

# Circles of Light

April 2000 — Number 1

Premier  
issue

## Tapping Into Economic Development: Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup

by Jane McDonald

Joining an ancient First Nation traditional skill and the latest technology, the First Nation of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, just south of Maniwaki, Quebec, is tapping into the rapidly growing market for maple syrup. Canada leads the world in maple syrup production, and Quebec producers make up 90 percent of a national industry whose exports are expected to exceed \$226 million by the year 2002.

The First Nation Council, led by Chief **Jean-Guy Whiteduck**, recognized this potential for sustainable economic development in the community. In 1998, **Verna McGregor**, the First Nation's Community Economic Development Officer, started the project rolling. She co-ordinated a feasibility study with Master of Business Administration (MBA) students at McGill University, through a Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO) program. Financed by the Royal Bank of Canada and CESO, this MBA Field Placement Program makes MBA students' expertise available to First Nations communities.

The image, "circles of light," symbolizes a new era of co-operative efforts to build stronger Aboriginal communities and economies. These circles of light reflect a powerful belief in the future of Aboriginal people. The image also refers to the rising sun as a symbol of new beginnings. The five rays of the sun represent the five challenges Aboriginal people are undertaking in economic development — skills and experience, access to capital, lands and resources, markets and economic infrastructure.



Photo credit: Jane McDonald

The operation employs six First Nation members nearly 24 hours a day for nine solid weeks.

Following the feasibility study, the First Nation looked for an individual with the required technical expertise, and in February 1999, hired horticulturist **Thomas Ferguson** as project manager.

Together, he and Chief Whiteduck, McGregor, forestry technicians and

the community manager prepared a business plan and got the project under way. As a result, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg has turned a 57-hectare mixed growth of maple hardwoods in the centre of its reserve into a 10,000-tap maple syrup operation.

It took about a year to establish Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup, an oil-fired sap-processing plant that created 15 jobs during its construction phase and currently keeps six employees busy nearly 24 hours a day for nine

"Tapping Into Economic..."  
continued on page 2



Indian and Northern  
Affairs Canada

Affaires indiennes  
et du Nord Canada

Canada

**“Tapping Into Economic...”**  
continued from page 1

solid weeks. The operation works on a vacuum that keeps the sap moving through several thousand kilometres of plastic tubing into three 8,700-litre fibreglass holding tanks. This process can produce approximately 680 litres of syrup every 10 hours.

“We use plastic spiles (spouts) and tubing instead of the traditional buckets because our operations are enormous,” Ferguson explains. “It’s more cost-effective, and the modern methods do less damage to the trees.”

The company expects to diversify in its first year of operation by transforming maple syrup into secondary products including maple sugar, candy and butter. Ferguson’s sales projections have already exceeded initial estimates. By the end of the spring, Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup should gross \$90,000 from wholesale and retail sales.

“With approximately 50 percent combined funding from both DIAND (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) and Aboriginal Business Canada, we are looking at one aspect of our local economy that could sustain itself for years to come,” explains Chief Whiteduck. “There is a learning process we go through as we realize what aspects of our economy take priority over others. We decided that we had a booming maple syrup operation at our fingertips and Tom, in his role as manager, has proven to be enthusiastic in leading operations.”



By the end of the spring, Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup should gross \$90,000 from wholesale and retail sales.



The First Nation’s maple syrup operation uses plastic spouts and tubing instead of traditional buckets.

Like all packers who trade internationally and within the provinces, Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup is registered with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. A recent visit by Health Canada also produced a glowing appraisal, giving the operation just one more reason to be optimistic about its lead-free product and strong sanitation program.

By 2005, Awazibi Pure Maple Syrup expects to have diversified, grown and even transformed itself in order to meet the growing demand of a world market. ✨

## Our New Publication

Welcome to the first issue of DIAND’s new publication, *Circles of Light*. It replaces our former newsletter, *Transition*. *Circles of Light*’s vibrant, bold look mirrors the optimistic vision of our main theme — enhancing the quality of life of Aboriginal people across Canada. Every issue of *Circles of Light* will feature stories on Aboriginal people’s outstanding progress and successes in building stronger communities and economies. Our aim is to showcase, and share with our readers, as many of these success stories as we can.

Photo credits: Jane McDonald





# Wemindji Cree's Ground-Breaking Mineral Exploration Spurs Skills Development

by Raymond Lawrence

**T**his past winter the unanticipated flurry of prospecting activity along James Bay had people talking.

In a short period, 140 claims were staked in a mineral-rich area. What's causing the talk in the mineral world is the fact that Cree people staked these claims.

For six years, a steady buzz of exploration on Cree territory brought no benefits to the Cree. Unwilling to wait and hope that a nearby mine would ultimately benefit their community, the Wemindji Cree took matters into their own hands.

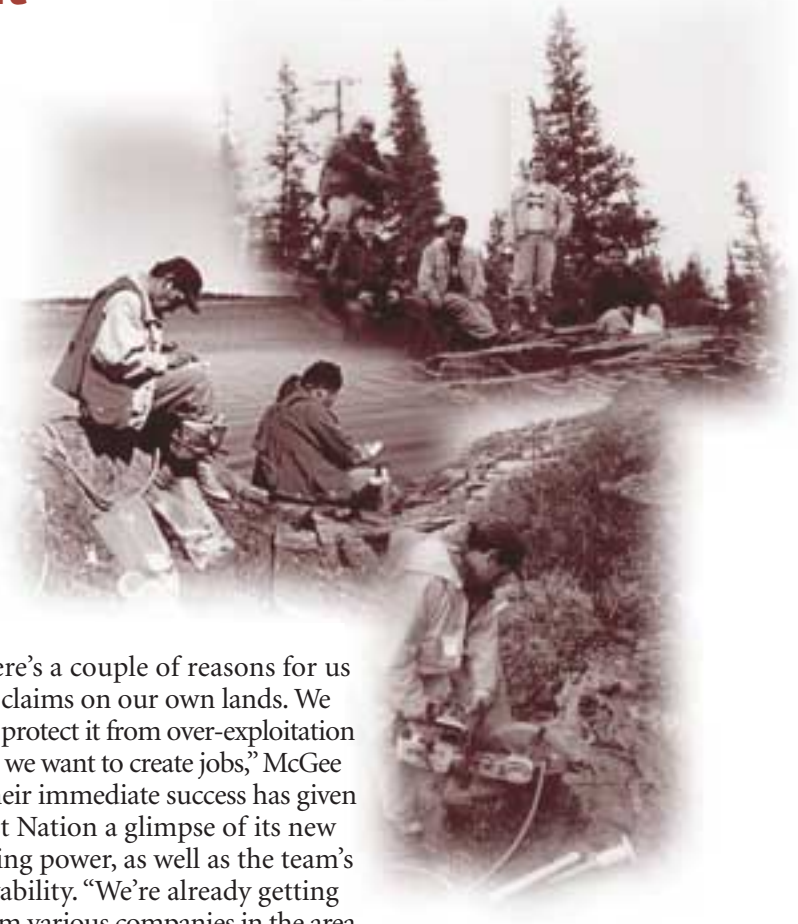
"A couple of years back myself, the Chief and council said let's stop fighting it and join it, as it was the only way we were able to start taking immediate control back over our land. So we formed a company called Wemindji Exploration that is 100-percent-owned by the First Nation," says **Mike McGee**, general manager of the First Nation's economic development corporation and of Wemindji Explorations. Through Human Resources Development Canada, they obtained training dollars for a six-person team. Then a three-year preparation process got under way.

The team undertook studies in geology, geophysics, prospecting, staking claims, and how to use the tools of the trade.

"We just incorporated our company in September 1999, and in December and January, right after incorporating our company, we went out and staked claims on our land and this is unheard of. All the other mining companies' jaws hit the ground," McGee says. "We caught them off guard and we're creating some sort of turmoil in the mining industry in Quebec where, historically, Native people haven't been active. We didn't fight...we just jumped right in and started doing what they're doing."

"There's a couple of reasons for us staking claims on our own lands. We want to protect it from over-exploitation but also we want to create jobs," McGee says. Their immediate success has given the First Nation a glimpse of its new leveraging power, as well as the team's employability. "We're already getting calls from various companies in the area who want to meet with us, share our claims, and to see if our guys can go work for them as subcontractors to their operations."

"It will be interesting this summer because we're planning on spending \$150,000 on doing more research on the area that we've recently claimed. We're quite confident that when we send out our soil analysis and the laboratory results come in, there's going to be some pretty interesting showings of precious metals," he says. "We intend on continuing staking claims for the years to come so we can protect lands and create jobs. It's isn't about digging a big hole in the ground; it's about regaining something that was inadvertently signed away over 25 years ago." Under the 1975 *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*, the Cree, Inuit and Naskapi obtained ownership over 14,000 square kilometres of territory.



McGee says he sees people from other Cree communities getting involved: "In terms of job creation and skill development, this trend will spread throughout the other nine Cree communities making up the James Bay area, each of whom has traditional title to a large area." This summer the Wemindji Cree will be working with the Eastmain Cree, helping them train people as prospectors while pursuing claim developments in the area.

"If things go well, depending on what we find and how good our results are, we're looking at forming a junior company that would be on the stock exchange that people can buy shares into as early as next year," McGee concludes.

For more information, visit the company Web site at [www.wemex.ca](http://www.wemex.ca). \*

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

# Inuvialuit Projects Inc. Increasing Annual Revenue By Fifty Percent

by Diane Koven

Residents of Aklavik in the far north-western corner of the Northwest Territories have priority when it comes to hiring for the Komakuk Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line Site Clean-up in the Yukon. That's because they live in the nearest Inuvialuit community to the site — approximately one hour away by Twin Otter aircraft.

The Komakuk clean-up contract involves the demolition of the first DEW Line Station built in Canada. It is the largest clean-up contract — valued at \$9.7 million — undertaken to date by Inuvialuit Projects Inc. (IPI) of Inuvik, NWT. Founded in 1993, IPI is a wholly Aboriginally-owned company, a general contractor specializing in contracts with an environmental clean-up focus. IPI also takes on general contracting work for commercial, industrial and institutional building services.

Northerners have the big advantage of knowing and understanding the area and its challenges, says **Gary Kozak**, former General Manager of IPI. "Working at remote northern sites presents unique logistical challenges which companies from the south may not be aware of," he explains. The distances and the arctic weather conditions can create major problems and delays, leading to lost revenue. Transportation costs to bring necessary supplies and equipment to the site can be astronomical as everything must be brought in on ships that arrive at the site only once a year. Air transport for personnel and camp supplies can also be very costly.

Working in partnership with other companies associated with the Inuvialuit Development Corporation (IDC), IPI has expanded into a variety of areas.



The Komakuk Distant Early Warning (DEW) line site.

Proof of its success is the fact that its revenue has increased by approximately 50 percent each year since 1996. The various projects it undertakes require a number of diverse skills and IPI's management and staff include engineers, building construction managers, certified technical staff and general workers. The company creates employment for 200 to 300 people annually, in addition to generating local business opportunities. On the DEW Line project, 80 percent of those hired are Aboriginal.

Attracting and keeping reliable, qualified staff in the North is always a challenge. IPI seems to have met this challenge by creating an atmosphere of teamwork. "Management and staff are on a performance incentive program," says Kozak. "Their incomes

are tied to the health and well-being of the company. We are not top-handed in how the company is managed. We think that we offer an environment where staff are encouraged to assume broader responsibilities. This has been part of our strategy for success and I am confident that the company can continue to prosper and grow in the North with the wide-ranging opportunities on the near horizon."

IPI has opened a regional office in Yellowknife and is on the lookout for opportunities elsewhere north of 60° — in the Yukon and in Nunavut. The future looks bright for this innovative young company.

For more information, visit the company's Web site at [www.ipi.inuvialuit.com](http://www.ipi.inuvialuit.com). ✪

# Keeping Capital from Capital Projects On Reserves

by Raymond Lawrence

When it comes to major on-reserve capital projects, a lack of skilled professionals can mean a big drain on a community's financial resources. Paying for the services of an outside architect or engineer is an expensive proposition.

In 1990, three Manitoba First Nations joined forces to reduce, and ideally eliminate, this kind of economic leakage. They created Ininew, an organization of professional project managers which helps transfer skills to First Nations project co-ordinators. Ininew is also building a team of highly skilled Aboriginal professionals. Over 40 percent of Ininew's core complement of experienced project managers are First Nations members.

The organization is 85-percent-owned by the Split Lake Cree First Nation, the Chemawawin Nation and the Mosakahiken Cree Nation. It does between \$2 and \$3 million in business annually in professional engineering and architectural design services, and project management expertise for capital projects in First Nations communities.

"The three First Nations who founded the company...had managed capital projects in their own communities, and they wanted to offer the same service. The idea was to try to realize as much of the economic benefits as possible through major capital projects on-reserve," says **Gary Einarson**, Ininew President.

In the past, it was too often the case that a contractor would be handed a job and complete the project, in the process creating very little employment for people on the reserve. "With us, the First Nations provide many of the resources necessary, such as gravel-crushing as well as employment, because you don't want the money from a project to trickle out, you want it to stay right on-reserve," Einarson emphasizes. Ininew contractors use the labour pool already on reserves, and rent as much heavy equipment as possible from First Nations.



Ininew is also set up to give Aboriginal architects and engineers starting out an opportunity to learn from veterans in the field: "The way it works out is the non-Aboriginal engineering component consists of people in their mid-50s to mid-60s who want to put something back, and the Aboriginal professionals are younger and they are learning. That was the idea so that over the next 10 years, we'd have trained and experienced engineers to help train others."

"There's benefits in learning to manage projects...and I think in our case we found out that most First Nations have the skills to manage a project with some help. Our role changes because the First Nations ask fewer questions and give more directions and that's the way we like it. We consider ourselves as employees of the First Nation when we take on a project — we're the project manager and they're the owner."

Einarson adds that Ininew recently set up a partnership agreement with the Nisga'a of British Columbia: "What

they want is a five-year diminishing joint venture. They want us to help them set up the same kind of company as we have," he says. "It's a 50-50 venture and over five years, as their capacity grows, they can buy out our percentage. We formed the company as a partnership between us and the Nisga'a. We have a person out there on site and we're beginning to do work and with the signing of the treaty, there'll be a lot more."

Einarson says the reasons for this initiative are the same as those that led to Ininew's creation — to ensure that the majority of economic benefits stay on First Nations' territory.

For more information about Ininew, visit the company Web site at [www.ininew.com](http://www.ininew.com). \*



# Eel River Bar First Nation Partners With Kan-Go-Roo Playgrounds

by Wendy MacIntyre

Country-singing sensation **Shania Twain** has purchased a set, and so have the City of Saint John and First Nations throughout the Maritimes and Quebec. The highly prized commodity is playground equipment created by Kan-Go-Roo Playgrounds Ltd., a partnership venture between the Eel River Bar First Nation in northern New Brunswick, and company founder **Sylvain Lebel**.

Lebel, who first established the company in 1993, has years of experience in researching, designing and testing play systems.

The joint venture, majority-owned by the First Nation, currently employs two community members. They received specialized training working with steel and plastic to create the high-quality, innovative playground equipment built to last for generations. Kan-Go-Roo's Web site catalogue has over 300 products, designed to stimulate children's imaginations and ensure they have fun in a safe environment.

"Safety of the children is most important," says **Tim Dedam**, Eel River Bar's Economic Development Officer. "We demand that the equipment be installed according to our specifications." Kan-Go-Roo offers clients three choices for installation: a qualified professional can supervise the process; the company can arrange for a local contractor to do it; or customers can do it themselves. As well as detailed specifications, Kan-Go-Roo provides aerial plans indicating the safe distance between the various components.

"It's a wonderful business," says Dedam. "We have a playground here in the community; we can look out and see something we built ourselves."

The partnership began in 1998 when Kan-Go-Roo's founder approached Chief **Everett Martin**. "I knew they were looking for business and jobs on the reserve," says Lebel, who was interested



in breaking into the Aboriginal market. He had developed some products for First Nations communities, and realized this was a market with highly lucrative potential.

"If you want to sell to the Aboriginal community, you have to be an Aboriginal company," says Lebel. "That's why I approached the Chief."

The joint venture offers some ideal opportunities for both partners. "He had the process, the know-how and the start-up in place," says Dedam of Lebel. "We had the key to the door for the Aboriginal market. We're in a strong position because we have access to the market. We should make sure we size it up."

"We're building up the organization," says Dedam, "building up assets, and modernizing equipment." The First Nation invested in an ironworker, for example, which punches holes in sheets of metal, greatly speeding up production.

"As a high-quality playground manufacturer, we've been able to build up the credibility of the community," says Dedam. "We supply First Nations across the country and our products are second to none. It's a great asset to be the only Aboriginal supplier in the country."

Lebel is also deriving unique support from his partnership with Eel River Bar: "The Chief and Councillors are great people. They understand that market and are helping me expand it. I feel that I'm not alone anymore. It's good to have a community behind you."

Kan-Go-Roo will shortly be hiring an Aboriginal employee to focus on marketing. As the market expands, more community members will be joining the company and trained in equipment manufacture.

Kan-Go-Roo offers a free consultation service for customers. For more information, visit the company Web site at [www.kangoroo.com](http://www.kangoroo.com). ★

# Cultural Education Society Offers Favourable Winds for Trades

by Raymond Lawrence

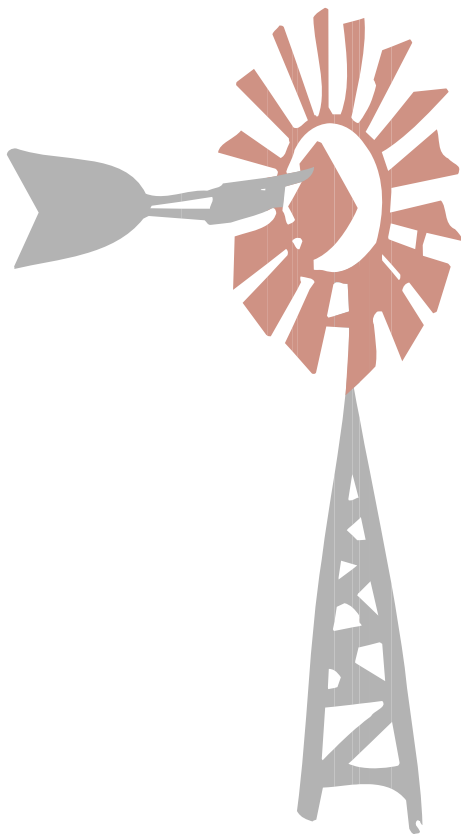
**I**t is estimated that in the next five to 10 years, as many as 40 percent of professional tradespeople will retire. In British Columbia, the Shuswap Nation is gearing up to fill that void.

The industry arm of the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society provides a number of key services to help people achieve the industry educational requirements they need to apprentice in their chosen fields.

The Aboriginal Apprenticeship and Industry Training (AAIT) initiatives range from math upgrades to actual apprentice work that results in buildings being put up by the future tradespeople. “We have a building inspection and building maintenance worker program, and entry-level carpentry, project management training. There’s a lot of opportunity out there for our people so what we want to do is provide as much education about the trades



AAIT annually recognizes the apprentice who attains the highest standing in his or her technical training in the current year. Shown here receiving the Jules Family Apprenticeship Achievement Award is **Peter-August Sjodin** (l.) with Chief **Clarence (Manny) Jules** of the Kamloops First Nation.



field as we can. We’re training to build, inspect, and maintain,” says **Rob Egan**, program director and a journeyman carpenter.

The Cultural Education Society has a Joint Apprentice Steering Committee that operates in partnership with the provincial Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission. It is the committee that signs on apprentices, rather than individual businesses, smoothing the process for participants.

“We found that First Nations people were not finishing their apprenticeships; they were having difficulty getting (enough working) hours and so forth,” Egan says. “We started encouraging people to get into apprenticeships and also we started working with them on

finishing their apprenticeships so they would become ‘red-sealed,’” he says. This certification allows them to work anywhere in Canada.

There is often not enough work in one First Nation community to enable a participant to complete an apprenticeship. But Egan says there is now more travel between First Nations who are sharing their projects, helping each other to develop their work forces. “The only way we’ll develop a skilled trades force is by having our people get the hours and finish their apprenticeships. We are planning on delivering a ‘women-in-trades’ apprentice program allowing women the chance to explore the various opportunities in the trades fields,” he says.

**“Cultural Education Society...”**  
continued on page 9

# Hard-Won Skills Helped Award-Winning Video Producer Succeed

by Wendy MacIntyre

**A**ward-winning video producer **Melanie Goodchild** first got interested in film-making through one of those twists of fate that suddenly opens a new world. At age 19, she was featured in a video about her volunteer work with a multicultural youth group in Thunder Bay, Ontario. “It was the first time I’d seen a professional film crew with a director, a sound person and a lighting person,” she recalls. “I started to ask them some questions about how to get my foot in the door.”

From that point, Goodchild, a member of the Ojibways of Pic River First Nation, launched her own dynamic career path, steadily accumulating the skills and experience she needed to make her own videos. She volunteered her services to work with a film crew in Toronto, where her duties included photocopying scripts and peeling carrots. But at the same time, she was absorbing the nitty-gritty of how a film is made. “You have to take advantage of every opportunity,” she emphasizes.

To build up her skills, Goodchild apprenticed with the Canadian Film Centre and took the Resident Filmmaker Program at the International Film and Television Workshops in Rockport, Maine. “It was hands-on, with the latest equipment, 16-millimetre camera and computerized editing. Because you’re in residence, you live and breathe film.”



Melanie Goodchild on location for *Grey Owl*.

By the age of 24, Goodchild had founded Raindancer Interactive, a multimedia communications company based in Thunder Bay where she produced interactive Web sites, CD-ROMs and videos. Today, Raindancer Interactive is exclusively devoted to video production.

When Goodchild heard that Health Canada was looking for Aboriginal youth to write and direct a video on healthy lifestyles, she immediately applied. She cited her volunteer and video production experience, including her videography workshop teaching Elders how to make a video.

“They took the chance,” she says of Health Canada, and together with a group of young Aboriginal volunteers, Goodchild wrote and directed the video, *Balance — Healing Through Helping*.

In 1997, it won an award in the “Public Service” category at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco.

That award opened the way to her next project, a video for Aboriginal youth commissioned by the Canadian Public Health Association. Goodchild co-produced, wrote and directed *The Healing Choice: You and A Career in Health* which was launched in Ottawa in February.

Goodchild says one of her outstanding opportunities was being selected to work on the feature film *Grey Owl* as trainee assistant director with Academy-award-winning director, Sir **Richard Attenborough**. “I heard

**“Hard-Won Skills Helped...”**  
continued on page 9



**"Cultural Education Society..."**  
continued from page 7

Secondary school apprenticeship initiatives introduce youth to the concept of apprenticeships, and encourage them to start early through high-school apprentice programs. The Secwepemc Cultural Education Society is working with the province on a three-year pilot project that will enable First Nations people to get the training they need to become qualified building maintenance people.

AAIT also brings in Aboriginal tradespeople as role models. "We bring them in as a demonstration to our communities that it is really happening out there, and that if you make the commitment you can succeed. That is

very important, especially for our youth. Nowadays you have to have a certificate or diploma to succeed," Egan says.

Since AAIT began in 1996, it has helped more than 100 apprentices get math upgrading. Nineteen building inspectors have graduated, and currently, there are 22 registered apprentices with an additional 16 recently signed on. Forty-two people have completed the project management training. The entry-level carpentry program has produced 36 graduates, all of whom got the kind of hands-on training that is essential for building community infrastructure. \*



**"Hard-Won Skills Helped..."**  
continued from page 8

Melanie Goodchild  
with Pierce Brosnan,  
the star of *Grey Owl*,  
at the Toronto premier  
screening.



the crew was looking for someone with an Ojibway background and some film experience," she says. She faxed her résumé and within a week, the job was hers. "I made some wonderful contacts," she says, adding that Attenborough was very encouraging and generous in sharing his knowledge and expertise.

A solid education is another essential element in Goodchild's skills base. In the fall, she will start graduate school to do an M.A. in Medical Sociology.

Her speciality subjects — healing and well-being, and coping with grief and loss — are also the topics on which she wants to produce videos.

Goodchild's ultimate goal is to write and direct a feature film, drawing on all her well-founded skills and experience, and the critical thinking she has developed in university. "I've paid my dues," she says. \*



*Circles of Light* is published by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Production: Anishinabe Printing  
Managing Editor: Wendy MacIntyre  
French Editor this issue: Jacinthe Bercier

Please address all letters, comments and requests to: *Circles of Light*, DIAND, Communications Branch, Room 1901 Les Terrasses de la Chaudière Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H4

Telephone: (819) 953-9349

Published under the authority of the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development  
Ottawa, 2000

QS-6145-001-BB-A1  
[www.inac.gc.ca](http://www.inac.gc.ca)



Printed on  
recycled paper

# Saskatoon Tribal Council Promotes Safety Through Joint-Venture Training Institute

by Michael Fisher, Saskatchewan Region

**T**he Emergency Services Training Institute (ESTI) — a joint venture between the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) and MD Ambulance Service Inc. — caters to individuals seeking a career in emergency services, and to professionals already working in the industry. It offers a complete range of medical, firefighting, safety and protective services, health services and human resources training — a combination of instruction previously unavailable.

“We felt there was a need for co-ordination of emergency services training in [Saskatchewan], plus a need to offer those types of services to Aboriginal communities,” says **Dave Dutchak**, ESTI president. “A partnership was just a natural decision.”

ESTI’s certified programs are delivered by qualified instructors at a fully-equipped facility in Martensville, just outside of Saskatoon. Off-site delivery is also available.

“There are a number of trainers in Saskatchewan but nobody that packages it,” says **Darrell Balkwill**, managing partner for STC. “There was a demand for a sort of one-stop shopping; we can give people a full menu and mix the programs according to client needs.”

ESTI has an added professional development component — including communication, organization and time-management skills — so students can round out their studies, learning more than just the technical side.

This broad spectrum of courses allows the institute to assess clients’ training requirements and deliver customized programs to meet their specific needs. For protective services organizations whose employees and volunteers require skill enhancement, the institute offers the ideal solution.



“There is a growing demand for this type of training in Aboriginal communities,” Balkwill says. “With health transfer taking place, there’s a need for medical and health training. And the safety issue, there’s a lot of emergency preparedness plans being put into place, so individuals need to be trained in that area as well.”

ESTI also offers the only fire certification program in the province — a definite plus when volunteer firefighting is such an important initiative in many Aboriginal communities.

This program, which graduated its first class in May 1999, is offered twice a year. It is designed to train professional firefighters qualified to work in the public and private sector. “It’s recognized internationally, so graduates have the opportunity to work anywhere in the world,” says Balkwill. The institute is committed to providing this type of high-level instruction in all areas of programming.

“We want to ensure we deliver a quality product that is acceptable in the industry, so we are putting out graduates that can get jobs,” Balkwill says. “Health and safety standards are increasingly becoming more stringent, so people need to be able to meet those standards.”

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development provided an Economic Development Opportunity Fund contribution to assist the institute in its first year. Since then, it has expanded the number of programs available. These include a new Emergency Medical Technician program set to begin this year to meet the demands of ESTI’s growing client base.

ESTI has high expectations for the future. “We want to branch out to other parts of Canada, do some national delivery and then also international,” says Balkwill. “We think there is a need for the type of training and services that we deliver internationally.” ✨

**T**his premier issue of *Circles of Light* focuses on the theme of skills and experience. To meet the demands of the labour market, Aboriginal people across the country are developing skills and experience in a wide range of employment and businesses. These will support stronger Aboriginal communities, and contribute to the economic health and prosperity of Canada as a whole.



# Portrait

## Something Told Me I Had To Go Home

Wayne Odjick  
Algonquin  
Entrepreneur

by Fred Favel

*He could have travelled the world as a flight engineer. But after 10 years, Wayne Odjick missed the companionship of his people and the closeness to the bush. So he began a printing business in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, an Algonquin First Nation near Maniwaki, Quebec. "I did a lot of travelling before. I'd just like to stay home and work."*

A reserve-based print shop, designed to service federal departments and Aboriginal organizations in Ottawa is not what most city dwellers would consider an economically viable business decision. Wayne Odjick had that vision and today is the owner of a community-based enterprise which proves that with a little bit of ingenuity, a lot of risk, and today's global technology, it is possible to establish a successful First Nations business without leaving family and community.

The printing business was not Odjick's initial career choice. Born in 1958 in Maniwaki, Odjick's earliest recollections are of slingshots and fishing rods, and of wanting to work as his father had in the bush.

Although his family lived near Maniwaki, Odjick's favourite place was Pockanok Lake, a remote area where his father grew up, without electricity or running water. He participated in school sports, particularly hockey, but he craved contact with the outdoors. "I always wanted to work, so when I was a little bit bigger, at Easter break, I used to bug my father about working in the bush." Odjick worked in the evenings and weekends making snowshoes. He shipped them to a company in Renfrew, and shared the resulting income with the family.

He attended an English high school where students chose to be taught in either French or English. "I went to school in the English section....Same school, but two different sections." Odjick's bilingualism comes from his fluency in the Algonquin language, not French. "When I grew up, it was always Algonquin at home."

Odjick graduated from high school in 1975. "And I moved down here (Ottawa) like all the other kids." He attended post-secondary school in Hull, across the river from Ottawa, but soon realized he wanted to do other things. Dropping out of school, he became an apprentice, fixing aircraft. "It was actually easy, because there were some people in the community already involved in the aircraft business. Like our Chief, Jean-Guy Whiteduck, who used to be a pilot for Laurentian Airways; and his brother Lionel, whom I worked with for a long time, was an aircraft maintenance engineer." He took his apprenticeship at Bradley Air Service which eventually became First Air, working with everything from small to large aircraft.

Odjick began with the basics, fixing tires and cleaning airplanes, but his immediate rapport with aircraft engineers served to move him ahead in his chosen field. "I always got along good with people, and I wanted to learn. So they gave me the opportunity... and in no time I was travelling all over the countryside, mainly up north, because they had a lot of contracts up there."

After three years of apprenticeship, he became an aircraft maintenance engineer and began what would be a 10-year stint as a flight engineer. Odjick most enjoyed working with Air Inuit: 28 days on, then take 28 days off. During his time off, he always returned home. In the mid-80s, he decided to leave his job to end the

constant travelling. While he does not care to talk about any brushes with danger in his job, he shares one story. "I flew around with two pilots for about a month straight as a flight engineer...I'd been flying with these guys every day. Something told me I had to go home and take holidays." Shortly after, the two pilots were killed when their plane crashed into the side of a mountain.

Back at Maniwaki, Odjick worked at the airport and in construction, but he also began thinking about how he could start a business in his own community. One of his cousins, Sid Cooko, had been running the presses in a print shop for the National Indian Brotherhood in Ottawa, and had just completed an offset printing diploma at George Brown College in Toronto. Odjick and his cousin put their heads together, and decided to open a print shop on reserve. With Cooko's printing experience and Odjick's contacts in the private sector, they decided they could make it work. They began with a business plan. "I told him, well, we might as well try it, because if we don't try it now, I'm going to hear about it for the rest of my life." A market study convinced them that the surrounding reserves, and proximity to Ottawa, would generate sufficient demand to get them started. They took their carefully crafted business plan to the band council office, Aboriginal Business Canada and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for funding.

Their business operations began in an old house which was jacked up and moved to a purchased piece of land. After a year of renovations and preparations, Anishinabe Printing officially opened its doors on June 1, 1993, the community's Indian Day. "Everything seemed like it was against us. We had no place to start. We had no history, no business credibility or business history." But with the support of the community and Aboriginal organizations in Ottawa, they began to develop their client base.

Anishinabe Printing has a staff of six and an impressive list of customers, including the Assembly of First Nations, Odawa Friendship Centre, National Aboriginal Forestry Association, First Nations Travel, DIAND and many other federal departments. The list goes on, and business is growing monthly. A \$95,000 press, their fourth, has been added, along with other state-of-the-art technology. Odjick is to expand the company and possibly add more staff. "What I am doing is basically what I believe I can do. It's not something special. If somebody wants to start a business, they've got to be able to feel good about it, feel confident and say, yeah! I can do that — that's what I want. And just make it happen."

On a drive through the community, Odjick points out various lakes and creeks he has fished and hunted in, and speaks with pride about the modern homes located in beautiful settings — the many reasons that make his community a wonderful place where he and his people live in comfort and security. "I don't want to branch out," he says, when asked whether he has plans to expand off the reserve. "I did a lot of travelling before, I'd just like to stay at home...We have a good team of people working here. We're happy with that; very happy with that."

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

