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Norval Morrisseau's children sue over will

By CBC Arts
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Lawyers representing the aboriginal artist's seven children filed the lawsuit in B.C. Supreme Court in Vancouver on Wednesday.

"We want to honour dad's legacy as one of the greatest Canadian and aboriginal artists. I believe dad wanted his estate to stay in the family. I know he wouldn't disinherit us on purpose," Victoria Morrisseau Kakegamic, the artist's daughter, said in a statement.

The lawsuit involves control over the right to use Morrisseau's name and images, as well as the right to reproduce his colourful acclaimed artworks, which are held in galleries and collections across Canada and around the globe.

According to the statement of claim, Morrisseau's children have requested the court declare his will invalid.

The documents allege undue influence by Gabor Michael Vadas, the artist's close friend who was named executor, trustee and sole beneficiary of the estate under the current will, which dates from July 1999.

The lawsuit alleges that the will was executed under suspicious circumstances, including while Morrisseau was "physically, mentally and emotionally frail" from Parkinson's disease and "dependant on Vadas for all aspects of his day-to-day existence."

The filing also alleges that Vadas kept the artist away from his family, was verbally abusive towards him, controlled Morrisseau's life and profited from his artwork.

Died in 2007

In December 2007, Morrisseau died in Toronto at age the age of 75, following a long battle with Parkinson's. He was buried on a reserve in northwestern Ontario about a month later, following a protracted battle over his final wishes for his remains.

Morrisseau's brother, Bernard, and Vadas contended that he had asked to be cremated.

However, the artist's children demanded that he be buried next to their mother, Harriet Kakegamic, whom he had married in 1957. The couple later separated.

Born and raised near Thunder Bay, Ont., Morrisseau was the founder of what became known as the Woodland school of painting and inspired generations of aboriginal artists.

However, he also battled alcohol abuse and was homeless in Vancouver when he met Vadas in the late 1980s. Vadas,

a former street kid, and his wife Michele Vadas became the artist's main caregivers for more than a decade.

Vadas has yet to return CBC requests for comment on the lawsuit.

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