



FRONTIER CENTRE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY
Profile Series

Profile of:

JESSICA MEHTA

***"You have to do what it takes to make it on
your own."***

For Jessica Mehta, 36, an ambitious and intelligent Cherokee entrepreneur from Oregon, the key to business success is to “do it with a mindset of service.”

“If you look at any large successful enterprise, you will see that is at the center,” she said, in a phone interview. Mehta said that the mentality of service to others also speaks to the cultural values and identity of Native Americans.

Mehta is an accomplished poet, author, and the founder and owner of Mehta-For, a national award-winning small business that focuses on providing writing services to clients. The on-line business features her editing and writing skills and that of a small team of dedicated and trusted writers and editors. With over 10 years of writing and editing experience, Mehta relies on a solid reputation to get clients. Now, she has clients from Fortune 500 companies as well as from major media outlets.



Mehta’s life journey to becoming an author and a business owner has certainly been bumpy, but it speaks to her incredible ability to overcoming adversity.

Her father was a Cherokee from Oklahoma who served a prison sentence in

Texas for armed robbery and assault. Her mother was a waitress working at a local restaurant in Oregon. Their meeting was not normal. Her father sent love letters to his girlfriend who worked at the same restaurant as her mother. Eventually, the girlfriend gave up on him and gave Mehta’s future mother the love letters. She fell in love with his writing and began a writing relationship with him. Eventually, this relationship led him to a halfway house when he was released from prison, eventually finding his way to Mehta’s mother.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Mehta’s own life, however, was not without its challenges as well. Her father tragically died of hepatitis C, something he contracted from a getting a tattoo in prison. Her mother suffered from mental health issues and had a nervous breakdown later in her life. Her mother recently died from an opioid overdose, not long before this profile was written.

Mehta was forced to grow up rather quickly when her mother kicked her out of the house when she was 15 years old. Around the age of 20, she enrolled in Portland State University.

Mehta recalled, “I don’t know how I got into college. I kind of stumbled into it.”

She later enrolled in the English program. As a child and teenager, she said was always interested in reading and writing. Her love of writing has, in fact, always been a part of her, she said.

“People would ask me when I started to be a writer. I say that it is who I have always been. It’s not something you decide to be. You always are.”

Despite failing out of university in her

first term, she returned and eventually earned a bachelor's degree in English and a master's in Writing, both degrees from Portland State University.

At that point in her life, however, she, "did not have any future plans and she certainly did not have plans of becoming an entrepreneur. She chose to travel to South Korea to teach English, as many college and university graduates do. After the recession hit in 2008-2009, Mehta found herself unemployed from the non-profit company she was working for.

At that time, she moved to Costa Rica to take advantage of the lower cost of living. Thinking of putting her writing and editing education to good use, she looked through ads on Craigslist for writing jobs. After discovering an ad that was very "arrogant and unprofessional" sounding, she decided to give the poster some advice and responded to the ad. She sent the poster's author a sample of her work and he became her first client.

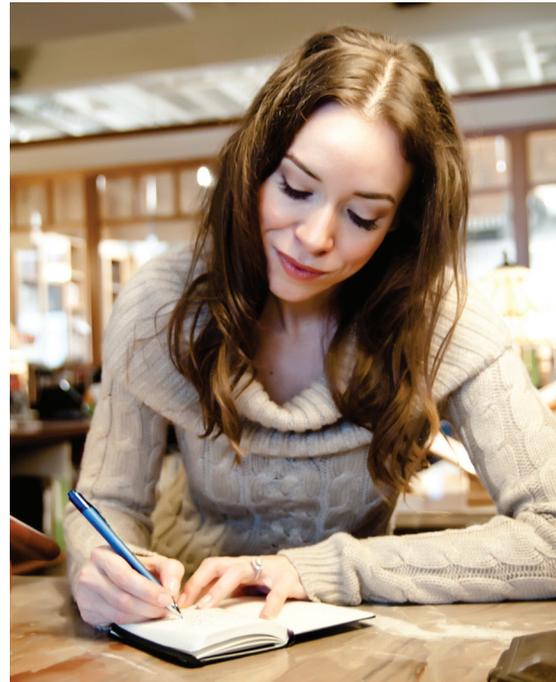
She decided to give the writing and editing work a try and decided that she wanted to make \$100,000 a year at the job. She eventually reached that goal (interestingly, she published a business book called 100 Ways to Make \$100K with Your English Degree.)

After learning the important techniques of the writing and editing business, she relocated to Portland, Oregon. In 2013, she founded her company, MehtaFor. After starting her first business, she produced four books of poetry, two novels, and one book about professional writing. Although she is the principal writer, she works with a small group of writers. Mehta is clear that she wants to write and does not want to manage other people..

In terms of challenges, Mehta said that building trust with clients was an obstacle at first.

"My business is online and people don't see me. I do that on purpose, but not because of my Indian ancestry, but because I am young."

As an Indigenous entrepreneur, she said that Native Americans could face additional life obstacles because their life journey may be full of challenges, similar to her own life. These challenges, she said, relate to the economic conditions and educational opportunities of her people. But, her "go-getter" attitude has taken her beyond that life she was, it seems, destined to live.



"You have to do what it takes to make it on your own," she said, remembering that perhaps her father passed that attitude to her. She said the best advice she can give to aspiring Native American entrepreneurs is to "find a way to make a comfortable living doing what you love."

Mehta confessed that she did not have many positive formative influences

in her life, but she does attribute her sense of finding her Native American identity and “family connection” from her involvement in The Native American Student & Community Center during the years she spent at Portland State University.

Tribal communities and governments can certainly help entrepreneurs by providing more scholarships to students (Mehta is the founder of the Jessica Tyner Scholarship Fund which supports Native American students pursuing an advanced degree in English and creative writing.)

According to Mehta, more targeted assistance needs to go towards students who do not live on reservations.

She added that more programs should be made available for Native American students trying to make a living with arts and crafts. She said there could also be more education programs aimed at Native Americans. One problem, she notes, is that many programs

seems to assume that Native Americans are not as ambitious as other people, a myth she wants to break. As a member of the Cherokee Nation, Mehta offers complimentary writing services to Native American students and non-profit organizations situated in the Pacific Northwest or in Native American communities.

Mehta’s outstanding achievements certainly have not gone unnoticed. MetaFor received two national bronze awards for Startups of the Year in 2015. She was also the winner of a grant from the Money for Women/Barbara Deming Memorial Fund in Poetry and the Potlatch Award for Native Artists. Finally, she is a recipient of the National Centre for American Indian Enterprise Development’s “40 Under 40” national award.



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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.