



FRONTIER CENTRE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY
Profile Series

Profile of:
IAN GLADUE

"never give up, keeping moving forward, keep smudging."

Ian Gladue, 39, is the ideal Indigenous entrepreneur. He saw a need within the Indigenous community and he acted to fill it.

Gladue, a native of Bigstone Cree Nation in northern Alberta on Treaty 8 territory, is the co-owner of Native Delights – a restaurant in Edmonton focusing on First Nation foods – and a strong promoter of Indigenous cuisine.

Gladue worked a food concession business years ago, and recalled working at First Nation pow wows. He said the lineups at the pow wows for traditional Indigenous cuisine was very impressive. He said he remembered asking himself at the time why this cuisine could not be featured in the cities.

“That realization was the first pebble in the pond for me,” said Gladue. He said native food – such as bannock, traditional dried bison meat, and Indian tacos – was so popular, he was so surprised that no vendors were taking advantage of that. He said he approached other concession business owners who were not sure it would work.

“I saw that as a challenge,” he said. “I have always loved a good challenge. That is the type of person I am.”

From this realization came Gladue’s decision to start a concession business in Edmonton that eventually led to a restaurant specializing in Indigenous cuisine. However, he said he faced many challenges he had to overcome along the way.

Growing up in Hobbema, he said he faced serious challenges. His electrician father got a job and the family was living in a shack at the time. There were six children living in one bedroom in a 200-square-foot home, he

recalled. At the age of 13, he said his father was tired of his out-of-control behaviour and kicked him out of the house. Despite that experience, he said he learned many important values from his father, including being responsible, being generous, working hard, and being honest.

From his mother – who he counts as a main role model in his life – he said he learned the value of being straight up with people and always speaking your mind.

At the age of 13, he said he hitchhiked to Edmonton and started a new life. It was not easy. He slept under bridges and said he used to ring doorbells at apartment buildings to get access to buildings to sleep in laundry rooms, where it was quiet.

Looking back, Gladue said he always had a passion for cooking.

“When we were kids and playing in careers, like doctor or whatnot, I had my own restaurant with my own menus,” he recalled. He said he would prepare beef mandarin stir fry and submarine sandwiches for his family. He recalled back on Hobbema reserve accepting a job at a kitchen and working for a woman (who has since passed away) who taught him all he knows about cooking and maintaining a kitchen. Even if worked and ended up going away on a “bender,” he said she always took him back and “never gave up on him.”

“She never judged me and she gave me that extra confidence to move on.”

But at 13, he said he was totally in the party scene and into drugs and alcohol. This lifestyle, he said, came from the reserve life, where parties and boozing were everywhere, even in group sports

activities, such as volleyball.

“I was so influenced by my surroundings,” he said, but also pointing out that it was funny that he never once saw his father drink in his presence. “I did not have any positive influences in my life at the time. The people I had known were either dead, in jail, or working for gangs.”

Gladue remembered that during this time he was very unhappy. When he reached Edmonton, he fell into criminal activity, such as breaking and entering, robbing, and selling drugs. At 18, he was arrested for attempting to sell drugs to an undercover police officer. He did not show up for his sentencing and he said a warrant was put out for his arrest all over Canada. At 21, he grew very tired of running from the police and he turned himself in. After spending some time in prison, he moved away and got himself a job in the oil fields of northern Alberta, working on the rigs.

Gladue credited the birth of his first daughter Mercedes with turning his life around.



“One day – around the age of 26 – I was looking at myself in the mirror and I realized how selfish I was. I was pale and strung out. I realized after thinking about my daughter and her life there was more to life than money.”

Around 2008, he started saving every

penny he earned working on the oil fields. He saw he wanted more out of life because he was tired of missing his daughter’s first words, first steps, and so many Christmases.

The next big event in his life was his surviving a catastrophic burn injury on the oil fields. He was not sure if he would walk again. He said he had to have 890 staples placed in his leg. He said he experienced a lot of self-pity and had a spiritual crisis where he was angry that the “Creator would allow something like this to happen to him.” He said he experienced a “spiritual awakening,” when he met the man who was mainly responsible for his injury and he forgave him.

After these events, he decided to move on to Edmonton to live out his dream of bringing Indigenous cuisine to the city. But, he quickly came up against an obstacle. He discovered the cooking van he would need was very expensive – between \$100,000 to \$130,000.

Coming the reserve and having bad personal credit, he did not know how he would come up with that kind of money. Instead of that expensive vehicle, he settled on purchasing a hot dog stand. He quickly learned, however, that he would have to overcome several hurdles placed by Alberta Health. But he never gave up and failed countless times at Alberta Health inspections of his stand. Finally, in April 2012, he passed the test and the inspector informed him that he was first vendor in Edmonton to get a Class C High Risk Mobile Cart. He said he had built the cart from scratch.

Eventually, he was selling bannock burgers and Indian tacos, two main features of Indigenous food. He said he was selling so much food, the line-ups were incredible. He said he was

still selling out in April and there was still snow on the ground. He was now able to afford a concession truck and in 2014, he opened Native Delights, his restaurant devoted to Indigenous cuisine. Then, he opened a second location in Edmonton. They were now able to do catering business. He was focusing on promoting his business at various public events in Edmonton. He tapped into all the multicultural events in the city.

Gladue was motivated to sell Indigenous cuisine because he wanted to promote this kind of food in a positive way. He said he was bothered that tourists would visit Canada and they would only be given maple syrup. He said he wanted to provide visitors to Canada with the cuisine Indigenous to the country. Through his restaurants,



he said he has been passionate about promoting pânsâwân, 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. He has consulted with traditional elders in his community about preparing and promoting the meat, so

he had that blessing from the community.

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.

Just recently, he has been able to sell a franchise of his business to another proprietor in Edmonton. Gladue attributed much of his success to Rondell Gladue, his wife and partner of Native Delights Inc. and Pânsâwân Inc. from Cold Lake First Nation, who he married last year.

Gladue now has four children and he has been sober for six years and drug free for nine.

Gladue said he would caution other Indigenous entrepreneurs to “never give up” and to “keep moving forward.” He also reminds them that there are no successes in life without some failure. He also recommended Indigenous entrepreneurs “keep smudging,” meaning keep in touch with your spirituality and keep improving yourself. Although he said he had to build his business from his own savings and did not receive help, he hopes First Nation governments and organizations help out entrepreneurs, but he cautioned that First Nation entrepreneurs must do their own part and do the hard work.



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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 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.