



University of
Lethbridge

NEWS RELEASE

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Medical doctor and changemaker, Dr. Esther Tailfeathers, to receive University of Lethbridge honorary degree

Dr. Esther Tailfeathers (BA '84), a member of the Kainai First Nation, persevered in her education and became a medical doctor at a time when there were few Indigenous physicians, and throughout her career, she has improved Indigenous health care and inspired other generations of Indigenous doctors. The University of Lethbridge will recognize Tailfeathers' substantial contributions to health care by granting her an honorary degree at Spring 2023 Convocation.

“It was not an easy path for Esther Tailfeathers to become a medical doctor and that may be one of the reasons her success and her contributions to her community are so inspiring,” says Charles Weaselhead, ULethbridge chancellor. “She has inspired countless young women to enter the medical field because of her perseverance and her ability to break down barriers to achieve her goals. All the while she has made a huge impact on her community and bettered the lives of so many people through her practice and advocacy. The University is proud to recognize these efforts with an honorary degree.”



The University of Lethbridge will present Dr. Esther Tailfeathers with an honorary Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*, at Spring 2023 Convocation, Ceremony II, on Thursday, June 1, 2023, at 2:30 p.m. in the 1st Choice Savings Centre gymnasium.

Esther Tailfeathers

Dr. Esther Tailfeathers knew she wanted to pursue a career in medicine after an experience at the Cardston Hospital when she worked as a candy striper. A friend had arrived alone at the hospital ready to give birth and Tailfeathers stayed with her friend as the baby was born. The experience cemented her desire to become a doctor, but the path to becoming a family physician wasn't easy. A high school guidance counsellor tried

to steer her toward teaching or nursing. She came to the University of Lethbridge where she completed a bachelor's in what was then known as Native American Studies.

Tailfeathers married and moved to Norway where she lived amongst the Sami people. Her life changed dramatically when her younger brother, who was a third-year medical student at the University of Alberta, died in a vehicle collision. Tailfeathers had spoken to him the week before and he encouraged her to go into medicine. She returned to southern Alberta for his funeral and took his words to heart. After earning a medical degree at the University of North Dakota, she completed her family medicine residency at the University of Alberta.

Tailfeathers moved back to her home community in 2000 and works as a family physician in Standoff and Cardston, as well as providing on-call and emergency services at the Cardston Hospital. She serves as the Indigenous Medical Lead with Alberta Health Services' Indigenous Wellness Core. Previously, Tailfeathers also provided 24-hour medical service for one week per month in Fort Chipewyan.

Tailfeathers was at the forefront of dealing with the opioid crisis on the Blood Reserve. She led the charge to develop a community response which included educating people about naloxone kits and the dangers of fentanyl. Tailfeathers is committed to helping health-care providers understand addiction and the social determinants of health, which include enduring poverty and trauma resulting from the residential school system. Tailfeathers also organized a relief mission to Haiti following the earthquake in 2010 where Blood Tribe paramedics, nurses and health-care workers tended to more than 2,000 patients.

Her work has not gone unnoticed. The Faculty of Health Sciences granted the Friends of Health Sciences Award to Tailfeathers in 2015 for her integral role in the community response to the opioid crisis. In 2019, Tailfeathers was awarded the Dr. Thomas Dignan Indigenous Health Award for her contribution to improved Indigenous health care in Canada.

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Contact:

Trevor Kenney, News & Information Manager
403-360-7639 (cell)
trevor.kenney@uleth.ca
@uLethbridge