

Ascending to New Heights

Aboriginal entrepreneurs discuss successes, challenges and the reshaping of Alberta's economic landscape

By Benjamin Freeland | Photography by Phillip Chin

One of the more intriguing subplots in the story of Alberta's spectacular rate of growth over the past 20 years is the increasingly prominent role played by aboriginal Albertans. Excluded from the economic mainstream for the longest time, this group's growing level of participation in the province's economic success is a story of which everyone can be proud.

Nowhere is this growth more apparent than in the province's oil and gas sector. First-generation aboriginal-owned companies operating in the oil sands have gone from a blip on the investment radar screen to earning more than \$2.6 billion over the past 10 years. The growing presence in the mainstream economy isn't limited to the oil and gas sector either: aboriginal Albertans have played an important role in a wide range of sectors, from renewable energy, manufacturing and transportation to media and consulting services.

This change in the economic fortunes of aboriginal Albertans began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when aboriginal community leaders started to demand more meaningful consultation and compensation from the oil, gas and mining firms that wanted to access their land. In time, co-operation would replace conflict, with aboriginal-owned companies assuming more prominent roles within the partnerships that the two sides have often forged.

In spite of the progress that's been made in recent years though, aboriginal people still often face anachronistic and even outright discriminatory attitudes in the workplace. "There's still a stigma attached to working with First Nations," says William Big Bull, former energy manager for Piikani Utilities Corporation in southwestern Alberta and current board member for the Ontario Sustainable Energy Association. "They come to us when they need us and they don't when they don't have to."

A former Imperial Oil Ltd. and Exxon Mobil Corp. executive from the Beaver Lake Cree Nation and a current member of Suncor Energy Inc.'s board of directors, Mel Benson shares Big Bull's view. "Some of the corporate world views our people as extra work, as high maintenance," he says. "That's a struggle. But what is changing is that aboriginal people are developing aboriginal businesses that can compete with anyone. And when our people get to start from an equal starting line, they do succeed."

The growing number of aboriginal businesses in Alberta represents an important part of the province's future success. Here we profile five standouts.



MENTOR MINDED: Mel Benson says the next generation of aboriginal entrepreneurs needs mentors and coaches

Mel Benson, *Mel E. Benson Management Services Inc.* ▲

While aboriginal business has grown significantly in Alberta over the past decade, aboriginal people have been active in the province's economic mainstream for much longer than this, including a handful of remarkable success stories. One such success story is Mel Benson, a member of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation in the Lac La Biche area whose career in the petroleum sector has seen him take on virtually every role within the industry. After a long career with Imperial Oil in Canada and with Exxon Mobil out of their Houston office, Benson currently presides over his own international management consulting firm in Calgary, Mel E. Benson Management Services Inc., while also serving as a director on a number of boards.

"I've been very fortunate," Benson reflects. "But I've also been tenacious as hell."

The key to accessing the economic mainstream, he says, is the fostering of a bicultural mindset among young aboriginal people, in which traditional practices go hand-in-hand with higher education and a modern mindset. He also recognizes the need for people like himself to serve as mentors and coaches to an up-and-coming generation of aboriginal entrepreneurs, which he does in his role as member of the board of governors of the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and as a committed member of aboriginal society.

"People who have been successful need to go out there and encourage new business and influence educational institutions, corporations and corporate and aboriginal leaders alike." >



MEDIA MAVEN Nicole Robertson helps aboriginal clients design their media strategies

Nicole Robertson, *Muskwa Productions & Consulting* ▲

One of the most oft-heard complaints within aboriginal communities in Alberta and elsewhere is that good news stories about aboriginal people do not get nearly the exposure in the media that the all-too-familiar bad news stories get. The answer to this problem is simple, says Nicole Robertson, a Rocky Cree originally from Sandy Bay in northeastern Saskatchewan and the founder and communications advisor for Muskwa Productions & Consulting. "You have to be a salesperson to the media ... That, and it takes our people and others outside of the community to start doing it too."

A veteran TV journalist and producer with CBC, CTV, Global and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, Robertson founded Muskwa Productions & Consulting in 2001 for the purpose of helping First

Nations organizations, political leaders and other clients design their media strategies.

Aboriginal voices, Robertson says, are still conspicuously missing from the mainstream media, resulting in a skewed picture of aboriginals. "People still don't see us as businesspeople," she stresses. Organizations are working to change that, "and it's my job to communicate that to mainstream society."

Robertson also highlights the importance of breaking down barriers between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people as a catalyst for social justice. For Robertson, accolades such as her 2009 Aboriginal Woman Entrepreneur Award of Distinction represent a validation of the causes she champions through her work. "It's a huge boost and honour," she says. "Being recognized puts things into perspective. It means that the things I do are really making a difference."

Dale Monaghan, ▶ *Mikisew Group of Companies*

One of the most significant recent developments within aboriginal business in Alberta has been the emergence of influential aboriginal-run companies and recognizably aboriginal corporate brands.

The greatest such success story has probably been the Mikisew Group of Companies (MGOC). Incorporated three years ago and representing the isolated northeastern Mikisew Cree Nation, MGOC has in recent years emerged as Alberta's most recognizable aboriginal corporate brand, encompassing, among other things, an energy services company, an industrial supply subsidiary, a sport fishing operator and an airline company that has long served as a vital lifeline between Fort Chipewyan and the rest of the province.

MGOC chief operating officer Dale Monaghan explains that the group's aggressive brand promotion is about much more than pure economics. The slogan "Pride of a Nation is much more than an exercise in branding," he says. "It transcends every aspect of our operations. It is the overarching purpose and vision of every single employee - to excel, and in doing so, support our elders, all community members and the future generations of Mikisew."

While not a member of the Mikisew Nation himself, the Edson-born businessman has emerged as one of the community's staunchest advocates together with MGOC chairman Russell Kaskamin and the Mikisew Nation's energetic chief Roxanne Marcel. "In order to be successful you have to commit to being in it for the long term, and that's what we're doing," says Monaghan. >



BRAND PROMOTER: Dale Monaghan leads successful corporate brand and aboriginal-run Mikisew Group of Companies

WIND ADVOCATE: William Big Bull is one of the biggest advocates of wind energy in southwestern Alberta

◀ **William Big Bull,**

Wind energy entrepreneur

Southwestern Alberta's burgeoning wind industry is one of the province's newest economic mainstays, and unlike many industries where aboriginal people were forced to fight their way in, First Nations have been involved in the business from the start.

Nevertheless, wind energy entrepreneur and community advocate William Big Bull has had to stay vigilant to ensure that his people benefit equally from the region's wind energy revenue. A member of the Piikani Blackfoot Nation, Big Bull established the Piikani Utilities Corporation in 1982; he emerged 10 years later as one of the strongest advocates of wind energy development in the region, helping spearhead the region's first wind project, the 9.9-megawatt Cowley Ridge wind farm.

Big Bull's greatest victory to date has been his negotiation of the routing of the still-under-construction, 240-kilovolt transmission line connecting the wind farms of Pincher Creek with the North Lethbridge transmission station through the adjacent Piikani and Kainai (Blood) reserves, thus ensuring yearly revenue for both nations.

While Big Bull says that there is still a certain amount of resistance to working with First Nations among energy companies, he argues that times are indeed changing. "Opportunities exist now with companies that previously had no interest in dealing with First Nations," he says. "The best approach for us to take is to build companies that exist outside chief and council, and these companies are standing the test of time." **AV**

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