

2022 Economic Developer of the Year Award Winners

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Recognize! Celebrate! Honour!



In 1995, the Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award was created to recognize and promote recent or long-standing Indigenous economic vision of sustainable economic self-sufficiency.

Throughout the years, it became apparent that there were businesses and individuals also deserving of recognition for their contributions to the advancement of Indigenous economic development. That is why today Cando grants Economic Development of the Year Awards in three separate categories:

Individual EDO | Community | Indigenous Private Sector Business

development initiatives throughout Canada. All winners, past and present, share a desire to advance their communities as each pursues a

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Three candidates exemplifying outstanding Indigenous economic development were awarded at the Cando 28th Annual National Conference that was held on May 16–19, 2022, in Whitecap, Saskatchewan. Two finalists in each of the categories were selected to present to an audience during a special plenary at the conference. After all finalists were given equal opportunity to present, the conference delegates voted via a secret ballot for the finalist who they believed was the most deserving of the top award in each category.

It is an honour to present to you the 2022 Economic Developer of the Year Award winners!



Albert Derocher
ED of the Year Winner
— *Individual EDO Category*

David Kobliski,
Nelson House Development Corporation
ED of the Year Winner
— *Community Category*



Leslie Walker, Walker Home Construction
ED of the Year Winner
— *Indigenous Private Sector Business Category*

Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner

Individual Category

Albert Derocher

Flying Dust First Nation, SK

Albert Derocher has spent the majority of his working career improving the fortunes of his Flying Dust First Nation.

It was way back in 1981 that Derocher first started working as a summer student for his First Nation, based in Saskatchewan.

Derocher is currently the general manager of the Flying Dust Holding Corporation, the company that oversees all of the economic development for the First Nation.

“It means a lot,” Derocher said of the fact he is in the running for the accolade. “It means I’m being recognized for a lot of the work I’ve done and for the advocacy I’ve done for First Nations issues.”

Derocher said plenty of others could have just as easily been recognized for their efforts.

“There’s a lot of good folks out there who are working very hard as well,” he said.

Derocher, who, along with his wife, helped raise 10 children (seven girls and three boys), is proud of the fact that he’s been able to work for so long for his First Nation.

“I love my community,” he said. “We all work very hard. We’re a growing progressive community.”

Flying Dust has about 600 members who are living on reserve. The First Nation’s various businesses employ 230 people, with about 90 per cent of those being Flying Dust members.

But none of the Derocher children, aged 26 to 36, are living at home now or working for the First Nation.

“They’re all out doing their own thing,” he said, adding his children were all encouraged to become independent outside of their community and then, if they so choose, can return to their First Nation.

Derocher has had numerous noteworthy accomplishments during his work career with his First Nation.

One of his proudest highlights was the creation of the Riverside Market Garden, a venture that started off with two employees but now features five full-time workers and 20 seasonal workers.

Derocher said there are increased planting efforts this year to better help feed some community members.

“We’ve been told there will be a real food shortage,” he said.

Derocher can also boast about another initiative, the Flying Dust Power Corp., which is expected to be operational and producing power for the community by late 2023.

“It’s been 10 years in the making,” he said. “It’s been a long road.”

Derocher was also an instrumental figure in the \$2.5 million additions to the First Nation’s arena that are reaching completion. Besides facility upgrades, the renovations included an expansion of a retail store selling sporting goods.

Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner

Community Category

Nelson House Development Corporation

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN), MB

It seems like it's at least once a week that David Kobliski will receive a phone call seeking some advice.

Kobliski has served as the Executive Director for the Nelson House Development Corporation, the economic arm of Nisichawayasihk First Nation in Manitoba, for the past 25 years.

"A lot of First Nations look at our community as a model," Kobliski said. "We do have a model that works. And others can do it on a smaller scale or on a bigger scale."

Kobliski said he doesn't mind fielding calls from others who are looking to improve fortunes in their communities.

"The satisfaction I get is seeing a First Nation generating their own sole-source revenue and reinvesting into their own community," he said.

Thanks in large part to Kobliski's efforts, the work Nelson House Development Corporation has done has earned some recognition.

Kobliski, who is 60, said it seems his past quarter century of work has gone by rather quickly.

"I was kind of reflecting and looking back," he said. "Twenty-five years really flew by."

The first business Nisichawayasihk First Nation owned was a gas bar. It allowed the First Nation to keep revenue in its own community.

Several other businesses that the First Nation now owns have followed suit. They include grocery stores, a hotel, and a high-speed Internet company.

Kobliski said one business is not any more noteworthy than the others.

"All of them stick out because all of them are still around and they're all still successful," he said.

The Nelson House Development Corporation is also involved in a major joint venture. It has a partnership with Manitoba Hydro and owns 32 per cent of a hydroelectric dam project.

"All the rest of them are owned by the First Nation," Kobliski said of other business interests.

Kobliski said he has been preaching about the importance of owning businesses to officials in his First Nation for a very long time.

"I've always said to our leadership that in order to be self-sufficient and self-governing, you have to generate your own revenue," he said.

It's the same advice he doles out to others who call his First Nation looking for some guidance.

"I do try to assist other First Nations with what we've done here," he said.

Kobliski said he is planning to retire from his executive director role, probably within the next year.

But he does plan to continue working. In fact, he believes he will start his own consulting business.

"I will be providing the path to other First Nations and showing them what the benefits are," Kobliski said.

Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner

Indigenous Private Sector Business Category

Walker Home Construction

Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, YT

Leslie Walker had a promising music career that was put on a hold.

But Walker, a member of Champagne and Aishihik First Nations in Yukon, doesn't seem to mind, as he's managed to find plenty of success in another career.

Back in 2011, Walker was a member of Common Knowledge, which was named the best band at the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards.

But for a good chunk of the past decade, Walker has concentrated on Walker Home Construction, his Whitehorse-based business that specializes in residential and commercial construction services and products.

Walker added that his company has been recently recognized by other associations.

"It's a little overwhelming to get these opportunities," he said. "This is the vision I always wanted to work towards. It's happened 10 times faster than I thought it would."

Walker was always rather handy. He had been hired to do various jobs in the past, even when he was doubling as a musician.

"I took a risk, and then I started my company," he said.

In the early days of his business, Walker said he was known as 'The Trailer Guy'. He would go around and fix mobile homes in trailer parks.

And then he started working on home additions, while also building fences and decks. He then started taking on larger projects, building homes and commercial businesses.

Walker doesn't have an exact total of how many houses he's worked on since launching his company in 2009. But it is in the hundreds.

Also, his company now has more than 30 employees. And about 70 per cent of those workers have First Nations ancestry.

Their jobs range from being apprentices to lead hands to site supervisors. Whenever possible, Walker Home Construction also enjoys dealing with subcontractors who are First Nations owned and operated.

Walker said he's seen other workplaces that have a strictly businesslike approach. But that's not something he's in favour of.

When they're at work, he wants his employees to be happy, laughing, and having a good time.

"We're trying to create a life for ourselves and our families," he said.

Though his musical career is on hold for now, Walker is hoping it is something he can eventually return to.

"I picked up the guitar and wrote a song the other day," he said. "I'm never going to put it down."

Walker added that he's hoping his company becomes even more successful so that he will have the opportunity to do other things, like get back and devote more time to his music.

"But right now, my main focus is this company," he said.