

## LaBillois Provides Mi'gmaq Employment Through Her Businesses

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Victoria LaBillois  
*Wejuseg Construction*

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Victoria LaBillois wanted to be part of the solution. Mission accomplished. Many times over.

LaBillois, a member of Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation in Quebec, knew drastic changes were necessary for members of her community to benefit from the various projects taking place on their traditional territory. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, she worked for her First Nation, holding positions of director of economic development and intergovernmental relations. LaBillois was disappointed that, despite varying local projects, community members were often excluded when it came time to hire individuals to assist with different initiatives.

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This article draws on a personal interview with the author in August 2022.

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LaBillois recalled that the two largest industries in the Gaspé Peninsula, which includes Listuguj, were fisheries and forestry. “We were excluded from those industries for various reasons,” she said. “It took a Supreme Court ruling for us to get access to commercial fisheries, and that was a long battle. And that was a recent battle. We’ve only been involved for 20 years. And if I look at forestry, when our people tried to get involved commercially, they were told that all the allotments were already handed out. And we couldn’t get access to these, so we had to blockade, we had to protest. Our people fought us, and governments fought us. Everything was going on. It was like the deck was stacked against us.”

LaBillois’s previous work experiences enabled her to understand how community members were being passed over for employment opportunities. “I worked for a time for [the] Chief and Council as director of economic development and intergovernmental relations in the late 1990s and early 2000s,” she said. “Just seeing everything happening around us, without us. The band is always the largest employer, and we were excluded from all of these projects happening across our traditional territory. You needed to move mountains to be a part of that.”

LaBillois said her First Nation’s fortunes began to improve when it became involved with wind energy projects earlier this century. When word spread that a wind farm was being built 45 minutes east of Listuguj, LaBillois was keen to be part of the action early on. She secured a tour site invitation. It took her only a short time to determine she was interested in getting involved to help create opportunities for her community members. “One of the things I came up with after looking at 300 pieces of heavy equipment was starting an excavation contracting company, just like that.” LaBillois said. “I didn’t know anything about it. But I have an MBA, and I know a little about business that I picked up in university and running previous businesses.”

LaBillois launched Wejipeg Excavation Inc. in 2011. “That first year, I leased equipment on three different projects,” she said. “Learning about maintenance, heavy equipment, and considering growth strategies, which meant purchasing equipment, [all] that developed over time to the point that I decided to go into a joint venture.”

That venture became Wejuseg Construction Inc., a company that she co-owns and leads as president. “When I created these companies, it was not to work in the community. It was not to work ‘on reserve’,” LaBillois said. “The band already creates employment [and] has a public works unit that looks after local projects. My goal was to create companies that bring [a] skilled Mi’gmaq labour force to projects across our traditional territory off the reserve.”

Wejuseg means “powerful wind”. The company’s philosophy is as follows:

With the completion of the wind park in Gaspésie, Quebec, we were able to train and engage over 100 Mi’gmaq tradespeople. Creating an energy source from the wind was empowering. Watching our community learn skills and engage in the project was uplifting. These projects were on Mi’gmaq land and were completed with the help of the Mi’gmaq people. Pride in our work is paramount and naming the company Wejuseg is our way of honouring our Mi’gmaq heritage. We have the desire and the expertise to create big things. (Wejuseg Construction Inc., n.d.)

Though she had to overcome numerous barriers, LaBillois persevered. “I had to learn everything,” LaBillois said in a 2021 magazine article for her alma mater, the University of New Brunswick. “I researched the industry from scratch. I was confident because I had the tool kit for business, and having the MBA allowed me to be taken more seriously.” LaBillois added that she doesn’t mind being a trendsetter. “There were not many women in the field at the time, and no Indigenous construction companies,” she said. “But barriers don’t stop me.

I find ways to go over them or around them. I walk on the job site as if I own it because I know I belong there. Growing up on a reserve setting and being treated like a second-class citizen has taught me to be resilient” (UNB Alumni News, 2021).

Launching a pair of companies enabled LaBillois to assist members of her community immediately. “One of the immediate impacts I think about is the employment I create for people in the community,” she said. “Of course, I hire the talent. Non-Indigenous employers in the region would overlook these people. I hire people who can have multi-barriers. These are people I know [who] can get the work done. So, I create employment. I create investment in the community because the dollars come into the community. Of course, I’m spending in the community, and I try at every turn to hire sub-contractors or to procure from different companies in my community that otherwise wouldn’t have that chance.”

Though they were once thriving companies, both Wejipeg and Wejuseg were greatly hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. “Everything flipped with COVID,” LaBillois said. “With COVID, the province of Quebec had shut down construction right from the get-go. Amidst all the uncertainty, I thought that was the end of the trail for both Wejipeg and Wejuseg. I didn’t know how we would survive, what we would do to survive.”

As it turned out, both companies could stay afloat because of a change in thinking. LaBillois’ businesses could keep operating because of the work they took on in her First Nation. For starters, there was a \$3 million project to install storm drains in her community. Her companies then got involved with significant infrastructure investment in the community, providing work for a housing development program.

Since both of her companies survived the first few years of the pandemic, LaBillois once again turned her attention to some larger federal projects, hoping to be involved with significant initiatives in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. “It forced serious reflection on where the company is going,” LaBillois said of some of the dark days her business endured during the pandemic. “Survival isn’t enough. We want to thrive. We want to also live in abundance. Shedding that mentality of scarcity is a challenge. So, we’re getting back to the original *raison d’être* for the creation of Wejipeg and Wejuseg.”

Admittedly, LaBillois was still determining whether either or both of her companies would still be around today. “There were some dark days during COVID, some dark days when I thought this is it,” she said. “But all the blood, sweat, and tears that I put into it — just like that, a global pandemic comes along, and I’m wiped off the face of this landscape. It was a struggle. I’m happy to say we survived that and are still here.”

Though her businesses have survived and at times thrived, LaBillois said being an entrepreneur, especially an Indigenous woman, has not been easy. “Racism, sexism, you name it, it’s out there,” she said. “But you need to look past it. And I think when I encounter this, it’s hurtful, frustrating, and makes you angry, but you need to move on from that. And I say I’m not the jackass whisperer. I can’t fix all these issues. I’ve just got to keep going and doing my own thing.”

LaBillois also realizes she will have to continue to overcome challenges each step of the way. “There’re always challenges,” she said. “People look at running your own business as this glamorous role and [think] that you’re the boss and call the shots. No two days are the same. It could be cash flow issues and waiting on payment, especially in construction; you could wait up to 90 days, which is the standard wait for payment. I always say sub-contractors are bankrolling general contractors.” LaBillois realizes that no matter how successful her companies become, challenges will remain. “It could be being overlooked for opportunities or projects,” she said. “It could be systemic bias — me not being taken seri-

ously as an Indigenous woman working in construction. There are lots of challenges that exist.”

LaBillois, however, plans to move forward. And not just for her interests. “I think it’s important that we all benefit [and] that the benefits accrue communally,” she said. “I’m not here to build this big empire. I’m here to ensure that our people are included in the regional economy, and I have the capacity and resources to kick down doors to make that happen. That’s what I’m going to do.”

And she’s not just doing so for herself. “It’s important for me because, recall, the original driver for me to create this company was to bring this talent of Mi’kmaq labour pool that was often overlooked in our region. The goal was to bring Mi’kmaq talent to projects away from the territory,” she said. “That is very important to me — that our people are working on our territory and that they’re also reaping the benefits.”

The word “quit” is not part of LaBillois’ vocabulary. In November of 2017, LaBillois was interviewed by CBC News at a conference in Moncton, N.B., which was geared towards helping Indigenous women start and run successful businesses. “Well, when the going gets tough, the tough put on lipstick — you just have to get it done,” LaBillois said. “I think it takes a strong degree of tenacity and courage to get up every morning and keep trying. No is not an option, right?” (Letterick, 2017)

LaBillois is also hoping that many others will follow in her footsteps. Before her appearance on the 2019 Cando Conference’s Women-in-Business panel, she spoke about her accomplishments. “We need to raise our women and continue to break the barriers,” she said. “Our women need to see success stories in real people they can relate to. My message is a call to action — whatever you are thinking about doing, just start today. There is no better time.” LaBillois also offered advice for other women who are contemplating similar roles: “Stand your ground, know your stuff, and own the room when you walk in — you are not a doormat” (Narine, 2019).

For LaBillois, however, success does not have to be measured in dollars and cents. “It’s not about making money or creating an empire,” she said. “It’s about creating these opportunities in the community and being that face of Indigenous business that [says] yes, we are here and capable, and we have a talented workforce. To me, that’s a success.”

LaBillois is also okay with passing on other advice, a wise practice she deems necessary for success. “Financial literacy is foundational to entrepreneurship and launching your own business,” she said. “So, to youth thinking about it, you need to protect and nurture your credit score, your credit. Educate yourself on this. Some key advice I was given early on was to borrow money when you don’t need it because when you need it, it’s harder to come by.”

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