Circles of Light

May 2001 – Number 12

Opitciwan Sawmill

Partnership Pays Off for Community of Obedjiwan

by Annabelle Dionne

The Attikamekw community of Obedjiwan, Quebec, located in the heart of the boreal forest, was looking for an experienced lumber company that could provide positive spin-offs for the community. It decided on the well-known Quebec firm Donohue (now owned by Abitibi-Consolidated) as its partner, mainly because of the company's proven environmental and social awareness.

When Donohue first moved on to Attikamekw land in 1993 to begin logging, it demonstrated its respect for trappers' activities, and consulted community members about plans to build a road between Donohue's St-Félicien mill and Obedjiwan. Moreover, Donohue uses the block-cutting method, so that rows of trees are left standing between its logging sites. The company also uses lighter machinery, which causes less damage to the land than equipment used by other forestry companies.

"The respect shown by Donohue towards our community's people was an important factor in our choice of a partner," says Chief **Simon Awashish**.

The partnership bore fruit in 1998 when the community opened the Opitciwan sawmill together with Donohue.

With a 55-percent holding in the new sawmill, the Attikamekw community is responsible for seeking funding, obtaining timber supplies from the government and training Aboriginal workers. For its part, Donohue looked after planning project costs, selecting and purchasing equipment, and building the sawmill in the community. The company also provided training in sawmill operation and management, and sells the lumber.

Photo credit: Annabelle Dionne

Manon Pelletier, (l.) General Manager of the Opticiwan Sawmill and Chief **Simon Awashish** of the Attikamekw community of Obedjiwan, Quebec represent a partnership that has an annual turnover of $8 million, and a workforce of 55 Aboriginal people.

Partnerships

The far-reaching power of partnerships to support strong, healthy Aboriginal communities and economies is in evidence right across the country.

The sawmill now has an annual turnover of $8 million. Its Forestry Services section, wholly owned by the First Nation Council and responsible for logging, reforestation, clearing and forest management work, has a turnover of $7.5 million.

The project has had a significant economic impact on the community. The sawmill employs 65 people, 55 of whom are Aboriginal, and has

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Tsimcrehawk Development Group

Partnering with Maoris on New Zealand Oceanfront Resort

by Diane Koven

Calvin Helin (l.) and **Dave Tuccaro** formed Tsimcrehawk Development Group as a result of a trade mission to New Zealand.

Five years ago, **Dave Tuccaro** went on a trade mission to New Zealand and met with Maori business people. As a result of that trip, Tuccaro has formed a partnership with **Calvin Helin**, the Vancouver lawyer who co-ordinated the trade mission. In turn, the two are involved in a major development project in New Zealand in partnership with the Maoris.

Their company, Tsimcrehawk Development Group, has a 49-percent interest in a project to develop the Maoris' oceanfront property — just south of Auckland — into a resort. "The Aboriginal community owns a lot of land," says Tuccaro, "but they do not have the financing or management expertise to develop the property. We will bring both financing and management expertise to the project."

Both Tuccaro and Helin have proven business acumen. Tuccaro, a Cree from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, owns and operates eight businesses and is involved in numerous volunteer activities related to Aboriginal business development. Helin, a Tsimshian from Lax-Kw'aalams, north of Prince Rupert, B.C., was a commercial fisher and the owner/operator of a martial arts club before becoming a lawyer. After practising law with a Vancouver firm where he started and headed up the First Nations Law Group and chaired the Asia-Pacific Law Group, he decided to go out on his own four years ago. He has since been involved in various business ventures.

Working with the Maoris has been mutually beneficial. "Their people have gone through the same struggles that we have," says Tuccaro, "so we understand each other very well."

Tsimcrehawk has developed a business plan that it will use in future projects as well. "We never develop anything on speculation," says Tuccaro. "There has to be a market strategy in place before we attempt to start a project." Tuccaro and Helin did a great deal of market research before beginning the Maori development, and held meetings with the Maoris to determine what they wanted. "Now," says Helin, "we have a line-up of groups that want to deal with us because what we are doing is very fair to Indigenous people. That is the heart of a long-term partnership — it has to be win-win."

Although Tsimcrehawk's projects are designed to benefit their various Aboriginal business partners, they are not simply "make-work" projects. "Our first principle," says Helin, "is that it has to make business sense for us to pursue it. We have to provide a competitive product at competitive market rates. If that is the case, it will be a self-sustaining project."

The Maori resort will serve as a plan for Tsimcrehawk's future projects. "We are hoping to do similar projects in other parts of the world," says Tuccaro, "such as in South America and Mexico, with the Indigenous populations there, to show the Aboriginal people what they can do."

The two partners are also working with a First Nation on Vancouver Island to develop a hotel, marina and golf course; and are discussing ideas for partnering with other First Nations to develop First Nations community lands.

For Tuccaro and Helin, both successful businessmen in their own right, working in partnership has proven the sky really is the limit. ✸

In this Issue...

Mohawk Internet Technologies

Powering the Internet through Partnership

by Karin Lynch

Just three years ago, the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake would never have dreamed that it would become a powerhouse driving the Internet. "It was an amazing combination of things," says Grand Chief **Joseph Tokwiro Norton**. "In fact, an official from the state of New York started it all — that was the beginning of a very fruitful partnership. Now, Mohawk Internet Technologies (MIT) is a major player in the e-business."

Kahnawake was uniquely positioned to develop its world-class Internet Service Provider (ISP). First, they have underground fibreoptic cable running through the community. Second, an abandoned mattress factory provided the perfect space to set up the 1,115-square-metre (12,000-square-foot) electronic business centre. And third, it's next door to Montreal, with its full fleet of transportation and telecommunications services.

"When that New York official approached us," Norton explains, "we immediately saw the possibilities. Other business partners soon jumped on board." With an investment of $4 million, MIT provides Internet services to some of the world's most visible businesses. "I can't name names," says Norton, "because some of our business customers are competitors. Complete confidentiality and security is key. But I can say that you'd immediately recognize most of these major financial, health and educational institutions."

MIT prides itself on providing a full slate of services for big business, including common infrastructure and technical services such as a Network Operations Centre and a Customer Support Centre. These are designed to monitor network performance, answer customer queries and respond to service interruptions. Hosting and access, consulting and support, and MIT affiliate programs and services are also available.

What sets MIT apart from other co-location ISPs? "It's definitely our advanced technology," emphasizes Norton, "as well as our unique combination of services." The facility boasts state-of-the-art server room facilities, with superior network infrastructure, raised flooring, air conditioning and a clean-room environment. "In this business, security is paramount, so we offer 24/7 physical security, including multiple cameras, intrusion alarm systems and regular security patrols."

"Our vision," continues Norton, "is to be a modern-day trading post of the Internet — a central location where our business partners and e-customers join together in an environment specifically geared toward cross-business alliances and development."

At MIT, all those involved are winners. E-customers buy, sell or trade their products and services. Although MIT is a private, community-owned business, partners gain from their extensive business-to-business contacts. And the Kahnawake community benefits, too — more than half of its approximately 200 employees come from the community itself.

"We're opening ourselves to the world," says Norton. Recently, e-businesses from Australia, the United States and Europe have chosen MIT as their ISP.

"Three years ago," concludes Norton, "I had no idea of what the information technology industry was about, and now we're state-of-the-art! The message I want to send out to brothers and sisters who read *Circles of Light* who have any doubts about their capability, or what can be done if you want to succeed, (is)...Take your dreams. Make them real. Explore every opportunity to learn and pursue it to see if this is your dream. One *will* come that's right for you. Most of all, don't be afraid of partnership outside your community. That partnership could be your dream come true!"

For more information, visit the Web site at **www.mohawk.ca**

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Launching the Aboriginal Canada Portal

Donna Cona Plays Prime Role with Non-Aboriginal Partner

by Sue Baker

A unique Internet gateway, designed to help close the digital divide for Aboriginal people in Canada, has already begun to demonstrate its tremendous potential for encouraging partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal businesses.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) took the lead on this project, working with Aboriginal groups and other government departments to develop and launch the gateway. To assist in the launch, INAC brought together two businesses — one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal.

Donna Cona, one of Canada's leading Aboriginal high tech companies, and Ottawa-based Taylor Made Communications worked in concert with the department to unveil the Aboriginal Canada Portal at the *Indigenous Summit of the Americas* this spring. The launch, attended by heads of government and over 300 Indigenous leaders from around the world, included a promotional video and a live "surf" demonstration of the Portal. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth had the honour of entering the crucial keystrokes that officially launched the Portal.

With over 7,500 links to information for and about Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the Portal, at **www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca**, provides much more than just easy access to information. It's also about using the Internet to create partnerships, to sell products and services, to promote Aboriginal tourism, culture and heritage in Canada and around the world, and to facilitate people working together to build strong communities, people and economies in the Information Age.

Anna Molley, who directs Donna Cona's Marketing and Business Development sector, was instrumental in guiding the Portal from the committee stage to design, and to the launch itself. Donna Cona became the hub of the wheel in the partnership of the six national Aboriginal organizations and eight Government of Canada departments to create the Portal. Of her full year's dedication to the project, Molley says, "I found balancing the cultural diversity as presented by First Nations, Inuit and Métis a challenge. It was certainly a rewarding experience. The Portal project was invigorating and gave Donna Cona and myself exposure to a wider and culturally enriched world."

At the launch of the Aboriginal Canada Portal (from l. to r.) **John Kim Bell**, Master of Ceremonies; Grand Chief **Joseph Tokwiro Norton**, Mohawk Council of Kahnawake; and **Skahionwi:io Owen Mayo** of Kahnawake.

Susan King of Taylor Made Communications had the lead in developing the communications strategy and provided writing services for many of the supporting information products. The partnership between her company and Donna Cona helped make the launch a true success story, she says. "Anna and I quickly developed a good working relationship. We respected each other's areas of expertise and trusted one another's input."

Molley agrees: "I found working with Susan and Taylor Made a refreshing and rewarding experience. Susan brought energy and enthusiasm to the project."

From its very beginnings, the Portal has demonstrated that it is not only a gateway to Internet resources, but also to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people building new partnerships and business relationships in the Information Age. As King notes, "Anna, and this project in general, taught me about the diversity of Aboriginal peoples in Canada."

Closing the digital divide will bring significant economic and social benefits to Aboriginal people in Canada, and the Portal is a significant step towards bridging the gap.

For more information about the Aboriginal Canada Portal or to request a link, visit **www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca** or call toll-free at 1-888-399-0111. ✷

Anishnaabe Gitigewin Inc. Tree Nursery

Helping Keep the Forests Green

by Raymond Lawrence

With big-name forestry companies behind them and a guaranteed demand for seedlings, Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation's $1.57-million tree nursery is a lucrative venture that is also helping keep the forests green.

The award-winning operation — Anishnaabe Gitigewin Inc. Tree Nursery — is the pride of the entire Northern Ontario community. Not only is it generating money for the First Nation, it is also providing jobs for community members.

"We have a partnership with Weyerhaeuser (Company Ltd.) and with Bowater (Forest Products Division, Thunder Bay Woodlands Operations) to provide trees for them. But they also provide us with professional help through their foresters who are just a phone call away," says **Roddy Brown**, the tree nursery's manager. "The partnership gives us a measure of security because if we do well, they're guaranteeing us that they keep awarding us with contracts."

The forest companies provide Anishnaabe Gitigewin Tree Nursery with selected seeds to help ensure an optimal crop. The First Nation overplants by 20 percent to further make sure the operation is able to meet its contractual demands. In the late fall, at the end of the growing season, the seedlings are wrapped, boxed and put in cold storage where they actually freeze until shortly before planting. The community's on-site cold storage is able to hold as many as 9.4 million seedlings, about 17 centimetres high.

Because of funding shortfalls in what would have been their first year, the First Nation had to subcontract out to other nurseries. But by last year, the community's 5,000-square-metre greenhouse was up and running, producing about a $500,000 crop in its inaugural season. Its contract for this year is for 6 million seedlings and the community already plans on adding new bays to the nursery. "Last year we had a target of 210,000 black spruce and we also produced 5 million jack pine," says Brown.

The community's on-site storage can hold millions of seedlings.

The operation provides full-time employment for seven people, and short-term employment for many more. "Our peak season is during the wrapping when we employ 42 people. We started wrapping on November 6 and didn't finish until December 22," Brown says of the year-end. To complete the work before Christmas, and so as not to lose any of the crop, they offered their staff an optional evening shift. Many people opted to come back for the second shift after working an eight-hour day. "It was something to see the community coming together like that," Brown emphasizes.

"There's a lot of support and interest in what we're doing on a daily basis, but especially when the crop is in," he adds. "We've got the school involved as well. We put 480 seedlings aside and set up a project with the school. The children have to take care of them which teaches them responsibility, and as well they can make some money from it later on by selling the trees."

The community's efforts have not gone unappreciated. "For the year 2000, Weyerhaeuser and Bowater nominated us for an Ontario Aboriginal Partnership Recognition Award for business success for this tree nursery," Brown notes. "When we heard we won, it was really quite special for the entire community." ✷

Raymond Lawrence is a freelance writer of Ojibway and European ancestry.

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a total payroll of $2.4 million. "The Forestry Services section pays more than $800,000 to around 60 seasonal workers, 99.9 percent of whom are Aboriginal," says **Manon Pelletier**, the sawmill's general manager.

In addition to creating jobs, the sawmill has strengthened the Attikamekw community. "Thanks to the profits generated by the sawmill, the community can build more homes and will even be constructing an indoor sports arena in the coming months. There is a sense that things are happening in the region. People have a renewed enthusiasm for life and are proud to see the lumber produced by the mill. They feel they are benefiting from the resource," Awashish says.

Other new companies have sprung up since the sawmill came into operation, supplying machinery and rolling stock as well as transportation, loading and shipping services. It's hardly surprising then, that the Opitciwan sawmill won a partnership award two years ago from the Royal Bank of Canada. This year, Industry Canada presented it with the "Enterprise of the Year Award," given to the company that has had the greatest impact on its community. ✷

Aboriginal Alliance of Companies

United Front Opens Industry Doors

by Raymond Lawrence

In Nova Scotia, the Aboriginal Alliance of Companies (AAC) has been working to open the door to industry-related opportunities for its members — opportunities that had previously been slipping away.

Until just over three years ago, industry in Atlantic Canada had little idea of the potential benefits of doing business with Aboriginal firms. Moreover, numerous barriers prevented the two sides from meeting. These were the same kind of barriers that prevented Aboriginal firms from accessing opportunities, or from forming partnerships to take on large industry contracts.

But developments in the Sable Offshore Energy Project signaled an opportunity too big to let pass.

Acting on this opportunity, a small group of Aboriginal business people put together a plan: they would unite and approach industry with a clear, unified voice. Starting with the four key sectors immediately in demand — construction, business services, professional services and business wholesale/retail — the AAC started knocking on the doors of the Sable Offshore Energy Project and other industry players.

"We saw the potential for Aboriginal involvement in the gas industry in different capacities," says AAC Treasurer **Robert Bernard**. "We saw a need in the Aboriginal community for the businesses to come together and form a collective to create a stronger voice."

In total, more than 30 Aboriginal companies banded together as the AAC took aim at long- and short-term contract work with big industry. But there was a learning curve. For one thing, the companies had to meet stringent industry safety requirements. "One of the first projects was to incorporate a safety training module that was open to all Alliance members through an agreement with the Nova Scotia Construction and Safety Association," Bernard explains. "That allowed some of the companies to gain the necessary partnerships through joint ventures to access some of these contracts."

The AAC continued to examine the obstacles to success, and then structured a head-on approach. "What we've done is banged on the doors of industry, government and our communities so that they recognize the needs of Aboriginal business," Bernard says.

"In terms of industry relations, we've had a lot of success," he adds. "We're recognized by industry as being the movers and shakers for Aboriginal business."

The Alliance's success to date is evidenced by the interest level of new companies, the formation of new joint ventures and contracts to date. Initially, most of the companies in the AAC were not operating full-time, Bernard explains. Many of their proprietors had jobs, and ran their businesses as a sideline. "In the past two and a half years, that has changed," Bernard emphasizes. "Some of us are running our companies full-time now." In fact, about half of AAC's members are now full-time businesses.

Many First Nations people have been able to gain meaningful long- and short-term employment as the result of the AAC's efforts, Bernard points out. Moreover, Aboriginal companies now have access to industry-based opportunities through connections with the Alliance.

"Through its growth, the AAC has also encompassed many different needs for these Aboriginal businesses in terms of support, development, training and linkages to various forms of opportunity," Bernard notes. "The AAC hopes to continue this growth with the support of both industry, government and Aboriginal leadership in the Atlantic area."

Visit AAC's Web site at **www.aboriginalalliance.com** ✸

Image courtesy of Aboriginal Alliance of Companies

Atlantic Canada offers industry-related opportunities for members of the Aboriginal Alliance of Companies.

First Nations Buying Group

Strength is Numbers

(Reprinted courtesy of *The Globe and Mail*)

Curiously, the opening lines in **Michael Birch**'s résumé tend to catch in a reader's throat.

"I did not continue my formal education after Grade 11," writes the once-timid man from Garden Hill First Nation in northern Manitoba, "but rather chose to educate myself through a process of trial and error."

"This trial-and-error-process cost me over $1 million and it could have been avoided if I had a business degree."

That unconventional commencement to a résumé has a distinct uplift in its conclusion: Birch, just 32, is today a successful Winnipeg entrepreneur.

His First Nations Buying Group, the only such Aboriginal brokerage in Manitoba and perhaps the largest in the country, has grown like a brush fire in just over two years, signing deals with Xerox, Grand & Toy and Manitoba Telecommunications Services, among others.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the First Nations Buying Group

Signing an agreement with the First Nations Buying Group recently are, rear, left to right: Grand Chief **Vern Roote**, Anishinabek Nation; Grand Chief **Leon Jourdain**, Grand Council Treaty No. 3; Grand Chief **Stan Beardy**, Nishnawbe-Aski Nation; Grand Chief **Larry Sault**, Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians; and front, left to right: **Michael Birch**, President, First Nations Buying Group; **Terry Mosey**, President, Bell Ontario; Vice-Chief **Charles Fox**, Office of the Ontario Regional Chief.

Not the expected career trajectory for a knock-kneed kid from the reserve.

"When I came out of the North, I was just a shy, terrified individual," says Birch, who is these days pressed to speak at Aboriginal schools and community settings. "I wasn't used to mainstream business."

He learned in a hurry. Birch's Aboriginal Beverages Company was a going concern for four years in the mid-90s until the price war between Pepsi and Coke, along with a plummeting Canadian dollar, gave him his costly first diploma from the school of hard knocks.

"At the time," recounts Birch, "I said to myself, 'There isn't a lot of margin in this business as it is. Instead of making myself sick, I have an existing infrastructure here in Winnipeg I can use.'" Birch well knew that the Aboriginal presence in Manitoba was substantial, roughly 10 percent of the overall population with over 100,000 people.

First Nations communities in the province were spending tens of millions of dollars on telecommunications, office supplies and other goods.

"I thought, we've got 60 reserves here, why aren't we buying together?" says Birch, adding that Winnipeg itself, with some 50,000 Aboriginal residents, could be considered Canada's largest reserve.

His well-publicized soft drink company had already won Birch a high profile in the province, both with Aboriginal communities and beyond. That would prove valuable.

The crunch was that Birch was facing a year of transition to get the buying group going while continuing to pay out over $150,000 in wages to his staff.

Following his usual approach, he declined to seek more in loans and just pounded the pavement while keeping alive such other paying interests as a convenience store in his community.

"We went to a number of the key suppliers, MTS (the provincial phone utility), and Grand & Toy," says Birch. "We needed to convince these corporate bigwigs that this was the way to go."

But Birch, together with First Nations Buying Group Director **Barry Gibson**, also had to convince his own community. Early on, he won a critical ally — **Rod Bushie**, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs which represented provincial bands.

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Deton' Cho Corporation

Diamonds are Yellowknife's Best Friend

(Reprinted courtesy of *The Globe and Mail*)

The new civic motto around Yellowknife is that the town is where "a golden history meets a brilliant future."

The gold ore that drove the early economy of Canada's North isn't entirely history, but depressed world prices for the metal keep potential mining operations mired below profitability in most parts of the region.

What glitters in recent years, of course, are the Northwest Territories' diamonds, the "brilliants" of the municipal slogan.

As several international firms work to extract the initial $24 billion of the stones estimated to lie beneath their claims, Yellowknife has sprouted the least likely of Arctic industries: Diamond cutting and polishing plants.

"Normally, this industry has only been developed in Europe, Israel and India," remarks **Darrell Beaulieu**, Chief Executive Officer of the First Nations-owned Deton' Cho Corporation, which runs one of those plants in partnership with Goldeos Ltd. of Calgary.

"What we're doing is finishing the products that are mined from the lands here."

Earning that right took a determined effort by the territorial government to insure that a portion of the stones are processed locally rather than in Antwerp or Tel Aviv. The result, says Beaulieu, whose company belongs to the Yellowknives Dene, has been significant for First Nations people in the region.

"We were looking at employing Aboriginal students from our community and this industry has brought a whole new component to the existing economy," he comments.

Deton' Cho's 25 workers in diamond finishing include Dene students who are undergoing a three-to-five year training program in sawing, lasering and polishing the stones.

"These skills are transferable and the students can take them wherever they want," says Beaulieu, noting that current projections anticipate some 25 years of diamond extraction in the Territories.

Deton' Cho's recent enterprise in diamonds is clearly a new direction for the community, yet not without analogies to its traditional activities. The company has long served the mining industry in the region, building and catering work camps and assisting with haulage.

Diamonds are, in one sense, just the latest example of how the community has managed to see to it that resources beneath the ground translate into opportunities on the surface. ✸

"First Nations Buying Group..."
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"One of the biggest mandates of the Grand Chief's platform was economic development," explains Birch, who says Bushie saw business sense in the plan quickly.

Yet while Bushie's support was important, all the individual Chiefs of the participating First Nations would also have to sign on, which was far from automatic.

"In the beginning, it was the chicken and the egg problem," observes Gibson, meaning that the company initially had no suppliers to offer the Chiefs and no Chiefs to offer the suppliers. Moreover, a key to getting signatures was that the bands not be compelled to use the offered services, only committing to a modest membership fee that would entitle them to participate.

MTS couldn't long resist the apparent virtue of the approach; the phone company had block long-distance calling deals with sundry groups, including various Chambers of Commerce, "but the business we represent to MTS is bigger than all the other groups combined," Gibson notes.

Discount dialing for the tribal signatories soon followed, along with savings of about 40 percent off catalogue costs with Grand & Toy and other block deals with Budget auto rental, Xerox, General Western Star Trucks, Fast Air charter services and a host of other firms.

With just the original four staff at First Nations Buying Group in Winnipeg, the business has already extended its reach to Ontario.

There, a deal involving Aboriginal communities and Bell Canada has been struck, with former national Aboriginal leader **Phil Fontaine** helping represent the First Nations Buying Group effort.

Birch says Quebec and British Columbia are next in his sights.

"I really look at all this as being without any territorial boundaries," says Birch.

"Just because we're from Manitoba, that should have no bearing. Aren't we all fighting for the same things?" ✸

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada

Portrait

The Road to White Mountain

Chief Earl Commanda
Ojibwa
Visionary

by Fred Favel

He stands at the podium of the National Press Club dining room, across from Parliament Hill in Ottawa, welcoming Aboriginal leaders, and representatives from business, academia and the arts to the White Mountain Academy of the Arts' reception and art exhibition. He and his colleagues have travelled many miles from the north shores of Lake Huron to showcase the White Mountain Academy (a unique partnership between the North Shore Tribal Council, the City of Elliot Lake, and the Serpent River First Nation) its students and its art, to the Ottawa forum.

Chief Earl Commanda speaks with great pride of the accomplishments arising from this collaboration of First Nations and the nearby municipality. The White Mountain Academy of the Arts was built on a vision of equal respect for the traditions of both the Anishnabek people, and those of their non-Aboriginal neighbours.

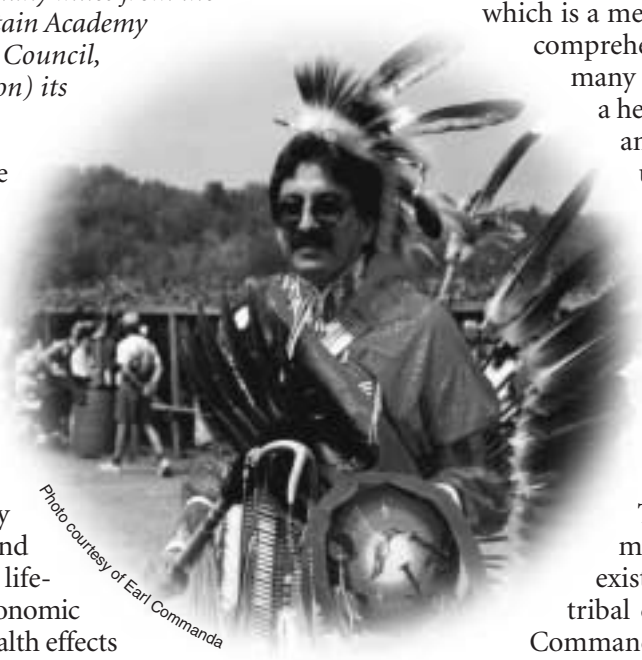

Photo courtesy of Earl Commanda

It could be said that the life of Earl Commanda and the Academy have been intertwined since shortly after his birth. He was born in 1952 in the Serpent River First Nation, the great-grandson of an hereditary Chief, only one year before uranium was discovered in Elliot Lake and a sulfuric acid plant was built in his community. In his lifetime, prosperity from the uranium mining changed to economic depression when the mines closed, then to long-term health effects on the residents from occupational exposures to chemicals. A portion of the monies provided for economic diversification by Ontario Hydro to deal with the effects of the mines' closure was earmarked for an arts college. This funding is the Academy's link with the area's mining past.

Commanda's life path made him a natural candidate to co-ordinate the translation of a vision of a northern arts college into the reality that exists today. He came from a community with strong traditions based on an ancestral lifestyle of trapping and hunting, and his career has focused on Aboriginal rights and community development. He became interested in Aboriginal human rights through his work with the Union of Ontario Indians, particularly issues affecting the local Aboriginal community. He served as the executive director of the Indian and Eskimo Friendship Centre, now called N'swokamak, and later worked his way through the ranks of the provincial treaty organization for Northern Ontario. Commanda eventually became executive director.

In 1980, his uncle, then Chief of Serpent River, took him aside and said, "Why don't you come back home? We need a good band administrator." Commanda did go back home, but rather than take on a position he felt was basically bookkeeping for community administration, "I created the band economic development officer position." Commanda also wanted to regain some of his community traditions he had missed because of boarding away from home as a teenager, so he asked his father to teach him to trap. "I was the laughing stock of the village for three years in a row, but by the end of the third year, I was able to stand on my own with my brothers and other trappers in the community."

One of Commanda's first actions was to find funding for a band planner, and he found a good fit with Keith Lewis in this position. This formidable team began with a trading post and a senior citizens home. Then they hired a full-time education counsellor, an adult co-ordinator of seniors' services, and a welfare administrator. Soon there were 20 people working for the First Nation in various positions. Commanda then began to focus in the area of health, "primarily because of the bad experience with the uranium mines and the acid. We lost band members through occupational health hazards. People were dying of cancer."

Commanda is now in his eighteenth year as Chief of Serpent River First Nation, which is a member of the North Shore Tribal Council. Through the comprehensive community plan he and Keith Lewis developed, many improvements have come to the community, including a health station, increased post-secondary education funding and public works. When the idea of a new institute came up — a concept of a northern campus of the Ontario College of Art — the City of Elliot Lake approached the North Shore Tribal Council to participate in the Academy's creation. " I was kind of leery of that involvement because I didn't want any more tokenism that I had seen in any college or university initiatives in the past. I didn't want it to be an advisory council to the Board of Governors or whatever. I said that if you are serious about this, then it has to be a true partnership."

The original steering committee for the Academy was made up of four seats for the City of Elliot Lake, four for existing colleges and universities in the area, three for the tribal council and one for Serpent River First Nation, with Commanda as its representative. The Academy quickly began to take form with the hiring of the Dean, Dr. Robert Kavanagh. Then an opportunity came up: "A building was being closed by the federal government. It was a national laboratory...with 45,000 square feet and three floors. Because of the lab space, it was ideally suited for studios."

Aboriginal people are involved in the Academy's board and in key staff positions. Commanda adamantly denies that the Aboriginal people employed are there as window dressing. "No! It is a true partnership...The doors are always open (to qualified Aboriginal people)."

The Academy is into its third year with a mix of 35 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students producing fine art, as evidenced in the National Press Club showing. Even though the development phase is over, Commanda is still very much involved in White Mountain. "I do work with the college when they need me for fund-raising, political advocacy, lobbying, those kinds of things and this is my commitment to the Academy." Commanda summarizes this rare partnership best in his own words, "I think the curriculum of this institute really has captured the essence of where we are in terms of First Nations people, Ojibwa people. I think we've been able to incorporate the spirituality of our people in teaching these students...they learn about our stories, symbols, but it goes much deeper in terms of the Elders imparting all of the spiritual meaning of these things."

Photo courtesy of White Mountain Academy of the Arts

Commanda hopes that one day the White Mountain Academy of the Arts will be compared to Emily Carr College in Vancouver or to the Ontario College of Art, and his confidence leaves no doubt that he will some day see that aim realized. From his community of Serpent River through the 20-minute drive to Elliot Lake, Earl Commanda has seen many of his visions for the future become reality. A true visionary, dedicated and motivated, he is most certainly a great asset to his people.

Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.

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