



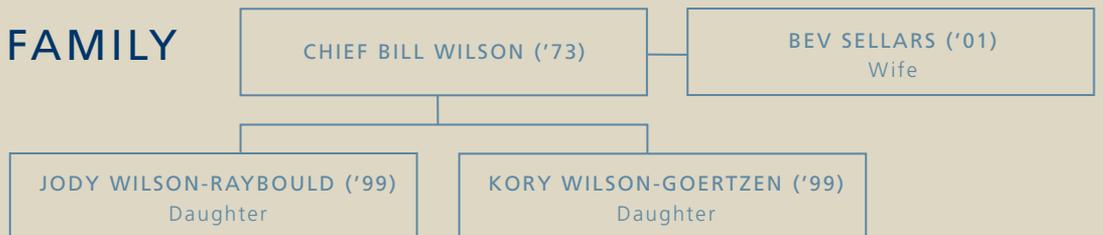
Chief Bill Wilson, Class of 1973, was one of the founding creators of the first annual Tricycle Race at UBC Law. Photo reproduced by Martin Dee



Far left: Bill Wilson and his wife Bev Sellars

Left: Regional Chief Jody Wilson-Raybould

WILSON FAMILY



In federal law, he has a remarkable distinction: he helped to draft the first and only amendment to Canada’s Constitution. Locally, he helped start a 40-year tradition at UBC Law School that still requires no studying or exams. Sure, up until a few years ago, you might have found cases involved, but they were the kind that held beer. His memorable contribution began with a ramp, water and a kiddies’ pool.

By Heather Conn

Chief Bill Wilson (Class of 1973) was one of the founding creators of the first annual Tricycle Race at UBC Law, a tradition that continues to this day. (Wilson pegs 1971 as its year of origin, but some written sources claim it started a year later.) “Everyone on the trikes ended up soaking wet in the pool,” he says, over lunch at a favourite Greek restaurant in Vancouver’s West End. “We brought fun to the school.”

When Wilson arrived at law school—after receiving the second-highest mark in the province on his LSAT—he says that he found the atmosphere too uptight. Determined to change that, he announced to his schoolmates, “We’re going to have a beer bash in the lounge.” The dean at the time agreed to let him do it on one condition: “You invite me and we will walk in together.” The event went ahead, offering ham hock sandwiches and beer for a quarter. Wilson added that both students and faculty reached out more to each other as a result. “It [the law school] became a better place.”

Despite his emphasis on fun as UBC’s president of the Law Students’ Association in 1972–73, Wilson played a serious role off-campus, fighting for Aboriginal rights. Wilson (or Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla) is a hereditary chief of the Kwawkwewlth from northern Vancouver Island. He was the second Aboriginal person to graduate from UBC Law, and acknowledges the breakthrough role of the first, Alfred Scow¹ (Class of ’61), his first cousin, who graduated from UBC Law more than a decade earlier.

During first and second year, Wilson worked full time and travelled a lot, holding executive positions in numerous First Nations groups, including Director of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, and of the Native Indians and the Law Program. By third year, he had two full-time jobs, including Director of Aboriginal Title and Land Claims for the BC Association of Non-Status Indians.

Not surprisingly, the outspoken advocate had little time to study and says that his marks weren’t great: “I did just enough to get by.” But he found that his education, particularly in constitutional law, helped him immensely in his political work. In 1970, for example, he discussed a case in Ottawa with Jean Chretien, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. “We had just dealt with that case [in class]. I corrected Chretien’s aide.”

At one point, Wilson was going to quit law school to focus on full-time work in Ottawa. One of his professors, the late Ray Herbert, urged him to stay, get the ‘canned notes’ and write the Christmas exams. Wilson followed his advice—and aced his exams.

He became vice-president of the Native Council of Canada in Ottawa in 1982, which led to what he calls the high point of his political career. In March 1983, Wilson served as negotiator at the First Constitutional Conference on Aboriginal Issues. He met with then prime minister Pierre Trudeau and helped to draft and successfully negotiate the first and only amendment to Canada’s Constitution. In section 35 of the *Constitution Act*, it expanded the concept of consent regarding treaty rights and Aboriginal title.

¹ Scow became the first Aboriginal lawyer in BC and the first Aboriginal judge appointed to the BC Provincial Court, where he served from 1971 to 1992. He went on to win numerous awards including the UBC Great Trekker Award, a UBC Honourary Doctor of Laws Degree, the Order of BC and the Order of Canada.



“The work we did changed this province and the country,” says Wilson, wearing a black T-shirt with ‘Think Indian’ in tall white letters. “It’s a cornerstone built on the 1763 King George Proclamation.”

In 1990, Wilson became chair of the First Nations Summit, helping to bring the federal and provincial governments together to create a BC Claims Task Force. This led directly to the creation of the BC Treaty Commission and the treaty negotiations now in progress. “As an Indian leader, the first thing you learn about is land claims,” says the man who grew up listening to his father and others discuss this issue. “I felt a certain mission.”

In a family of such legal achievement with politics as the dinner conversation, it’s not surprising that Wilson has two daughters who are UBC Law grads and leaders in their own right in the Aboriginal community.

“It was a foregone conclusion that I would follow in my father’s footsteps,” says Jody Wilson-Raybould (Class of 1999), now the Regional Chief of BC for the Assembly of First Nations. “Dad encouraged us to be critical thinkers and to look at the world from all different perspectives. Law school seemed like the most appropriate place to be.” She adds that her activist grandmother, Pugledee, the matriarch of her Eagle clan, also greatly influenced her.

“My education has given me the knowledge and understanding to assist our Nations in advancing and implementing our Aboriginal title and rights,” Wilson-Raybould says. Still a practicing member of the BC bar, she uses her legal training as Regional Chief

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and in her community/Nation as a Council member of the We Wai Kai Nation.

As a former provincial Crown prosecutor, Wilson-Raybould says that she frequently met judges and lawyers who were her father’s UBC classmates. Following one courtroom success in provincial court, she says, “The judge called me into his chambers and said he had gone to school with my dad and how much that meant to him.”

Both Wilson-Raybould and her older sister, Kory Wilson-Goertzen, applied to UBC Law School around the same time, got accepted, and graduated in 1999. Today, Wilson-Goertzen is chair of the Aboriginal Studies program at Langara College.

“I think that you have a responsibility when you have that much education to help those in the Aboriginal community who haven’t had the same opportunities,” Wilson-Goertzen says. As a member of the Aboriginal Law Graduates Working Group, she helped produce a study that identifies and addresses discriminatory barriers that face Aboriginal lawyers, law graduates and students.

While at UBC, Wilson-Goertzen says that she enjoyed the support of professors and sharing many classes with her sister. The siblings did not compete with each other; she can't recall even comparing marks. While pregnant in third year, she remembers waddling to classes, being too big to fit in certain desks. She heard lots of funny stories about her father from faculty who had been his professors or classmates.

Yet, at the same time, she acknowledges, "A lot of the students there came from very wealthy families, from a different social class and experience." This enabled her to witness the impact of a privileged life, she says. She remembers, in particular, that some students in a class on First Nations perspectives were questioning that residential schools had even existed.

Bill Wilson's wife (Class of 2011) went to residential school and has written a novel of her experience called *Number One*, based on her assigned number under the repressive system. Wilson credits his spouse's legal education with giving her the courage and confidence to write about this painful event.

At UBC, Sellars remembers that she found some content in a required course on property law to be difficult to accept. "The concepts of ownership go against what Aboriginal people think," she says. "There was nothing in there that recognized us. The history began when the newcomers came."

But she says that she made a lot of good friends through the First Nations Law Students Association. She did community liaison and outreach work through International Indigenous Legal Studies, the research arm of the First Nations Legal Studies Program.

Today, as Chief of the Xat'sull (Soda Creek) First Nation near Williams Lake, BC, Sellars says that she, too, finds satisfaction using her leadership and law education to advance the rights of Aboriginal people. In April of this year, she and other First Nation Chiefs in the northern Shuswap created a leadership council to oversee treaty negotiations with the provincial and federal governments. Previously, she spent six years working for the BC Treaty Commission, presenting workshops around the province that explained the treaty process and its legal concepts. "The federal and provincial governments need to recognize the legitimate place of Aboriginal people," she says.

Wilson-Goertzen uses her knowledge of law every day, since much of her curriculum at Langara is law-based, she says. For instance, the course 'Contemporary Social Issues for Aboriginal People' examines the control and colonization of Aboriginal peoples through treaties, legislation, the reserve system and the residential school system. Soon, she plans to launch The Right to Learn Foundation to help Aboriginal learners succeed at any age and any stage of their education, whether they're in foster care, need a tutor or have a learning disability.

In Wilson-Raybould's words, "True leadership is about the person who demonstrates passion and commitment to what they believe in and what they choose to do in life. True leaders are all around us and they lead by example." ●