

# Circles of Light

October 2000 – Number 6

## Award-Winning Video Maker Draws Strength From Community

by Ruth McVeigh

**A**ward-winning video maker **Barb Cranmer** credits her community as the source of her strength, “and most importantly, my family. They have given me a strong sense of identity, of knowing who I am and where I come from.”

There’s no question that Cranmer is now giving back to her community. She’s making a big splash in the film world, winning awards, receiving grants and bringing First Nations stories to a wide audience.

Cranmer is a member of the ‘Namgis First Nation of Alert Bay, an island village just off the northern end of Vancouver Island. At 19, she moved to Vancouver, took courses in administration at Capilano College, then returned home to work in community economic development.

In 1980, a film crew from Chicago visited Alert Bay to record the opening of the U’Mista Cultural Centre. Cranmer and six other students took a quick course in making and editing videos. By the time they had completed a library of 200 oral histories from community Elders, Cranmer was totally hooked on video production. She returned to Capilano College in 1988 and enrolled in an intensive, 10-month media arts course sponsored by the Chief Dan George Foundation.



**Barb Cranmer** (centre) on location in Juneau, Alaska, directing “We Weave Our History,” with cinematographer **Rene Sioui Labelle**.

Photo credit: Teresa Marshall

“I was tired of seeing negative images of ourselves and I wanted to change that in some way,” she says.

She was a researcher, project manager and production manager for other people’s films until she felt comfortable going solo. Then, with veteran producer, **Cari Green**, Cranmer made her first film in 1993.

That same year, they formed Nimpkish Wind Productions, Inc. and produced *Laxwesa Wa: Strength of the River*, for Discovery Channel. Of this film, Cranmer

Aboriginal women across the country are founding dynamic businesses in fields as diverse as auto wrecking, business development services and training, fashion design and video production. According to the 1996 Census, 36 percent of the self-employed Aboriginal people in Canada were women. Aboriginal women entrepreneurs make vital contributions to their communities’ economies, and are inspiring role models for young people.

“Award-Winning Video...”  
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Canada

**“Award-Winning Video...”**  
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says: “To the Native people of Canada’s West Coast, the rivers and ocean are not just a way of life, but life itself. As the region’s original inhabitants, they have always respected the resources of their rivers and oceans, creating a society of great spirit, culture and economic wealth. But within the space of a single generation, they have watched governments manage the fishery into a state of crisis. Now it’s time for the government to listen to what Native Canadians have to say.”

This film won Best Documentary at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco (1995) and Special Mention in the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto (1996).

Cranmer then wrote, produced and directed *Qatuwas: People Gathering Together* — the story of the rebirth of the canoe culture on the Pacific Northwest Coast. This film, which won the first Telefilm/TV Northern Canada Award and Best Documentary at the American Indian Festival, was also invited to the 1997 Sundance Film Festival.

Nimpkish Wind Productions’ *T’Lina: The Rendering of Wealth*, about the traditional eulachon fishery, won Best Documentary at the 1997 American Indian Film Festival, as well as Best Videography, 2000 Golden Sheaf Award. **Doug Sjoquist** did the filming with Cranmer directing.

In 1999, Cranmer made a film about the opening of the new Alert Bay Big House which replaced the original centre that had been destroyed by an arsonist. *I’tusto: To Rise Again* was made with the participation of CanWest Global TV.

*We Weave Our History*, in which Cranmer documents traditional forms of Chilkat weaving among coastal First Nations, is currently in post-production.

Cranmer and Green now dream of establishing a second firm, Nimpkish Wind Interactive, Inc., to produce new media projects showcasing First Nations’ history and culture. ✨

## Sandra Bighead: From Baker to Auto Wrecker

by Michael Fisher

**S**andra Bighead says she started Adam’s Active Auto Wrecking with three basic ingredients.

First, learn everything there is to know about the business. Second, hire well-informed, congenial staff. Third, and perhaps most important, provide the best possible customer service. After 10 years in business, this recipe has proven to be a success.

“In the beginning, of course, there was a lot of uncertainty,” Bighead admits. “But I knew I could make things happen.”

Bighead has steered her business out of a rented .7 hectare (1.7-acre) wrecking yard into its permanent 3-hectare (7.8-acre) home in Saskatoon’s north industrial area. Since the move, Bighead’s sales have tripled. She has also doubled her staff, from six to 12.

Not bad for a former baker who says she didn’t know much about cars when she purchased the assets of an

existing auto wrecker. Bighead chose the “Adam’s” business name so that she would come first in the phone book.

“The market was there, and I knew I had the management skills to run a successful business,” Bighead explains. “Besides,” she jokes, “I didn’t know anything about baking and still worked my way from bread slicer to manager of a bakery.” Auto wrecking was just another challenge.

A member of the Beardy’s and Okemasis First Nation, Bighead also has an accounting certificate from the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology.

Today, Bighead’s company is one of the most reputable auto wreckers in the area, with customers province-wide and beyond. Although she can tell you almost anything you need to know about auto parts, she prefers to handle the business end of the operation from her office on the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation’s urban reserve. Her staff, whom she credits for much of her business success, take care of the day-to-day operation.



Photo credit: Michael Fisher

**Sandra Bighead can tell you almost anything you need to know about auto parts.**

“The staff are really important,” she confirms, adding that they contribute to the company’s friendly, relaxed atmosphere. The welcoming atmosphere, and employees’ automotive expertise, keep customers coming back.

In fact, business is so good that Bighead no longer needs to advertise, at least formally. Word-of-mouth endorsements have brought her more than enough business.

“If you go to the shop, the phones are always ringing,” she says. ✨

# Saskatoon Doggy Wash a Hit with Pets and Their Owners

by Jeff Campbell

When business is going to the dogs for **Patti Bird**, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Bird is the owner of Saskatoon Doggy Wash, a unique service on the city's west side, which allows dog and cat owners to bathe and groom their pets without making a big mess at home. Through the self-serve dog wash, Bird, a member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation and a long-time Saskatoon resident, has found an imaginative business niche. She can indulge her love of dogs and score a commercial success at the same time.

There are many unusual aspects to this small business, not least that it's one of the few around owned and run by a deaf person. Hearing people, especially those who haven't dealt with deaf business owners, are sometimes puzzled, as Bird explains through interpreter **Ed Smith**.

"Some people say, 'That person is the owner? That can't be. It's impossible.' That sometimes leads to a discussion of why can't I? The only thing I can't do is I can't hear."

"I hope this helps dispel the idea that 'deaf people can't.' Sometimes I heard that growing up and I always wanted to answer back that I could do it."

Pet owners sometimes lack the expertise or facilities for grooming their animals. That's where Bird and her assistant **Pearl Nightingale** come to the rescue. Their shop — the only one of its kind in Saskatchewan — has dog-sized bathtubs, where owners can wash their pets, and tables where pets can sit while they get a quick trim. Make no bones about it, dogs are indulged here. There are even paw prints painted on the brightly coloured walls, and cartoon dogs over the bath tubs.



Photo credit: Jeff Campbell

**Patti Bird** in front of one of her dog-sized bath tubs:  
"If I see the dog is happy, then I'm happy."

While the canine beauty shop caters primarily to dogs, it has recently opened up for cat washing. Mondays, the usual run of terriers, poodles and retrievers is taken over by cats — as mixing could have them fighting...well, like cats and dogs.

Bird, who owns a cat named Boo, has been crazy about animals since she was a little girl. The real impetus for choosing her unusual occupation came when she was considering her career options.

"I wanted something different. Something that would work well with my deafness and work with the skills that I have," she says.

"A really wonderful teacher I had said why don't I wash the dogs? I had never heard of anything like that. I checked it out in Regina and in Calgary and that was something I wanted to do."

Bird considered buying a franchise from a Calgary operation. Then she decided to strike out on her own.

"I thought it was possible, so I did the research and did the business plan and I thought, why not? So here it is."

Since her business launch in the fall of 1999, the number of dogs coming in for a spruce up has doubled.

Bird says the deaf community has been a great help to her, especially during the set-up phase of the business.

"There was a class of deaf students who helped me paint, and set up the bath booths and helped me make this cement floor," she explains. "We have a community of deaf people and we give each other advice...They're good friends." \*

*Jeff Campbell is a writer of Métis descent who is based in Regina.*



# Elaine Woodward: Self-Employed, and Loving It

by Edwinna von Baeyer

**E**laine Woodward, owner of Wordcrafting Services based in Yellowknife, NWT, is proud of what she has accomplished since first establishing her business in early 1996. She has broken into the tough market of business and organization development and human resource management. In a short time, she has realized her dream of self-employment, raising a family and contributing to her community.

When she decided to go into business for herself, Woodward did her research well. She went from the safety of a high-salaried government job, where she had honed her skills in employment training and human resources, to zero income. However, she was determined and proceeded to promote her new business. Soon, she was attracting more and more clients. "I've never had a moment of regret. I have a lot of freedom to choose between contracts," she says.

Woodward also enjoys the flexibility of being her own boss. "It is hard work, but I can decide, for example, to work in the evening rather than the afternoon. This has allowed me to run the business and raise a family at the same time."

A Métis, Woodward grew up in Anzac, northern Alberta. An NWT resident since 1974, she now runs her business from her home office, focusing on organizational reviews of companies and a wide variety of human resource activities. Among her other services, Woodward assists small- and medium-sized businesses interested in expanding. "I look at the human resource situation and make recommendations," she says. "Depending on what the client wants, I may assist in the development and implementation (of the business expansion)."

Woodward also helps businesses by developing company prospectuses, brochures, business plans and proposals. One of her best-known clients is Creations by Berna, which produces clothing based on Aboriginal designs. Woodward prepared the company's initial business plan which it used to secure start-up funds.

Her multi-faceted business provides other human resource services such as recruitment, staffing and job descriptions; and her organization work covers strategic and work planning. Woodward also delivers programs, such as the Community Mobilization Program on Crime Prevention with Justice Canada and the Justice Department of the Government of the Northwest Territories. Under this program, she helps communities write proposals to obtain funding for crime prevention initiatives. She can also meet all her clients' communications needs, from writing and researching to developing proposals, manuals, policies and newsletters.

Woodward's main clients are from Aboriginal organizations, federal and territorial government departments, the mining industry, the

business sector and non-profit organizations. While she has focused mainly on business opportunities in the NWT and Nunavut, she is open to working in other regions.

The challenge of working on a diversity of projects with different companies and individuals is one Woodward particularly enjoys. Asked about her biggest reward, she replies emphatically, "Successful results. The biggest reward is helping companies succeed."

Woodward is often approached by other women who would like to start their own businesses. Her advice is: "Believe in the possibilities, because anything is possible. Assess and fully utilize your knowledge, skills and experience because they are all conducive to having a business. Do extensive research so you know what you're getting into. Establish realistic and challenging business goals." It is certainly a formula that has worked for her.

For more information about Wordcrafting Services, telephone (867) 920-7971. ✨



**Elaine Woodward** enjoys the flexibility of being her own boss.

# Suzanne Shatekenhatie Phillips Transforms Artistic Gifts into Home-based Business

by Diane Koven

**S**uzanne Shatekenhatie Phillips earns her living doing what she most enjoys. She is a woman at peace with the world, deeply grateful for the artistic gifts her foremothers passed on to her.

Born and brought up in Kahnawake, Quebec, Phillips has never strayed far from home. "I have lived on the same quarter-acre all my life," she says. A proud Mohawk, not yet 40, Phillips is an artist who has turned her talent into a home-based enterprise, designing logos and signage for other businesses.

"I haven't yet had time to make myself a sign," says Phillips. "I've just been too busy." Although most of her clients are from Kahnawake, Phillips is now becoming known across the country. "I have put some of my work in Native magazines," she says. "The Mohawk Council has a Web site for its businesses and I am included in that as well. Everyone on the reserve knows me, and the Native Friendship Centre in Montreal acts as a base where people can look for my work."

How does Phillips design a logo for a client? "Usually people give me a business card," she explains, "and I work from that. I may design a logo and put something 'Native' on it." She has also been decorating jackets with designs, but this is a labour-intensive, specialized type of work.

"It has not been a straight path to success," she admits. "I have had several other jobs along the way. After the Oka crisis, I got a grant and have been working here for 10 years. In addition to making signs for businesses, I have done maps and am now working on paintings for galleries and exhibitions."

Both Phillips' mother and her grandmother were artists. Her mother painted religious art and her grandmother did beadwork. Phillips began her artistic endeavours with beadwork, but gradually switched to painting which became her main love. Her mother not only influenced Phillips to become an artist, but also



Artwork by  
Suzanne Shatekenhatie Phillips.

gave her daughter a home in which to create her studio. Phillips is grateful to be able to work in her home studio with her two daughters always nearby. "Now that my younger daughter is 10," she says, "I have more time and I am really enjoying my work."

Phillips' business continues to grow by word-of-mouth recommendation as more and more business owners see the power of high-quality, original signs to advertise their wares.

For more information, telephone (450) 635-8883. \*



## Susan Wright Plays du Maurier Classic

by Fred Favel



Photo credit:  
Laurel Lemchuk-Favel

**Susan Ann-Lynn Wright** of Edmonton, the only known Inuit golfer on the circuit, recently qualified for one of the seven openings available to Canadian women professionals for the du Maurier Classic, a major tournament on the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour. The tournament was held August 10-13 at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club in Aylmer, Quebec. (Wright is shown here with her mother, **Dora**.) Since March, Wright has also played 12 Futures Tour tournaments throughout the United States, managing an eighth-place tie in Spring, Texas, as well as three du Maurier Series tournaments for Canadian professionals in Calgary, Alberta; Shawinigan, Quebec; and Rosemeath, P.E.I.

# Internet Café Founder Also Her Community's First Woman Chief

by Diane Koven

**V**al Monague's recent 40th birthday signalled a year of challenge, excitement and personal "firsts" galore. In addition to opening an Internet café with her sister, Monague was elected the first woman Chief of the Beausoleil First Nation in June.

This busy wife, mother of two and social services worker is also a full-time student in her last year of an Honours Bachelor of Social Work program. She's enrolled in a pilot project — an off-campus program of Carleton University. For most people, this would be more than enough. But not for Monague.

Last year, Monague and her sister, **Arnya Assance**, both members of the Otter Clan, took the entrepreneurial plunge and opened their Internet café. Known as "The Otter Place," the café is on Christian Island. Located due north of Wasaga Beach, about an hour north of Barrie, the island is home to the Beausoleil First Nation.

What prompted the sisters' decision to open the café? "We both love coffee," says Monague, "and we have the best coffee north of Toronto — maybe even including Toronto!"

In fact, "The Otter Place" offers far more than just coffee. "We also have a healthy food choice menu," says Monague, "including soups, salads and

sandwiches." And, of course, there is the Internet: "We have two computers right now and they are always busy."

The café is staffed by three full-time employees, all members of the Beausoleil First Nation. Monague and Assance work on the weekends, and rely on the staff to keep things going during the week. "We have excellent staff; we are very fortunate," says Monague. "The café is open from 6:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. seven days a week, except for Christmas and New Year's. We have really created a social hub for the community."

Not content to rest on their laurels, the sisters have plans for expansion. "Over the next year, we will research

the market with a view to expand, and to distribute our coffee to other First Nations," says Monague. She is also considering franchising the café, but will first develop guidelines for "First Nations-specific" franchise agreements.

Monague has continued as a consultant, somehow finding the time to work in public and community consultation.

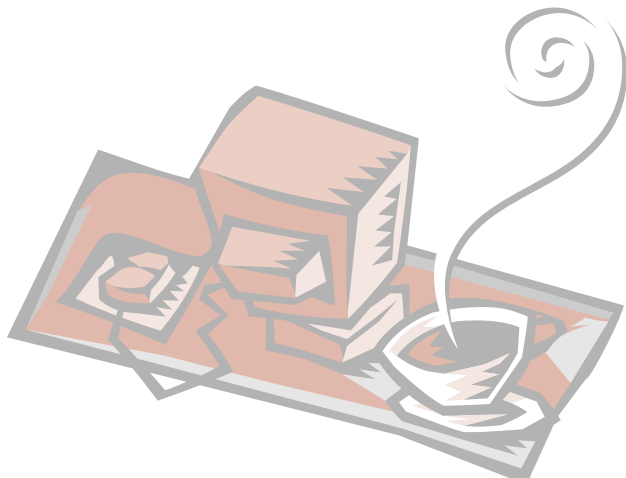
What more could a busy, energetic 40-year-old woman add to her agenda? The answer came on June 29, when, running against four others — all men — Monague was elected her community's first woman Chief. She is very proud of this accomplishment, and equally enthusiastic about her duties.

Of her hectic life, Monague says, "It's crazy, overwhelming, but never dull. This is problem-solving at its finest."

Monague credits her husband, **Hiram**, for enabling her to do what she does so well. "Over the years," she says, "as I have worked and gone to school, I have had experience in juggling roles, but my husband has been a tremendous help in keeping the home fires burning." \*



Val Monague with her nephew, Griffin.



# Leanne Joe's Envision Consulting Helps Small Enterprises Grow

by Wendy MacIntyre

**F**ounder and owner of Vancouver-based Envision Consulting, **Leanne Joe** believes Internet marketing is an ideal way for small Aboriginal businesses to grow from strength to strength.

Armed with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing, a Certificate in Internet Marketing and continuing studies in E-Business, Joe develops marketing strategies for small enterprises. "There's a misconception that if you build a Web site, clients will automatically come," she says. "The fact is, they don't. You need to captivate your audience."

Joe sits down with potential clients to determine their target audience, and the best Web solutions within her client's budget, for reaching that audience. She also assists clients with business plans, competitive analysis, market research and project management — "anything," she says, "to help a business grow."

A member of the Squamish Nation in North Vancouver, Joe envisions a time when lots of her clients will opt for a "full E-commerce solution." This will mean that their customers, who might be half-way round the world, will pay for the company's goods or services right at its Web site. "That is the outlook of what the Internet will be," declares Joe, "and I want to be a part of it."

Joe established Envision Consulting in May of this year, and plans to build up her company gradually. "I've always had a passion for helping people," she explains, "and this is one means to do that."

She discovered she had a knack for marketing in her very first marketing course in college. "I realized I really like this."

"Marketing is a huge subject, with many different aspects," she adds. So she took every possible course, and got work experience that would support her own business goals. She has worked as a commodity analyst, analyzing the pulp and paper market for B.C. Rail, and as a supplier relations officer with Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Networking has also played a big part in her career, Joe says. "I've always used it as a tool to succeed. The big thing for me is not just getting clients; it's helping clients network with others."

A primary goal of Envision Consulting is to help clients strengthen their businesses through joint ventures and strategic alliances. Applying this strategy herself, Joe is entering into a joint venture with Indbusiness.net. This newly established Internet business portal promotes the Aboriginal business community, and helps Aboriginal enterprises connect with a wide range of resources to help their businesses flourish.

"Indbusiness.net has huge potential for the Aboriginal business community as a whole," says Joe, who will serve as the Web site's Director for Youth and Business.

"The majority of Aboriginal business Web sites out there are government sites or are information-based," Joe says. "This one actually facilitates bringing businesses together. That's why I'm excited about it."



Photo credit: Karen Flanagan-McCarthy

**Leanne Joe**, owner of Envision Consulting, develops marketing strategies for small Aboriginal businesses.

Joe's "passion for helping others" carries over into her abundant volunteer activities, including helping out at social gatherings in her community, and giving talks at colleges, local schools and seminars. "I love doing that," she says. "I never turn down an opportunity to speak about education and career choices to other young people."

For more information about Envision Consulting's services, telephone (604) 908-0288, E-mail: [envision@intergate.ca](mailto:envision@intergate.ca) or visit [www.indbusiness.net](http://www.indbusiness.net) \*

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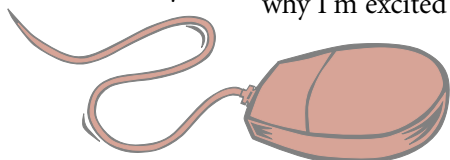
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# Two Bears Offers Big Hand to Aboriginal Women Seeking Self-Employment

by Raymond Lawrence

**I**n business, as in life, you have to walk before you can run. And those first steps are often the hardest to take.

For many people, self-employment represents a critical first step in a journey that may one day lead to a full-blown business. Two Bears Cultural Survival Group, of the M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, offers support and guidance to Aboriginal women who have chosen this path. Program co-ordinator **Laura Corbiere** says the Group's present efforts focus on cultivating the right business climate and knowledge base for women who want to be their own bosses. The Group supports initiatives in cultural development, language, family healing, and other areas that help women become self-employed.

Two Bears Cultural Survival Group is creating the building blocks that other First Nations will be able to adapt to help strengthen their communities, and enhance women's opportunities for self-employment — and ultimately — for business.

“The Group's basic goals are to support initiatives that will be positive for the community...opportunities that promote economic self-sufficiency for the well-being of Native women, their families, and communities, including the personal and professional growth of Native women,” Corbiere says. “The project itself has been a difficult process because there aren't models in place that we can use. So there have been a lot of lessons learned.”

“They have the knowledge and skills to generate an income,” Corbiere says of the women the Group aims to assist. “But they lack the self-employment skills like marketing, packaging, pricing, promoting and distribution.” The women often need advice on how

The women taking part in the Group's skills exploration training produced these arts and crafts items.



to keep track of expenses, and obtain the materials they require, Corbiere adds. Some women who have met through the Group have pooled their financial resources to purchase materials for self-employment initiatives. “They do quite well when they're off and going,” says Corbiere.

Corbiere sees the paperwork involved in business plans as the biggest barrier for many aspiring women entrepreneurs. “We refer to it as the self-employment plan,” she explains, “the reason being because when they use the word ‘business,’ they envision a large storefront or a factory.” The Group also teaches that realistic income expectations are important, and that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.

To date, Two Bears Cultural Survival Group has had a fair amount of success with its Self-Employment Ventures Project, part of the Canadian

Women's Foundation's national study on women and economic development. Local women pooled their resources and skills, for example, to start up “The Wild Rice Kitchen,” a catering business that the women own and operate themselves. Current plans include adding a storefront deli to the operation, which now caters for weddings, meetings and social events.

Two Bears Cultural Survival Group works closely with other on-reserve organizations and programs, as well as various programs off the reserve. It hopes to expand on this network to optimize opportunities for the First Nations women it represents. The Group firmly believes that these self-employment opportunities represent a critical stepping stone into the world of business. ✨

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





# Portrait

## Out of the Box

Elaine Cowan  
Ojibway  
Entrepreneur/Educator

by Fred Favel

*I know intimately what the community is suffering, what they are going through — their identity, their confidence. I get so angry when I'm dealing with the private sector and they don't have any idea of what the challenges are for Aboriginal people. I know first-hand, and that's why I can champion this.*

As you enter the Winnipeg offices of the Anokiiwin Group, one of the first things you see is an award on the wall. Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year — Elaine Cowan — Start-Up Award 1999. “In recognition of her achievements, daring and creativity in successfully confronting new and untried situations.”

A table crowded with various trophies and citations emphasizes that the motivating force behind this group of companies is no ordinary individual. Elaine Cowan strides into the room, hand outstretched, in a rush of energy. “I started this with a small office of 250 square feet” she says of the three-storey building housing the Anokiiwin Training Institute and Anokiiwin Employment Solutions, of which she is President, Chief Executive Officer and 51-percent owner. Through her private sector organization, Cowan is determined to help Aboriginal people help themselves by teaching the skills they need to achieve their goals.

Cowan was born in Winnipeg in 1945, a member of the St. Peters Band (now Peguis First Nation), and received most of her schooling in the city. “Coming from a pretty dysfunctional family, I spent a good deal of my youth with my aunt, who for a whole pile of reasons, decided to leave the south side of Winnipeg and go to Wabowden, Manitoba,” a remote Aboriginal community on the railway line from The Pas to Churchill. “When there was a problem within my own family, I got shipped up north to her, so she became like my second mother.”

“I managed to get through school,” she says, “but I never had that feeling that I could perhaps do something great....” There was also the factor of her Aboriginal heritage which she was told to downplay by denying who she was.

Cowan rebelled against this kind of thinking. She turned to her aunt, who was an entrepreneur, the owner of a restaurant and a pool room, as well as a healer who knew the curing powers of herbs and roots. “I really saw her as a role model, she ran a successful business and she was a very strong woman....”

Cowan went on to become the first member of her family to complete Grade 12. Then she moved into the workforce. From an entry-level position with the provincial government, she quickly climbed the ranks. Her many positions included Director of Training, Northeast Manitoba Training Committee; Special Assistant to the Minister of Northern Affairs; and Co-ordinator, Manitoba Energy Authority Task Force on Hydro Development. “I was never out of work in my entire life...and I started realizing that any little frustration I had with a job was because I wanted something to be more creative...the government was saying ‘no we can't do that...we need you to work inside this box.’ So over the years, I began to get frustrated.”

During her time with the public service, for several years Cowan co-owned a business which built log cabins. “I laugh about my days in Red Sucker Lake, sliding around in the mud, knee-high boots on and climbing over pieces of construction

equipment.” She’s done it all, she says. “I’ve flown in every possible plane you can think of. I’ve flown upside down. I’ve flown where doors have blown open. I’ve been left stranded on air strips in the north and no one around to come and get me. I could tell you stories that would have you rolling on the floor laughing.”

In her work with the provincial and federal governments, Cowan became aware of the critical state of Aboriginal community needs. She knew that there had to be a better, more creative way to do things. “The issues are so immense, that there cannot be one standard program that is going to address all of those needs. Each community has its own uniqueness and culture...the policy gets designed for regional, it gets designed for the province-wide, designed for nation-wide, so what happens is that you end up with a very structured box...It makes you think intentionally that you have to stay within this box to continue getting money.” Cowan decided it was time to get out of the box and encourage others to do so. So after much discussion with Ray Starr, a like-minded government colleague, she decided to set up her own firm in 1995. “It meant some scary stuff. It meant we had to be self-sustaining. We couldn't get core funding because once we take core funding, we are in the box again. We had to keep out of the box.”

It was a tough struggle and she faced early opposition, but because of her contacts throughout the province, she was able to garner support for her idea of a private Aboriginal training firm. She laughingly looks back at her early days in a tiny office with a rented phone and borrowed fax machine. “I was sitting there wondering, how am I going to pay the rent this month?” She got training contracts with 10 communities. Thus began what is now the most successful Aboriginal business of its kind in the country.

As the Anokiiwin Group grew, it opened offices and held classes in other parts of the building. Cowan and Ray Starr, who had joined her as a partner, began to scrape together all the money they could to buy the building, but it was not enough. “It was then that a guardian angel came forward and said ‘I’ll help you with the down payment,’ and we are forever grateful to this person.”

Over 1,000 Aboriginal students have now graduated from Anokiiwin Training Institute since its inception, and the institute is conducting community-based training programs in Aboriginal communities all over the province. Another office is located in Thompson, Manitoba. The most popular courses include adult upgrading and information technology (computer training and management). Anokiiwin will design a program to fit any computer training need.

Cowan is still on the move. They have received requests from other Indigenous nations to expand out of the province and country. “All Indigenous nations around the world are taking control back...everybody is looking around saying ‘we need some skills to get anything happening.’”

Cowan encourages youth particularly, “to do whatever they want to do. You can do anything you absolutely want to. You are in a tremendous stage in your life and the opportunity out there is absolutely endless.”

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



Photo credit: Andrew Sikorsky Photography

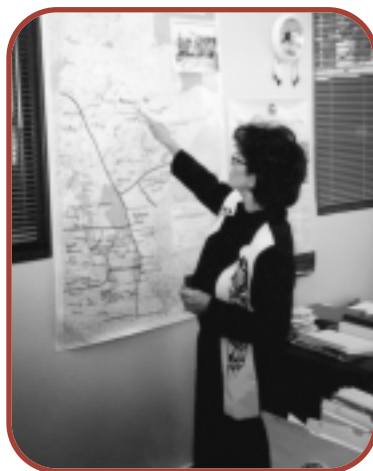


Photo credits: Fred Favel

