

# Transition

## Air Freight Business Soaring for Eight First Nations in Northwestern Ontario

by Raymond Lawrence

**I**n 1989, eight First Nations in northwestern Ontario bought 49-percent shares in an airfreight company. The freight company was then making \$3 million a year. Today, the fully First Nations-owned enterprise brings in over \$25 million annually.

Wasaya Corporation formed 10 years ago with the goal of buying into the air freight company, and other off-reserve opportunities. "Through Wasaya Corporation, the First Nations initiated the process, and in 1991 bought 49 percent of the company formerly called Kelner Airways Ltd," explains **Tom Morris**, airline vice-president. "Then there was a further acquisition to bring them up to 75-percent ownership in 1992. They acquired the remaining 12.5 percent of the company in October 1998, to make it 100-percent First Nations-owned."

It was the advice of an Elder that inspired the formation of Wasaya Corporation, says Morris. "There's only so much (economic development) you can do at a community level," he explains, "so one Elder from Kingfisher Lake First Nation said that we should be looking at what's happening around the region." The Elder suggested that their communities should tackle larger-scale economic development opportunities. He noted as an example, that all their communities relied on air service as their primary means of transport, for moving both people and goods. Taking his advice, the corporation set up with the aim of getting involved in viable economic activities that would also benefit the communities.



*Wasaya Airways Ltd. serves most of northwestern Ontario.*

At first, they serviced their own communities and a few other First Nations in their area. But Wasaya has expanded its business over the past decade. "Right now we're freighting into Manitoba and most of northwestern Ontario. We service companies like the Northwest Company, Ontario Hydro, Canada Post, plus our First Nation clients, and a mining company in northwestern Ontario," Morris says.

"In addition to freighting, we set up another program called our scheduled charter program. We provide the charter and the communities develop corporations to do all the duties that we used to do as a passenger service," he adds.

The cost of expanding the corporation to date means that the communities have not yet received returns on an annual basis. But Wasaya Corporation is making a major investment in the future, in a business that will provide employment and revenue. "What the shareholders have done is reinvested their money back into the company

so that it can grow and prosper. But we're looking at concepts that would allow some money going back to the community," says Morris.

The airways enterprise is definitely creating employment opportunities, and Wasaya Corporation is looking for ways to increase the percentage of Aboriginal employees in the business. At present, 15 percent of the airline's staff of 170 are Aboriginal people. This percentage in itself is a big improvement from three years ago, when only about 4 percent of the employees were from the First Nations. Morris says the corporation is working on further advancements. The Airways is planning to visit First Nation communities and on-reserve schools, for example, to encourage young people to consider aviation trades such as pilots, mechanics and ground crew workers. ♦

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

# Community Futures Program Supports New Entrepreneurs-in-the-Making

by Raymond Lawrence

**T**hrough a specially tailored grassroots program, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory and the Mississaugas of the New Credit are reaching potential First Nations entrepreneurs who are often overlooked. The two communities' jointly operated Community Futures program provides advisory services and loans to a broad range of clients, including Elders, youth and female entrepreneurs.

Several years ago, plans were afoot to cut the program, first developed in the late 1980s, and then funded by Human Resources Development Canada. However, the two communities hung on to keep it alive, as did many other First Nations. "The government realized how much they were actually getting for their investment in the community, so they decided to allow for second-generation programs," says **Kim Hill**, Community Economic Development Manager.

The two First Nations believe that adaptation is the reason their program is still around. Needs change, and so they modified their Community Futures program to keep in step with their communities' requirements.

When the program first got under way in the 1980s, the two First Nations were lumped together with the entire Brant County, and this left them at a disadvantage. "Right from day one, the fact that reserves are different,

such as with difficulties in accessing loans, resulted in us asking for our own initiative," says New Credit Chief **Carolyn King**. Operating the program on their own, the First Nations were quickly able to address and meet their members' needs.

"We brought loans into the community," she says. The program provides training and business advisory services, helping entrepreneurs prepare market research, and develop a complete picture of their planned business development and operations.

"We try to give them the whole picture of business right from the start-up phase. We do all sorts of seminars and each year the demands change and we try to accommodate them," says **Rachel Martin**, Small Business Development Support Officer. She says their clients demonstrate a great deal of trust and confidence in Community Futures advisors. They ask for advice on everything from detailed business information to feedback on a store-front display.

"We all agreed that business support advisory services, and something comparable to a mainstream Chamber of Commerce, or at least a resource centre, was something we needed in the community to help the businesses before they got to the actual loan process," says Chief King. "It gives them information to help in the development of their business idea,

to get some training, or to maintain their existing businesses if they were already operating and needed to enhance their own abilities."

"We primarily work in three areas in community development: youth entrepreneurship, small business support, and tourism support and development," says Hill. "We're very forward-thinking in terms of where young people are going with their business ideas and they need that assistance. Those young people coming up are pretty savvy and they keep us hopping at the business resource centre. We assist them in the development of business plans, accessing financing, and doing research on the Net and linking them up with opportunities to market themselves."

"They need to understand the whole picture — what they can realistically deal with, the financing they'll need, the money they'll have to put up, and they have to understand the market research data. We take them from the daydream toward something that is more realistic."

For more information, visit their Web site at [www.shopnative.com](http://www.shopnative.com). ♦

## Correction

*Transition* wishes to apologize for an error that appeared in the article "Fort Listuguj Turns History into Environmentally Good Economy" in the December 1999 issue. The article should have said that Fort Listuguj is located in Quebec.



# Youth Loan Funds — An Investment in Future Entrepreneurs

by *Raymond Lawrence*

**I**f finding meaningful employment is a challenge for young people, then the task of creating it might seem monumental.

This challenge is intensified for Aboriginal youth because — unlike young people in the aging mainstream population — they make up the majority of the Aboriginal population in Canada. So, there is always plenty of competition for the jobs that do become available.

Nevertheless, many First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth are taking up that monumental challenge by going into business for themselves.

Historically, First Nations people on reserves have had great difficulty getting business loans. For young people on reserves, this obstacle simply doubles. At Six Nations of the Grand River, the Two Rivers Youth Loan Fund has been helping local youth make it past this first hurdle.

“One of the obstacles... for youth or otherwise, has been collateral, because with Indian-based lands, banks couldn’t arrange their security,” says **Ginger Smith**, Youth Loan Officer at Two Rivers Community Development Centre. “With the youth, it can be hard to get a job, but a lot of them have good ideas, so we decided to concentrate on young entrepreneurs to get the wheels rolling. The younger they are, the more able they’ll be to succeed down the road.”



*Youth Loan Officer **Ginger Smith** and her daughter, **Dani**.*

The program began in 1998, and the first loans were made a year later. But the program offers the local youth more than just access to capital. “Through the youth program, we do two-day workshops once a month to do business planning. Once you’re in business, you need a business plan. So we help them produce their business plans, and we do mentoring and counseling with them,” says Smith.

“We say...you have to see what you’re getting into, and if you can do the paperwork and the business plan, then we feel they have the initiative to proceed. And the spirit is there because they’re more involved and know what comes next.”

Of every four applicants, an average of one continues through the business planning stage to the loan process.

The average loan is \$12,500, with a maximum of \$15,000. Interest rates are between 8 and 10 percent. The average client is 25 years old, with businesses ranging from renovations to digital sound equipment sales and goat-breeding operations.

With the debt resulting from start-up costs, Smith says the first year can make or break a new business. “We tell them...you might be working for two years without a pay, trying to keep your business afloat. We try to show that in the business plan; we try to do everything at a minimum because we want the client to see that this will be their bottom line.”

“The dollars are there, but you have to have the ambition to go for it, and you have to help yourself. We stress that to the clients,” she says. “If you want to be a young entrepreneur, you can do it.” ♦



# Nunanet Worldwide Communications Helps Nunavut Get on the Net

by Wendy MacIntyre

There are over 1,400 happy Internet subscribers in Nunavut thanks to super-energetic Iqaluit-based entrepreneur, **Adamee Itorcheak**. In 1995, he set up Nunavut's first Internet provider service, connecting his initial 300 customers single-handed. Today, his company — Nunanet Worldwide Communications Limited — has four employees, a healthy profit margin and a promising regional partnership with Inukshuk Internet Inc. Inukshuk is a new company dedicated to connecting Canadians across a high-speed, wireless Internet network.

For Itorcheak, the partnership means he can realize his dream of getting a "big network up" in Nunavut. "There's a lot of small communities still not serviced that I think should be serviced," he emphasizes.

One of Inukshuk's three founding partners is Microcell Telecommunications Inc., well-known for its personal communications services under the Fido® brand name. Microcell Vice-President **Dean Proctor** praises Itorcheak's expertise: "He's very valuable to us in the south," he says. "He has lots of experience providing service in an extreme climate and difficult terrain. We want to tap into that knowledge down south, when we set up service for remote communities in northern Alberta, for example."



Adamee Itorcheak

Itorcheak's communications experience dates back to 1981, when at age 16, he joined Bell Canada, working in installation repair. For the next six years, he got a thorough hands-on education, working in the NWT and in Northern Ontario and Northern Quebec. "I loved the job," he says. "I got to get out of the office, and meet a lot of people."

He worked all the overtime available ("I was single then") and made between \$80,000 and \$120,000 a year. At the age of 21, he met his wife-to-be and the next year settled down in Iqaluit. With the savings from his Bell Canada job, he started his first business — an outfitting company, Canadian

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# Ted Nolan and Assembly of First Nations Plan All-Star Aboriginal Hockey Team

by Diane Koven

**T**he game of hockey has been a source of joy for **Ted Nolan** since his boyhood on the Garden River Reserve in northwestern Ontario. The Ojibway hockey hero has played the game for as long as he can remember, achieving outstanding successes, including being named NHL coach of the year for the Buffalo Sabres. Now, Nolan is set to embark on a new hockey challenge.

In life, as in hockey (for him, the two are intertwined) Nolan's guiding principles have been a positive attitude and goal-setting. Never one to let obstacles stand in his way, Nolan thrives on challenges.

Last summer, while working with Assembly of First Nations National Chief **Phil Fontaine**, Nolan crossed the country speaking to young people on issues such as self-esteem and overcoming problems. "We thought an Indigenous hockey program would enhance opportunities for youth," Nolan explains. "We all knew what the problems are, but I wanted to focus on the solutions."

The idea didn't come out of thin air. "This concept was mentioned before. I remember my father talking about having an all-star Native team, but nothing really came of it," he says. The more he thought about it, the more excited he became about the prospect. Chief Fontaine agreed.

"Phil hired me to see this thing through," Nolan says. The idea is a very ambitious plan to develop an all-Aboriginal hockey team which would compete internationally, perhaps even in the Olympics. Nolan says the plan has been developed. The next stage is to come up with a business plan; to get corporate sponsorship to make it financially feasible.



From left: Assembly of First Nations National Chief **Phil Fontaine**, **Elijah Harper** and **Ted Nolan**.

"We have spoken to **Bob Nicholson**, President of the Canadian Hockey Association and he is supportive," Nolan adds. "We have a good relationship with Hockey Canada and they are sharing ideas."

Nolan says that the scouting process has begun and he hopes to have a national hockey camp in operation by this summer. "We want to kick it off in July and then two weeks later, go to a national tournament."

The aims go far beyond just recruiting hockey players. "This program is not designed to develop NHL players," said Nolan. "It is to give the kids life skills; to speak to them about goal setting, nutrition, education. These are the things that will be taught in our camps. We can teach anyone to pass the puck, but we want to teach them how to be successful in life, not just on the ice."

Nolan recognizes that his own success was uncommon. "For every (Aboriginal) person like me who made it in hockey, there are thousands who never had a chance. This program will give 20 to 60 kids a year an opportunity of a lifetime." This year's plans are just the beginning. "Once we have the boys' program established," Nolan says, "we will try to start a girls' program."

Does he miss the glamour of the NHL? "The NHL was nice," he says, "but to establish a program like this with the grass roots is very exciting." With supreme confidence, Nolan looks forward to success. "Once you have a plan and the right desire and the right people backing you," he says, "you are bound to succeed and I know we will." ♦



# Increased Literacy Leads to Better Job Prospects

by Raymond Lawrence

**I**lliteracy can pose one of the biggest obstacles to finding employment. About 40 per cent of the Canadian population is functionally illiterate, with Aboriginal people accounting for well over a third of that group. The problem of illiteracy in Aboriginal communities obviously needs tackling.

One of the agencies helping Aboriginal people overcome illiteracy is the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC). As a result of its programs, many Aboriginal people are discovering that literacy is the path to improved self-esteem, increased personal motivation and better job prospects.

“Some of the challenges they face are barriers to employment, the inability to read a story to their children or grandchildren, or understanding things like insurance documents, banking documents,” says **Roger Desmarais**, ONLC communications consultant. “When that person is unable to get out of that cycle and understand things better, the likelihood of their children going into the same cycles are increased. So what we’re looking at is breaking that cycle by teaching people the skills that they want to learn. We’re going back to the way we used to do things in a very experiential manner, and that makes for life-long learning and life-long skills.”

The Coalition works directly with 30 literacy programs in First Nations communities, Friendship Centres and one Métis community. It is also striving to bring new dimension to Aboriginal literacy through culturally appropriate materials and programs and the direct teaching of cultural ways through literacy.



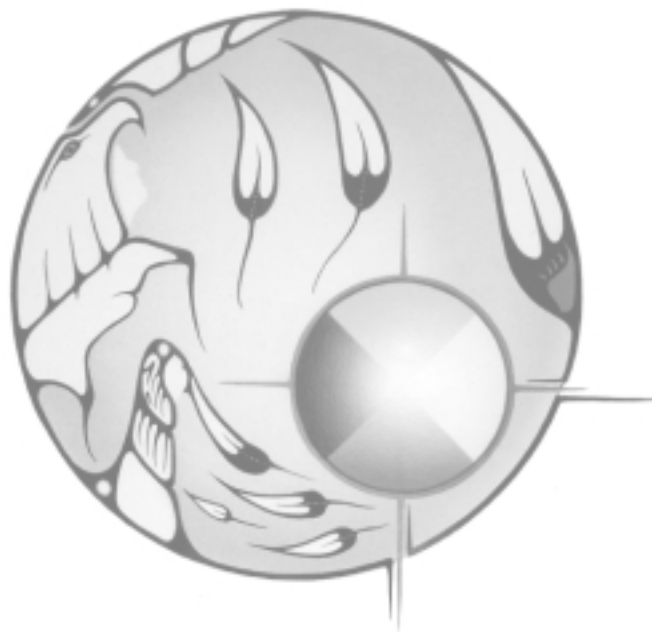
*The 13 Moons of Anishnaabeg is a calendar and teaching tool produced by the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition and its sister operation, the Ningwakwe Learning Press. Produced in English and Ojibway, the calendar teaches culture and conservation, respect for Elders, and language and literacy.*

“We have over 3,500 people enrolled in our programs right now and we have no way of estimating how many Native learners are taking literacy training from non-Native organizations because there is no one to meet their needs,” says **Petal Furness**, Coalition Executive Director. She says the Coalition can only estimate the number of people

they have educated in their 11 years in operation — about 35,000 — as many are seasonally employed and come for training only during the off-season.

Although the Coalition’s mandate is strictly literacy, it often acts as a referral agency, guiding people into life-long education. “We support and encourage that, so there’s a seamless process, because we don’t want people coming through the window of hope only to have the door of reality slammed in their face,” Desmarais says. “We want as much as possible to foster that and encourage partnerships so that if people come in, and their goal is to go on to higher education, they can get the skills they need and be successful.”

“What we’re really talking about is self-esteem and when your self-esteem is high, all things and all dreams are possible. This is about improving the quality of life of the individual whether they’re a homemaker, a trapper, or unemployed. People feel better, and socially our communities come together, and there is better harmony and balance and that does translate into things like employment,” he says. ♦



# Inuglak Schoolchildren Win Grand Prize in Book Contest

by Diane Koven

The tiny hamlet of Whale Cove, Nunavut, is home to only 300 people, but some of its youngest citizens recently brought them well-deserved fame.

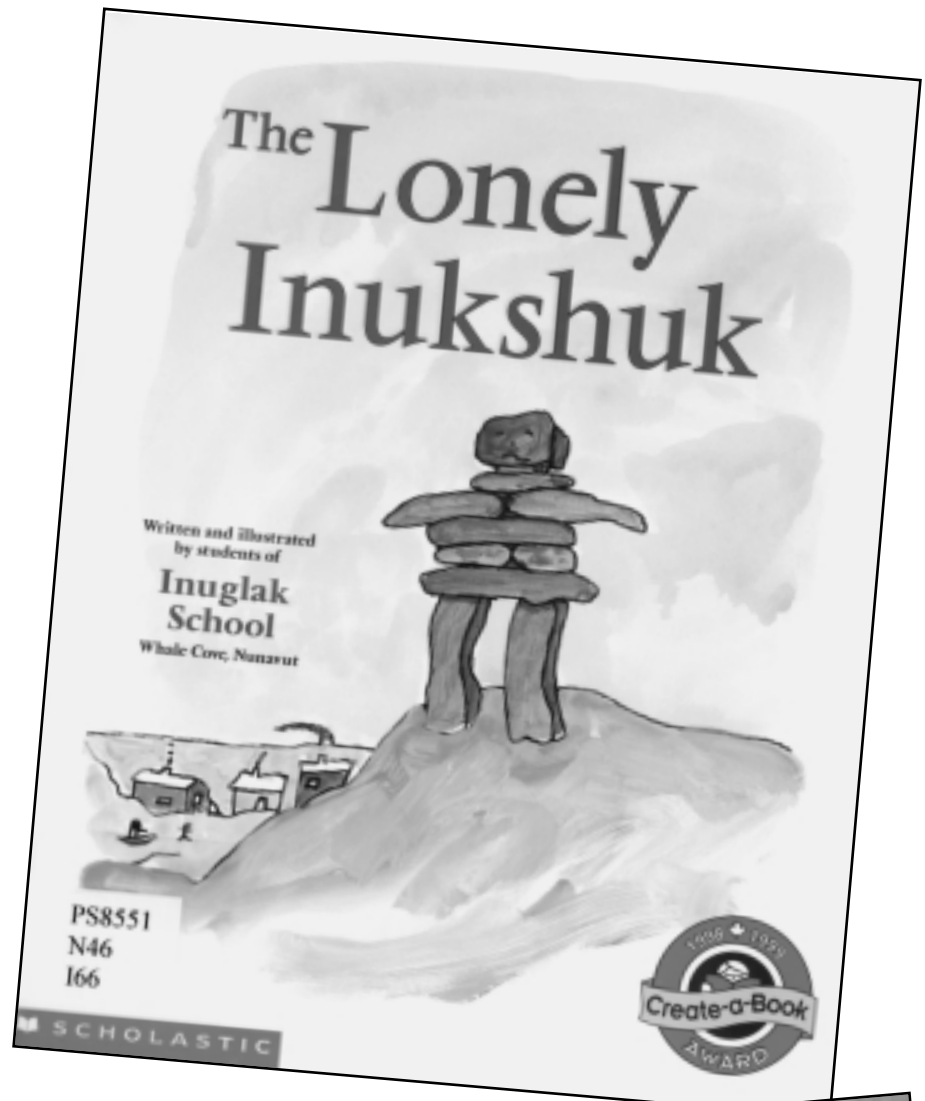
Fifteen students in Grades 4, 5, 6 and 7 at Inuglak School were the Grand Prize winners in the 1998-99 contest sponsored by Scholastic Book Fairs (Canada) Inc. for a book that they wrote and illustrated, *The Lonely Inukshuk*. The students, assisted by teachers **Sue Callard**, **Ken Jacobi** and **Michael Montcombroux**, took up the challenge and voluntarily spent hours after school and on weekends working on the picture book.

As part of the award, Scholastic published the book in both English and French with Inuktitut translation. **Sophie Igviksaq**, secretary-treasurer of Inuglak School, was one of the Inuktitut language consultants. She is very proud of the work the children did and the recognition they received. "The award ceremony was very exciting," she says. "The president and vice-president of Scholastic came to Whale Cove, and the Minister of Education and other dignitaries were here too."

The children each received two copies of the published book, a special medallion and a Create-a-Book T-shirt at the award ceremony. In addition, Inuglak School was presented with a cheque for \$1,000 and a commemorative plaque.

**Caroline Thompson**, who was principal during the 1998-99 school year, is proud of her former students and their teachers. "It is just a thin,

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*"Inuglak Schoolchildren Win..."*  
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little book, but it really represents what Whale Cove is all about. It is a beautiful story," she says. "They worked so hard. In the end, I hired substitute teachers so they could work on it full-time to finish it. They really put a lot of work into it."

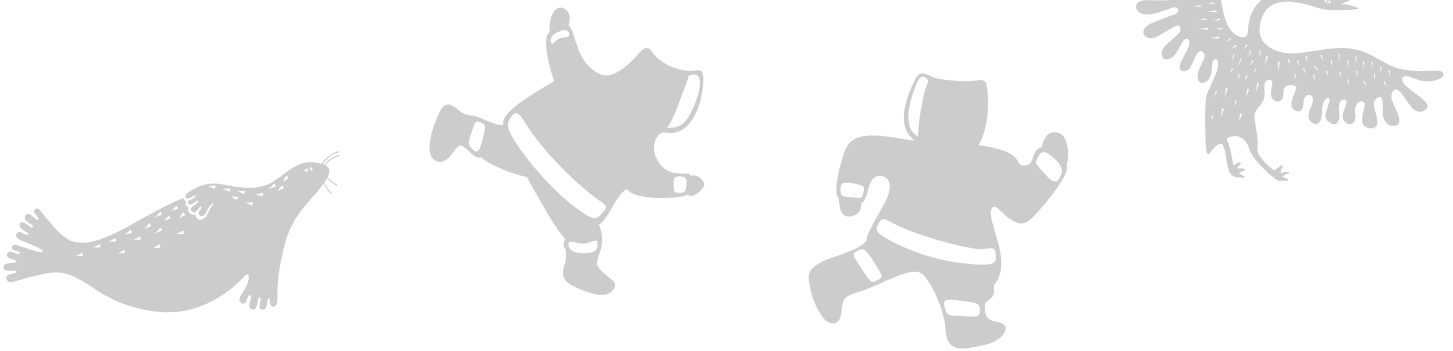
Although they are no longer in Whale Cove, teachers Sue Callard and Ken Jacobi returned for the award ceremony to share the excitement with their former students. "The process was very organized. We had two teams of writers," says Jacobi. "We looked at

**Robert Munsch** books and read many books; then identified aspects that make good stories. The kids decided on the theme of Inukshuk and the animals that are all around. They came up with some ideas on their own and they also went home and asked their Elders about the Inukshuk and its importance to their culture. At the same time, we were studying the Arctic in science, so it all came together."

Michael Montcombroux joined the staff in January 1999. "He worked with some students on the pictures, the

drawings and paintings," says Jacobi. "It was a lot of work for both students and staff, but everyone learned from it."

The book was chosen from over 150 entries submitted by students from across Canada. "The community is the smallest in the region," says Callard. "For those kids to produce the book and win this national contest was really special, a real feather in their cap." ♦



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Arctic Adventures, that he still operates. This company, which offers clients treks from Ward Hunt Island to the North Pole, enables Itorcheak to maintain his ties with the land and his culture.

"My culture is very important to me," he stresses; he is teaching his two young children Inuktitut.

Growing up in Iqaluit, Itorcheak says that his first role models were "the custodians who cleaned the school, and then on the weekends, went hunting." He strongly believes that everyone's role in an organization is equally important: "the janitor, the programmer, the guy who picks up the garbage."

His philosophy in life and business is: "Give it a shot. Just keep trying. It doesn't hurt." Among his inspirations, he counts determined risk-takers like

British mega-entrepreneur **Richard Branson**, former Prime Minister **Pierre Elliot Trudeau** and the "father of Nunavut," **John Amagoalik**. "He never gave up," Itorcheak says.

Itorcheak sees the Internet as a superb information tool for the new territory. His company has developed on-line forums and chat groups — a networking lifeline for Nunavut's widely scattered population. "The Internet is also an awesome game machine," laughs Itorcheak, whose son regularly plays on-line with children in Japan.

At its Iqaluit office, Nunanet also offers hardware and software sales and service, training, Web page construction and "virtual private conferencing."

For more information, telephone Nunanet at (867) 979-0772 or visit the company Web site at [www.nunanet.com](http://www.nunanet.com). ♦







# I CAN DO THIS!

*Dorothy Grant*

*Haida*

*Fashion Designer – Entrepreneur*

*by Fred Favel*

*I remember standing at my patio looking out towards the ocean, and just having this surge of energy — like, I can do this! And that beats all the fear you struggle with just to get to that point.*

The Sinclair Centre, a restored heritage building in downtown Vancouver, is a focal point of the city's trendy, high-end fashion area. As we enter the foyer, our destination is not hard to find — an elegant glass, bronze and marble storefront. There are no gaudy neon signs or flashing strobes, only a name mounted on black and white marble. The name is that of Canada's top Aboriginal fashion designer, Dorothy Grant.

As she sits at her desk overlooking her store filled with Haida-inspired creations, Dorothy Grant tells her story. She was born in a little Haida village of Hydaburg, Alaska in 1955. The Haida in Alaska originally came from the Queen Charlotte Islands, now called Haida Gwaii. Grant was one of seven children. Her father passed away when she was a young child, and the family moved to Kitchikan, Alaska. When asked whether she attended residential school, Grant replies: "No, we were saved from that misery...It was a real normal little Alaska town that didn't have any of those kinds of things...I was saved from that, and I think that has a lot to do with my self-confidence and self-image."

Grant expresses her forceful, proud advocacy of Haida culture both verbally and through her fashion creations. Raised in an extended family, she drew cultural and spiritual strength from her grandmother, who instilled in her a pride in her heritage.

As an aspiring designer, Grant made her first outfit when she was 13. She also made clothes for her sisters. "It was just something fun," she says. "It is a very satisfying thing to do, to actually make a garment." From Kitchikan, Grant went to Seattle, Washington and took computer training, as well as some college courses. She worked for Honeywell, an electronics firm, and moved up the ladder quickly. But after six months in a company-sponsored computer language training course, she decided to leave. "This just isn't me," she realized. "It's like having your head buried into something and you really don't look up to see the light of day until you've got it perfected. I started to look at Haida art books and old artifacts. I just got a real interest in my own cultural art so I started to study that and decided I should go back to school full-time."

Several years later, she visited Masset, a village in Haida Gwaii. There, she met Robert Davidson, the now world-renowned Haida artist and carver, who was to be her future husband. Their relationship lasted 14 years: "That's where I developed a lot of my skill as an artist. Robert was a very good teacher, but he encouraged me to do other things, new things, and we were of the belief that Haida art is such a strong and traditional art form, that the people who really keep it alive and make it progressive, are the artists." Grant studied Haida art for the next few years and began making button blankets. She also learned the art of weaving spruce baskets from the Davidsons and from her own grandmother.

Although she found the baskets challenging, she realized that she wasn't going to make a living at it. "So I thought of fashion, and everybody always said what a good idea, but nobody ever did anything about it." In 1987,



she enrolled in a private design school. She needed to learn all the aspects of the fashion world from pattern making to merchandising, but design was what she focused on. "I didn't excel in pattern making. I excelled in design and the concept of Haida art on clothing. So it was really new, I mean I was the only strange one in my class. I was doing something that was sort of off-the-wall."

After she graduated, she was asked to do a fashion show for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in the nation's capital — an event that was to be her debut in the fashion world. She worked for over a year, and designed and produced 55 pieces "of very different avant-garde kind of Haida design clothing. I had hired a friend that went to school with me and she did the sewing of the clothes.

I did all the cutting and the appliqué work, so I basically started a business right from school, but it was a home-based cottage-style business."

Then Grant learned that the Museum could not do the show because it was financially unfeasible. "So here I sat with a whole closet full of brand-new clothing that I'd made and I was devastated. I didn't know what I was going to do." Then she made the decision to stage a show herself.

So on December 7, 1989, Dorothy Grant's premiere fashion show opened in the Hotel Vancouver ballroom to a sold-out crowd. The local and national publicity it generated kept her busy for the next three years. "It's like taking possession of something you know is really special and has a future. And if you don't do it with a lot of value, and respect, it's like your one chance to make an impression. So that's what I did...Somebody was taking Haida art to another level, another stage."

During those three years, she also did market research, on the lookout for fashion shops to carry her line. She travelled to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, and came to the conclusion this was not the way to go. "It would get lost in somebody else's store...so that's when I decided, we need our own house for this type of clothing."

In 1993, after winning the Best Professional Design award at the "Winds of Change" fashion show organized by the Canadian Council for Native Business, Grant decided she was ready to take the challenge. Within a year, Dorothy Grant Ltd. opened its doors, carrying her "Feastware" and "Dorothy Grant" collections, as well as gold and silver carved jewellery. Not only is her work worn internationally, but museums have made purchases for their collections of Haida art. Grant's contribution to the preservation of Haida culture, and her success as fashion designer and businesswoman, have earned her a 1999 National Aboriginal Achievement Award, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Northern British Columbia.

"I'm a pretty good observer of what goes on in my industry and also the art world and the Native community too," she says of her decision to start her own business. "I remember standing at my patio looking out towards the ocean, and just having this surge of energy — like I can do this! And that beats all the fear you struggle with just to get to that point."

*Some items can be purchased through Dorothy Grant's Virtual Boutique at [www.dorothygrant.com](http://www.dorothygrant.com).*

***Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.***



Photo credit: Laurel Lemchuk-Favel