

Keynote Speaker: Heather Kendall-Miller



Heather's personal story serves as the foundation for her work fighting for Alaska Native rights. A well-respected and award-winning Athabascan lawyer, teacher, and mentor, Heather's legal experience includes cases involving subsistence, tribal sovereignty, human rights, and taxation. In 1998, she was the first Alaska Native to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, fighting on behalf of the Native Village of Venetie. In 2001, Heather was instrumental in winning the Katie John subsistence hunting and fishing rights case. Throughout her career, she has worked with numerous Alaska Native People and communities, including the Akiachak Native Community, Native Village of Kluti Kaah, the Native Village of Barrow, and the Nome Eskimo community.

Heather was born in Seward, and lost her mother when she was two years old. Her family eventually relocated to Fairbanks, where Heather grew up during the height of the social, cultural, and economic explosion brought about by the discovery of oil on Alaska's North Slope and the subsequent construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline. After dropping out of Lathrop High School, Heather married and set off to homestead in the Ray Mountains, 140 miles north of Fairbanks. When the marriage ended, Heather—then a young single mother—took an \$11-an-hour job as one of five women cooking and making beds for roustabout camps in Prudhoe Bay's oil fields. She later joined the Laborers Union and worked on rigging pipes, shoveling ditches and laying gravel. Heather went on to earn her GED and, in 1983, enrolled at the University of Alaska Fairbanks where she graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in History. In 1988, intent on pursuing a legal career, Heather applied for and received a full scholarship to Harvard Law School. In 1991 she became the first Alaska Native to graduate from that prestigious institution.

Upon graduation from Harvard Law School, she returned to Alaska, clerking for Chief Justice Jay Rabinowitz of the Alaska Supreme Court. She was awarded a Skadden Fellowship, a two year post-graduate public interest fellowship, and went to work at Alaska Legal Services Corporation, representing indigent clients in court and in administrative hearings, before finally starting her career with the Native American Rights Fund. She has received numerous prestigious local, state, and national awards, including the American Bar Association's Spirit of Excellence Award, presented to Heather in February of 2018. According to the ABA, this particular award is bestowed upon attorneys who "personify excellence" on the national and international level, and have "demonstrated a commitment to racial and ethnic diversity." In April 2018, the Federal Bar Association's Indian Law Section honored Heather with the 2018 Lawrence Baca Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Federal Indian Law. The award is given to select leaders in the field of Indian Law by the Federal Bar Association's Indian Law Section, and is considered a significant national honor.

After more than 25 years at NARF working for Alaska Native rights, Heather is now officially semi-retired -- but she continues to champion the important and culturally-significant *Sturgeon v. Frost* case, as it continues to wend its way through the federal court system to this day.