



# FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Profile Series

*Profile of:*

## LILY STENDER

***"Our strengths lie in the ability to work together as a collective, utilizing our skills in a collaborative way."***

For Lily Stender, 49, Māori business leader, being a trustee of the Tolaga Bay Inn is a way to place the historic enterprise in Māori ownership as well as foster economic, cultural and social development in the local community.



“When we acquired it, making money was not our main driver,” she said, with a laugh, during a Skype interview. “It was our way of returning to our ancestral homelands, reconnecting with our whakapapa, (relatives) and more importantly, bringing mum back to her place of birth.”

The Inn is a local historic landmark originally built in 1866 and then rebuilt in 1930. A challenging \$5 million restoration project caused Stender and others to transfer the asset into a charitable trust which meant it was protected from private ownership. Their roles changed from owners to Kaitiaki (guardians) of the Inn. It became their responsibility, as descendants to protect, restore and preserve the Inn for our future generations.

It also meant the Inn would be uti-

lized for additional beneficial services to the community including the development of an information centre, on-site training, fundraising activities and business incubation services.

Tolaga is both a bay and small town on the East Coast of New Zealand’s North Island. Stender said the East Coast has the unique distinction of being the first place in the world to see the sun rise. It is also known for its historic role in Indigenous nationhood in New Zealand.

Her mother, Ngaerima Crawford, was raised in Tolaga Bay until the age of seven, after which her mother died of tuberculosis which was brought by European settlers to New Zealand. Her mother spent time in an orphanage until she and her siblings were adopted out to various families.



Her mother eventually travelled to the city of Wellington – where she met their German father, Lemmy Stender and had six children. But her mother’s desire was always to return to the East Coast. The purchase of the Inn enabled her moth-

er to spend her last remaining years in her ancestral community as well as reconnect her whanau (family) to her Maori culture and heritage.

Stender said running the Inn business was very challenging for past proprietors. Also, it had never been in Māori ownership before, although some had leased it. She said that previous lessees had not been able to maintain the building and hence it was left in a state of disrepair.

The pub associated with the Inn also had an interesting reputation. When they took over the Inn in October 2011, many of the locals were barred from the pub. After Stender and her family came aboard, they wiped the slate clean and worked to regain the trust of the locals. Acquiring the Inn was a challenging feat requiring the efforts of her extended whanau (family), including uncles, aunties, and cousins.

Her youngest brother Kamil, with the help of Rico Gear, were able to put down a deposit on the business. Another investor Tony King also contributed funds to help keep the business afloat. With the need for renovations, the business venture did not look promising at first.

“We literally came on board with no money and a \$20,000 overdraft,” said Stender, laughing at the thought now. She was chosen by the family to manage the Inn because of her extensive experience overseas. She had left the country at the age of 18 for England. She said at the time she could see her-

self going down a bad life path and so resolved to change her goals.

After acquiring her first aid certification, she started off as a nanny in England, but she quickly realized that line of work was not for her. She said she lacked the patience for the job. Having purchased a one-way ticket, she had to find work and quickly. After working at various pub and pizza parlour jobs, she resolved to become a secretary. From there, she became a recruiter for various video producing agencies. After a while, she became quite good in this profession.

She did not acquire a university degree, but she learned many of her skills on the job. She was eventually promoted into managerial positions and spent about 13 years overseas, including a stint in Germany and time on a kibbutz in Israel.

“I visited in the early 1990s during the First Gulf War. I was wondering why the tickets to Israel were so cheap,” she laughed.

The communal nature of the kibbutz life was familiar to Stender having grown up with the Māori culture, which was very collectivist in nature. She eventually moved closer to home and relocated to Sydney, Australia and worked in recruiting. When she returned to New Zealand, she felt she was starting again from scratch.

It was her brother’s idea of returning their mother to her East Coast Māori homeland that inspired the

idea of taking over the Inn and pub. The family did not have any grandiose plans for change. They worked slowly on building local faith and confidence in the business. As a pub business, they had to contend with new legislation on impaired driving and smoking in public places.

The struggling nature of the business made them realize they needed to adopt a different approach to preserve the iconic business. They decided that selling the Inn to foreign owners would defeat the purpose of retaining local control. The decision to place the business in a charitable trust involved relinquishing control, but this has allowed the family to position the Inn to contribute to the community in a beneficial way.

"We are really the caretakers," she said.

They began to partner with key organizations including 'EIT' (Eastern Institute of Technology) to provide in-house hospitality training. 'Super Grans' – transformative life skills. 'Digital Wings' - to develop digital technology training. 'Activate Tairāwhiti' to set up an on-site information centre. 'MWDI' Māori Women's Development Incorporation for business development and networking.

"I was also on the board of Kimihia He Oranga to assist in the Maori Economic Growth Strategy for our region, producing a report for the New Zealand Parliament highlighting our regional dilemmas - poverty,



low incomes, lack of decent job opportunities, and low wage growth. The report in conjunction with the Regional Economic Development plan showed tourism and digital technology as two main solutions to foster economic growth."

Stender is pleased that through the Tolaga Bay Inn Charitable Trust she is positioned to perhaps help her region economically, especially through tourism. It works as a collective with locals to initiate and develop tourism products and experiences like fishing, eeling, marae visits, cultural workshops, guided tours, hunting and horse riding etc., thus creating jobs and self-employment opportunities with the local people, regenerating the community from within its own homelands.

After acquiring funds for a consultant to conduct a feasibility study, they said they believe they have a securer foundation for the future. The study has allowed them to attract interest from investors and philanthropic agencies. Stender also said she was very proud to be involved with the TaKoha Bunch as part of their first Māori crowdfunding platform.

In the way of challenges confronting Māori entrepreneurs and business leaders, Stender said Indigenous poverty is still a problem. It is difficult to attain capital for start-up businesses. "Many of us have no assets to provide collateral for loans," she said, pointing out that the collective ownership of Māori lands protects these lands from being used as business collateral. "Our land is our mother and needs to be looked after and retained for our future generations."

"Our strengths lie in the ability to work together as a collective, utilizing our skills in a collaborative way. Our mindset is more suited to the social enterprise models, where there are positive social, environmental and economic outcomes."

In 2015 Tolaga Bay Inn won the Connection Excellence Award in 'The Westpac Business Excellence Awards'. In April 2018, Tolaga Bay Inn was a finalist in two categories of The Māori Women's Development Incorporation Awards. The award ceremony is a well-attended event by leaders and entrepreneurs from across New Zealand.



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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.