



## *POLICY SERIES*

No. 214 / MAY 2018

# INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CANADA

BY JOSEPH QUESNEL



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Policy Series No. 214 • Date of First Issue: May 2018.

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Frontier Centre for Public Policy expresses its appreciation and thanks to the Lotte and John Hecht Memorial Foundation for supporting for this project.

ISSN 1491-78

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has been a veritable explosion in Indigenous entrepreneurship in Canada over the last few decades, and it is especially evident among Indigenous women. These entrepreneurs and business leaders are operating and finding success despite considerable legal, political, and community-level obstacles. Increasing education and exposure to the wider world—especially through the Internet—is showing First Nation people that there are economic opportunities out there for them to tap into.

The economic climate in First Nation communities has been changing. There is now a flood of companies and investors that are waiting to partner with First Nation entrepreneurs to bring opportunities to these impoverished groups.

This report presents six profiles of successful Indigenous entrepreneurs and business leaders from Canada. The six profiles are later examined for commonalities in backgrounds, challenges/obstacles, and how these people could achieve business success.

This study is in a series of studies of entrepreneurs for a project that seeks to understand, and, in fact, to promote Indigenous entrepreneurship in four countries, Canada, United States, New Zealand, and Australia, with a goal of discovering insights that could be applied in Canada.

First, we turn to the six Indigenous entrepreneurs/business leaders from Canada.

## SIX LEADERS

### Brad MacMillan

***"I wanted to become successful in spite of all of this."***

Brad MacMillan is a 45-year-old from a Mi'kmaq First Nation band located in northern New Brunswick. After a career in the RCMP on First Nation reserves, where he learned responsibility and discipline. When he retired, MacMillan still had a passion for sports and fitness and turned a sprawling 11,000-square foot fitness complex with 400 members into a booming business.

MacMillan started his gym business out of a garage on the highway running through the reserve. Initially not charging his clients for membership, he quickly realized that he could turn his passion and sense of community service into a business enterprise, helping people but also making a living for himself and his family.

After this realization with his gym, in 2012 he opened a brand new 3,000 square foot facility called "The Pound" also on the reserve. Within six months, he added another 2,400 square feet to the building, and in 2013, added an additional 2,400 square feet.

Also, in 2013, he attended a trainers' course by CrossFit, an intense branded fitness regimen, in Montreal. He was then certified by CrossFit, and soon after he opened the CrossFit Pound on Eel Ground, the first CrossFit gym on a First Nation in Canada. He later opened a CrossFit gym facility in the Maritimes, and it became one of the largest CrossFit gyms in Canada, all beginning from a location on a road running through a reserve. In 2014 and 2016, he added more space to the facility. So, over the few years, he has expanded his facility from 1,800 to more than 11,000 square feet now. He now employs 13 people in both part time and full time capacities.

MacMillan received part of his education in the United States and part in New Brunswick. However, he admitted he had problems with completing post-

secondary education (an observation common to a number of entrepreneurs), he focused on serving his customers and expanding his business.

Of course, MacMillan brought his own family, community and personal challenges to his business ventures. People in many First Nation communities often struggle with addiction, violence, suicide, and run-ins with the justice system. So, many First Nation people have been dealing with psychological and social problems. It is a testimony to their resilience that so many often have great success.

Coming from a "broken home," as a child, MacMillan was raised by a grandparent, and struggled with alcohol addiction later in his life. He could have had a "dependent" life of alcohol and drug addiction, like many of his friends, but he chose to keep these problems from defining who he is and what he can become. Instead, he used his troubled past to motivate himself, providing a purpose for his own life, and, while doing this, helping other people in his community.

Like many First Nation entrepreneurs, MacMillan encountered and overcame the land value obstacles. That is, reserve land has lower value than similar land off-reserve. The reason for the difference is because reserve land has limited market value because it cannot be sold. Consequently it is worth less than comparable land off reserve. Significantly, reserve land cannot be used as collateral for loans to help businesses grow and develop. MacMillan understands how much more valuable his properties would be if they were located off the reserves.

### Caralyn Rabichuk

***"I grew up with a strong sense of womanhood where we were taught that we could do anything we wanted to, we could do anything we put our mind to."***

Caralyn Rabichuk, a 39-year old Metis woman from Manitoba, came from a background and time period where Indigenous identity was not disclosed due to shame, racism, and fear of discrimination.



Rabichuk is certainly not alone in this reality on the Prairie provinces where many would not admit they had “half-breed” (Metis) ancestry. Instead, families that could (probably due to their “white” appearance) would identify with the dominant Euro-Canadian community and deny their own Indigenous identity. This is interesting given that today many are eager to identify with Indigenous ancestry for many reasons. Firstly, and thankfully, prejudice and discrimination against Indigenous people has diminished in society. Second, many realize that there are benefits associated with Indigenous status. For many entrepreneurs, there is also a realization that there are many targeted assistance programs that seek to increase Indigenous entrepreneurship. These programs thankfully help increase business creation and development among Indigenous communities, including the Metis community Rabichuk belongs to.

Rabichuk and her husband are a business team that started Covert Logistics from a little one-truck basement business in North Kildonan (a region of Winnipeg, MB) to a multi-million-dollar business with over 100 pieces of equipment now. Rabichuk gained access to important start-up capital for her logistics provider and transportation solutions business after achieving Metis status in Manitoba. Her grandmother reminded her that such assistance for Metis entrepreneurs existed.

The Manitoba-based business certainly has grown. It started in dealing with trailers, trucks, and vans as a cartage company that was very oriented towards on-call, emergency situations for larger vehicles. The company has now grown and focusses much more on stability, moving towards contract work for three to five years at a time. She attributed much of her business success to the assistance of her driven husband, who brought much experience in the transportation industry, in all sectors. Like many entrepreneurs (as mentioned above in the MacMillan synopsis), Rabichuk had a mixed reaction to formal education (she attended the University of Winnipeg), but found her way and passion through other jobs.

Rabichuk described her own background as very typical middle class. She said an obstacle coming

from that is access to capital. She did not bring much wealth or assets to use as collateral for business loans. Accessing Metis funding and finding lenders that believed in her and her business was key to her success. Despite her middle-class background, she came from a motivated household of strong independent women who encouraged her to reach for the stars in her life and she had positive role models in her life.

## Chief Reginald Bellerose

***“Our entrepreneurial spirit has been dormant. We must re-ignite that spirit.”***

Although not an entrepreneur himself, the 49-year-old Chief Reginald Bellerose has been identified as a business leader and big promoter of entrepreneurship within his own community and among other First Nation communities. Bellerose came from a long line of chiefs, so his life could have gone on along a much more political path. However, his beliefs in Indigenous economic independence have turned him into an advocate for business on reserves. The long-time political leader of Muskowekwan First Nation in southern Saskatchewan is perhaps best known for creating the first potash (used mainly in fertilizer) mine on First Nation land in Canada. He signed an historic agreement with a mining company and was key in bringing his community on side the development. Despite so many First Nations opposing resource development on their lands (mainly oil and gas, however), Bellerose is a big proponent of resource development that is done responsibly and with much public input.

Bellerose has adopted many of the ideas of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development that promotes Indigenous governance reform and taking necessary steps to make reserve lands investor-friendly. For instance, he strongly promotes a separation of politics from business on First Nation ventures. His vision is propelled by a strong desire to see First Nations achieve more own-source revenues that reduce reserve dependence on the federal government, so that the community can achieve its own destiny. Bellerose sees it as his

role to convince outside investors that reserves are great economic opportunities and to also prepare those Indigenous communities to be ready for this coming investment. Bellerose said that he sees his community members dealing with family and community problems, such as the legacy of the residential school experience, as well as addiction, grinding poverty, and chronic health conditions. He said the development of own source revenues will allow these communities to finance programs and initiatives to deal with these problems.

The main challenges facing First Nation entrepreneurs, he said, is the land ownership restrictions placed by the *Indian Act* that kill the value of First Nation lands. Also, potential entrepreneurs live in communities that need to learn how to operate at the speed of business, not government. Regulation and red tape are killing off investment, he said.

The answer, he said, is to re-ignite the entrepreneurial culture that does exist on reserves.

## Calvin Heline

***"... if they want power over their lives they must have economic control over their income."***

Calvin Helin, 58, is an accomplished Indigenous businessman, lawyer, and best-selling author. He is best known for the publication of *Dances with Dependency*, a best-selling work that dealt with the corrosive effects of governmental dependency on First Nations, all from an Indigenous perspective. Helin also tackled issues of band corruption and unaccountable band governments in his book, which earned him some controversy within First Nation circles.

He came from a respected and accomplished background. Helin is a member of the Tsimshian Nation and comes from the community of Lax Kw'alaams on the Northwest coast of British Columbia. He is the son of a hereditary chief and grew up within a hard-working fishing family. The values of hard work, discipline, and determination were planted in him early on in his childhood.

He is former President of the Native Investment and Trade Association and held director-ships on the Vancouver Board of Trade (where he chaired the newly formed Aboriginal Opportunities Committee), GeoScience BC, and the Canada-China Resource Development Foundation.

Helin attributed much of the community and family-level dysfunction on so many reserves to social assistance dependency in so many households. He saw this problem on his own reserve community. He said government dependency in general was creating what is termed, "learned helplessness" which was robbing community members of their dignity and responsibility. The development of a strong private sector would be key to overcoming community and family dependency. Indigenous communities need to develop economic opportunities to improve conditions.

With controversy growing over First Nation opposition to resource development, particularly to oil and gas development, Helin has championed Indigenous involvement in the oil and gas industry on their own terms. Within this context, it is very important to mention how heavily involved First Nation communities are in oil and gas, as well as other resource industries, especially out West (mainly in Alberta and BC, but also Saskatchewan and Manitoba to a lesser degree). Many First Nation and Metis communities in northern Alberta are heavily dependent on the oil sands sector. This industry employs thousands of Aboriginal workers and these communities engage in contract work with major oil companies. There was even a proposal out there a few years ago for a First Nation-driven oil refinery and upgrader northeast of Edmonton.

Helin made history by promoting an Indigenous-led oil pipeline proposal. Calvin is chairman and president of Eagle Spirit Energy Holdings, Ltd., a First Nations-led company looking to build an energy corridor through northern B.C. and Alberta. The \$16B Eagle Spirit oil pipeline would be about the same size as the Energy East project cancelled last month by TransCanada.

The Eagle Spirit pipeline was proposed as an alternative to Northern Gateway, a project opposed

by First Nations in the region for not providing enough environmental protections for their communities.

The proposed pipeline generated Indigenous support because it was innovative in its protection of the environment in Indigenous territories by dividing the areas of the pipelines in zones that different Indigenous groups were responsible for protecting. Helin said he had to work on overcoming suspicions from within Indigenous communities. Communities, he said, had to be shown that the structure really left them in control.

Helin found that obstacles that were specific to resource development entrepreneurship on reserves. In particular, outside non-Indigenous environmental groups used and manipulated Indigenous peoples as props in their campaigns to oppose all resource development, no matter how environmentally friendly the projects were.

Other obstacles included a lack of a developed entrepreneurial culture on reserves. Fear of the unknown and inter-personal jealousies (the so-called “crab syndrome” on First Nations where individuals are pulled down if they are individually successful by other community members) need to be overcome. Individuals need to understand entrepreneurship requires risk taking as well. Most importantly, individual members need to understand that the only way out of the dependency trap is to take ownership of your life and problems and embrace new knowledge that can make a difference.

Helin has certainly in his own life taken control over his destiny and refused to accept any obstacles. He is forward looking and not backward looking and mired in jealousies of others.

For governments to help spur entrepreneurship on reserves, it needs to “get out of the way.” It needs to cut regulations and allow First Nations to leverage their lands for collateral. Finally, and most importantly, the governments at all levels need to recognize and assist individual entrepreneurship, rather than just focus on communities in business.

## Ian Gladue

***“Never give up, keeping moving forward, keep smudging.”***

At the age of 39, Ian Gladue has certainly accomplished much. After discovering a need for the promotion of Indigenous foods in urban settings, he started a food truck business in Edmonton that expanded into a concession business, then into two restaurants that specialized in Indigenous cuisine and now he is looking to franchise his business.

Gladue’s business also promotes the sale of pânşâwân, a traditional Indigenous dry meat made from thinly sliced bison. The meat is important to his people and he said he is glad to promote it.

The product is now available in 23 stores, including Save On Foods and Freson Bros. It will soon be approved federally, and they intend to ship it around the world.

Originally from Bigstone Cree Nation in northern Alberta, Gladue was certainly no stranger to difficulties and challenges in life. Kicked out of his home at a young age, Gladue had to fend for himself in the world, eventually falling into the “rez life” of drugs and alcohol and criminality, drifting through life without a clear purpose. Gladue found purpose and vision with the birth of his daughter and decided to cash in on his passion for cooking. Having worked on the staff at a kitchen on another Alberta reserve, Gladue carried these skills forward into his future businesses. Originally working in the oil and gas industry, he decided that he wanted something different in his life. His resume included living under bridges, sneaking into apartment buildings to sleep, breaking and entering, robbery, and drug dealing. He eventually ended up in prison, but left with a renewed sense of purpose. After suffering a catastrophic burn injury on an oil field job, Gladue found solace in spirituality and a determination to forgive others and leave a mark on the world.

He discovered that many vendors at traditional Indigenous pow wows were not marketing Indigenous food in the cities, so he decided to accept the challenge of promoting their traditional food. To Gladue, this is the truly “authentic Canadian cuisine.”



Gladue was determined and persistent and received approval from Alberta Health and obtained the proper permits to operate his outdoor food business.

He credited some positive role models in his life for his later success. For many Indigenous peoples, seeing positive individuals in their life who were not modelling the destructive behaviours and lifestyles that were engulfing their First Nation community is critical to seeing a sense of hope that these circumstances can be overcome. Gladue admonished other Indigenous entrepreneurs to “keep smudging,” which is a reference to the traditional practice of bathing oneself in burnt sacred herbs to ward away evil influences. In Gladue’s view, maintaining a personal spirituality of values and purposeful life is part of self-development that is so needed on Indigenous communities, and particularly among those seeking to improve their conditions. This is succinct advice for Indigenous entrepreneurs as well, whatever form of spirituality or value system that takes for the individual.

Despite his background and surroundings, Gladue held to an iron determination to improve himself and he advised other Indigenous entrepreneurs to “never give up” despite what they are going through or in face of the rejections they may face.

## Rhonda M. Dienie

***“The more you work on yourself, the more good things will come to you.”***

Rhonda M. Dieni, 45, is an Indigenous entrepreneur who has overcome many trials to get to where she is now. The owner and operator of Bliss Tea Kombucha in Westbank First Nation, British Columbia, Dieni now is selling her product in 120 stores in two provinces, but mostly in B.C.

Originally born in Kamloops, British Columbia, Dieni grew up in a single parent home among nine children, of which she is the youngest. Suffering sexual and physical abuse as a child and living through a life of addictions, she eventually found inner peace through overcoming an “addiction to suffering” that she sees too often from among Indigenous

communities. Working on yourself, she said, is more important than focusing on your good or service as an entrepreneur. In fact, she recommended that for all Indigenous community members.

She credited her mother as a strong role model in her life, and provided her later inspiration in the food industry because she was a cook who had dreams of her business.

After studying away from her Indigenous community, she opened-up her own hair styling salon in Vancouver. As in the case with most entrepreneurs, she discovered earlier on that she was not suited to being an employee of others. Her hairstyling days were followed by days working as a flight attendant with Air Canada, where she discovered she was more interested in flying the plane than serving passengers. She travelled the world as a stewardess and eventually ended up in a very negative relationship that left her broke and depressed.

She was exposed to yoga and started her own yoga studio, but through her exposure to a fermented tea beverage called Kombucha she decided to open-up a facility to produce it. The kitchen facility is 800 square feet, but Dieni intends to double or triple the size this year. In the first two months, her business was open, she sold 1,200 bottles in 57 days at her first store. At the grocery stores that carried her product, it was in the top 10 of most sold.

Her main obstacles were overcoming the red tape required to sell a food product to the public. She had to jump through regulation hurdles and get through mounds of paperwork to sell her products. She also had to learn to build business relationship from scratch and learn how to do distribution and shipping all on her own. She encountered some prejudice but overcame it by simply doing what she was doing well.

Dieni believed that the key to Indigenous success was overcoming a victimization mentality and working on themselves. Attitude was the biggest battle, she said.

## COMMONALITIES AND ANALYSIS

Most of the Indigenous entrepreneurs and business leaders experienced hardship themselves or witnessed it in their own homes and communities. None of them was a stranger to suffering within Indigenous communities. For example, Gladue, Dieni, and MacMillan personally dealt with domestic strife and addictions. All saw criminality in their communities and Gladue got involved in violence and was imprisoned for his role. These personal anecdotes are, of course, consistent with data showing that First Nations people—especially on reserves—are much more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system, either as a perpetrator and/or as a victim, than people who do not live on reserves.

The good news is that for many Indigenous people in Canada, “rough backgrounds” are not an insurmountable obstacle to achieving career success. In fact, in the case of MacMillan and Gladue, their troubled pasts were motivators for their improvement and moving forward. For Dieni, the rampant victimization was, in his mind, holding back many First Nation people on reserves. This “addiction to suffering” was keeping people on a path-dependent way towards bad choices and a life devoid of hope and purpose.

For most of the Indigenous entrepreneurs studied here, the path to business success comes through personal self-development and improvement. Dieni admonished other First Nations business leaders to focus on improving themselves rather than on the products and services they deliver to others.

Despite their turbulent backgrounds, Indigenous entrepreneurs need to focus on a determined attitude that transcends their circumstances. Entrepreneurs from all ethnic or religious communities have discovered that mentality and attitude is central to their success. This mentality is even more important for those facing external suffering and turbulence. Whether one finds inner peace and contentment through spirituality—like Gladue—or through the adoption of another strong values system is up to

the individual. Calvin Helin combines a spiritual and a very positive disposition to guide himself form of business and entrepreneurship promotion.

None of these entrepreneurs on reserves, all except Rabichuk, faced an attitudinal, legal, or a political climate that was very hospitable towards business. First Nation communities are heavily dependent on federal transfer payments, although many are discovering their own-source of revenue streams, and thus there is little incentive to become an entrepreneur and to try and improve their community. Many of those profiled encountered inter-membership jealousies when they started their business. Government dependency kept people in a “welfare trap” where there was little desire to upset the status quo. First Nation communities lack a well-developed private sector—as opposed to non-Aboriginal communities, so there is a lack of exposure on many reserves to private sector culture and norms, as well as business-oriented role models.

All of the reserve-based subjects profiled here have faced obstacles, in particular its paternalistic form of land ownership identified in the *Indian Act*. Land is protected from seizure especially for using a collateral and for non-payment in the case of foreclosure. This significantly reduces the marketability of reserve lands. MacMillan, for example, mused about the value of his properties if they were based outside the reserve. His fitness business would likely be more lucrative if it was situated in a nearby non-Aboriginal community. Chief Reginald Bellerose also mentioned how the *Indian Act*-based restrictions repelled investors from investing in businesses on reserve lands.

For many Indigenous entrepreneurs, such restrictions severely limit their ability to borrow money and use land as collateral, and thus denying them capital to fund and expand businesses. Frequently, they are dependent on special government programs for borrowing money rather than on their own entrepreneurial skill. Also, either the federal government or the band government will need to guarantee loans, which places huge liability and risk on these governments if the borrower defaults.

Bellerose mentioned how other red tape created by the *Indian Act* places restrictions on reserve-based businesses. Helin also mentions that the *Indian Act* hampers business development on reserves. As well, Bellerose's notes that First Nations' businesses must "operate at the speed of business" to be successful, but this is a central problem that Indigenous entrepreneurs find themselves. The economic climate is inhospitable to business.

Many of the people profiled share a number of common experiences because they have higher education degrees and many have moved off the reserves to develop their business skills. They realized that the know-how they need cannot be learned on their First Nations. Although many experienced difficulties in post-secondary institutions, they all mentioned learning valuable skills at these institutions, and they also mentioned being off the reserves brought them into contact with other valuable resources.

Interestingly, very few of the people felt that they were hampered racism or discrimination. Dieni mentioned that other people were surprised to see that an Aboriginal was in her line of business, but she did not see that as a barrier. In fact, she was motivated even more to do what she was doing and to do it well to dispel stereotypes other people may have. Rabichuk says that she encountered some gender-based stereotyping in her work than based on her Metis heritage. This is worth mentioning because there is a perception that Indigenous people encounter considerable prejudice. But these people say this is not true. Indigenous people should welcome this news because it means that to become entrepreneurs, discrimination is not something to worry about.

There are many critics—particularly within the "elitist" Indigenous society—who assert that business and entrepreneurial culture does not blend well with traditional Indigenous values and cultures. But, surprisingly, not one of the people interviewed mentioned that to be true. Nevertheless, it is their Indigenous identity that has motivated them in their initiatives. Gladue, for example, attributes a renewed sense of Indigenous identity with changing his life for entrepreneurship. Gladue's business

involves the promotion of Indigenous food, so identity is central to his business. Helin is a strong advocate of Indigenous culture, values, and beliefs matched with his strong sense of self-reliance and his unique belief that First Nations should build their own businesses.

## CONCLUSION

The people profiled in this report are from Canada, and the research has shown that many of the business people faced many challenges. However, these challenges—whether in personal or community attitudes, family or community dysfunction, a lack of a business culture on First Nations’ reserves, or obstacles placed in their way by the *Indian Act*—are not insurmountable. Even with difficulties, the conditions still exist for First Nation and Metis entrepreneurs to become successful in the business world. It is clear from these personal accounts that Indigenous entrepreneurs can transcend numerous limitations they have faced. Given that the deck is stacked against them, Indigenous entrepreneurs can overcome these difficulties.

It is clear from these people that very few of them encountered a positive and supportive environment for entrepreneurship. There is work to be done by First Nation governments and the federal government in developing positive relationships with Indigenous entrepreneurs. Perhaps these profiles of Canadian Indigenous people will help make that challenge a reality. In fact, some of these Canadians, such as Helin and Bellerose, certainly have pointed the way for younger Indigenous people. But, Indigenous entrepreneurs are increasingly finding success despite these obstacles. These people are clearly adopting positive-oriented attitudes that are common in modern societies.

Now, we move on to Indigenous entrepreneurs in other countries to see what similarities and differences emerge for those people. We need these stories to guide us to find better solutions encouraging Indigenous entrepreneurs here in Canada.

