



Arnold Martinez, BSW, was presented with 2023 Janusz Korczak Association of Canada Award for Distinguished Social Work Practice Protecting the Rights of Children at the BCASW AGM, October 20, 2023. This award is co-sponsored by BCASW and the Janusz Korczak Association of Canada and is given to a social worker in recognition of their contribution to improving children's lives and well-being in ways that reflect the philosophy of Dr. Janusz Korczak. Their practice demonstrates respect for the child, fosters skills that lead to healthy independence, promotes self-determination, promotes and protects human rights, and engages in collaborative practice with the child or youth.

The Janusz Korczak Association of Canada strives for the dissemination of knowledge about Dr. Korczak's work and ideas in order to better integrate it into contemporary legal, social, and pedagogical theories and practices, and to make it the basis for cooperation among educators, child welfare workers, researchers, physicians, lawyers and children's rights activists.

I'm a guardianship social worker from The Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Service Society (VACFSS). The VACFSS Guardianship program is responsible for the care and well-being of Indigenous children and youth under a Continuing Custody Order.

I view my work as more than overseeing, care planning, upholding children's rights and ensuring their voices are heard. It's about empowering Indigenous youth in care to not only thrive but to chase their dreams. Take, for instance, a young person who aspired to graduate from the Vancouver Film School and pursue a career as an illustrator. We collaboratively set goals throughout his high school journey, ultimately preparing him for a college-level program. He graduated.

It's also about making connections to one's roots and hereditary rights. I had the privilege of traveling with a father and his son to their ancestral home. The father, a survivor of the '60s Scoop didn't know his family. What transpired when we arrived was incredible – they were met by cousins, revisited the home where he lived as an infant, met extended family, and paid respects at the graves of his mother and grandparents. Witnessing this homecoming was an honor, and it underscored the importance of making connections to culture and family.

It takes a village to raise a child. I believe my role is also to maintain and build the village, creating a nurturing and empowering circle around children and youth, that will continue to follow them as adults. Collaboration is at the core of our work. Consulting with a diverse team is crucial when making decisions in the best interest of the child.

I also wish to acknowledge the importance of a child's voice in all aspects of their planning. Our youth advisory committee regularly reminds us of this. That it is their life path, and not ours. They need support and empowerment to develop the vision they have for their lives, rather than an oppressive silencing practice. Current legislation and overarching conventions call on us to protect their rights. This must be done without fail.

I firmly believe that increased education and awareness regarding the historical traumas of the residential schools is extremely important. The youth in my care are directly impacted by these events, and it's crucial that society at large understands their effects. Moreover, the Indigenous population is the fastest-growing demographic in Canada, underscoring the need for ongoing support and understanding. My work as a guardianship social worker is a commitment to nurturing the well-being and dreams of children in care while addressing the historical wounds of the past and fostering a brighter future for Indigenous youth.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the meaning of my work with you.

I would like to close with a quote from Janusz Korczak. "Children are not the people of tomorrow but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be – the unknown person inside each of them is our hope for the future."

Arnold Martinez