

Philanthropist donates \$1 million for ground-breaking journalism course



Philanthropist Alison Lawton donated \$1 million to launch Canada's first International Reporting course. COURTESY OF ALISON LAWTON

Frontline/WORLD to air documentary in May

By CINDY CHAN
Epoch Times Staff

Vancouver philanthropist Alison Lawton has donated \$1 million to the University of British Columbia (UBC) Graduate School of Journalism to launch Canada's first International Reporting course.

As the first documentary produced from the course prepares to air on premier broadcaster Frontline/World in May, Ms. Lawton and the school will be hosting an event on April 7 to celebrate the

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launch of the course and mark its inaugural achievement.

The International Reporting course is dedicated to in-depth investigative journalism and "change-making documentaries on important and under-represented global issues."

The venture is a brand new concept in Canada and one of the first courses of its kind in the world, said Ms. Lawton. It is similar to the New York-based ProPublica newsroom launched in January

2008, a non-profit project that produces investigative journalism with an exclusive focus on important stories with "moral force."

The major difference is that the UBC initiative is a course with the key aim of training new journalists.

"First and foremost I want to give the students an opportunity to become cutting-edge, responsible journalists," said Ms. Lawton.

"How do you do that? You give them access to opportunities, and you give them access to mentors—professors, advisors who have been in the field. And this course is a bit of all of that."

The course is led by Associate Professor Peter Klein, an award-winning investigative journalist and documentary producer who has covered stories from more than a dozen countries. Among other honours, he won an Emmy in 2000 for his 60 Minutes program on the former Soviet Union's smallpox weapons program.

For the last three and a half months, the course was also taught by visiting professor and award-winning news producer and journalist Sarah Carter, Johannesburg Bureau Chief for CBS News who oversees the network's coverage of Africa.

The two reached out to their contacts and made opportunities for the students to interact with other high-profile journalists online.

"To me, that's exciting, and I think it will awaken this sense of power and the ability that the students can have if they become journalists, to really shape public perception on issues that I think right now are under-represented," Ms. Lawton said.

Ms. Lawton's gift of \$1 million will be spent over 10 years to fund the course that will admit 10 students each year who are working toward their Master of Journalism degree.

An advisory committee, which includes Ms. Lawton, will select the students. And each year's class will have the chance to travel abroad to study and practice international reporting firsthand, going beyond the journalism of "sound bites."

Ms. Lawton herself has always been interested in mass media

and "creating content that allows people to react and change perceptions."

The mass media conglomerates are not doing enough in-depth international journalism because they would rather cover local and economic issues and don't want to pay the cost of sending journalists abroad, Ms. Lawton said.

An accomplished business executive and passionate social entrepreneur, she spent three years producing an award-winning feature-length documentary about the 20-year civil war in Northern Uganda.

"Uganda Rising" started as a small video piece to raise awareness but "snowballed" into a major worldwide campaign, said Ms. Lawton. It received a great deal of acclaim and won several film festival awards for best documentary, but she did not feel it reached the "maximum audience potential" she wanted, like the audience that a Frontline documentary would have.

The UBC course aims to reach a wide audience via access to premier broadcasters like Frontline. As well, with more and more people turning to the web for content, the course will also maximize the power of multimedia through the best of Internet technology.

This year's class has brought forward story ideas from under-represented and global issues that Ms. Lawton had not considered before. "The great thing about students is they do have a youthful and idealist way of thinking about things, so they're not tired in their general ideas of what's interesting," she said.

The students have gone on their trip and are now editing the content and creating the story. Ms. Lawton said they had to identify the opportunities, produce a draft, deal with field workers abroad, travel to the location, film, edit, and obtain agreement with Frontline to air their story—an impressive accomplishment for these "first-timers."

And just what is the documentary about?

"We're going to wait until the screening," said Ms. Lawton.

Additional reporting by Joan Delaney

Children 'biggest losers' in family court, says judge

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Brownstone authored a recently published book, the first of its kind for a sitting family court judge, aimed at educating separating couples about the pitfalls of fighting their battles in court.

In Tug of War: A Judge's Verdict on Separation, Custody Battles, and the Bitter Realities of Family Court, Brownstone wants parents to understand that taking their fight to family court is not a decision that should be taken lightly—they should be prepared.

"Family courts are clogged with people who watch Judge Judy. They see on Judge Judy how fast it is, how easy it looks, and they come running to court and then they find out that they're in the middle of a real mess. It's very stressful, it's costly, it's time consuming, and there are rules and procedures, and rules of evidence you don't see on Judge Judy."

Brownstone says "immature" and "self absorbed" couples show up in his court to fight over issues as trivial as the length of the child's hair, who gets to take the child trick-or-treating, or which summer camp the child should attend. This endless wrangling takes an immeasurable toll on the children.

"There are very, very many couples who are so wrapped up in their own pain and their own need for vengeance that they completely lose sight of what they're doing to their children," he says.

The enmity can go so deep that Brownstone has had parents tell him they'd rather see their children dead or in foster care than with the other parent.

Edward Kruk, a University of British Columbia sociology professor and Canada's foremost expert on custody issues, says family court's emphasis

on sole custody rather than equal shared parenting fosters animosity between parents.

He says much controversy and disagreement exists in professional literature regarding the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome. He questions the wisdom of removing Ms. A from her daughter's life in the absence of proof of abuse or serious neglect.

"For one parent having been the primary caregiver to be suddenly removed, and the child's whole routine disrupted, just seems like a very harsh, very blunt instrument to say the least in dealing with a problem that is almost universal in child custody disputes because of the way the full custody system is set up."

Kruk says it's common for both parents to engage in parental alienation, pushed into it by the knowledge that only one of them can get custody.

"The court basically pits parents against each other ... so they get into the pattern of denigrating each other while trying to prove to the court—and also dragging their children into it—that they are the superior parent; but more importantly that the other parent is untrustworthy, deficient, and incapable. The system is set up to promote that kind of behavior."

Kruk maintains equal shared parenting is the key to preventing parental alienation and "preserving the integrity of the child's relationship with both parents." He says the time has come to "get rid entirely of this dominant, full custody regime that we have where one parent is removed from the child's life via a sole custody order."

It's within this "winner take all custody regime" in which parents are threatened with the loss of their children that violence tends to occur, he says. "It's a recipe for disaster."

Studies show that equal parenting is better and actually desired by children themselves. Propo-



Adversarial family court system exacerbates animosity between parents. PHOTOS.COM

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nents of equal parenting say it also reduces false allegations of assault and sexual abuse, a common occurrence that monopolizes the court system.

Kruk says equal parenting can work for couples who remain in conflict through "parallel parenting," in which arrangements are made where the parents don't have direct contact with each other but can still co-parent independently.

Brownstone believes that by constantly returning to family court to fight over petty issues, couples are using the system as a platform to perpetuate a relationship that they're not ready to let

go. Counseling and "parenting coaching"—provided free by the courts where needed—would go a long way in resolving this and helping feuding parents learn to get along, he says.

"I think the courts need to provide mediation for free for people who can't access it. And I think that the legal profession, the family law lawyers, have to be very sensitive to the damage that the court can do and steer their clients to the kind of information I'm giving them in the book," he says.