out that the remedies do exist but require more than a patchwork approach for implementation. The event was well attended with over fifty members representing a cross section of the bar. At the end, Justice Cromwell was presented with a sealskin bow-tie, which he has been seen wearing at various events since.

"We left very happy. It was a very successful weekend," concluded John. "We're not just about holding CLEs and writing letters; we should also be doing some social things because we're such a small community as a bar."