

Rosalie Francis
Graduated: 2003
Currently: Lawyer, Burchells LLP

CV: BA Anthropology/History, Dalhousie University, 1993 / **MA, Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary's, 2003** / LLB, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University, 2015

Rosalie Francis remembers her first day of law school clearly: “I went to one two-hour class at Dal law school, and right after that I walked down Robie Street and applied to Saint Mary’s.”

That was in 2001, and at that point Francis—a member of the Sipekne'katik First Nation, with a BA in Social Anthropology from Dalhousie—had already been in the working world for seven years, employed with the Union of Nova Scotia Indians and working on negotiating treaty rights Mi'kmaq justice programs. She also helped to implement the 82 recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall Jr. Prosecution, which stemmed from the outcome of the landmark fishing-rights dispute.

She wanted to continue working to advance Indigenous rights and justice issues, and logically saw a law degree as the best way to help her develop her knowledge and effectiveness. But, she says, “There was very little research out there about our treaties, and none of the universities offered any kind of study in that field, or in Aboriginal rights or issues. So when I saw Atlantic Canada Studies, I thought I could find a strong focus there.”

She thus embarked on a two-year program MA in Atlantic Canada Studies, where her thesis project was an investigation into the 18th-century treaty-making process—an attempt to uncover, in a scholarly fashion, the cultural and social norms in Mi'kmaq society of the time in order to “look beyond the written word” and glean fuller insight into Mi'kmaq leaders' intentions when signing treaties.

In the ACS faculty, Francis found knowledgeable and inquisitive mentors who helped draw out her interests, including her thesis advisors, one of whom was John Reid.

“Dr. Reid is just the best, I can't speak so highly of anyone,” she says. “His fairness and balance when examining contentious historical issues, and he uncovers new angles, juxtaposing what the British, French, and Mi'kmaq were doing at various times. It was extremely gratifying to study with him.”

Upon graduation, Francis spent a year with the Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative before moving on to become Research Director at Membertou First Nation. There, she led an effort to create a research department on oral history and helped to bring more light to the significance or oft-overlooked oral histories. She spent five years in that role, and eventually—14 years after walking out of that Dalhousie classroom—returned to Dal's Schulich School of Law. She earned her degree in 2015, spending her final semester at the Intensive Program in Aboriginal Lands, Resources, & Governments at Toronto's Osgoode Hall Law School.

Today, Francis is an associate with Burchells LLP in Halifax, where, she says, her Saint Mary's education has become invaluable.

“I’m extremely thankful that I have my ACS degree, and spent those years doing that work,” she says. “It made all the difference, as to how I approach issues, and I can bring perspectives and knowledge to the table that many lawyers, even those with a lot of experience on these issues, simply can’t.”