

Transition

Khot-La-Cha: Traditional Crafts Shop Sees 30-Percent Sales Boost

by Ruth McVeigh

Khot-La-Cha is a North Vancouver company internationally renowned for the quality of its products. This claim could probably be made by many British Columbia companies. But Khot-La-Cha, (named for the proprietor's father, **Chief Khot-La-Cha Simon Baker**) is an Aboriginal business run by a woman, and in the past 10 years, despite an overall decline in the provincial economy, its gross sales have increased by 30 percent.

Khot-La-Cha, which means "kind heart," was established in 1968 and sells traditional arts and crafts of the Northwest Coast Squamish people. However, the way **Nancy Nightingale** has achieved her phenomenal success is anything but traditional. Nightingale purchased the business in 1989 from her mother, **Emily Baker**, at a time when enterprises were usually passed from father to son. Raised with a deep pride in her heritage, Nightingale was also encouraged by her parents to learn to survive in mainstream society.

"Being named runner-up for the Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 1994 opened a lot of doors for me," she says. "A couple of bank managers came to see me at my business asking if they could be of help. I was also recognized by the Department of Industry as a role model in strengthening the rights of Aboriginal women."

In 1995, the departments of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; and Foreign Affairs and International Trade, together with Aboriginal Business Canada, enabled Khot-La-Cha and 10 other Aboriginal businesses to send



A carved totem pole serves as the main beam inside the gallery.

representatives to the annual fall trade fair in Frankfurt, Germany. The aim of the trip was to help expand the Aboriginal export business.

Nightingale describes the experience: "It was a mammoth fair, a market for all of Europe. Ordinarily, it takes years to get a booth there, but the organizers really wanted representation from Canadian Natives, so we were given a booth. I've been over twice since then at my own expense, but feel it will take five to 10 years to really get the market nailed down. Many Europeans prefer to make such purchases while visiting Canada," she adds. Khot-La-Cha ships crafts to the United States, Europe, China and Japan, and the market is steadily growing.

On July 24, 1999, Khot-La-Cha marked a new beginning when it moved into a new two-storey cedar "longhouse-style" gallery. The shop



Nancy Nightingale took over the business from her mother in 1989.

is considered a tourist destination as it displays and sells hand-carved yellow and red cedar totem poles and plaques, as well as ceremonial masks. Sweaters in a variety of traditional patterns are

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Aboriginal Health Field Placement Firm Helps Connect Career People with Work

by Raymond Lawrence

Although the growing national demand for health care workers is cause for concern, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

The recently created Aboriginal Recruitment Coordination Office (ARCO), located at Lakehead University campus, is helping to connect Aboriginal client-based health care service providers with skilled people. While the Northern Ontario organization is fairly new, it is already charting a course that should result in more Aboriginal people making health-related work their career choice. Aboriginal students are in turn encouraged to learn there will be opportunities waiting for them once they complete their post-secondary studies.

ARCO's service is aimed at helping Aboriginal organizations across Ontario — as well as non-Aboriginal organizations in the province which serve Aboriginal clients — looking for health care and social service employees. These positions include nurses, physicians, mental health workers, dietitians, nutritionists,

community health representatives and many others. Job postings are entered in the data bank which scans relevant files to generate a list of candidates with the best matching qualifications. The list and search terms are then given to the potential employer who arranges interviews as necessary. This service is free for both Aboriginal people registering in the data bank, and for potential employers using it.

The news is good for Aboriginal people searching for work in the health areas as there are employment and career opportunities available. In fact, in some cases, there is a shortage of qualified people. "Part of our mandate is basically to encourage people to get into health and social service careers," says **Donna Lyons**, Director at ARCO. ARCO hopes it can encourage older grade-school children on reserves to think about pursuing health-related careers by showcasing role models, and raising awareness about existing health-related opportunities.

"In order to be effective in meeting the hiring needs of the Aboriginal organizations, we are actively recruiting

individuals with the education and work experience in health care and social services who are interested in working in an Aboriginal setting, and getting them registered on our system," says Lyons. "At the same time, we are encouraging Aboriginal organizations and communities across Ontario to place their job postings with us."

More than 150 job postings have already been processed. "Our goal is to register as many health care and social service graduates as possible. We work with Aboriginal education counsellors, colleges and universities to register all Aboriginal people attending and graduating from post-secondary health care and social service education programs in Ontario," she says. There are currently about 360 professionals registered on the system which will help reduce the demand to a manageable size.

Users can contact ARCO through its Internet site at: www.arco.on.ca. ♦

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

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popular with local British Columbians, as well as with tourists. Also on sale are traditional hand-tanned moose-hide moccasins, plain and beaded, along with jewellery in materials ranging from porcupine quill and bone to silver and gold pieces carved by noted artisans from Haida tribes. The one-of-a-kind arts and crafts in the store represent over 200 British Columbia artists, including **Pat and Alfred Seaweed, John and Don Lancaster, Charles Harper** and **Nancy Dawson**.

To capitalize on the outstanding success of the North Vancouver shop, Nightingale has plans to market Canadian Aboriginal arts and crafts through the Internet. Open year-round, the store employs an assistant manager and four part-time employees during summer and at Christmas.

For more information, visit Khot-La-Cha's Web site at www.cacmall.com/khotla/kkhot. ♦

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Aboriginal Super Information Hwy. Inc. Pulls in Big Contracts

by Wendy MacIntyre

In 1991, Lori Lavallee found herself laid off from her management job when her employer, Northern Telecom, downsized. That accident of fate led to her founding her own Winnipeg-based companies, Personal Touch Computer Services (PTCS) and the Aboriginal Super Information Hwy. Inc. (Abinfohwy). In the process, she also made history. In 1993, she became the first Aboriginal person in the country — and the first woman in Manitoba — to obtain her Certified NetWare Engineer (CNE) designation. The CNE, which requires a highly demanding course of study, is one of the most sought-after designations in the computing industry.

Today, Lavallee's PTCS and Abinfohwy are the longest-established Aboriginal information technology (IT) firms in Manitoba, with a customer base that includes federal and provincial government departments, hotels, accountants, bank managers, dentists, non-profit organizations, Aboriginal organizations and private businesses. The companies' services range from the design and installation of local and wide area networks to global connections.

When the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network was looking for an Aboriginal firm to set up the IT network for its Winnipeg head office, it was Abinfohwy that won the job. In another recent project, the firm connected nine Manitoba First Nations with the Lands Registry of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). And through the federal government's

Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business, the firm won a two-year Regional Master Standing Offer that will help it attract more business from government clients.

Abinfohwy's solid success is grounded in its owner's experience, formidable drive and inspired ability to seize and adapt to opportunity. "I didn't set out to build a career in IT," explains Lavallee, who is Métis and originally from St. Ambroise, Manitoba. "I was doing my Certified General Accountant studies, while working for Northern Telecom on the production line. A position came up in the accounting department and I got it. There was a computer on my new desk and I thought — What is that? — I had to learn it."

And learn it she did — with plenty of enthusiasm, attending Red River Community College in the evenings for various programming courses.

When a position opened in Northern Telecom's computing department two years later, she jumped at the chance to learn mainframe technology. But she could see a big change coming in the industry. "This was 1988-89," she explains. "LANs (local area networks) were coming in, and mini-computers."

To meet that future need, Lavallee started taking computer science courses at the University of Manitoba. When she was laid off in 1991, she started to look for work but couldn't find a suitable job.

"So I decided to create my own job and set up my company," she says. She took all her savings and withdrew



Lori Lavallee

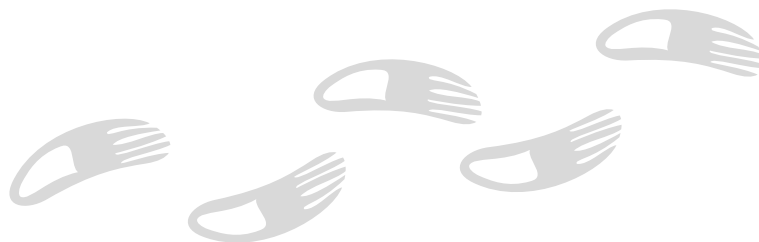
money from her Registered Retirement Savings Plan. At the same time she went after her CNE designation.

Her business has grown by leaps and bounds. From one-on-one training, she went to selling computers, and then to installing and maintaining computer networks with global connections. She plans to expand further into customized IT services, particularly project management: "We build an IT structure to fit the employees because employees are a company's biggest asset. We're there constantly until everyone is comfortable with the system."

Lavallee is now negotiating with a young Aboriginal man who will be joining her team. The majority of her subcontractors are Aboriginal.

Intensive personal networking has helped her attract clients, Lavallee says. "I joined four different business clubs, as well as the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce. And I always carry my business cards."

For more information, call Abinfohwy at (204) 275-2067. ♦



Muskoday First Nation Sowing Seeds of Economic Success

by Michael Fisher, Saskatchewan Region, *DIAND*

Good fortune and prudent planning have made Muskoday First Nation a model of economic success in Saskatchewan.

The community of about 500 people, located 19 kilometres southeast of Prince Albert, has successfully pursued a number of economic ventures, creating seasonal employment of more than 95 percent.

The First Nation's latest venture, a market garden, has alone created more than 50 jobs. Initiated in 1999 as a pilot project, with assistance from various government agencies, the market garden has already shown enormous potential.

"The initial assessment is that the project has been successful," says Chair **Lyle Bear** of Muskoday's Economic Development Authority. "We've got our product basically sold, and the fact that it took 50 people off social assistance is success in itself. It's 100 percent successful in that regard."

Muskoday redirected some of its social assistance resources to help fund the work opportunity program, which has done much more than provide jobs for band members. Combining income support, job training, cultural and spiritual elements and economic development, the program emphasizes personal as well as economic growth.

"The program has had a huge, positive impact on Muskoday," says Bear. "(Participants have) become more self-aware, have a better self-esteem and a sense of independence. They can start to look at things they want to do for themselves and their families and some of them, through the project, have been able to upgrade their academic skills.

Most participants attended horticultural and gardening classes approved by the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, as well as First Nations life skills classes led by Elders.



Ron Elton examines Muskoday's potato sorter.

Photo credit: Trevor Sutter



Muskoday's Convenience Store & Gas Bar is an important centre of activity in the community.

Photo credit: Trevor Sutter

A quarter section of land — 47 acres of potatoes, 100 acres of hemp and three acres of various other vegetables — has been devoted to the market garden, which also includes a four-year tree-planting project. The band intends to increase the garden's capacity as the business is established, with an extra 28 acres planned for next year alone.

Muskoday's approach to business is simple: start small and expand.

"Being such a small-populated reserve, we only have a limited amount of money to work with," says Band Councillor **Eric Bear**. "But with what we've got for economic development, we can generate money for next year."

The market garden is not intended to be a temporary make-work project, but a profitable business enterprise. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the project's business will be covered by the garden's revenues in its first year. So the band has taken a cautious approach, making the best use of its available resources, to ensure the business will be sustainable into the future.

For example, the band used its long-abandoned curling rink as a storage and cleaning facility for the more than 426 tonnes of potatoes harvested in the fall. This type of innovation has helped to ease the growing pains and to increase the viability of the business considerably.

"Once it gets going a bit — we're in the initial stages now — but once it gets going a little further down the way, I think we'll see that we'll be able to expand our markets and employ more people; it has a lot of potential," says Field Manager **Ron Elton**, who was hired by Muskoday to oversee the market garden project.

"Being involved with community projects in the past, I'm very happy with Muskoday and very proud of them; in fact, they've taken the initiative to do something for their people and their own First Nation."

Muskoday anticipates the market garden will stimulate the local economy and lay the foundation for a strong economic future. But the First Nation hasn't put all of its potatoes in one basket.



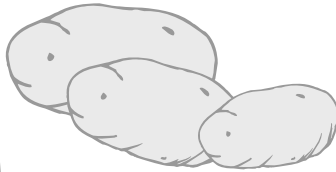
Photo credit: Trevor Sutter

Teresa Crain has seen Muskoday's business potential up close.



Photo credit: Trevor Sutter

Mary Johnson makes home-made fries from market-garden potatoes.



The Muskoday Economic Development Authority, charged by chief and council with the responsibility of creating economic development on-reserve, is pursuing several other new and ongoing initiatives to facilitate long-term, sustainable development in the community.

“For the last 20 years, since the highway went in — it goes through our reserve east to west and west to east — we sat and watched economic opportunity go through one side of the reserve and then right through the other without capturing any of those dollars,” says Lyle Bear. “In order to do that, we had to develop, parcel and market a product before we could expect the traffic to stop.”

In 1991, the band opened the Muskoday Convenience Store & Gas Bar to take advantage of this high volume of traffic moving through the reserve. A restaurant followed in 1998. Ideally situated along Highway 3, the businesses serve both the community and surrounding area, plus travellers

from within the province and beyond, attracted by their friendly, down-home atmosphere.

The store, which employs 11 people, carries a wide range of merchandise, from confectionary and grocery items to some hardware and automotive products. It also boasts one of the few on-reserve, full-service postal outlets in the province and, in the summer months, an outdoor vegetable stand which sells fresh produce from the market garden.

It has become an important centre of activity on Muskoday, says Assistant Manager **Teresa Crain**, who notes that prior to the store opening, band members had to leave the community to purchase even the basic necessities.

“We’re band-owned and operated, but we’re self-sufficient,” she says, adding that profits are reinvested in the store, which enables the business to maintain quality service and competitive prices. “If (we continue to follow) the right

policies and proper procedures, I think the store has a lot of potential; same goes for the restaurant.”

Muskoday’s restaurant, an extension of the store, employs six people and serves a varied menu of breakfast, lunch and dinner items, including home-made fries from market-garden potatoes. Though a relatively new operation, the restaurant’s manager, **Mary Johnson**, brings over 30 years of food-preparation experience to the business.

“I know everything about food,” she says confidently.

The existing community-based businesses, already developing solid reputations, will eventually complement Muskoday’s plans to diversify into the hospitality industry. The First Nation has also embarked on an ambitious eco-tourism project which it hopes will draw even more people, and commerce, to the reserve.

Currently in the development stages, the project involves clearing a hiking trail around the circumference of an island, along the scenic North Saskatchewan River, and constructing a teepee village, a docking site and cabins for overnight visitors.

In conjunction with the Saskatchewan Waterways Initiative, which identified Muskoday as an ideal location, the band will host down-river tours from Saskatoon. Visitors will experience the area’s natural beauty and the rich cultural heritage of the First Nation.

Muskoday is optimistic that tourism, along with its other economic ventures, will bring additional jobs and economic stability to the community.

“We are fortunate here because of our uniqueness of geography, and we have a good supporting neighbourhood in Birch Hills and Prince Albert,” says Lyle Bear. “We’re also looking at other markets throughout Canada and possibly even some international. In terms of innovative programs and projects, we haven’t even started. There’s lots of potential out there; it just takes careful planning and some development.” ♦

Cold Drinks Hot Item for First Nations-owned Arctic Beverages

by Raymond Lawrence



With several big name brands bottled by its operation, First Nations-owned Arctic Beverages has developed one of the largest market niches in North America.

The parent companies of Pepsi and Cadbury, which offer such popular sodas as Pepsi Cola, 7-UP, Dr. Pepper, and Mountain Dew, give the Manitoba-based bottling and distribution company powerful business allies, as well as internationally known products.

Since buying Arctic Beverages, Tribal Councils Investments Group (TCIG) of Manitoba, Ltd. has done more than just generate investment dollars for the First Nations umbrella organization. TCIG has also begun to create employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in and around Flin Flon — the base of the northern Manitoba bottling operation — and at Arctic Beverages' headquarters at Opaskwayak Cree Nation.

Buying a bottling and distribution business is no small investment. TCIG's purchase, however, was a well-calculated risk involving the seven tribal councils which formed the investment group (see accompanying article). Before the Group purchased Arctic Beverages in 1991, the bottler had been in business for more than 50 years. The 5,575-square-metre bottling facility operates under licence agreements with Pepsi and Cadbury.

Arctic Beverages' territory encompasses northern Saskatchewan, northern Manitoba, northwestern Ontario, and 98 percent of Nunavut. The company has distribution points in Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. "We cover over 20 percent of Canada geographically," says General Manager **Sean Post**. "We're the single largest franchise in terms of geography in North America."

The company's vast distribution area presents outstanding challenges. "We deal with winter roads, we deal with



(From left) at Arctic Beverages "Bottler of the Year" award presentation, **David M. Shaw**, President of Pepsi Cola Canada; **Philip Dorion**, Chair of the Board, TCIG and **Marvin Tiller**, President and CEO, TCIG.

sea lifts, we ship by rail and air. Freight is the single largest cost attached to the product. Ensuring that the freight is efficient and its cost is reasonable are the greatest challenges," Post says. "You're certainly working under a lot of different constraints that you don't encounter with direct door delivery. The cost for us to get our product to those markets is no different than our competition's...we've just done it more effectively."

"Our business has doubled in just over four years and we've been recognized by Pepsi Cola Company as the fastest-growing franchise bottler in North America and we were recognized in 1998 as Bottler of the Year in Canada and first runner-up in North America," Post says.

Arctic Beverages' owners are its greatest promoters, bringing their products and company information to trade shows while continuing to actively promote the business to clients.

"We have certain responsibilities to our parent companies in terms of the product quality, that we maintain the

integrity of the brand, and that we deal with our national customers such as Safeway, and the Northwest Company — one of our major customers — and that we have a consistent dealing with them," Post explains.

"It's fairly expensive to purchase the rights to a premium brand for a certain area — there no doubt were significant costs because there's power behind brands like Pepsi," says Post. But Arctic Beverages' well-organized, focused and efficient operations are definitely paying off. "It's done well for the investors," says Post. "There's a great deal of pride and excitement in the ownership of Arctic Beverages."

Currently, 28 percent of the company's 31 full and part-time positions are filled by Aboriginal people. As non-Aboriginal people retire or leave the company, the focus will be on replacing them with First Nations members. Arctic Beverages also generates direct and indirect economic spinoffs, including contract hauling, repairs and maintenance, and fuel supplies. ♦

Strategic Investment Economic Development Catalyst for Manitoba First Nations

by Raymond Lawrence

When First Nations in Manitoba collectively purchased Arctic Beverages and in a short period doubled its business volume, they embarked on an entrepreneurial path that is now seeing dramatic returns.

But the success of Arctic Beverages is only one part of the bigger story.

The Tribal Councils Investment Group of Manitoba, Inc. (TCIG) came together in 1990, quickly launching First Nations on to the cutting edge of business for the new millennium. The Group consists of all seven Manitoba tribal councils which represent the 55 First Nations in the province — some 92,000 people.

“TCIG was conceived and developed by the seven tribal councils of Manitoba who came together in 1990, each throwing in a grand total of \$25,000. And today they’re totally financially independent and have a multi-million dollar balance sheet,” says TCIG President and CEO **Marvin Tiller**. “So they are a great example of a bunch

of people who had their own vision to come together, and pool this money together, and to lever themselves into the mainstream economy by putting money into strategic investments.”

“Our overall mandate is to become involved in the mainstream economy to generate some real wealth back into our First Nations community which will enhance their ability to achieve self-government,” says Tiller. “Strategic investments, in our view, are essential to build some real economic power at a level that will make a difference. You need strategic investments but you also have to have local economic development.”

TCIG goes after only those opportunities that are beyond the means of individual First Nations and tribal councils. Hence, they never compete with the people they represent. The TCIG approach is cautious and conservative; it invests primarily in joint-venture opportunities. In all cases, it looks for a history of profit, along with solid, stable operations.

Recently ranked among the top 100 companies in the province, TCIG anticipates being in the top 25 by next year. One of the reasons for this is a partnership it formed with Aetna Canada Inc. to create First Canadian Health Management-Corporation Inc. This is a 51-percent TCIG-owned organization that processes medical, pharmaceutical and dental claims for Aboriginal people on a national basis.

When the contract came up for this service, TCIG was confident that, partnered with Aetna’s capital and expertise, it could put together a winning bid that would meet the federal government’s Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business directives. As a result, staff at operations like the new corporation’s Toronto call centre is 45 percent Aboriginal. TCIG’s objective for this joint venture is 60 percent Aboriginal employment, a goal it is confident it can achieve in the near future.

In addition to more jobs for Aboriginal people, TCIG’s strategic investments are having other positive impacts on the First Nations community. “TCIG has a capital pool for other investment and it has given back to the seven tribal councils \$1.7 million in cash for local economic development,” Tiller says. About 20 percent of TCIG’s earnings go back to the communities for localized economic development. The remainder is reinvested in the company to enhance its value, strengthen its balance sheets, and develop its pool of capital for future investments.

“There is an enormous sense of pride for what has been done and it’s a great opportunity to see some interesting achievements that most people would not have thought possible,” says Tiller. ♦



Centre Aims at Cross-Cultural Business Development Readiness

by *Raymond Lawrence*

The recently opened Marieval Enterprise Center Inc. is an educational link that will provide business development training and expertise to the entrepreneurship community at large, while serving as a catalyst for forging cross-cultural partnerships. As well, it may result in more entrepreneur-related economic development for First Nations under the Yorkton Tribal Council.

But then, the centre, located on Cowessess First Nation, may have a larger impact if all goes as planned.

The Marieval Enterprise Center — recently incorporated as a non-profit corporation — is unique in that it is open for all people, regardless of their race or background. It will be trying to reverse a trend that sees First Nations people leave their communities to get business-related training and expert direction. Moreover, it will bring non-Aboriginal people to a First Nation for training. Already, the centre has had some success in this area, but believes this will improve dramatically as word gets out about what it has to offer.

Although the centre is not out to take business from other similar ventures in nearby communities, its rates are competitively low. Marieval is driven by a team of general managers (**Barb Cox-Lloyd, Alesa Verreault, Cherylynn Walters, Hazel Grotsky, and Diane Fox**) who are all well-educated veteran business people, bringing a wide array of skills and expertise into the circle for their clients.

Office manager **Jacqueline Johnson** is the juggler, keeping a steady rhythm so that at the end of a week when one general manager leaves (returning to her own business) the incoming general manager continues to move in the same direction. “They’re full of knowledge and experience and come with these incredible resources of people.”



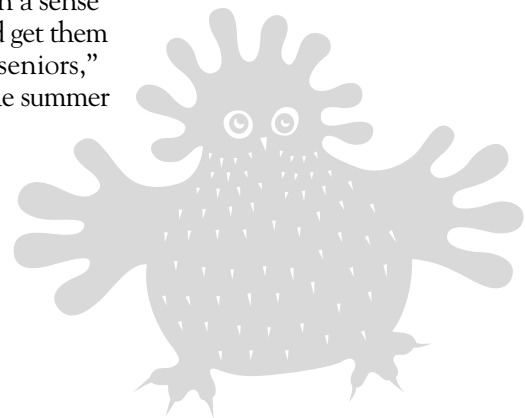
*From left: shown at the Grand Opening of the Marieval Enterprise Center are: **Jacqueline Johnson** (Marieval Enterprise Center Inc.), **Van Isman** (Saskatchewan Economic and Cooperative Development), **Lorne Kobak** (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development), Senator **Hector Badger** (Cote First Nation, Yorkton Tribal Council) cutting ribbon, Tribal Chief **A. Tony Cote** (Yorkton Tribal Council), Vice-Chief **Morley Watson** (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations), Chief **Terrance Pelletier** (Cowessess First Nation), **Darel Pack** (Canadian Rural Secretariat), and **Cherylynn Walters** (Marieval Enterprise Center Inc.)*

Johnson is one of the Marieval’s success stories, having passed through the ranks of a management internship program to assume her current post, where she is training to take on the role of general manager.

During the past summer, Marieval employed 10 youths on-reserve in projects aimed at beautifying and enhancing the Cowessess First Nation. The project also put the young people in close working contact with seniors so that they might learn from them. “Its aim was to instill in the youth a sense of pride in the community and get them out there working with the seniors,” says Johnson, who oversaw the summer enhancement project.

“This place is going to have an incredible impact,” says Johnson. “You can’t imagine how many people come in here wanting to start their own business...there’s so much that can be done as far as that goes and eventually it will have the domino effect.”

Marieval also does in-school presentations and keeps its doors open so that students have the chance to experience and learn from a business-type environment. This way, they get a feel for what the business world might offer them. ♦





A RESILIENT HERITAGE

Laura Langstaff

Métis

Disabilities Advocate and Singer/Songwriter

by Wendy MacIntyre

I was making up songs before I had language, my father said. I defined my day in music at 18 months. It was "Laura's Little Opera."

At the age of 21, aspiring singer/songwriter Laura Langstaff made the very tough decision to put her musical career on hold. Her third child — Mischa — had been born with multiple disabilities. Although she was a single parent with very limited financial resources, Langstaff determined to do all she could to help Mischa have the best life possible.

In making that commitment, she opened the door to what was to become a career — as a provincial and national advocate for Métis people with disabilities. As she was soon to learn, the issue of disabilities is one that governments tend to relegate to "the back burner." Her day-to-day struggle to protect her son's rights and nurture his well-being was buoyed by her own fighting spirit and the blessings of music and laughter. "I made a covenant with the Creator," she says, "that I would learn what I had to learn, go back to school so that I could make decisions for my son from an informed basis."

"Looking back, I suppose it was hard," she admits. "But there were so many other bigger decisions that it didn't seem hard at the time. And of course, music was always there for me as a healing agent. I kept using it for myself and kept writing."

Langstaff's music draws its inspiration from her Métis heritage, and is rooted in the cultural icons of the sash, the sweetgrass, the grandmother, the drum, the fiddle and the jig. Her father, who recently passed away, was an Aboriginal veteran who raised his children to be proud of their culture. "I could tell my lineage as soon as I went to school," she says. "When a teacher would say — 'Who knows their heritage?' — I'd stand up and quote lineage from St. Boniface Parish, Selkirk County in 1890... That's who I am!"

"Dad was very active in the Métis movement in Saskatchewan," says Langstaff. "He made sure we participated in the cultural events...He taught us to be involved in a service capacity in our community." Her father was one of the founders of the Winter Warmth Program and was instrumental in building seniors' homes and accessible housing in the province.

In addition to encouraging a life of community service, her father was Langstaff's first audience: "I was making up songs before I had language, my father said. I defined my day in music at 18 months. It was 'Laura's Little Opera.' I sang everything — 'Good morning, Dad!' My whole life's been 'Laura's Little Opera,'" she laughs.

Langstaff's sense of humour has been a great asset throughout her years of battling to obtain funding and the right programs for her son's needs. Mischa is hyper kinetic and profoundly deaf, and has epilepsy and many food allergies. In addition, he was diagnosed with autism, a neurological dysfunction that impairs an individual's ability to communicate and to interact socially with others. Individuals who are autistic are also usually highly resistant to change, and often establish very specific routines in their daily lives.

Langstaff defines autism as simply "the art of being alone." But when her son was born in 1976, the medical profession knew very little about autism and there were no support programs available. "I learned about the very harsh reality...that if you're Aboriginal, particularly in those days, there was absolutely no support for people with disabilities."

She then took on the task herself: "If you look at my résumé, you'll notice that my education is very narrow and focussed and coincides with the



development of my son. So as he grew, I'd go and get the courses he needed for his stage of life, and provide him with developmental care, rather than custodial care."

That education and experience were to lead to her service in the broader Métis community and positions like special needs project co-ordinator for the Women of the Métis Nation Alliance; Aboriginal rehabilitation counsellor with Canadian Paraplegic Association in Alberta; and founder of the Métis Advocacy and Disability Society of Alberta.

From 1996 to 1999, she volunteered her service as the disabilities co-ordinator for the Métis National Council (MNC).

In April 1999, MNC obtained funding for the position full-time, and Langstaff made the move from Edmonton to Ottawa. Before leaving Edmonton, Langstaff saw Mischa happily settled in a large duplex and working at two jobs. "He's with other Aboriginal kids with the same disability and he hires and selects his own staffing model. So he's doing very well now."

"It took years to find a job match for Mischa that I thought was respectful," she emphasizes. "And now he's got two. He works at a recreation centre, taking care of all the plants in the atrium, and during the summer he does the flower beds. He has a real connection with the earth. He gets out there and he sniffs the ground. He's also working with a medicine man, helping to prepare and sort his medicines because his sorting skills and sense of smell are so acute."

Langstaff's youngest son, Nicholas, is living with her in Ottawa, where he works in construction and has plans to pursue studies in constitutional law. "I'm finishing him off," Langstaff says. "He was the 'premie' too. He was only a pound and 13 ounces when he was born. So he blew all the frontiers (this was 1979). Babies that tiny weren't surviving. And he did." Langstaff's eldest two sons, Scott and Shane, are settled with children of their own.

Since her arrival in Ottawa, Langstaff has organized national workshops aimed at empowering Métis people with disabilities to help them participate in the design and development of their own programs.

Reflecting on her own persistence in a field that is too often overlooked, Langstaff credits the encouragement and advice she received from "some great mentors in the field, absolutely the cream of the crop." She mentions Métis Senator Thelma Chalifoux, Métis historian Olive Dickason and First Nations health issues

advocate Maggie Hodgson. "These are all women I've done 'board time' with. I've had my butt kicked by the best."

Langstaff is also once again pursuing her music wholeheartedly. She performs her own songs either solo, or with three other women — Jan Friedel, Deb Coulter and Cathy Long — collectively known as "Summer Sage." The group was invited by Sarah McLachlan to be part of the Lillith Fair show last summer in Toronto.

Her songs are all "gifts that come to her," says Langstaff who will often get up at three in the morning to record lyrics and music she feels are channelled through her.

Despite her abundant talent and creativity, Langstaff is adamant that she is no exception in her community. "The art I engage in is inherent in the Métis community," she says. "On any given Friday night, you can hear people way better than me around somebody's kitchen table."



Photo Credit: Janice Lang, DIAND

(From left) Janice Friedel, Laura Langstaff and Deb Coulter.