



FRONTIER CENTRE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY
Profile Series

Profile of:

BRAD MACMILLAN

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

For Indigenous entrepreneur Brad MacMillan, 45, growing up with some of the worst parts of a New Brunswick First Nation reserve has never been an excuse for quitting, but has always been an inspiration to seek something better.

He went from an Indigenous youth on a troubled path to an entrepreneur with a sprawling 11,000-square foot fitness complex building that has 400 regular members.

"I am not going to use my troubled background as an excuse to go towards the bad side," he said, in a telephone interview. Instead, he was inspired by his background to create one of the largest CrossFit gyms in Canada, and located on a First Nation reserve, not in a nearby non-Aboriginal community, which is often the case.

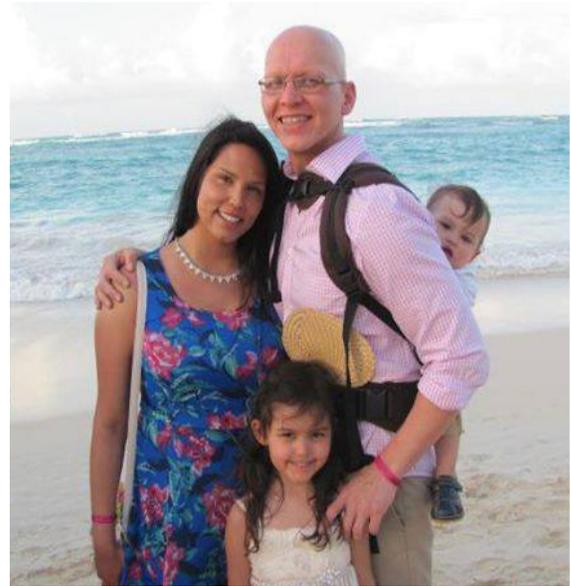
MacMillan grew up on Eel Ground First Nation, a Mi'kmaq First Nation band located on the Miramichi River in northern New Brunswick. MacMillan was raised in a broken home, and was raised by his grandmother since the age of 11, who he said had problems with alcohol addiction.

He saw many of his friends and relatives succumb to drinking and drugs. He refused to allow himself to follow their footsteps into a stereotypical "troubled native" lifestyle. He said he drew resilience to succeed in life from that background instead.

"I wanted to become successful in spite of all of this," he said.

From an early age, MacMillan was interested in sports and fitness. His love of fitness started at the age of 12 when his father took him to see a gym in nearby Miramichi.

Not initially thinking of gym and fitness



as a career choice, he was inspired by some role models in his early life. The first was his uncle Roger Augustine, a renowned chief of Eel Ground First Nation from 1980 to 1996. Prior to that, he served on band council for four years. Augustine also co-founded the Atlantic Policy Congress (APC), an organization that acted as a political voice for First Nations chiefs across Atlantic Canada.

His famous uncle's success and sobriety were inspirations for MacMillan as, "he kept me on the straight and narrow."

MacMillan, however, felt a calling outside the community. After high school, he enrolled in Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island on a baseball scholarship. He did not finish his program in general arts, and returned home and enrolled in the University of New Brunswick in a business program. He did not finish that, either. MacMillan admitted that he did have a problem with "completing stuff."

His career moved ahead when he joined the RCMP and he was stationed in Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick. He worked there for seven years

and then was transferred to his home reserve of Eel Ground. He characterized his time with the RCMP as mostly positive.

It was changes in his health that would change his life forever. A doctor diagnosed him with Colitis, a painful inflammation of the colon, and later Crohn's disease, a gastrointestinal condition. Realizing he would have to eventually retire soon from the RCMP, MacMillan described it as a, "punch to the stomach."

Rather than ruminate over what he could no longer do, he used the moment as an opportunity to realize what had become his lifelong dream of opening his own gym.

Initially, MacMillan started his gym business out of a garage on the highway on the reserve. He focused on "functional fitness," a unique approach that emphasized a group training atmosphere. The techniques used were those used by professional athletes in training, said MacMillan. He initially did not even charge his clients. But, starting with one client, interest in his facility quickly grew.



"I went from one client to two to four and then 400," he said, proudly. "It really went that way."

Starting in 2009, he had to add more and more classes offered at the facility, until they had used up all their space. He eventually started charging clients after he officially opened a brand new 3,000 square foot facility called "The Pound" on the reserve in 2012. Within six months, he had to add 2,400 square feet to the building and in 2013, added an additional 2,400 square feet. In 2013, he attended a trainer's course by CrossFit, an intense branded fitness regimen, in Montreal. He became certified by CrossFit over time and he opened the CrossFit Pound on Eel Ground, the first CrossFit gym on any First Nation in Canada.

He opened a CrossFit gym facility in the Maritimes and it became one of the largest CrossFit gyms in all of Canada, all from a location on a reserve. In 2014 and 2016, he added more space to the facility. So, over the years, he has expanded his facility from 1,800 square feet to 11,000 now. He now employs 13 people in both part time and full time capacities.

Having a business on a First Nation reserve, however, has had its hurdles. Obtaining financing, he said, was very difficult. Being exempt from taxes, he said, is an advantage, but a large disadvantage is a bank or other lending institutions cannot foreclose on an unpaid loan, so they are reluctant to lend to First Nation entrepreneurs. This is an obstacle for First Nations seeking capital to start or expand businesses on reserves.

Under the Indian Act, First Nations do not own title to their land and the Act prevents any party from foreclosing on unpaid loans. MacMillan said it would be easier for him to obtain a car loan because if he stopped making payments, the bank can repossess the vehicle, but they cannot do that in the

case of buildings or land on a reserve.

MacMillan credited a credit union in nearby Miramachi with taking a risk on him, despite those obstacles.



But, because it is located on a reserve, I cannot borrow anything against that building or land,” he said.

In the meantime, MacMillan has said that he is continuing at his business and building partnerships. He continues to work with his First Nation and in the wider community, introducing people to the work of fitness and well-being.

He has also received recognition from other bodies, as in 2012, he received the Ulnooweg Business of the Year award for New Brunswick. In 2012 and 2013, CrossFit Pound was voted Miramachi’s best gym.

“My building is located on two acres of land and is 11,000 square feet. If it was located off reserve it would be worth \$800,000 or so. I am not sure.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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 north-eastern 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.