

2011 ECONOMIC DEVELOPER OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS

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The 18th Cando Annual National Conference theme “Nation Building through Economic Development”, was embraced by conference delegates who all attended to promote and foster sustained economic development in Aboriginal communities. In the opening ceremonies of the Cando conference, Chief Kim Baird, of Tsawwassen First Nation addressed the conference delegates and captured the conference theme perfectly by stating that “Economic development is a means to an end, and that end is nation building ... that builds robust, vibrant and healthy communities”. Building Aboriginal economies is not a task for the federal government alone. It requires hard work and a collaborative effort by EDOs, corporations, entrepreneurs and the support of Aboriginal governments and communities. While there is still a long road ahead, Aboriginal people have made significant gains to eradicate poverty and create opportunities in the communities they live.

It is important for Aboriginal economic developers to get the recognition that they deserve for their commitment and dedication to increasing standards of living and prosperity in Aboriginal communities. This is what motivates Cando to coordinate and host the annual Aboriginal Economic Developer of the Year Awards. Outstanding achievements of nominees from across the country are recognized in three separate award categories which include: Community, Individual Economic Developer Officer and Aboriginal Private Business Sector. Two

finalists in each of the categories are selected to present to an audience during a special plenary at the Cando Annual National Conference. After finalist presentations conference delegates vote via secret ballot for the finalist who they believe is most deserving of the top award in each category. It is an honour to present to you the 2011 Economic Developer of the Year award winners!

ED OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER, ABORIGINAL PRIVATE SECTOR BUSINESS CATEGORY:

NEECHIE GEAR

Established in June of 2010, Neechie Gear is an award-winning clothing company with a social conscience. The Neechie Gear clothing line promotes humorous phrases with attractive designs that appeal to both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal market. The company was founded by Kendal Netmaker, 25, a recent University grad with a B.Ed and a B.A in Native Studies.

Remarkably, Kendal started the company at the age of 23, while studying full time at the University of Saskatchewan for his degree in education. During his studies at the University of Saskatchewan, he was introduced to the corporate/business lifestyle through Inroads, which is a national organization with a mission to “develop and place talented minority youth in business and industry and prepare them for corporate and community leadership.” Inroads sponsored

Kendal to attend a business leadership summit in Toronto, where he immediately fit in. In his last year at the University of Saskatchewan, Kendal had the idea of starting a clothing company. He wrote his first business plan in between managing his full-time course load, and decided to enter an on-campus business pitch competition to test the response to his business idea. Kendal won over ten thousand dollars in this competition, and Neechie Gear was born.

During the time that Kendal was finishing his last year of school he managed to exceed over \$22,000 in sales. This past fall, he was one of thirty entrepreneurs in Canada chosen to form Team Canada at the G20 Young Entrepreneur Summit in France. Neechie Gear has since been recognized in many prestigious awards including the 2011 ACE Saskatchewan Student Entrepreneur Provincial Champion, third place Award in the Brett Wilson Centre for Entrepreneurial Excellence i3 Challenge, and the 2012 Saskatoon's Finest Entrepreneur Award — and has been nominated for many more.

In the summer of 2012, Neechie Gear celebrated the Grand Opening of its store located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Since expanding from online retail to operating a retail store, Neechie gear has enjoyed substantial increases in sales and continues to grow. Although the growth of the company is impressive, what is incredibly unique about Neechie Gear is its commitment to giving back to the community. Kendal established the NG Athletics Club Inc, which is a non-profit organization and arm of the Neechie Gear Company that supports, develops and manages Canadian youth based sports teams. Neechie Gear also offers educational bursaries for Aboriginal students enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan which provides the added benefit of free advertising for the company that reaches its strongest target market — Aboriginal youth.

The Story behind the “Social Conscience”

From Neechie Gear's website, <http://www.neechiegear.com/pages/the-story>, we learn that Kendal Netmaker is the eldest child of four siblings from the Sweetgrass First Nation and was raised in a single-parent, low income family. Kendal attended elementary school off-reserve, and without disposable income or a vehicle, he did not have the opportunity to get involved in

any extra-curricular activities. During this time, he met a life-long friend who was from South Africa who recognized Kendal's athletic talent and wondered why Kendal did not join any of the same sport teams that he played on. Kendal told his friend that his family did not the money to pay registration fees, or have any mode of transportation that would allow him travel to and from games and practices. He relied on the school bus to travel to and from school, and was restricted from participating in any after school activities. Shortly after this exchange, his South African friend pulled Kendal aside and said, “Kendal, I told my parents what you told me and they want to pay for your fee to play on my soccer team and we can even drive you home after all games and practices”. Kendal was surprised and touched by the kindness and generosity of this South African family, and was extremely grateful for the opportunity to be part of many sports teams and continue with his education. Many years later, the South African family moved away — but before they left, they gave Kendal's family a running vehicle which would enable him and his sisters to continue their involvement in sports and would eventually carry them through high school and into university. Kendal believes that without his friends' help, he would not have a landed a college volleyball scholarship after graduating high school, finish university and later go on to establish an award-winning company! As a result of his life experience, Kendal has learned firsthand what sports can do for youth by developing elite athletes and future leaders. The support and kindness Kendal received from the generous South African family as a youth has changed his life. Kendal remains committed to “paying it forward”, which is why he has incorporated the “social conscience” into his business model, where a portion of all profits are used to support Aboriginal youth achieve success through sports and education. Kendal is now involved in promoting entrepreneurship to various First Nations communities throughout the province of Saskatchewan as a role model and successful business owner. He is often invited to motivational speaking engagements where he strives to inspire others to start businesses by sharing his remarkable journey of success.

“Helping youth through the Neechie Gear Brand”

Kendal Netmaker,
2011 Cando Conference

**ED OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER,
INDIVIDUAL EDO CATEGORY:
GRANT TAIBOSSIGAI**

Grant is from the M’Chigeeng First Nation located on Manitoulin Island, Ontario and has worked as the Economic Development Officer for the past 25 years. Under Grant’s leadership, expertise and teamwork-based enthusiasm, M’Chigeeng First Nation has made great strides in building a sustainable economic base that provides opportunities and prosperity for the M’Chigeeng First Nation citizens through innovative projects such as the Mother Earth Renewable Energy wind farm project. When asked about his views on Aboriginal economic development, Grant believes that “We are moving and forging ahead with new ideas. First Nations are taking a larger step and doing business outside of the community. The opportunities are there and we need to move on them.” It is apparent that Grant Taibossigai walks the talk, and is a valued driver of economic development in the M’Chigeeng First Nation. Grant is certainly deserving of the ED of the Year award and will surely continue to do excellent work in the field of Aboriginal economic development. Congratulations Grant!

MERE Project

For the past ten years Grant has worked tirelessly on the MERE Project—a wind farm on M’Chigeeng First Nation land to harness renewable wind energy that would be sold to the Ontario Power Authority for power grid distribution. After a decade of perseverance, the MERE dream has become a reality. In June of 2011, construction commenced for the erection of two 2MW turbines and is the first renewable energy project in Canada owned entirely by a First Nation. M’Chigeeng has contributed \$3 million to the \$12.5 million project. Another \$1 million has come from the Government of Canada while the Government of Ontario is providing a loan guarantee, enabling M’Chigeeng to borrow the

remaining \$8.5 million. The loan will be repaid from the income received from the Ontario Power Authority, at 15 cents per kilowatt hour for 20 years. By next spring the turbines will be in place and ready to deliver enough electricity for a thousand homes.

Community Benefits

The MERE project will create over 100 local jobs, and has provided opportunities for M’Chigeeng contractors to assist with road construction, tree felling & clearing, security, landscaping, sanitation and meal & hospitality, to name a few projects associated with the construction phase of the wind farm. M’Chigeeng will use the net profits for the benefit of band members through social and development activities that contribute to the bands economic self-reliance.

“Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower”

Grant Taibossigai
2011 Cando Conference

**ED OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER,
COMMUNITY CATEGORY:
MORICETOWN BAND —
KYAHWOOD FOREST PRODUCTS**

Moricetown is located along the Bulkley River Valley approximately 30 km west of Smithers, BC. Moricetown is home to approximately 636 on-reserve members and with a total population of 1923 people. Due to its geographic location and like many other remote Aboriginal communities, the Moricetown Band faces greater challenges in identifying economic opportunities than those communities who are located close to major urban markets. Remote communities are often left to rely on the utilization of natural resources for economic development, which is often in conflict with traditional values of stewardship. The Moricetown Band has long aspired to achieve a level of sustainable economic self-sufficiency and the provision of employment opportunities on reserve without forgoing their traditional values. In an effort to balance these needs, Moricetown Band has worked hard to incorporate traditional values *into* their approach

to business and economic development and it is clear that these efforts have really paid off. Moricetown is an excellent example for other communities who strive to pursue economic opportunities that reflect the values of the community and earn the support of the members, while creating jobs and self generated revenue. The pride and sense of community is strong in Moricetown, it is with great honour that Cando presented them with the ED of the Year Award in the Community Category. Congratulations Moricetown Band!

Kyahwood Forest Products

Kyahwood Forest Products is a finger-joint value added mill that is wholly owned by the Moricetown Band and operated on reserve lands. Due to a declining lumber market and productivity challenges, the mill was forced to halt operations in 2008. As the largest employer of the community, the closure of the mill had a devastating effect on the community which saw unemployment rates skyrocket to nearly 90%. The band recognized that the only feasible way to get the plant operational and get members back to work was to cut production costs and improve efficiency. It was clear that an investment in technology was required, and in order to finance the upgrades they needed to be innovative in their approach. Moricetown pulled up their sleeves and got to work. The band created a new economic development structure that allows the band to establish a tax effective way of building and operating business on reserve. Moricetown also forged partnerships that assisted with securing the capital needed for crucial technology upgrades, and provided access to markets in China where they would now export their

product. More impressively, the Kyahwood Mill is a green operation; they utilize scraps from external sawmills to create a marketable product. 25% of the sawdust created from the Kyahwood mill is used to heat the facility, and the remaining “waste” is shipped to China. Overall, Kyahwood has achieved a 98% decrease in air pollution from preventing the burning of scrap material.

Community Benefits

Once the upgrades were complete, Kyahwood Forest Products reopened during the global recessions and began exporting its product. Since 2010, Kyahwood has successfully operated at full capacity and may need to expand operations through an additional shift, indicating the success of the company. Kyahwood currently employs 71 people from the community and is the largest employer of Band members on reserve. Effectively, the jobs created at Kyahwood have resulted in a 70% decrease in the reliance on social assistance payments within the community and has instilled great pride among the trained employees. Kyahwood is an environmentally conscious business that has created jobs for community members, and provided revenues for the Moricetown to make great strides toward the goal of economic self-sufficiency.

“Incorporating traditional values in our approach to business and economic development”

**Moricetown Band
2011 Cando Conference**