



FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Profile Series

Profile of:

DION DEVOW

***" achieve their dreams, gain economic independence and
contribute to their communities. "***

Mark “Dion” Devow, 47, an Indigenous entrepreneur and business leader from Australia, said his Indigenous clothing line could have done better financially at the start if he had chosen a different name, but he deliberately chose it to make a point.

Devow established Darkies Design – an Indigenous clothing line – back in 2010. Darkies Design is an online marketplace for Indigenous artists to connect with the corporate world.

Initially he received criticism for his choice of the word “darkies”, but he said choosing it was about reclaiming the word and removing the negativity behind it. “We need to flip the negative around,” he said.

“I was the most dark person I knew,” said Devow with a laugh, in a Skype interview. “I was always proud to be very dark.”

Devow is an Indigenous Australian, who are known locally as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Originally from Northern Territory, Dion is of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent with a background that stems from Palm Island in Northern Queensland, to Darnley Island in the Torres Straits.



According to the BBC News, there were 649,171 Indigenous people in Australia in 2016, representing about 2.8 percent of the total Australian population.

He started his clothing line despite not being an artist or graphic designer himself. He simply founded the company because he could not find Indigenous clothing that he liked. There were clothing lines at the time, but he did not find anything that interested him.

Devow came up with his own designs that he thought were “cool” and wanted to produce and market them. He wanted clothing ideas that resonated within Indigenous communities. Working alongside a professional graphic artist, he came up with 10 unique designs that featured Indigenous ideas and words. From there, his business took off. His company collaborates with Indigenous artists and designers to produce mainstream apparel and sportswear, and is enjoying widespread success.

Devow wanted to promote Australian identity on the international scene and remind people abroad that Indigenous peoples exist in Australia. One of his first concepts was a t-shirt with the logo: “100% pure Australian.”

Devow also does not accept modern trendy ideas surrounding “cultural appropriation” – the idea that one culture cannot adopt cultural elements from another culture. He proudly promotes his Indigenous designs among non-Indigenous people. He says that non-Indigenous people in Australia should embrace Indigenous cultures as part of being Australian. “We’re all Australian, so why not embrace it and understand it more? I’m interested in all cultures, so why is no one interested in ours?” he said in a media interview back in 2017.

Devow also believes that entrepreneurship can bring people together.

“Business is a great way of bringing black and white Australia together,” he said, in an interview with Australian media, citing how integration can help improve relations. Growing up with little means, Devow said his father also grew up very poor and that in order to survive many Indigenous Aus-

tralians need to become entrepreneurial.

“He had to wake up around four in the morning and go fishing. That was his income. He had to then sell that fish to other people. He had to sell it mainly to rich farmers,” said Devow, referring to his father’s hard life.

Devow did not begin in the area of art or graphic design. He wanted to start a career in IT, but said that he was dissuaded from pursuing IT education because it was considered too difficult for an Indigenous student.

“I was always told, by a teacher, that I’d never be able to work in IT because I wasn’t smart enough,” he said, in an interview with CityNews, an Australian media outlet.

In an act of challenge and defiance, he became CEO of Yerra, an Indigenous-owned Information Communications Technology (ICT) firm that provides a means for Indigenous entrepreneurs and workers to engage in the ICT field.



The company provides business and ICT services. Yerra has current partnerships with ICT software, hardware and networking solution companies, as well as accounting and recruitment firms.

Devow completed a Bachelor of Applied Science in Health Education at the University of Canberra in 1997. In 2014, his business was named ACT NAIDOC Indig-

enous Business of the Year. This was after 20 years successfully working in the area of community development.

The win inspired him to create the Canberra Business Yarning Circle in 2014 alongside the Canberra Innovation Network to assist other Indigenous people to achieve business success. Devow said the Yarning Circle had helped empower Australian Indigenous people to, “achieve their dreams, gain economic independence and contribute to their communities”. Allowing Indigenous people to become self-sufficient is an important goal for him.

The Yarning Circle, he said, helped provide direction for other Indigenous entrepreneurs.

“We got people to come from all different areas of the community to consult with the Aboriginal community about what support mechanisms we can provide for Aboriginal people that are interested in business or that are in business already,” he said, in an interview with the University of Canberra. “It was great because it gave a lot of people the confidence knowing that they can take that step and begin to become business people or entrepreneurs and that’s what I wanted to do.”

Devow was recently honoured to be named ACT Australian of the Year 2018. His goal is now to make Darkies Designs the most significant Indigenous clothing line in Australia and around the world.





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Profile Series No.19 • Date of First Issue: March 2018.

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ISSN 1491-78

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Joseph Quesnel is a research fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy who mainly focuses on Aboriginal matters and property rights. Presently based in eastern Nova Scotia, he is from northeastern Ontario and has Métis ancestry from Quebec.

He graduated from McGill University in 2001, where he majored in political science and history. He specialized in Canadian and U.S. politics, with an emphasis on constitutional law. He also has a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, where he specialized in political reporting. His master's research project focused on reformist Indigenous thinkers in Canada.

He is currently studying theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax.

In the past while as a policy analyst, he was the lead researcher on the Frontier Centre's flagship Aboriginal Governance Index, which is measured perceptions of quality of governance and services on Prairie First Nations. For over two years, he covered House standing committees as well as Senate committees. Quesnel's career in journalism includes several stints at community newspapers in Northern Ontario, including in Sudbury and Espanola. He also completed a radio broadcasting internship at CFRA 580 AM, a talk radio station in Ottawa, and the well-known Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC).

He is a past editor of C2C Journal, an online Canadian publication devoted to political commentary. He wrote a weekly column for the Winnipeg Sun and contributes to The Taxpayer, the flagship publication of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Quesnel's policy commentaries have appeared all over Canada, including the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Financial Post, the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Montreal Gazette, the Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, among many other major papers. Over the years, he has been featured as a guest commentator on many radio and television news programs.