

Circles of Light

June 2000 – Number 3

Unique DIAND Program Helps Emerging Artists Get Exposure

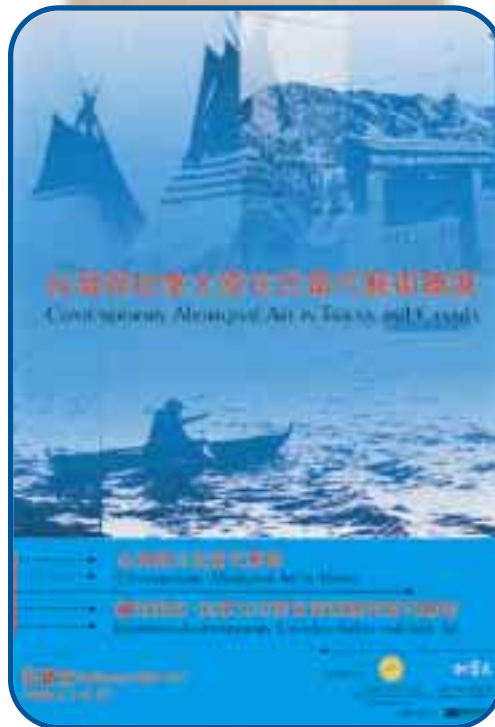
by Wendy MacIntyre

How does an emerging artist develop the kind of reputation that guarantees exhibitions and sales?

When DIAND's Artist-in-Residence Program was first developed in 1997, its goal was very much to assist emerging Aboriginal artists in getting much-needed exposure. "It's a program not happening anywhere else," says **Ryan Rice**, Curator of the Indian Art Centre. Originally from Kahnawake, Quebec, Rice is himself an artist who knows first-hand just how much effort artists must put into getting their work shown.

"Even though it's a small gallery, it still makes a big impact for Aboriginal art," he says of the Indian and Inuit Art Gallery where the artists selected under the program exhibit their work. Sixty percent of those selected are emerging artists, Rice emphasizes. The gallery, located in the foyer of DIAND headquarters in Hull, Quebec, attracts viewers and potential buyers from all the federal government departments in the complex, the general public, representatives of the nearby Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Gallery of Canada and private galleries.

"The response has been phenomenal," Rice says about public reaction to the work of the 18 artists the gallery has exhibited to date. There are plenty



Works acquired through DIAND's Artist-in-Residence Program are featured in international travelling exhibitions.

of comments along the lines of: "Great show! Can't wait for the next one."

By focusing the program on emerging rather than established artists, Rice explains, "We give them an opportunity to exhibit in a gallery space;

This issue of *Circles of Light* focuses on the theme of market access. To establish and maintain viable businesses, Aboriginal entrepreneurs require access to adequate and expanding local, regional, national and international markets for their products and services. The formation of partnerships and joint ventures is proving a useful strategy to reach new markets.

they basically curate it themselves." The Indian and Inuit Art Centres assist the artists in co-ordinating the exhibition and in producing an exhibition catalogue. "It's an important tool for the artist to have," Rice emphasizes, "something you can take with you. Not many emerging artists get that, and it helps them become more professional."

"It's up to the artists to be aggressive and try to bring people into the gallery," Rice adds.

An independent jury made up of Aboriginal artists, curators and arts administrators is now selecting the artists whose works will be featured in the gallery in the next 12 months. This juried process is open to Aboriginal artists across the country.

"Unique DIAND Program..."
continued on page 5



Improving First Nations Economies: An Interview with Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine

by Wendy MacIntyre

Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief **Phil Fontaine** recently talked to **Circles of Light** about his views on concrete ways to improve the health of First Nations communities and economies, and the work accomplished to date through the developing relationship between First Nations and the federal government.

National Chief Fontaine first addressed the issue of accountability, and the negative media coverage that has appeared regarding the administration of First Nations councils. “There’s been a lot of very serious allegations made,” he said of these stories, “and those people making the allegations are not asked to provide evidence and produce examples of where corruption and the like are being perpetrated.”

“There’s been very little said in the mainstream media about all the outstanding work done by so many First Nations councils, delivering good government to their people under severe financial constraints,” the National Chief emphasized. The AFN is therefore taking every opportunity to publicize examples of the good work being done.

In terms of the developing relationship between Aboriginal people and government, the National Chief noted the success of the intergovernmental forum held in December 1999 between the national Aboriginal organizations and Ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs at the federal, provincial and territorial levels. “The fact that we’ve moved this far is indicative of the commitments and risks that governments have taken in this process,”



Photo credit: Paul Proulx

Assembly of First Nations
National Chief **Phil Fontaine**

he said. “We view this as a demonstration of the willingness of governments to engage Aboriginal people in discussions on issues that affect all Canadians.”

The parties at that forum made concrete commitments for follow-up, he stressed. “So what that means is that there is a permanent ongoing intergovernmental forum that’s been mandated to look at practical solutions in terms of the co-ordination that has to take place between all governments, and to complement our efforts to address the very real challenges faced by Aboriginal people.”

Regarding First Nations economic development, the National Chief focused first on the current imbalance between the federal government’s \$1 billion allocation for social assistance and the \$90 million allotted for economic development. He said he would like to see “a very clear commitment from all governments at the table that they are prepared to adopt a more aggressive strategy to create the kinds of economic opportunities that will create jobs for our people.”

This means a new partnership with the private sector, like Syncrude’s with First Nations communities and entrepreneurs in Alberta, he explained. He said the strategy would also need a very firm commitment for governments’ negotiations with First Nations regarding their rightful access to the country’s natural resources.

The new economic development strategy he envisions must have an interdepartmental approach, the National Chief made clear. “All the federal Ministers who have something to do with the economy must be engaged with us in trying to figure out what this strategy ought to look like on the ground.”

National Chief Fontaine welcomes the major accomplishments flowing from the implementation of *Gathering Strength — Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, including an improved relationship between First Nations leadership and the federal government; and the additional resources allocated for First Nations job training and health; the Youth Strategy and the fund for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Nevertheless, he sees the eradication of poverty in First Nations communities as the outstanding issue still to be tackled. “The most impoverished group in Canadian society is still the First Nations people,” he said. “We still suffer from very high unemployment, poor housing, high suicide rates, epidemic rates of diabetes, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. All of these conditions are manifestations of poverty.”

“We will only be true partners once we’ve eradicated poverty in our communities — true partners in the spirit of the treaties. The United Nations ranks Canada as the best country in the world to live in; yet for First Nations communities, that ranking plummets to 63rd.” ★



Strategic Investment Funding in Economic Development Announced By Minister Robert Nault

On May 18 in Winnipeg, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development **Robert Nault** announced a major shift in focus in the department's spending. This year, a \$75 million increase will be strategically invested in First Nations and Inuit economic development.

"Since my appointment as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, I have given a lot of serious consideration to what my department does," the Minister told the audience at Vision Quest 2000, a major Aboriginal economic development conference. He said an important element of his consideration involved examining departmental spending in light of questions like: "How can we do a better job of building First Nations and Inuit economies?"

The Minister said he came to a conclusion that was confirmed by his visits in the past eight months with Elders, leaders and individuals in about 65 First Nations and Inuit communities across the country. That conclusion was that chiefs and leaders want to get on with the business of building stronger communities and economies — the kind that give their young people hope and the promise of prosperity.

Acting on that message, he aligned departmental priorities to focus the additional \$75 million on strategic investments in economic development. In essence, this more than quadruples the strategic investments the department is making towards building First Nations and Inuit economies.

"Increased funding for the year 2000-2001 and beyond will be used to enhance our efforts to develop partnerships with communities and businesses, other governments and the private sector," the Minister said.

Specifically, the department is adding a total of \$17 million to four of its current initiatives that have

already proved effective at promoting business development and First Nations employment. Two of these initiatives relate to resources. These are the Resource Partnerships Program, which aims to increase First Nations and Inuit participation in, and benefits from, major natural resource development projects; and the Resource Access Negotiations initiative which assists First Nations and Inuit communities to access and manage off-reserve natural resources, and attract investment in natural resource projects. The third current initiative to receive increased funding includes business development programs like the Economic Development Opportunity Fund, which provides equity for the start-up and expansion of community-based businesses; and the Resource Acquisition Initiative, which assists communities to acquire natural resource permits and licences. Together, these two business development programs will see an increase of \$10 million. The fourth existing initiative benefitting from the additional funding is the Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative, which works with the private sector to promote Aboriginal employment throughout Canada.

Minister Nault also announced four new initiatives. First, an additional \$3 million will go into supporting an Aboriginal Contract Guarantee Instrument to help Aboriginal companies access bid and performance bonds. Secondly, \$500,000 will be allocated this year to work toward finalizing the design of a new venture capital initiative tailored to meet the needs of First Nations entrepreneurs.



Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development **Robert Nault**

The department's third new initiative will make \$10.5 million available for the balance of this year to help First Nations take equity positions in major business ventures. And fourthly, \$40 million will be allocated for regional partnerships to assist First Nations and Inuit participation in — and benefit from — major regional economic development projects in partnership with the private sector and other levels of government.

Taken together, these initiatives will make an immediate and positive contribution to Aboriginal economic development, the Minister said.

In addition to the overall \$75 million increase this year for economic development, the Minister said he intends to add another \$100 million next year. "I believe the transition from \$25 million to \$200 million a year will result in significant progress towards our goal of building strong First Nations and Inuit economies in Canada," he said. ✪



Aboriginal Capital Corporation Expands Its Markets In Atlantic Canada

by Raymond Lawrence

*It is with deep regret that **Circles of Light** announces the passing of John Bower, Director of Operations, Ulnooweg Development Group, at the age of 58 in Truro, Nova Scotia. Born in Ottawa, he was dedicated to initiatives supporting Aboriginal people's access to capital and was a board member of the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association.*

***Circles of Light** interviewed Mr. Bower shortly before his untimely death. It is the wish of his colleagues at Ulnooweg that the following article based on that interview be published, together with their assurance that Ulnooweg will continue the work to which John Bower was so profoundly committed.*

Maritime Aboriginal Capital Corporation (ACC), Ulnooweg Development Group Inc., is expanding its own markets, shifting its emphasis from simply lending to providing a broader service base. "About 40 percent of our revenue comes from business services and 60 percent comes from assets such as deposits or loans," says **John Bower**, Ulnooweg's Director of Operations. The ACC is based in Truro, Nova Scotia.

"Here in the Maritimes, back in 1992, our market at that time was strictly Mi'kmaq, on-reserve, in Nova Scotia. Shortly after I arrived, we expanded to cover Status Indians on- and off-reserve in the Maritimes. The second thing was to protect the portfolio and help our clients. We decided we should offer business services not only to do business plans, feasibility and market plans, but also to provide after-care," Bower explains.

Bower says his organization sees economic development officers as a natural extension of what Ulnooweg does. The ACC has therefore created an economic development officers' network, with the same guiding principles as the National Association of Aboriginal Capital Corporations.

Ulnooweg's business services manager chairs the Maritime network.

Ulnooweg is also involved in a tripartite forum consisting of First Nations chiefs, the province, and the federal government. "The mandate given to us by the chiefs is to move toward self-sustainability

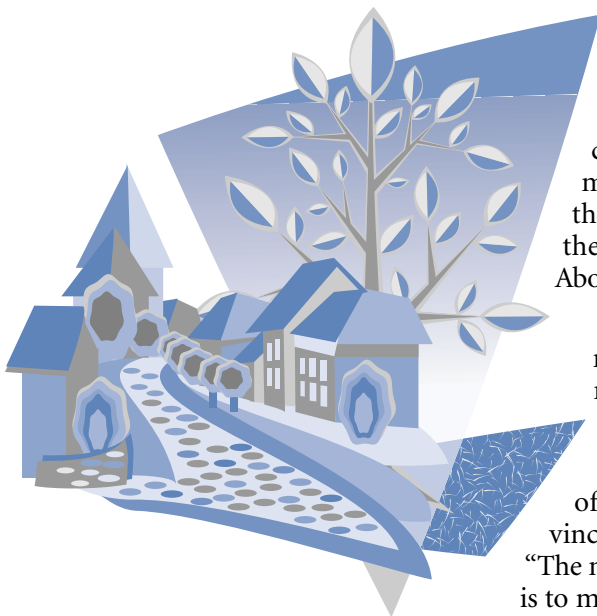
in the communities that we service. The first thing we did was determine what was deterring us...what are the issues, and the second thing we did was look at what solutions there are. We have grass-root involvement in this," he says.

As a result of this work, Ulnooweg participated in the creation of an Aboriginal procurement liaison officer to link First Nations communities with opportunities in government contracting. The ACC has also taken the idea of a procurement strategy to the business community in the province.

"We also decided we should establish an employee data bank," Bower adds. "You can't assume that all Aboriginal people should or could be small businesspeople; if we want to move toward more self-sustainability, it shouldn't just revolve around small business. It should include people who are trying to get jobs."

Still, Ulnooweg remains committed to the goal for which it was created. It is among the 32 capital corporations across the country that now cover about 80 percent of the Aboriginal small business market. Their developmental loans are considered higher-risk than most banking, but the results of their work continue to shine. "There are cases where we don't have a hard asset to secure our involvement but we have faith in the client, the business plan is good, the cash flow is there, and we do it," Bower says.

Since 1992, Ulnooweg has invested about \$30 million in small business in the Maritimes. "We prefer dealing with small businesses that create a few jobs," Bower emphasizes. ✨



First Nation Electrical Firm Serves Oil Sands Industry

by Diane Koven

In 1993, **Shirley Dunning** and her husband, **Ernie**, decided that they were both tired of working for other people. They could not have imagined then that within a few short years, they would be providing employment for about 60 people.

Dunning is the owner of Environmental Electronic Electrical Services Inc. in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Her path to this position began in Fort Chipewyan where she was born and raised. A member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation, Dunning moved to Fort McMurray in 1978 in search of better employment opportunities.

"In 1988," Dunning says, "I got a job with the Fort McKay First Nation. They were in the process of starting some band-owned companies related to the oil sands and were looking for people for administration. They tried very hard to hire Aboriginal people." After five years, Dunning, who started as a bookkeeper, had advanced to an office administrator level; at this point, she realized that she had reached the upper limit. That was when she and her husband, an electrician by trade, decided to take the plunge and start their own company.

"Syncrude Canada Ltd. has been very instrumental in the success of our company," she says. "In the early 1990s, Syncrude was, and still is, a strong supporter of Aboriginal-owned companies. We approached Syncrude and asked for an opportunity to bid on a maintenance contract that was out for tender. Syncrude decided to award their maintenance contract to one Native company and one non-Native company. In June 2000, we renewed this maintenance contract for another five years."

"The majority of our electrical work is in the oil sands industry," says Dunning. "For example, Syncrude has purchased RH400 hydraulic shovels from Germany. These are the largest hydraulic shovels in the world and we have had our electricians go overseas to install an auxiliary lighting and heating system on them."

There have been challenges along the road to success. "Being a Native company was a bit difficult at first," Dunning admits. "We had to work twice as hard to prove that we were capable of succeeding. I believe the key is how much effort you want to put into your business to make it successful."

With the same determination and forethought that Dunning used to start



Shirley Dunning is the owner of Environmental Electronic Electrical Services Inc. in Fort McMurray.

her company, she is now thinking of the future. "When we started this," she says, "we didn't just look at the short term. We looked into the long-term needs in the area. What we are trying to do now is to decide whether we should diversify and provide additional products that will complement our core business to further enhance the longevity of our company."

Shirley Dunning and Environmental Electronic Electrical Services Inc. will no doubt be around for a long, long time. ★

"Unique DIAND Program..." continued from page 1

The Artist-in-Residence Program is also an acquisition program, and the department has purchased works from each of the artists featured in the gallery.

Many of the acquisitions made during the past year will be featured in *Transitions II*, an international travelling exhibit Rice is now curating. *Transitions II* will feature the work of eight First Nations and Métis, and eight Inuit artists. Its predecessor,

Transitions — Contemporary Canadian and Inuit Art, generated acclaim and keen interest for Canadian Aboriginal art in Paris, France; New Zealand, Costa Rica and Taiwan.

Taiwan, Norway and Finland have all expressed interest in hosting the new exhibit, Rice says.

These international exhibits, with their own catalogues, are another way the department helps emerging Aboriginal artists get exposure.

"All the artists have been really pleased with working with us," Rice confirms. **Linda Young**, one of the emerging artists featured in last year's exhibition series, recently gave her assessment of the Artist-in-Residence Program — "a wonderful, empowering and validating experience."

For more information about the program, telephone (819) 997-6550. ★

Taybridge Communications — A Small Firm with a Long Reach

by Raymond Lawrence

Taybridge Communications has made high tech the reason for an Aboriginal business to stay home.

Although Taybridge Communications does some business in Fredericton — not far from owner **David Lewis's** Taymouth, New Brunswick home — most clients come from farther afield. But Lewis says that's perfect as the local market is limited, whereas with e-projects, the world is his market. Taybridge Communications' services include Web site design and authoring, writing, graphic design, computer-based training, and interactive CD-ROM development.

Lewis started working for himself part-time in 1992. But three years ago, a dramatic change in his situation led to his becoming fully self-employed. It was something he had planned on doing — just not quite then.

"I like the master of your own destiny sort of thing and I liked being responsible for every facet of it. I wanted the control and I liked the idea of working for myself," he says. "My situation came about because the company I was working for laid off 75 percent of the people so it was sped up for me a little bit."

"It worked out well at the time of the lay-off because the company I was working for had a U.S. partner company and they were looking for someone, and I'd established a good relationship with the CEO of that company. So technically I went from being an employee to being self-employed and having a good enough sized contract that I could afford to live within a couple of days," he says. From there, he has picked up other contracts and jobs, including working for a California company and some contracts from the federal government.



David Lewis is establishing a solid market in California for his company's services.

His college education included business studies, and later journalism, where he was first introduced to computers and desktop publishing. He combined this expertise with his writing skills to get employment with information technology companies.

In his career development to date, he is definitely a fan of what the World Wide Web can do. "I find the Web is a lot more flexible. I can put something up on-line on a temporary location on my server, and they (the client) can review it, and if there are any changes, they just e-mail them to me."

His work on the Web also serves as an excellent marketing tool in itself. Recently, he got a project in San Diego because someone saw the Web site work he was doing with another California-based organization.

That particular project broke new ground for him in that he hadn't met the client face-to-face. "I was a little leery because I had never met the guy. And the problem with electronic projects is that as soon as you hand over

the project, it's really hard to get it back. I'm sure he was leery as well," says Lewis. "But when you look at it, a personal handshake and a contract can feel useless too, so it's really not that different from the old way of doing business." *

Raymond Lawrence is a freelance writer of Ojibway and European ancestry.

Circles of Light is published by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Production: Anishinabe Printing
Managing Editor: Wendy MacIntyre
French Editor this issue: Andrée Lacroix

Please address all letters, comments and requests to: *Circles of Light*, DIAND, Communications Branch, Room 1901 Les Terrasses de la Chaudière Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H4

Telephone: (819) 953-9349

Published under the authority of the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development

Ottawa, 2000
QS-6145-003-BB-A1
www.inac.gc.ca



Printed on recycled paper

First Nation Restaurateur Caters to Wide Market in Vancouver's West End

by Raymond Lawrence

With a steady stream of clients filling its eleven-table dining room, Liliget Feast House and Catering continues to defy the number one rule of business: location, location, location.

Far from the hub of business and dining activity, Liliget's situation in a quiet West End Vancouver suburb is not an ideal area for a restaurant. But then during the past five years, bannock — one of Liliget's staple products — seems to have practically sold itself.

Owner **Dolly Watt's** vault into the food services industry was the result of a series of coincidences, as well as her own good business sense and ability to tackle huge projects without batting an eye. In the late 1980s, at the age of 49, Watts had returned to school. While studying anthropology at the University of British Columbia (UBC), she sold bannock to help a First Nations youth program raise money. She brought in \$1,500 in one week. Although then working as a researcher, she was able to open a food cart outside the UBC museum. She prepared her bannock, and then hired staff to operate the food service. The food cart made \$25,000 in a single month.

She started up a catering service, *Just Like Grandma's Bannock Inc.*, in 1992, and launched Liliget in 1995. "I learned to make bannock from my Mom and I used her recipe and people just loved it...there was a line-up for it," says Watts.

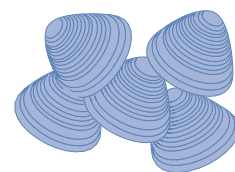
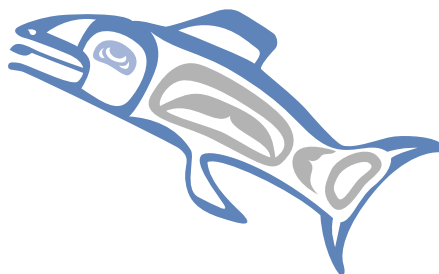
"I learned pretty fast what people like and after two months I decided that bannock was good business, but people wanted more than that. They wanted something around bannock like salmon, buffalo burgers and smokies (sausages), game and seafood," says Watts, who belongs to the Gitksan people. "The people in Vancouver's West End are very



The Liliget Feast House offers a superb dining experience.

health-conscious," she adds. "There are many vegetarians here, so I also offer a vegetarian platter."

Not long after opening her business, she was hired to do the catering for 13,000 people. Then she was asked to cater for the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards, which meant food for 22,000 people. "Over the years I've been catering for the CIBC (Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) and when that came up, they put my name forward," she explains. Her usual payroll of about 10 people grew to 30,



most of whom had graduated from local First Nations cooking courses. "I also hired on a Native chef and two other chefs who were teachers at the Native cooking schools."

But maintaining this success means an annual \$30,000 investment in promotion. "It's a fairly quiet area here, and in order to bring people in, I have to do a lot of advertising," she says. She runs ads in magazines and newspapers and is involved with several associations, ranging from Vancouver Tourism to the B.C. Restaurant Association. She also attends trade shows and promotes herself to the local hotel industry.

"I started the business with my own money, and some from my food stand. My family made investments worth about \$25,000 and I was able to get a loan," she says. "My son took out a loan as well, and I just recently paid back everything." ★

Inkameep Vineyards Limited Wins Acclaim for Osoyoos First Nation

by Diane Koven

Good wine begins with good grapes and one of the largest wine-grape vineyards in British Columbia just happens to also be the first 100-percent First Nation-owned vineyard in the country.

Inkameep Vineyards Limited, owned by the Osoyoos First Nation, has been in operation for over 30 years now. Located in the Okanagan Valley, 20 kilometres north of Osoyoos, B.C., the business is run by an appointed board of directors consisting of Osoyoos members. At the helm is former Osoyoos chief, **Sam Baptiste**, who has been the company's General Manager since 1989.

Baptiste takes his work very seriously. Educated in horticulture at Wenatchec Valley College and specializing in viticulture (the cultivation of grapes), he is always trying to increase his knowledge. "I enjoy my work very much," says Baptiste. "I have always been interested, but to get this position I had to go to Washington State for a two-year degree in horticulture."

Inkameep is always on the lookout for better quality and variety. "We are planting more and newer varieties," says Baptiste. "We are replacing all of the French hybrids with premium French vinifera. In 1988, we had 280 acres. We pulled out some and have since replanted. Viniferas take a lot more work than hybrids and cost more to manage. We cannot build an industry on an inferior grape, though, and the vinifera is superior."

In spite of research, education and lots of hard, physical labour, there is no guarantee that the crop will be successful. Unfortunately, the fickle hand of fate, in the form of the weather, plays a major role in the industry. While looking forward to the "first crush" (first wine) in the fall of 2000,



Baptiste is cautiously optimistic about the success of the crop. In May, he said, "the year is just beginning and it is already just borderline. We had hail that did some foliage damage to new leaves; hopefully, not too much bud damage."

Because the vineyards are in an excellent location, Inkameep has been very fortunate so far. The quality and variety of its products are known to be exceptional. "We win awards every year for our grapes," says Baptiste proudly.

Inkameep has agreements with many of Canada's top wineries and, in some cases, the word "Inkameep" has been incorporated in the name of the wines they produce. The wines are distributed widely, including to some very trendy Vancouver restaurants.

Barring any natural disasters, wine connoisseurs can look forward to some new and delicious wines in the next few months. ★



Portrait

The Whetungs of Curve Lake

Clifford Whetung Ojibwa Entrepreneur

by Fred Favel

I would say, do what you think is right and always remember that you only get out of business what you put into it. If you take too much, you've got nothing left.

“Experience the beauty of our history and gain insight to the present during your visit to the Whetung Ojibwa Centre” reads the opening line of the promotional brochure. It is a fitting introduction to a building which houses one of the largest displays of Aboriginal arts and crafts one will ever see in North America. And that’s not all. In an adjacent building, formerly a cattle barn since renovated, is the heart of the operation where hides are prepared, crafts stored, and wholesale orders shipped to national and international clients. Next to the converted barn is a tea shop which serves delicious fried bread (zosgun), herbal teas, wild rice, corn soup and other tasty items. Located in the beautiful Kawartha Lakes Region near Lakefield, Ontario, the Centre stands as a monument to an enterprising family, the Whetungs of Curve Lake.

Entrepreneurship is nothing new to the Whetung family. Although the enterprise has been handed down to Michael Whetung who now owns and manages the Centre, the patriarch responsible for its existence is never far away. Whether tending his beloved flower gardens surrounding the complex, talking with tourists or helping out his son Michael, now-retired Clifford Edward Whetung has remained close to the business. He’ll be 82 years old in September, but he moves around with the energy of a man in his early 60s.

Whetung was born in the community which at that time was called the Mud Lake Indian Reserve. As we sit at the huge communal family table in a 100-year-old home which once housed the Whetung general store, he tells his story. “It was a good life...things were a little more primitive. We had no electricity so everything was done by hand. It was a hunting and fishing situation more than anything.”

The Ojibwa people used to hunt and fish throughout the area until the signing of the Williams Treaty in 1923. It restricted any hunting and fishing to the 1,000 acres of land allotted to them, a peninsula between Curve Lake and Buckhorn Lake.

“We were always entrepreneurs, I think,” Whetung says. “My grandfather who died in 1928 was the original Dan Whetung. He farmed and fished and had a little store.” The store was built with lumber floated over from nearby Jacobs Island, when the New England Company, a trading post, ceased to exist shortly before the signing of the treaty. “The store business in those days provided things that you could not produce yourself such as sugar, flower and tea.” The family slept upstairs over the store.

Five generations of Whetungs have kept the family business growing. Whetung’s father put in cabins which were rented to tourists who came to the area to canoe and fish. They would eat at the main house which also housed the store. When Whetung took over from his aging father, he added arts and crafts. “We started selling a few of the handicrafts that were produced here to a few of the tourists...we eventually got out of the farming business and so converted our barn...it just kept evolving.”

Financing was not a problem as Whetung was able to secure a bank loan. “The Royal Bank at Peterborough was not supposed to finance people on Indian reserves. But he (the manager) said

“I don’t exactly agree with that policy.” He was more interested in the character of the people he dealt with than in assets for collateral.

Whetung’s life and business partner, his wife Eleanor, is an integral part of the business and is still active in its daily operation. Her first association with Curve Lake was as the public health nurse assigned to the reserve. It was natural that they would meet as the general store also served as a medical dispensary. They have been married for almost 56 years.

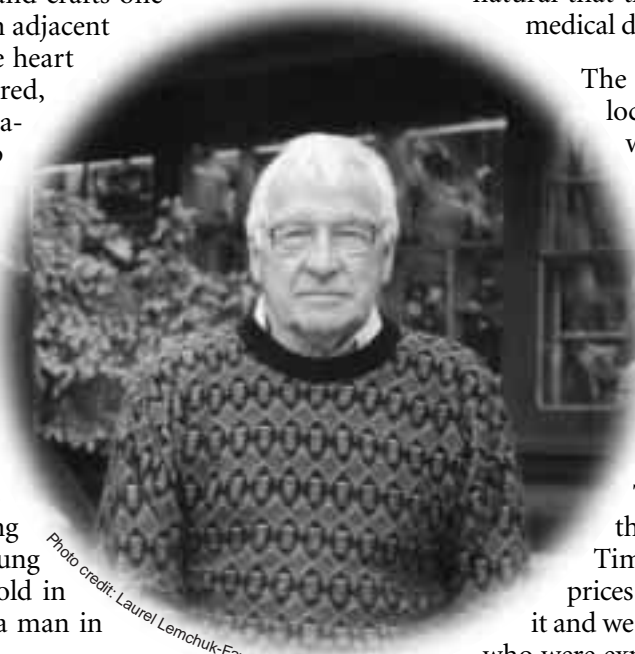


Photo credit: Laurel Lemchuk-Favel

The burgeoning summer craft business soon outgrew its location in the store/lodge/family residence. “We decided we had to build a new building...I had the boys cut the logs for the building, we dragged them out, then dug the hole and put them up with the help of a good friend of mine from Peterborough.” Whetung makes clear that they had many people help them along the way. The construction of the Centre is a good example of this. His friend, who is in the structural engineering business, brought an architect to the project. Clifford and Eleanor Whetung were initially alarmed. “I asked him about how much the architect was going to be.” The answer was that his company, Timber Structures, would take on a project every year that they thought would be good for the community. Timber Structures sold them the materials at wholesale prices from their plant in British Columbia. “So they designed it and we put the logs up with a couple of elderly band members who were experienced in the trade.”

The Whetung Ojibwa Centre officially opened in May, 1966. In 1980, a new addition doubled its size.

Today, the Whetungs go to large gift trade shows twice a year, and orders keep coming in from across Canada, Europe and the United States. The art gallery carries the work of well-known artists, such as Norval Morrisseau and Maxine Noel. “We’ve had a tremendous amount of help from other people. We’ve maintained all of the people from the reserve as employees. I don’t think you could find a better place to live and work than Curve Lake, really! It’s got everything.”

His advice for would-be entrepreneurs? “I would say, do what you think is right and always remember that you only get out of business what you put into it. If you take too much, you’ve got nothing left.”

The Whetung Ojibwa Centre is well worth the visit if you can manoeuvre around the bus tours and the tens of thousands of tourists who gather at this little million-dollar miracle in the woods every summer. A museum chronicling the history of the community and the business is in the making and Clifford or Eleanor Whetung are never far away for a friendly chat. You’ll probably find them in the tea room.

Much more could be added to describe the Centre, but the brochure says it best. “Indian-owned and operated.”

Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.

