

# Circles of Light

November/December 2000 – Number 7

## Tsawwassen First Nation — Model for Good Governance and Accountability

by Diane Koven

**T**he story of the Tsawwassen First Nation is an open book — quite literally. The members of this First Nation, located about 20 kilometres from Vancouver overlooking the Strait of Georgia, are actively involved in every decision concerning the community.

With approximately 270 members, 180 of whom live on the reserve, the Tsawwassen First Nation is a model for good, strong business practices. “The Chief and Council support operating the band similarly to a business or municipal government,” says **Fred Schiffner**, the First Nation’s Director of Operations. “They also believe in keeping the membership informed about all issues.”

There are a number of ways the First Nation encourages openness and accountability, including monthly meetings to ensure regular opportunities to discuss current issues. Whether financial or social, all issues are on the table at these meetings and everyone is encouraged to participate.

“We have spent a great deal of time developing policies and procedures for every activity,” says Schiffner. “We have also spent a lot of money and a lot of time training our staff to be computer-literate. Everyone has a PC; we are on a LAN (local area network); most of us have Internet access for



Chief **Kim Baird** of the Tsawwassen First Nation believes the band should be operated like a business or municipal government.

Across the country, First Nations are developing good governance practices that are critical to building strong, self-sustaining communities. First Nations are working to adopt enhanced accountability mechanisms in support of good governance.

research. There isn’t anyone here who is not capable of operating a computer. We also put on a lot of courses throughout the year, most of which are very inexpensive. For example, every year we put on a budget workshop so that our budgets are done completely and accurately.”

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**“Tsawwassen First Nation...”**  
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The budget is, of course, of paramount importance to the community. The annual budgets are approved by the Chief and Council and are ratified by the community before being put into effect. In addition, at the end of each year, the previous year’s budget is presented and gone over so that the community members can collectively decide what should be done about any shortages or excess funds. According to Schiffner, “We have been very fortunate

in having as Chief — **Kim Baird** — a very strong and bright individual who recognizes the need for controls.”

“There are many issues involved in running an efficient reserve,” says Schiffner. “We have by-laws covering everything. We have tried to fashion our by-laws so that they are almost identical to the neighbouring community. This makes the neighbouring community feel more comfortable and it also makes it easier to enforce.”

Capable, dedicated staff round out the successful business “team” on the

reserve. Their efforts are both respected and appreciated. Says Schiffner, “We are trying to update our staff and keep them abreast of new developments and to assist them to perform their duties — with as little stress as possible.”

With a strong Chief and Council, a capable and efficient Director of Operations, dedicated staff and very involved members, the Tsawwassen First Nation is well positioned for building on community success and prosperity in the years to come. ★

## Membertou Keeps its Site Set on Accountability

by Raymond Lawrence

**I**n a process it began two decades ago, the Membertou Band in Nova Scotia has taken some huge steps when it comes to the issues of transparency and accountability.

According to Membertou’s Director of Operations, **Bernd Christmas**, the community’s long-running accountability efforts just make good business sense. These are practices they feel will contribute to good relations and encourage business ventures, partnerships and investments. Membertou operates under the belief that the investments it is currently making to enhance its accountability will result in an even greater future return.

The picture the community creates on its Web page gives a good sense of Membertou’s financial direction. It compares past and present budgets, breaking down how and where that money was invested, and how the band has embarked on a rigorous plan to reduce its debt. The facts and figures are clearly and concisely laid out, and illustrated with charts. The Web site also highlights some of the community’s goals, and how they are being achieved through sound financial practices.

“We started the site back in February with the idea that we would open up the books to the general community.



We hand-deliver our statements to community members so they receive it in any event, but we thought we would like to share that with government departments so we decided to put it on the Web page,” says Christmas. He notes that the Web page even includes the breakdown of the Chief and Council’s annual honorariums.

“To even further build on our accountability and transparency efforts, on September 5 we started an International Standards Organization (ISO) 9000 certification process in partnership between Indian Affairs, the Business Development Bank of Canada and ourselves,” he says. ISO 9000 is a measurement to ensure something meets a global standard.

“If you have the certification, then you know there are policies, procedures, checks and balances, and all the rules and regulations are in place and that it is a safe organization to do business with. We’ve been told that we’re the first band to begin the implementation of it, and we’ve also been

told that we’re the first tribal group in the entire continent to start this certification,” says Christmas.

“This process will go on for 12 months. Then next September, we will bring in people to test us to see if we pass so we can be completely certified.”

“It increases administrative costs slightly because there has to be a paper or electronic trail constantly generated,” he says of the ISO process. “There has to be a document storage system developed and things like that...but once everyone is familiar with it, it should move along quickly.

“The end result is that it might cost some dollars in the short run, but in the long run we plan on showing our government partners that we will handle grants, loans and so on with the utmost care and they can see that the dollars have gone to good use. On the private sector side, we anticipate that our economy will grow because business will want to have a relationship with us because they know they can count on the band being very efficient.”

Visit the Membertou Web site at [www.membertou.ca](http://www.membertou.ca) ★

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

# Think Tank Opens Door on Understanding Governance Challenges

by Wendy MacIntyre

**H**ow good governance supports healthy, sustainable communities was the focus of a recent well-attended workshop in Ottawa. “The Governance Challenge: A Think Tank for Leaders,” organized by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), brought together First Nations leaders, academics, economic and social community practitioners, and federal government representatives.

The workshop’s goal was to develop a better understanding about the governance challenges facing First Nations, share experiences and determine opportunities for evolving new approaches.

**Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano**, a member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, contributed her insights as a former social worker, university professor of Native studies and Co-Director of Research for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

She challenged the federal government to find a solution to the present “fragmented funding programs with criteria designed in Ottawa or Toronto.” This system undermines the ability of Aboriginal professionals to deliver culturally appropriate services, she said. Another disadvantage she pointed out was the fierce competition that limited funding sets up between individual communities. This merely reinforces First Nations’ isolation, she emphasized, and prevents them from sharing information and experiences.

She saw First Nations leaders’ biggest challenges as “separating administration from the uncertainties of politics and developing a pool of skilled personnel.” Brant Castellano recommended identifying students with the potential skills a community needs, and supporting their development for future roles as their First

Nation’s “technicians and teachers, entrepreneurs and social workers.”

The crucial importance of human resources in good governance and economic health was a principle echoed by Professor **Joseph P. Kalt** of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. As Co-Director of the 12-year Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Kalt has seen plenty of conclusive evidence that “economic development only requires one natural resource and every society has it — human beings.”

“The solution to economic development,” he affirmed, “is to build a nation in which both businesses and human beings can flourish.” The key, he said, is “the institutions through which tribes govern, the ways they organize themselves to accomplish collective tasks.”

Kalt also presented the Harvard Project’s findings on the characteristics that effective Aboriginal governments must have. These include stable institutions and policies; fair and effective dispute resolution; separation of politics from business management; a competent bureaucracy; and cultural “match.”

This idea that government institutions should “match” or reflect people’s cultural traditions was one on which INAC Deputy Minister **Shirley Serafini** focused in addressing the Think Tank: “Harvard’s research has shown that the effectiveness of governance institutions depends on their legitimacy and a key aspect of legitimacy is cultural



Photo credit: Lisanna Sullivan

**Adolphus Cameron**, Western Area Regional Chief, Grand Council of Treaty 3, addressing the Think Tank.

fit,” she said. “Citizen engagement’ is a key to enabling First Nations to design, develop and implement effective governance institutions.”

INAC’s Director General of Self-Government **Barry Dewar** spoke to participants about the *Governance Continuum* — a tool developed by First Nations and departmental representatives that can be used to map governance capacities. Dewar emphasized that this tool is part of INAC’s effort to help develop “a shared vision and action plans for strengthening governance systems and capacities, adapted to the needs of specific communities.”

For more information about the *Governance Continuum* or the Think Tank, contact **Paulette Panzeri**, A/Director, Self-Government Policy Directorate at (819) 997-8258, or e-mail [panzerip@inac.gc.ca](mailto:panzerip@inac.gc.ca) ★

# Fort Albany: Regaining Control

## *Building a community, Building a future*

**L**ucy Sutherland, Fort Albany's band manager, has fought two battles in the building that now serves as the band office in Fort Albany. The first battle was for her self; the second for her community.

The building used to be Ste. Anne's residential school, where Sutherland, along with most other children from the James Bay coast, fought for survival.

"This room used to be where the dishwasher was," Sutherland says, surveying her office as if observing it for the first time.

"I try not to think about it, it leads to..." she shudders slightly. "The darker side comes out."

But there was at least one lesson from her schooling that Sutherland has found useful here in this office.

"After you've been through residential school," she says, "you can get through anything."

It's that sort of personal confidence that helped Sutherland fight her second battle here — the battle for control of the First Nation's books.

Three years ago the community was so broke and the finances in such disarray that Indian Affairs intervened, threatening to cut off funding if things weren't straightened out.



Fort Albany  
Chief **Mike Metatawabin**

**"You have to look beyond yourself and see that we are one community. There is no room for one faction to run crazy with things and drop people."**

Sutherland started work that same year.

"Things were a mess," she says. "Now they're okay."

More than okay, according to **Fran Bright**, Fort Albany's Northern Store manager. She cashed \$114,000 in pay cheques for community members last pay day.

"That's a major increase," Bright says. And that doesn't include the construction workers at the school.

In a community of 900 people, against all odds for employment in First Nations, just about anyone who wants a job in Fort Albany, has one.

### **In 1997: "Things were out of control"**

Things were different in Fort Albany back in 1997, especially at the band office. Just about everyone involved is reluctant to pinpoint how large the community's debt was, but officials at Indian Affairs put it this way:

"The debt was unacceptably high. Things were out of control. We had real concerns that they had run up such a debt and had so little left," spokesperson **Don Gauthier** says.

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### **Police intervention**

There was one particular day when the financial mess and the political consequences came to a head.

Chief **Mike Metatawabin** says it's a day he'll never forget. He wasn't chief then, just one of a group of persistent community members, intent on cleaning up the mess.

Additional officers from the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service had arrived at the airport to provide security in the ever-increasing atmosphere of uncertainty where chief and council seemed to be holding their community hostage.

But people in Fort Albany feared the police were there to take sides, to support a chief and council that lacked the support of their community.

"We blockaded the gates at the airport," Metatawabin says. "I will never forget that's when everybody stood together."

"The community has to congratulate themselves for knowing the difference between right and wrong."

The police stepped back, and on that day, the community took control.

### **Third party management: A step up**

But first, Indian Affairs took control of the books. And as difficult as that was, Metatawabin says third party management wasn't rock bottom for the community, it was the first step up.

“The bottom was when we had a council who didn’t have the foresight to realize the community was not satisfied with how things were going,” he says. “They didn’t respond to requests for change.”

After two years of personally badgering chief and council to respect the wishes of the community, in 1997, Metatawabin says he “applauded” the federal government’s intervention.

There’s not the least bit of irony in his voice when he talks about asking Indian Affairs to examine the band’s books.

“What we did was self-government,” he says. “We saw something that was not operating like an accountable government should and we said no.”

Later on, he explains the years of protest that led to the change in band government like this: “If you choose not to get involved in the affairs of your community, then you’re part of everything that’s going on — the poverty, the abuse of power. Every person has to think about being part of the change.”

“If you’re facing a crisis in your community and you believe you can make it better,” says the voice of experience, “if you believe in it — do it now. Don’t wait for someone to say go. The longer you wait, the longer your kids are at risk.”

“I don’t want my son cleaning up after me,” Metatawabin adds of his incentive to get involved and stay involved in politics. “I’d rather have a well-constructed environment for him to grow and prosper.”



**Faces of the future** — Charlotte Gillies (centre) and the rest of the young people gathered at Fort Albany’s youth centre look forward to the new school and suggest a bowling alley should be next on the list of community projects.

## Quick recovery

But no one, not even Metatawabin as the newly elected chief in 1998, could have guessed that Fort Albany would be out of third party management so quickly.

“When we got in, we were under third party,” he says. “I’m looking at a mountain thinking, there’s no way in hell I can do this.”

But Lucy Sutherland had a few tools for climbing that mountain. They included a “remedial management steering committee” that still meets every Wednesday to discuss spending. The tool box also included

many hours of overtime spent filing, fixing and restructuring a badly battered administration.

But mostly, Sutherland’s tool box contained integrity: “To be here every-day at work so that people will see, by your actions, how determined you are to make change in your own community.” Sutherland led by example.

So did Metatawabin. And the community didn’t just follow, people took on their own leadership roles. Even Indian Affairs noticed.

“The entire community was dedicated to getting that deficit down,” Gauthier says. “And they did.”

## “All of us have the sense we need to be accountable”

In May 1999, much to his surprise, the third party manager left — partly because the unity in the community was so evident.

Government officials came to the community with a pre-signed contract to extend the third party management.

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But after being treated to a luncheon and some socializing with community members; after being treated like people instead of enemies, the officials took a time out.

Metatawabin remembers the conversation after the break: "Okay, Mike, we're going to grant you your community back."

But it wasn't up to Indian Affairs — the community members had already returned that sense of togetherness to themselves.

"All of us have the sense that we need to be accountable," Metatawabin says. "When things go right, the whole community benefits. When things go wrong, we're all a part of it."

That sense of accountability will see even the co-manager departing from the Fort Albany band office shortly.

## **Less pain: more hope**

The community is thriving. Having overcome its past, the future is full of possibilities.

There will be new homes and a community-owned hydro grid to power them. There will be a new

school, built with foresight on high ground, so it can be used as a flood evacuation centre. There is less pain and more hope than three short years ago, some would say more than ever.

"Of course, I'd like more money," Sutherland says. "But I'm sure, with strategic planning, we can get where we want to go from here."

"We'd like to get some input from the youth, to see what they'd like to see in their community in five years," she adds. "Their ideas are important to the future."

## **"Before there was nothing"**

You don't have to go far from Sutherland's office to find Fort Albany's youth, or their ideas. There's a youth centre on the top floor of the residential-school-cum-band-office where the teens' music blares in defiance of the nuns' ghosts.

The new school is hot on the list of reasons why Fort Albany is a good place to be, according to the assembled group. And all of the students say they're looking forward to returning to their community after they complete post-secondary education.

Fifteen-year-old **Charlotte Gillies** says she'll be back as a nurse after college "to help around my community." Her younger brother **George**, 14, says he's not sure what his career plans are but he'll definitely return to Fort Albany to pursue them "because I live here, it's my home," he says.

And there's no doubt in the minds of the group that their community will grow with them. There's high hopes of a theatre, a swimming pool and a bowling alley in the community, before they're too old to enjoy them.

"Before there was nothing," **Junior Edwards**, 14, says when asked about his parents' youth. "No youth centre, nothing."

## **"Anybody could have done it."**

The youth have already inherited what Metatawabin says he found when he entered politics.

"The seeds were already planted," he says. "It was just a matter of cultivating what was there. Anybody could have done it." ✨



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# Community Development Plan Key to Accountability for Wagmatcook First Nation

by Wendy MacIntyre

About seven years ago, **Mary Louise Bernard**, an accountant, decided to run for Chief and challenge the way her First Nation community was being administered.

The Mi'kmaq First Nation of Wagmatcook, Cape Breton Island, was then in a bad way. According to **Brian Arbuthnot**, currently a Special Adviser to the First Nation, tradespeople and other suppliers were knocking on the Council's door demanding payment. The community's overdraft charges with the local bank amounted to as much as \$60,000 a year.

Bernard was elected Chief, and set about transforming the situation. First, she went to the Regional Office of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and asked for some time to get the community's finances in order.

"It was hard for her to say, 'this is how bad things are,'" says Arbuthnot. "But that changed the way the government looked at the community."

As a result of the Chief's new clear-cut policies and administrative reorganization, conditions in Wagmatcook began to improve.

Today, the community is free of debt. In fact, it has the third-highest budget surplus of all First Nations communities in the Atlantic Region. Work is under way on a \$2.6-million enterprise centre that will support the community's tourism goals. Canada Post is opening an office in Wagmatcook, as is the Toronto Dominion Bank — all evidence that the community is flourishing.

"At certain times of the year, you can't find people to fill jobs because everyone is working," Arbuthnot says.

The key to Wagmatcook's success is results-oriented community development planning. "All the programs serving the community go into the plan," Arbuthnot explains. "We look on these plans as contracts with the community and the federal government."

Last year, work began on developing a formal model that would support short- and long-term planning, and involve the whole community. Undertaking this project is the Wagmatcook Joint Community Planning Committee, with representatives from several Atlantic First Nations and federal departments, including Public Works and Government Services Canada, Natural Resources Canada and INAC. The Cities and Environment Unit of DalTech, Dalhousie University, is providing expertise in developing the model plan.

Having the right data is crucial if community development planning is to work. The first phase of the project therefore determined the information that First Nations need for community planning, and where to find it. The second phase focused on gathering and analyzing data required to develop



Chief **Mary Louise Bernard** helped transform her community's debt-ridden situation.

the plan. The third phase involves the actual construction of the model plan, which is being tested in two First Nations this fall.

"We believe a community plan built by the community and supported by the Council will help accountability," Arbuthnot says.

Many First Nations feel frustrated with the current sectoral way of doing business with the federal government, he adds. The different administrative requirements of the various departments' funding programs can severely hamper a community's ability to plan reasonably for the long term.

Arbuthnot would like to see all federal program monies flowing through INAC, for example, in a "single-funding agreement." "The department could then ask to see our community plan, and build our funding around it."

"We have to change from our side the way we look at the federal government, and see things from a business perspective," Arbuthnot concludes. ✪



# Assembly of First Nations Furthers Good Governance Initiatives

by Judy Whiteduck, Assembly of First Nations

**A**ccountability, like communications, is paramount to good governance.

Although the mainstream media have generalized in the recent past about First Nations' lack of accountability, the management of the majority of First Nations governments is *sound* and *respects* the needs of their constituencies.

First Nations communities and the Assembly of First Nations have maintained and furthered initiatives to improve issues relating to good governance and accountability. With the guidance of leaders, past national resolutions and recommendations made in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) Report, there has been much support for initiatives such as the National Table on Fiscal Relations; the Assembly of First Nations-Certified General Accountants Association of Canada Initiative (AFN-CGA Initiative) and the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association (AFOA).

The National Table on Fiscal Relations represents a national co-operative effort between the Assembly of First Nations and the federal government. It is a solid step toward developing a new fiscal relationship between First Nations and Canada, as recommended by RCAP.

Through the National Table, technical tables have been established to support good governance and examine the parameters of accountability to First Nations citizens — and responsibility of all stakeholders. The First Nations and federal government members of these technical tables are exploring options to enhance revenue capacity and greater economic development; ways to address accountability, to clarify responsibilities and promote investor confidence; facilitate the use of data and statistics

among First Nations; and examine options for more stable and predictable financial transfers to First Nations.

A priority of the National Table is to develop a suite of national First Nations Fiscal Institutions. It is proposed that the Indian Taxation Advisory Board evolve into a First Nations Tax Commission, and that a First Nations Finance Authority, a First Nations Financial Management Board and a First Nations Statistical Institute be developed.

The AFN-CGA Initiative promotes practical, workable solutions as part of an overall approach to capacity development. Helping First Nations address the financial management and accountability needs of community members was key to this initiative's success.

This two-year initiative resulted in a Final Report in July 2000, which included 10 recommendations towards:

- approval of the draft *Guide to First Nations Accounting and Reporting Standards* based on principles of reporting needs to First Nations citizens;
- development of useful reporting tools, financial management standards, practices, definitions and institutions;
- simplified reporting mechanisms;
- development of financial management capacity;
- ensuring resources are made available to train and retain financial officers; and
- resources for appropriate financial management practices based on the shared interest of a new fiscal relationship.

The AFOA is a national professional development institution focused on building the financial management skills and capacity of Aboriginal financial managers across Canada.



Established in 1999 with support from the AFN-CGA Initiative, the association is run by its members and works closely with provincial, regional and territorial chapters. The AFOA is currently ensuring that full national chapter representation is established. The chapters also play a significant role in delivering the association's Certified Financial Manager program and accounting designation.

In future, the AFOA will also work toward aiding and implementing specific AFN-CGA recommendations.

Commenting on the foresight behind these connected initiatives, **Doris I. Bear**, the AFN's Executive Director, Fiscal Relations Secretariat, says: "...The RCAP Report saw need for a renewed relationship, one based on stability, predictability, accountability and the ability to foster self-reliance, while our national resolutions have also called for flexibility, fairness, certainty, comparability, clear revenue jurisdiction, economic incentive and efficiency with established legal frameworks (Delgamuukw)...."

"These guiding factors have led each of our initiatives," Bear says. "Our discussion of renewed fiscal arrangements are to support self-determination, self-government implementation and efforts to attain a higher standard of living in communities." \*





# Portrait

## Builder of Bridges

Mike “Kanantakeron” Mitchell  
Mohawk

Grand Chief, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne

by Fred Favel

Bridges have been a major factor in Mike Mitchell’s life. From the age of 18, when he first worked on a steel bridge span outside of Syracuse, New York, he has dedicated his life to the building of many kinds of bridges — bridges of understanding and tolerance between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and between his Nation and the various branches of government, and even bridges between his own people (those who follow the traditional Longhouse practices of the Iroquois Confederacy, and those who have adopted the elected band system). And in the heart of his community stands the International Bridge which divides the Mohawk territory, but at the same time links Canada and the United States.

At Mike Mitchell’s birth, his grandfather, a faithkeeper and a traditional leader of the Longhouse people, chose him to carry on his knowledge. “He said, ‘I don’t want this child to be baptized or to be taken to school. I picked him to pick up what I know and I’m going to pass it on to him.’”

For his first six years, Mitchell lived with his grandfather — a life without electricity, roads or non-Aboriginal people — but filled with Elders’ traditional teachings.

The Mohawk territory on which Mitchell was raised consists of picturesque islands along the St. Lawrence River and straddles the borders of Ontario, Quebec and the state of New York. His parents and six brothers and sisters lived on nearby Cornwall Island so that his father could be closer to work and the children could attend school. Mitchell’s parents decided that he should also attend the Mohawk School on Cornwall Island. “It was a culture shock,” he says. “I never had seen a car, I had never seen that many people. When I saw my first train, I thought it was alive...I didn’t know what it was so I climbed a tree...” Later that day, he stole a boat and went back to his grandparents.

However, he gradually adjusted, and even though he spoke no English, his classmates helped him along. He was singled out in class after proudly stating to the priest who was there to teach religion, “I follow the Longhouse.” The priest took him by the ear and stood him in front of the class, describing Mitchell as a pagan who would go nowhere in life unless he accepted contemporary religious beliefs. “It left a lot of scars,” Mitchell says.

His grandfather’s teachings made Mitchell determined to succeed. He became an honours student, but left just short of completing his Grade 12. “I grew up pretty fast. By Grade 10, I was a father.” When Mitchell had just three exams left to write for his high school diploma, his brother told him: “There’s a big bridge going up near Syracuse, and they’re hiring a lot of Mohawks...You have to support your son.”

With his brother’s help, Mitchell began his new career as a steel worker, but it wasn’t easy. “When people talk about Mohawks not being afraid of heights, I go back to my first day...There was fear.” After three years of high steel work, Mitchell decided to pursue his education again. He was one of seven Aboriginal students selected out of 300 applicants for a new filmmaking program at the National Film Board of Canada. Mitchell was soon filming documentaries of his own community in partnership with an established film group.

Films became a tool for his advocacy work with First Nations people. Along with a film crew, he documented the blockade in his community of the International Bridge on December 18, 1968.

After a brief spell travelling in the U.S., he returned home and organized the takeover of islands in the St. Lawrence which had been leased to non-Aboriginal people for 999 years for \$9 a year. More police, more confrontations and another documentary film followed. In 1974, Mitchell left the National Film Board to join the North American Indian Travelling College, dedicated to working with Elders and youth, and to encouraging young people to get an education and stay in touch with their culture. He spent 10 years with the College.

In 1984, many Elders who were dissatisfied with the politics in the community approached Mitchell to run for Chief. They wanted him to unite the many factions that had arisen over the years. Whether to run was a difficult decision for him, as he had been raised in a culture that saw the government-imposed election system as one cause of his community’s problems. Putting his strong beliefs aside, he ran and was elected Chief. He relayed the same message to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and officials in other levels of government: “You’ve got to give Akwesasne a chance to take responsibility for their community, of developing the kind of instruments that they need to have — that rather than use the borders, boundaries and governments against us, you’ve got to give us a chance to develop our own leadership, our own community.”

Shortly after becoming Chief, Mitchell completed his high school education through correspondence courses, graduating the same day as his two children.

Mike Mitchell has been Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne for 15 of the last 16 years. “I don’t want to give the impression that you have to be militant to gain anything, because as I matured, I had another strong side and that was the ability to speak, to negotiate.”

Mitchell and his Council have developed a manual on a Code of Conduct for Leaders. “We developed our own instruments on financial accountability, reporting mechanisms...What we did in Akwesasne is build that in with the community first, with the people. We are accountable to them first...How you behave as a leader in a community, the relationships, the responsibilities — they are all written down and we hold ourselves accountable.”

With respect to the sensitive area of the elected system of governance, “We still have balloting,” Mitchell says. “You look for those compromises. You look for those traditional principles. You invoke them in a modern format...there still exists the traditional government of the Mohawk Nation and they still have leaders over there. The difference is, rather than fighting, I fought for ways that we could work together.”

Mike Mitchell’s life has been about both preserving the past and building for the future. “There is always the saying we want the best of both worlds. I look at it as keeping the best of both worlds.”

**Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.**



Photo credit: Courtesy of Mike Mitchell



Photo credit: Courtesy of Mike Mitchell

Kanantakeron and grandson Kaheroton.

