

Insights: A Window into the Indigenous Economy

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Abstract

In 2020, *Insights: A Window into the Indigenous Economy* began as a collaboration between the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) and Humber College. The purpose is to highlight the contributions of Indigenous peoples to the economy through open educational resources in the form of case studies. Indigenous business owners are invited to participate in a qualitative interview to discuss their entrepreneurial journeys, which are then developed into multimedia case studies. Each entrepreneur plays an active role in the creation of their respective study and has the opportunity to provide feedback and input. *Insights* aims to publish 15 case studies online, each including an interview video, written component, and teaching notes. In doing so, this initiative offers learners a wealth of accessible online resources filling a gap in available content on Indigenous entrepreneurs.

***Insights* is a direct response to the Truth and Reconciliation Report's 94 Calls to Action, specifically Calls 63 and 64 advocating for Indigenous voices to become part of the mainstream education curriculum in Canada.**

Indigenous voices have long been suppressed in business curriculums from the prioritization of Western worldviews (Woods, Dell, & Carroll, 2022). Consequently, few educational resources are devoted to exploring Indigenous Peoples' entrepreneurial journeys in depth, despite their valuable contributions to Canada's development (Woods, Dell, & Carroll, 2022; Pidgeon, 2016). Indigenizing education plays a large role in moving forward in reconciliation (Pidgeon, 2016). By studying the challenges, successes, and social impact of Indigenous business owners through case studies, more equitable learning environments can be achieved while also promoting the unique perspectives that are helping to drive economic growth (Woods, Dell, & Carroll, 2022).

Insights is using positive storytelling to challenge and decolonize perceptions of Indigenous economic prosperity through the co-creation of academic content with the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business and its members. The content produced through this collaboration provides both students and educators

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***Presentation Summaries** are brief reports that are summaries of the presentations. This presentation was given at Centre for Social Innovation Workshop Series on April 3, 2023.

with tools to gain a deeper understanding of economic reconciliation and entrepreneurship, with the opportunity to inspire future generations to embrace similar roles in driving social change.

Method

In 2020, Humber College and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) partnered in the development of the *Insights* project. CCAB is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting Indigenous business development opportunities through various networking, programming, and research efforts (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, n.d.). Indigenous business owners with majority control (51% or more) of their business apply to become a member of CCAB's network (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, n.d.).

As part of the research process, the Humber College and CCAB teams work together to identify potential participants among CCAB's members through purposive sampling strategies. Once identified, CCAB members interested in participating partake in an in-depth qualitative interview to discuss their entrepreneurial experiences in their respective industries. Through these interviews, the *Insights* team has captured valuable information about each Indigenous entrepreneur, which works as the foundation for building the case studies. Participants actively contribute throughout this process by providing their feedback and input. The Humber research team maintains ongoing communication with the CCAB team, ensuring all activities are appropriate, respectful, and aligned with ethical considerations. Upon completion, these case studies are published online as open resources for learners. By May 2024, *Insights* will have a comprehensive collection of case studies published, showcasing a diverse range of Indigenous businesses operating across Canada.

Results

Birch Bark Coffee

Mark Marsolais-Nahwegahbow, an Ojibwe entrepreneur, founded [Birch Bark Coffee Company](#) in 2018. Birch Bark Coffee operates as a social enterprise aiming to address the water crisis in Indigenous communities across Canada. For every bag of coffee purchased, \$1.00 goes towards buying a Belkraft water purification unit; for every 50 bags purchased, one home can access clean drinking water.

Mark started the business without a formal business plan or marketing strategy but focused on building a solid online presence using the well-known e-commerce platform, Shopify. Birch Bark Coffee Company offers organic and fair-trade coffee produced by Indigenous farmers, carrying the Small Producers Symbol (SPP) label. The company's logo and branding emphasize Indigenous culture and issues.

While initially a one-person operation, Birch Bark has expanded to include a social media team and a sales manager. Mark's goal is to leave footprints for other Indigenous entrepreneurs and be a mentor to them.

Birch Bark has experienced growth and secured partnerships with large grocery chains and can be found in stores across Canada. Birch Bark recently partnered with Chapmans Ice Cream to offer a Birch Bark coffee-flavoured ice cream product. Mark's focus is on maintaining the brand's integrity, preserving product quality, and addressing capacity challenges.

Overall, Birch Bark Coffee Company combines entrepreneurship, social impact, and Indigenous values to make a difference in Indigenous communities and the coffee industry in Canada.

"Entrepreneurs are risk-takers by nature. We want to challenge the way that things have always been done and make them better."

—Mark Marsolais-Nahwegahbow

Shades of Gray Indigenous Pet Treats

[Shades of Gray Indigenous Pet Treats](#) was founded in 2019 by certified raw nutritionist Kari Gray. Shades of Gray provides natural pet treats from rabbits raised on Gray's farm, with a 5,500-square-foot facility where all rabbits used in its products are born and bred. All products Shades of Gray sells are certified and inspected provincially and federally. She is committed to transparency and sustainability.

Kari is proud of Shades of Gray's products, and the company prioritizes minimizing food waste. These efforts stem from the Algonquin Philosophy that is deeply rooted in every aspect of her business:

"Only take what you need; give in order to receive; recognize that you are an equal part of all that is; be thankful for everything you get. It is encouraged that each person develops their own special relationship

with the Creator. It is this difference, this uniqueness with the Creator that creates meaning for the Algonquin Peoples.”

—Kari Gray

Kari also holds a strong connection to her community and sees Shades of Gray as an opportunity to provide well-paying jobs for members of her community, particularly women.

As Shades of Gray continues to grow and surpass its sales targets, there are hopes to expand into the United States (U.S.) market soon.

Kari incorporates Indigenous values and culture into everything related to her business. The Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation, where Shades of Gray is located, has a deep connection to their traditions and values and subscribe to the Anishinaabe Way to Live:

- Treat the earth, and all that dwell upon it, with respect
- Remain close to the Creator
- Show great respect for your fellow beings
- Work together for the benefit of all mankind
- Give assistance and kindness whenever needed
- Do what you know is right
- Look after the well-being of mind and body
- Dedicate a share of your efforts to the greater good
- Be truthful and honest at all times
- Take full responsibility for your actions

Indigenous Heritage - Shades of Gray - Canadian Pet Treats, n.d.).

Pawgwasheeng Economic Development Corporation (PEDC)

The [Pawgwasheeng Economic Development Corporation \(PEDC\)](#) in Pays Plat First Nation was founded by Ginny Michano. Its goal is to empower the community and create employment opportunities. The PEDC has successfully secured contracts with government entities and formed partnerships, leading to job creation and specialized training for community members.

The creation of the PEDC initially faced obstacles, including skepticism from the community and the cost of creating an economic development corporation. However, Ginny was able to combat this through education, community engagement, and persistence in securing funding. To date, the PEDC has gained credibility and support from

community members and has won large government contracts, including a bid from the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) worth \$500,000. The success of this contract has led to future opportunities to work with the MTO.

Additionally, the PEDC has received grants from the Indigenous Economic Development Fund and the Rural Economic Development Program. They plan to apply for further funding to support their growth and community engagement strategy.

The vision of the PEDC is to promote economic development and business opportunities that benefit the Pays Plat community while respecting their traditional territory and ways of life.

“One of our indicators of success will be when we can be completely self-funded.”

—Ginny Machino

Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations (AEDC) play a significant role in their communities. AEDCs serve as the economic and business development arm of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit governments, and they own and manage subsidiary businesses to support their communities. Their main goal is to create self-sufficiency and financial independence for future generations.

Currently, over 400 AEDCs are operating across Canada, with their numbers continuing to grow. AEDCs have a Board of Directors appointed by the Chief and Council on behalf of the shareholders, who are local community members. They operate independently like any other private business in Canada.

Bentwood Skateboards

[Bentwood Skateboards](#) is an Indigenous-owned skateboard apparel company founded by Brenda Knights and Jason Bothe, based in Fort Langley, British Columbia. Bentwood sells skateboard decks and incorporates Indigenous design elements into its products—they have partnered with local Indigenous artists to create the designs used on their skateboards.

Brenda is a member of the Kwantlen First Nation and brings her business management experience and community development background to Bentwood Skateboards. At the same time, Jason contributes his expertise in skateboarding and marketing after spending nearly 30 years in the industry as a skateboarder and MC.

Brenda incorporates her First Nations teachings into the business and emphasizes servant leadership.

“In my nation, we’re taught to live by seven laws, and it’s health, happiness, humbleness, generations, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding, and we try to bring those principles to the business.”

—Brenda Knights

Brenda and Jason aim to provide opportunities for Indigenous youth and break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. They believe skateboarding promotes a healthy lifestyle and social value, particularly in communities facing challenges with limited access to organized sports. They currently sponsor a young Indigenous skateboarder and hope to see an Indigenous skateboarder in the summer Olympics.

Overall, Bentwood Skateboards is a unique and inspiring Indigenous-owned business that combines traditional teachings with modern entrepreneurship to create opportunities and promote cultural representation in the skateboarding industry.

Gulf Islands Seaplanes

[Gulf Island Seaplanes](#) operates out of Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, and is owned by Alison Evans. Gulf Island Seaplanes offers local flights, scenic tours, and charter services throughout British Columbia and stands out from the competition by being able to land in remote locations with water access. Alison’s vision involves expanding their tours to include Indigenous cultural experiences, and she sees this as a way to contribute to the broader reconciliation efforts in Canada.

“I do believe that offering the cultural, scenic flights that we’re going to offer is reconciliation in action, sharing positive stories of resilience. And the people that were on this land, I think it’s uplifting and something that everyone in BC, Canada, and the world even needs to hear about and be part of. And hopefully, learn how incredible Indigenous people really are. Yes, there are a lot of negative stories out there, especially in the last couple of years. But I think that being part of the positive narrative that’s coming out is a huge part of why we’re doing it.”

—Alison Evans

Alison’s Indigenous values and heritage shape the

company’s operations. She strives to make decisions that will benefit the next seven generations, considering sustainability and environmental impacts. Gulf Island Seaplanes is committed to becoming carbon neutral, reflecting the importance Indigenous peoples place on the environment and setting an example in the aviation industry.

Alison emphasizes the importance of communication and reaching out to other businesses for collaboration. Gulf Island Seaplanes operates with collaborative and inclusive company culture, treating all employees equally and fostering a sense of family.

Alison successfully built Gulf Island Seaplanes by combining her passion for Indigenous heritage with her business acumen. As a result, the company offers unique services, embraces a positive company culture, and prioritizes sustainability, contributing to reconciliation efforts and promoting Indigenous businesses.

Nuez Acres

Anthony Wingham founded [Nuez Acres](#), a clean beauty product company specializing in seed-to-skin products made from pecans. Nuez Acres controls the entire manufacturing process, from selecting pecans to packaging the final products. Anthony operates the business from the unceded lands of the Katzie, Kwantlen, Matsqui, and Semiahmoo First Nations in British Columbia and has a background in Métis Business Management.

Anthony recognized the health benefits of pecans in beauty products and saw an opportunity to create sustainable and environmentally friendly alternatives to artificial ingredient-based beauty products. Anthony imports pecans from his wife’s family farm in Chihuahua, Mexico and has seen a 150% growth in sales over the past year. Their product range includes skin serums, body balms, hair oils, and serums, all certified clean, vegan, and free from toxic chemicals. In addition, the Nuez Acres branding reflects its Indigenous ownership, inclusivity, and family-oriented approach.

Sustainability is a core value for Anthony, and his team prioritizes responsible farming and resource management techniques. They aim to reduce waste, limit water consumption, and use recyclable materials in their packaging. Anthony draws inspiration from his Métis/Indigenous heritage to maximize the use of pecans and create a holistic approach to product development.

Nuez Acres has achieved several successes, including

becoming CertClean certified and winning international awards for its beard oil and mascara. The company plans to expand into the United States and South Korea, tapping into the waterless beauty market. Anthony and Nuez Acres continue to grow and positively impact the clean beauty industry.

“It was really neat to join a program two years ago that we really cared about, and then to be not only nominated but to win two awards, it really kind of put that little bit of pat on the back for all the work that we’ve been doing.”

—Anthony Wingham

Discussion

After speaking with several Indigenous entrepreneurs, a few key themes have emerged from the *Insights* research project. First, Indigenous entrepreneurs are not averse to taking risks. Many participants had no formal education or training in running a business. They challenged themselves to start their entrepreneurial journeys while learning as they went. Often faced with uncertainty and unpredictable challenges (i.e., COVID-19), these business leaders were forced to pivot their businesses while learning and developing their skills to ensure their businesses thrive.

Secondly, these business leaders understand and recognize the importance of community and that their businesses represent more than just turning a profit. Profits are important, and businesses need to turn a profit to be successful, but it is not the only thing that drives the business leaders interviewed for this project. The sense of community, ability to provide well-paying jobs, and offer training skills were often critical factors in these businesses measuring their success. This tenacity demonstrates that businesses can thrive in Western capitalist society while staying true to their communities and the people they serve and represent. Social causes and business development can go hand in hand.

Lastly, traditional Indigenous values and culture can co-exist with modern/Western economic ideals. Each entrepreneur brought their unique culture and teachings into their business, which shaped how their businesses run. These teachings often contrast with what is viewed as traditional capitalistic values. Although the sample size may be small, these businesses demonstrate that Indigenous ways and

teachings can co-exist and that there is much to learn from these change-makers.

Conclusion

Each entrepreneur who has participated in the *Insights* project plays their own unique role in creating social change that is meaningful and valuable to them, their culture, and their community. Together, they are leading the way toward societal growth that will impact generations to come. As the Indigenous economy continues to thrive, it is critical to prioritize inclusivity, respect for Indigenous rights, and sustainability. By forming partnerships, empowering Indigenous entrepreneurs, and upholding the values of reconciliation, Canada can forge a more inclusive and prosperous future that recognizes and honors the vital contributions and goals of its Indigenous peoples.

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