

INSPIRING ABORIGINAL YOUTH ACHIEVEMENT *One Path to Business School*

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Winnipeg's North End. The mere mention of this neighbourhood often triggers a flurry of associated imagery within one's mind. Gangs. Violence. Addiction. Poverty. These images are perhaps the most prominent and difficult to escape.

The ease with which one can escape these social problems varies—depending on who you ask. Non-residents can simply turn the page or change the TV station and they instantaneously disappear. Flip. Click. Gone.

For North End residents, however, it is not that simple. It is an uphill struggle to avoid joining a gang—they are pervasive throughout the downtown core and the North End. Addictions are rampant, and often drive break-ins, theft, and violence. Poverty precludes many opportunities—both education and employment.

In recent years, however, numerous development and renewal projects have begun to change the physical landscape of the North End—most notably on Selkirk Avenue. Thanks to these pro-

jects, Selkirk Avenue is more bustling now than it has been in years. Its vibrancy is perhaps a physical manifestation of a different kind of change that is also happening in the North End: a change that has been long overdue.

“This year [2012], we have the highest number of students graduating from this school,” exclaims a weary, but visibly pleased Leigh Brown on a humid day in June as she prepares for graduation ceremonies. “We have 40 graduates,” she adds with a smile.

Leigh Brown teaches at Winnipeg School Division’s Children of the Earth High School (COTE), nestled between the Rebchuk Bridge that ferries Winnipeggers into the North End and Selkirk Avenue. Children of the Earth high school is home to 230 students from grades nine through twelve—all of whom are Aboriginal youth from the inner-city.

“I think COTE is a very unique place. Although it is part of the public school system it does have a special mandate that makes it different from any other high school,” said Brown of her school.

“It is this mandate that makes a difference for the students who come here because they know they can be who they are in this school. They can learn about themselves, their people, and their history.”

Leigh’s path towards becoming an educator is best described as unique. “I came into this profession later on in life. It’s not as though I was green, and starting out—I had lived a whole other life before. I was working for a large, multi-national manufacturing company,” explained Brown.

Originally from Winnipeg, Brown’s corporate career took her to Toronto as part of the company’s centralization team. In that role, she was helped design new business processes, and subsequently travelled to the company’s various locations to train staff on those processes. Meanwhile, her company had acquired another company, and she had the opportunity to train the newly integrated staff that accompanied the acquisition.

At the end of her travels, Leigh returned to her former position in Accounts Payable and realized that all this travel precipitated a new outlook on life. Her extensive travel throughout North America caused Brown to catch a bug—not the travel bug, but rather the teaching bug.

“I just had an epiphany that I didn’t like what I was doing—I’d rather be a teacher and not pay bills all day,” said Brown of her transition back to her former role. She then quit her job, moved back to Winnipeg, and set out to obtain a degree in Education.

Leigh—who only learned about her Métis ancestry as an adult—graduated from Education eight years ago and was offered a position at COTE. She has been there ever since. Working at an inner-city school with an Aboriginal population presents challenges. “An inner-city population brings with it certain things that you need to work around. Issues such as poverty, family break-down, and transience have a pretty significant effect on the students,” explains Brown.

“Being surrounded by gangs, drugs, and violence was not without its struggles,” echoes former COTE student Lenny McKay. “I’ve lived to know what it’s like to go without electricity, food, and other things people often take for granted.”

Although Ms. Brown exclusively teaches COTE’s entire roster of grade twelve courses—with the exception of Math and Physical Education—she originally worked with Lenny (then in the eleventh grade) in 2008. Due to her extensive corporate experience, she was tasked with co-coaching the school’s teams for E-Spirit, which is a national business plan competition for Aboriginal youth developed by the Business

SPOTLIGHT

BDC’s E-Spirit Competition

In 2001, the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) developed E-Spirit, which is a national business plan competition specifically for Aboriginal youth.

Participants complete seven modules over a 16 week period with a facilitating teacher from their school. E-Spirit culminates in an all-expenses paid trip to the national finals, which is hosted by a host university on a rotating basis.

Since its inception, the national competition has worked with over 5,700 students from grades 10 through 12.

More information about BDC’s E-Spirit Competition available at <www.bdc.ca/en/espirt>.

Development Bank of Canada (BDC). He was a participant.

Participation in the competition requires each team to develop a business plans across seven modules over the 16-week period. Only those teams that complete each module, according to a fixed schedule, are invited to participate in the competition finals, which are hosted by a university in different cities each year.

Brown had previously co-coached COTE's E-Spirit teams, initially as an extracurricular activity for four years prior to working with Lenny. During those early years, Brown noticed that the teams she worked with had difficulty completing their projects due to family responsibilities (either taking care of younger siblings, or working part-time to help their families make ends meet).

In 2008, however, Paul Martin's *Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative* approached Children of the Earth and assisted in the creation of an elective credit course that enabled the teams to develop their business plans from concept through to completion—and receive a credit towards their graduation—without interfering with their family responsibilities.

Since that time, COTE teams have made progressively stronger placements in the competition finals. In 2010, one of their teams snared bronze—along with two special achievement awards. At the 2011 competition finals, COTE

captured Gold, and one special achievement award. COTE captured Gold, Silver, and Bronze—in addition to four special achievement awards at the 2012 competition finals.

Whether the recent string of strong placements at the national competition finals represent a new norm for COTE teams or not remains to be seen. However, winning is not Brown's primary concern, "Every year I tell the team 'Don't go in expecting to win.' Winning can't be what it's about. It's about trying hard, and doing their best," explains Brown. "I think most of what we do in this class is character building. When you give them a brief taste of success—even if it's classroom based—it just opens them up."

In addition to being inspired by their successes provided by the competition modules, Brown's students are inspired by her teaching philosophy. "At the end of the day it's all about developing relationships and to help students to understand that you not so much know where they're coming from, but that you respect where they're coming from."

"As part of that relationship, I treat each student differently based on their individual needs and where they're coming from. If somebody needs a little bit of extra time to do something, I'll give them that extra time. I try to set myself according to what the student needs. And it seems to make a difference," explained Leigh about her relationship with her students.

Her relationship-based approach to teaching has translated into better attendance and stronger effort, noting that, "they're more likely to show up every day. They'll do the work and do better."

It is not surprising that the most rewarding aspect of her job is graduation day: with the exception of the Entrepreneurship class: Ms. Brown spends her entire day with the school's grade twelve students.

"For many of our students, they are the first in their family to graduate high school. Among those who go on to university or college, they are the first in their family to attend. When they get acceptance letters, I like to think that I little bit of a part in that, and made a difference," said Brown.

Lenny McKay graduated in 2010 and is currently a third year student at the University of Manitoba's Asper School of Business. His leader-

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Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative

Children of the Earth's Entrepreneurship class is a part of the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Project, under the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative (MAEI).

Established in 2008, the Martin Initiative supports educational projects designed to provide Aboriginal Canadians with the opportunities they need to succeed.

MAEI has since developed curriculum materials for educators with no business background, and it has partnered with 17 schools across Canada.

More information about the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative available at www.maei-ieam.ca.

ship potential, seeded by COTE's supportive environment, is taking root as his accolades accumulate.

In November 2010, Lenny received the Manitoba Aboriginal Youth Achievement Award under the category of Entrepreneurship for the successes he enjoyed at the E-Spirit competition. In July 2011, Lenny was nominated one of five national recipients of the G.E. Foundation Scholar-Leaders Program. This selection awarded Lenny a renewable \$4,000 per year scholarship (up to three consecutive years in total), in addition to an all expenses trip to Toronto, where he was matched with a senior mentor from the G.E. Foundation.

In March 2012, Lenny was selected to participate in the Aboriginal Business Students—Western Roundtable discussion, as organized by Cape Breton University's Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies, in Edmonton Alberta. He was subsequently hired by CBU to work as a student researcher for the summer of 2012.

"I persevered and proved that no matter what conditions someone grows up in, they can succeed against all odds," said Lenny of his journey from the North End to the Asper School of Business, where he also mentors younger students through Aboriginal Business Education Partners.

Through his determination, Lenny is on a path that will not only benefit his own future, but that of others, as well. "For too long, Aboriginal people have been lead to believe that they cannot be successful—that education is not something that is made for them to succeed at."

Lenny's journey has demonstrated that Aboriginal youth—despite the odds against which they are stacked—can succeed at post-secondary education. His journey has helped inspire younger students who have graduated two years after him.

"Of the twelve students in the business program, we have seven going on to university. One student won a first degree, full-ride scholarship. They are seeing that it *is* possible—that they can do what they want to do and they don't have to do what the media or stereotypes tell them to do."

Children of the Earth's mandate makes it a school very much different than any other school. With its focus on their student's future potential, and not their past—and a special focus on forming relationships—COTE is not only producing an increasing number of graduates, it is producing leaders. Through their experiences in Winnipeg's North End, these blossoming leaders increasingly want to give back to their community. They want to change not only their own destinies, but also that of their community.

Perhaps the most important change they will bring about is a change in perception about the North End. Instead of associating the North End with gangs, violence, addiction, and poverty, future generations will think of the North End as the place that gave birth to a whole generation of Aboriginal leaders that rightfully took their place in the halls of Manitoba's post-secondary institutions.