

CANDO ECONOMIC DEVELOPER OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2002

>> >> >> << << <<

Cheryl Cardinal and Nicole (Migizikwe) Hetu

Introduction

The 2002 CANDO Economic Developer of the Year Awards were presented in Edmonton at the CANDO National Conference. Both award recipients demonstrated a commitment to exceptional leadership in Aboriginal economic and community development. Chief Sophie Pierre, the Administrator of the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Tribal Council and Chief of the St. Mary's Indian Reserve, BC was the recipient of the 2002 CANDO Individual Economic Developer of The Year. **Ray Gerow**, accepted the 2002 CANDO Business/Community Economic Developer of the Year on behalf of the Aboriginal Business Development Centre (ABDC), located in Prince George, British Columbia. Mr. Gerow is the manager of ABDC. In the following we are provided with a brief glimpse of their economic development views, ideas and stories.

Chief Sophie Pierre

2002 CANDO INDIVIDUAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPER OF THE YEAR

Under the leadership of Chief Sophie Pierre, the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Tribal Council has supported the completion of a number of successful eco-

economic projects. The St. Eugene Mission Project turned an old residential school into a first class resort in 2002 with a 125-room hotel, 18-hole golf course, casino, fitness centre with numerous nature activities. The resort is located on St. Mary's Reserve near Cranbrook, British Columbia. The building housed a residential school from 1878 to 1971 that stood as a symbol of oppression and assimilative policies. This community has transformed the image of this building to a symbol of economic growth and healing. Chief Pierre notes, "We still have some members of our communities that want it erased. . . . that part of our history. They would have preferred us to knock down the building and start from scratch. But, this sends a powerful message to the students of residential school and their families." Chief Pierre also ensured that the Ktunaxa heritage is honoured and kept sacred through teepee camp and artisan cooperation in community projects. Here are Chief Pierre's thoughts:

*How do you maintain balance between
family life and your professional career?*

That is the most difficult thing to do—
for anyone in a political position—we have to
make a conscientious effort to maintain balance

Learning Advisors, CANDO.

This article was based on preliminary interviews conducted by Kelly Many Guns, CANDO communications staff person, with each of the award winners. These initial interviews were reproduced in the CANDO newspaper, *N-Side News*. January/February 2003, Issue three.

between family life and a professional career. I always talk in seminars about the importance of taking time for yourself and your family. But it is really easy to say but much harder to do. You need to say to yourself, "No I am not going to go to that meeting, I am going to spend this time with my family or I am going to get that massage". As leaders, we need to make that conscious decision to stay with family and to spend time with them. Take time for yourself and for your family.

What were the challenges that you faced as a result of taking on the St. Eugene Mission Resort Project on your reserve? How did you address these challenges?

First, to get the agreement, support from the communities and the communities to believe that they could do something like this. There is little evidence of economic development on the reserve. With the added challenge of taking a residential school and turning it into something positive. We still have some members of our communities that want that it erased and that part of our history. They would have preferred us to knock down the building and start from scratch. But, this sends a powerful message to the students of residential school and their families. This is a beautiful old building that we turned into a hotel.

Second, to conduct five referendums. The five bands have ownership in common. If during the referendum, one band had turned down this project, it would have killed the project. We need a lot of internal work to ensure that this project was going to get the support. This project needed to get really good support from all the communities. And we did, one community voted 100% support behind the project.

Third, to raise financing for such a big project. We need \$40 million total in assets. Difficult to raise such financing. We had to use public sectors, so government both federal and provincial, private from the hotel and casino companies and we had to develop partnerships for investments purposes only. This is important because we wanted five bands to retain the ownership of the property. The investors could only get return on their investments but had no ownership of the property. This made it difficult to raise the financing for the project. Providing security to commercial banks is a challenge.

We need to come up with innovative ways to generate revenue, Otherwise, we will continue

to see third world conditions and poverty in Aboriginal Canada. Maintaining poverty is more expensive for the federal government than assisting First Nations in developing economy. This has been proven through the Harvard Study of Economic Development. This study has proven that self-determination through economic self-reliance works to reduce poverty. Continued poverty is going to cost government billions of dollars. The federal government is spending their money on social programs, not to assist First Nations in economic development ventures. The important thing to realize is to keep poverty in Aboriginal Canada is expensive.

What is the level of focus of economic development in your community?

I will speak in terms of the five bands. We have concentrated our efforts on the St. Eugene Mission. Now, economic development within our communities is more of a conscious focus of the five chiefs and councils. Having built the resort, it's more in your face. Economic development is easier, more acceptable, and not such a challenge in our own communities when you can see the result from the resort.

Has CANDO served a role in the enhancement of economic development within your life and in your organization? If so, how?

The recognition for development was a shot in the arm. It creates a spin-off and recognition of others. CANDO recognizes accomplishment. We made a success in building and now we have to make a success in operations. We have been recognized in the accomplishment of building this. With the awards, it gets the word out there and creates a buzz in Aboriginal communities. These awards are vital for creating further economic development accomplishments.

What are your plans for future projects or endeavours?

Economic development in our communities will focus on spin offs from the resort. So we will offer trail rides, cross-country ski trails, or boating companies for things such fly-fishing. People need to do something when they come to the resort. Gas stations and corner stores for buying bread because otherwise our people have to go into town for these things. I would like to see more small businesses on the reserves. For

myself, I am interested in pursuing a business venture. So we will need to have someone in my position to look after our investment on behalf of the five bands. We cannot assume that other companies will do it. We need to make sure that we have someone always looking after the best interests of the five bands in regards to the resort.

What would you suggest to other communities who want to take on big economic development projects like the St. Eugene Mission Project?

It starts with an idea. Just pursue the idea. There is always going to be someone saying you can't do it. Believe in what you are doing and know that you are in for the long run. Just go for it. There are so many opportunities for us. There is always going to be someone there saying we can't do it. We will be more of a failure if we don't even try.

The Aboriginal Business Development Centre

2002 CANDO BUSINESS/COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPER OF THE YEAR

The Aboriginal Business Development Centre (ABDC), located in Prince George, BC, was the CANDO 2002 Business/Community Economic Developer of the Year. ABDC provides entrepreneurial services to Aboriginal clients by Aboriginal staff persons since 1997. The mandate of the organization is to provide research, assistance in business start-up skills, budget forecasts, planning and general developmental supports to Aboriginal persons in northern British Columbia. ABDC provides competent business start-up advice and suggestions, as well as practical step-by-step business plan formats and small business analyses. It also provides general advocacy to serve any needs that their clients may have. A strong contributor to ABDC's success is that it was created and designed in response to the needs of Aboriginal entrepreneurs. The following questions were addressed by Mr. Ray Gerow, Manager of ABDC.

How do you maintain balance between family life and a full professional career?

You have to have a balanced productive family life before you can have a balanced

career life. When you are dealing with clients who have this opportunity, often this being their one and only time that they will have this opportunity to start a business — it is a very important moment in life. If you are “not all there” emotionally and mentally then you are not going to be able to assist the client. We treat our office as our home and you need to have a good balance to be able to do a good job!

There are a lot of demands placed on an EDO. You balance this by letting the family life have priority over your work life — most of the time. As the manager here I try to do things like, on some Friday afternoons, I will let the staff go home early to be with their families. Our staff get PTO (personal time off) days so that they can attend family events, school events etc. without affecting their holiday entitlements. Events like funerals, gatherings, etc. I always encourage staff to participate; there is always this type of support given by the office. Another example is that on National Aboriginal Day, June 21st the ABDC office will be working with the Friendship Centre and a few other Aboriginal organizations to coordinate this day in Prince George. We are also involved in community events such as hockey and baseball tournaments as an organization.

It is an un-written rule that when it is time to go home at the end of the day — you go home. At 4:30 you simply leave — you do not stay longer. There is an understanding that your family life is more important than your work life. I have been in organizations where people stay an extra hour each day but this begins to increase, as does your workload. You simply need to go home at the end of the day and make sure that this un-written rule is maintained.

What are some of the challenges that you have encountered with any of your development endeavours? What are your recommendations to overcome these challenges?

It is good to have challenges and hurdles ahead of you because it forces you and your clients to overcome those challenges before starting up a business. It is a proven fact that Aboriginal businesses have a higher success rate. There is a perception out there that it is because of all of the “free” money that we get to start up businesses. That is simply not true! It is because we are forced to come up with a good solid busi-

ness plan before funding is allowed for the business proposal. The situation for non-Natives is that it is often easier for them to maintain or secure funding for different reasons (i.e. off-reserve capabilities or legalities), and this can often lead to starting a business without properly addressing all of the important issues. These are often the issues that Native peoples face at the beginning of their business development process, whereas non-Aboriginal peoples face these similar issues later on. A good example of this would be having a solid cash flow in place. This is a critical part of any business plan as it allows you to plan for times when you need extra cash. A lot of businesses that go under are actually viable businesses, but they had poor cash management principles in place.

Another challenge is that client's needs have to be answered in an appropriate manner. For example, anytime we are forced into dealing with the political issues that are out there we need to isolate them from our client. As an Aboriginal organization the whole reason for us being here is to ensure the needs for our clients are met. We need to identify the Aboriginal political issues—and if the political issues are not met and if the client does not have the political support from the community, or for example the needed support from the Chief and Council, then this might be a challenge. It is not our job to work out the political problems with a client's business. We ensure that the client is aware of the need to try to get political and community support for their venture, but if they choose to ignore this or to start up in face of opposition, than it is our job to still support the client. My job as Manager is to keep these political issues away from the staff and the ABDC organization.

Is economic development a priority for the Aboriginal Business Development Centre, and if so what is the level of focus?

Economic development is not a priority for ABDC because ABDC is not out there to stir up the economy and attract businesses. The goal of ABDC is to assist their clients' business developments needs by assistance with feasibility studies, accessing financing, business plans etc. At times general advocacy for your clients, but we are not mandated to promote economic development for any specific community—an example would be a band or community run economic

development office that is there to attract investment into their community. We do not do that. We work with our clients, but they usually generate their own ideas. We can act as a clearinghouse for opportunities, matching up clients with viable ideas, but we do not actively solicit or advertise to do this. We will assist communities in their economic development planning, and we will assist clients to find opportunities matching their skill sets, but we are not out their chasing down the opportunities.

What role has CANDO served in the enhancement of economic development for you or specifically for the Aboriginal Business Development Centre? Second, you mentioned the importance of young Aboriginal persons entering the field of economic development—can you elaborate on this point?

CANDO has offered the networking opportunity and also their research materials are very useful. In a holistic way of looking at things—CANDO is providing a support mechanism for the EDO. The training and support that CANDO provides makes it easier to attract and retain EDO's.

It is important that Ec/Dev is introduced at a grade school level—planting that seed with our youth at that age so that by the time they are in high school they should be taking entrepreneur courses and business. Economic Development Officers are very important right now, and will be for a long time as business will be a way of life for our people. At that age group you are not targeting students to become EDO's, but if a student is aware of that certain knowledge then they can consider becoming an Economic Development Officer as well as considering being a doctor, lawyer or Indian chief. An Economic Development Officer becomes a viable career option beginning first as a seed in their grade school and then more advanced in high school. Most EDOs for different reasons may not have gone through high school and university saying that they want to be an eco/dev officer when they finish college or university. Often this position gets taken on because it is a role that they might inherit as a Band Councillor that usually is open or that they fill simply because it is a vacant position within an organization, and they start by filling the job as a secondary duty.

You mentioned that ABDC is strictly a small business developer. Do you intend to eventually have a lending capacity?

No! I am a strong believer in keeping these roles separate. You cannot effectively work with a client on development of their idea, their business plan, and then turn around and be the one responsible for adjudicating it. I have worked in an organization where I had to do it, and it was not effective. I would like to see a dedicated loan fund established for the northern interior and northeastern parts of BC, but that fund would need to be overseen by a separate governing structure.

What are future goals that we can anticipate from the Aboriginal Business Development Centre?

There are no major future goals other than what we are presently doing. It is something that we do well, and changing for the sake of change can be dangerous. The future aspirations are that we do not change; that we can continue doing what we do well. It is often tempting to change in order to keep the funding coming into the office, but that is also a dangerous road to go down.

What makes ABDC unique is that we are a dedicated business service provider. The infrastructure like ours is usually attached to something else such as a band office, a tribal council or a lending institution. This type of relationship makes you open to the political interference that we are all aware of, as well as the perception of favouritism. For us (as ABDC) being a stand alone non-profit organization we are somewhat insulated from that type of thing (be it perceived or real) which allows us to focus on meeting our clients needs rather than keeping Chief and Council happy (for example) or whomever else—we focus on the client. We are probably one of a few organizations of this kind in Canada—

there is now an organization like ours in Cranbrook. It is similar to our office and actually we were involved in establishing it. Our office was also instrumental in establishing an office in Fort St. John, called the Northeast Aboriginal Business Centre Society.

Summary

Both of these leaders honour balance and family. In Ray Gerow's case, he personally and professionally accommodates staff family events and community life, reflecting positive community values in an Aboriginal organization. The award winners take different approaches to economic development ventures in their communities. The importance of economic development is that it leads to greater sustainability within Aboriginal communities whether rural or urban.

Securing funds for economic activity is a common obstacle. Ray Gerow welcomes challenges, and views hurdles as opportunities enabling persons or organizations to be better positioned to handle future obstacles. Chief Pierre is an integral part of the St. Eugene Mission Project success that is linked to uniting the five bands within the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Tribal Council. These bands needed to be in complete agreement and supportive of the project because the five bands own the St. Eugene Mission in common. Through their support, Chief Pierre was able to secure a \$40 million total in funds through the public and private sectors and through building partnerships. They overcame traditional funding scarcity through creative partnering.

The future looks bright for these leaders and the communities they serve. Ray Gerow is cautious and thorough and will not encourage change without due consideration. Chief Pierre reminds us that we must focus on capacity-building so that we can manage change within our own communities and not rely on others.