



FRONTIER CENTRE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY
Profile Series

Profile of:
RHONDA M. DIENI

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

For First Nation entrepreneur Rhonda M. Dieni, 45, there is something more important to running a business than having a good product or service.

“Don’t worry so much about your business, work on yourself and work through your life trials,” she said, in a phone interview.

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

She said too many people in her own Indigenous community, as well as others, are, “addicted to suffering.” They need to overcome their trials and not remain focused on being victims, she said.

The owner and operator of Bliss Tea Kombucha in Westbank First Nation, British Columbia, Dieni has seen her share of life struggles and tribulations. Born in Kamloops, B.C., she was born to a single mother and is the youngest of nine children, with the oldest being 23 years old and the youngest being 11 years older. Although she had male influences in her life, they might not have been the most positive experiences as she suffered through hardship, such as trauma, bullying at school, abandonment and she dealt with self-worth issues.

Her mother – who has since passed away – was a First Nation woman from the Upper Nicola Band, an Okanagan Indigenous community. Her father was Italian in background. She said she was subjected to racism. She also said she was mistreated by her older brother and was sexually abused as a young child.

During the early 90’s, while living in London, England for four years, she led a party life involving drug and alcohol addiction.

But, it was the example and inspiration of her mother, as well as a very strong belief in herself that allowed her to overcome. She said her mother may have planted the seed of inspiration of starting her own business. Her mother was a cook at a local restaurant and always spoke about running a bed and breakfast in Costa Rica and other ideas. Her mother’s example as a strong and independent woman helped to inspire her.

“She was the matriarch in her own family. She was a real leader-woman.”

Dieni said she was not initially entrepreneurial and saw herself as more of a service-oriented person. She finished Grade 12 and later enrolled in a hairstyling certification program at a community college in B.C. Then, she cut hair at a studio in Vancouver where one of her customers who worked with Air Canada recommended she become a flight attendant because of her great personality.

She found work as a flight attendant with Air Canada. Dieni said she has been to 65 countries in that job and was able to take her mother on many international trips before she passed away. Dieni saw her first entrepreneurial stirrings when she started to feel that being a flight attendant was not enough. She wanted to pilot the aircraft itself.

“I had become an all or nothing kind of person,” she said.

From there, she got into yoga in a big way. She became a certified yoga instructor in 2003. She credited it with helping her overcome some addictions. But she was not satisfied just teaching yoga, she wanted to open her own yoga studio. She would eventually open her own yoga studio in North Vancou-

ver. However, her life changed when she met a man – who Dieni described as a self-made millionaire – who she married and had a son with. She sold her studio and moved with him to Ecuador. However, they lost all of their money in the stock market.

When she returned to Canada and years later separated from him, she knew she would have to make her own money to survive.

Dieni learned and became a big fan of a fermented tea beverage called Kombucha. Dieni said the drink originated about 2,000 years ago in China and Russia. The drink is full of probiotics and digestive enzymes that are said to have health benefits.

She began producing Kombucha tea back in Kamloops and opened-up a business at the Kamloops farmers market. At one point, she had sold her first six cases within two hours.



She was then able to get her product into grocery stores and health food stores. She opened a certified commercial kitchen in Westbank, B.C. in July 2015 and from there has enjoyed amazing success. She was also able to place her son in a private school in Westbank so that he could enjoy more opportunities in life.

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 product is now available in 120 stores in two provinces, mostly B.C.

“I wanted to create a product that is a recognized brand, and as big as, Coca-Cola. I just think Bliss Tea Kombucha is a superior product that is low in sugar, caffeine, and is all organic. I just wanted to share the benefits of health and wellness, she said, pointing out that kombucha is a \$500 million a year industry in the United States alone.

As an Indigenous entrepreneur, Dieni said she is “very proud to be 100 percent Aboriginal owned and operated.” Since arriving in Westbank, she said she has come “full circle” in terms of her Indigenous identity and has been able to focus more on her cultural identity.

As a First Nation entrepreneur, she said she did face some obstacles. The first was all the public health “red tape” required to produce and market a fermented product to the public. She said it took her seven to eight months to navigate through the paperwork required to open her business. Distribution and shipping, of course, were obstacles as she had to build all these business relationships from scratch. She also had to learn how to manage a new business, but she said she is a people person who was always good at sales, so that helped.

She also had to deal with the jealousies and naysayers who did not believe in her business. One woman expressed

shock that an Aboriginal woman was selling this kind of product.

As far as advice to other Indigenous entrepreneurs goes, she is adamant that they must lose the victimization mentality and must work on themselves. It is all about attitude. You can't give up and you must see the end result in front of you. She also said that First Nation governments need to do more to support businesses on their territory.

"I support Aboriginal business, but half the time, we don't know they exist out there," she said, arguing that band governments need to publish Aboriginal business directories so that Aboriginal people know where Aboriginal-operated businesses are, so they can shop them and support them.

Dieni is putting her money where her mouth is as she is supporting networking among female Indigenous entrepreneurs. She is involved with the Aboriginal Women's Business Entrepreneurs Network (AWBEN) and will be a panelist at their February conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.



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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.