

Cameron's Dreams Fulfilled With Her Indigenous-Owned Dreamcatcher Promotions Company

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Dreamcatcher Promotions' Michelle Cameron

The fact that Michelle Cameron is in charge of the largest Indigenous-owned promotional company in Canada should not come as a surprise. After all, Cameron, the owner and CEO of Dreamcatcher Promotions, has been a curious entrepreneur since she was a tween. Her entrepreneurial spirit started when she was 12, making cookies at home and getting her mother to sell them at work. “I wanted to contribute to the family income because we grew up pretty poor,” Cameron said. “I was always looking at ways [of] helping out and having a little bit of extra money.”

Cameron, a member of Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, still has fond memories of her early business venture. “From a young age I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” she said. “So, I started it with me having a cookie company. I would make cookies fresh every night and put them in brown paper bags and send them with my mom to sell them out

at work. Every day she'd come home and they'd be all sold out. So, I got the taste of what it was like to make a little bit of extra money."

After about a month, however, Cameron realized her cookie business was not actually a financial success. When her mother asked her to start paying for her own baking supplies, Cameron quickly realized the math was not in her favour: "I really wasn't contributing. By the time I figured out all my costs, I was just covering the costs of the ingredients and not my time. So, it really wasn't a great business idea."

But the short-lived 'business' proved inspirational for Cameron. "My mom was a single mom and I always helped with my sister," she added. "My mom would work two jobs so I was always either cooking, cleaning and watching my little sister. Doing those things since I was 12 years old. It wasn't much for me to start a cookie business because I was already cooking pretty much everything homecooked that you could imagine."

Cameron would go on to raise five children herself. While her children were her priority, Cameron also had ideas of how to make a few bucks rattling around in her head. "The burning desire to be an entrepreneur has always been there and always will be there I think," she said. "So, as I got older, I always looked at different things at how can it be a business, how can I turn this into a business. So, in my 30s I had this idea that embroidery would be a good idea." Cameron noticed an embroidered item with a logo, like a jacket or a toque, everywhere she went: "I started noticing it [embroidery] at hockey tournaments. And a lightbulb went off and I thought that's a really great idea. Every year, there's going to be a new team that comes and kids grow out of their stuff so every year they're going to need a new hat, a new toque, new jackets, new pants and a new jersey. So that was my idea."

Cameron launched her company in 2011 and called it Dreamcatcher Embroidery. "I bought a used embroidery machine and watched YouTube videos for a couple of months teaching myself to embroider," she said. "Thinking about it now, I had the basic skills for embroidery but somehow I turned that into a multi-million-dollar business with one machine." Cameron changed the name of her company to Dreamcatcher Promotions in 2013 to reflect the business' expansion beyond embroidered products to include other promotional items.

But the early days of her business were not easy. Cameron worked as a daycare coordinator before getting into the embroidery business and she maintained that position while starting her business. "I was starting to work 18-hour days, every day," she said. "And I was missing so much time with my kids. I'd miss hockey games, football games and soccer games in order to keep up with my (Dreamcatcher) business because I never wanted to leave my full-time job because I knew it was income guaranteed and I knew I had to look after the kids and pay the bills and the rent. So, I never gave up my daytime job until I knew my business was going to be okay and that I had a good client base to leave my full-time job to commit to my embroidery business." Though she was getting some business, Cameron was not raking it in during the early years. "We were in debt for the first 3-5 years, for sure," she said. "We got a loan and a grant to start it up. There were many, many times I wanted to give up. I honestly thought about probably quitting, in the first three years, 20 times easy."

But during those moments when she was questioning whether to forge on, the thought of her children made Cameron persevere. “It was my kids that kept me going,” she explained. “I thought if I give up now, I missed all those things for nothing. I kept going because I was building something for my kids. I was building a future for them. I wanted to give them more than I ever got growing up. My mom was able to make ends meet every two weeks. It was pay the bills and it was gone. I wanted to do more. So, if I were to quit, I would have given all that up for nothing. There were times I was crying at my desk at the 18th hour in the day, saying I can’t do this anymore. And then I would go home and see my kids and my mom.” Another moment that put her life into perspective and motivated Cameron to carry on was when her daughter said all her friends think she’s so cool now because her mother owns a business. “Just to see the pride in her face and hearing that in her voice, how she was so excited for me, for us, that was the little push I needed to keep going,” Cameron said. “And I didn’t want to give up anymore.”

But Cameron did continue having challenges with her business. “The early years were really, really tough,” she said. “I missed a lot of time at home. It took me on the road, going into different communities and meeting people and building that client base that I needed because a lot of my clients were First Nations communities and organizations that supported an Indigenous business.” Early on, Cameron estimated that 99% of her business was coming from Indigenous clients. Even today, Cameron said about 92% of her products and services are sold to other Indigenous people.

But in early 2024, Cameron fulfilled one of her long-held wishes to work with the National Hockey League’s Winnipeg Jets. The NHL franchise signed a partnership with Dreamcatcher Promotions to produce its Indigenous-themed promotional products. “I’m at a level that I never expected to be,” Cameron said. “I wanted to be the largest Indigenous promotional company in Canada. I had two dreams when I started my company. That was one of them. And the other one was to print for the Winnipeg Jets. So, I’ve accomplished the two big dreams that I had in business. I’ve hit those two and now it’s like where do we go from here?”

Well, it seems the only direction for Cameron to go is up. In May 2021, she launched another company, the Indigenous Nations Apparel Company (INAC). INAC opened the first Indigenous-owned store in CF Polo Park, a Winnipeg shopping mall. A second INAC store has opened in Saskatoon, and now Cameron has visions of opening INAC locations in every Canadian province. Cameron also oversees another company titled Dreamcatcher Executive Offices, located in the Manitoba rural municipality of Headingly, about 20 kilometres west of Winnipeg. This business provides co-working office spaces as well as private offices and meeting rooms. And yet another Cameron-led company is expected to launch in 2025.

But while Cameron owns several successful businesses, Dreamcatcher Promotions remains the jewel in the crown, currently employing 55 employees. “Staff is a big thing for me,” Cameron said. “I love being able to create opportunities or great jobs. I also love creating opportunities for Indigenous success in business. I get asked to speak at a lot of events which is really nice because I get to share my story, my journey and inspire other Indigenous youth, entrepreneurs into going after their dreams. So, that’s probably my biggest reward. And I think for me personally, I think it [the reward] is mostly

building a successful company so that we can employ 55 staff.” A little more than half of Cameron’s employees are Indigenous and that is a big deal for her. But she’s also proud of keeping a large number of individuals employed. “I look at it as personal because there was a time when I applied for more than 30 jobs,” she said. “And I felt I was an ideal candidate for many of them. And I was passed over time and time again. I struggled to find a job and put my skills to the test. And so, when I had the opportunity to create employment, create opportunities, it was a new passion for me. I want to give someone that same opportunity that somebody gave to me. I was given the opportunity to show how good I was at the job. There are some people in this place that didn’t have that opportunity. And they applied for 30-plus jobs and they were passed up. Some of them are some of my best employees, the most committed and hard working.”

But although she has dozens of people working for her, Cameron isn’t one to sit idly by. “I’m very much involved still,” she said. “I’m the CEO. I’m here as much as I can be. I have a great management team and management structure. But I’m very hands-on still.” And she relishes the impact Dreamcatcher Promotions is making: “I like to say we are a business with purpose. We don’t do business traditionally. Everything we do, we have something in mind. Like for me, every contract, every corporation that comes on, I don’t necessarily look at it as another dollar to the account. I look at it as an opportunity to create more employment.”

Cameron can also boast about her business’ capacity to meet its goals. “For us, we’ve been in business for almost 12 years and we’re very fortunate that we have gone through the growing pains, we’ve gone through what they call ‘Death Valley,’ the first five years,” she said. “And we’ve come out of that and I like to toot our horn. We are debt free. We have no debt and everything we own in the building is owned by myself and within the company. That doesn’t happen very often. And so, it’s really nice we can say that because most Indigenous companies don’t have that.”

But Cameron is disturbed that other Indigenous businesses have major financial issues to deal with. “It’s great they’re providing funding for startups,” she said of various Indigenous funding agencies. “But where is the assistance, where is the support in the middle, in Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, when you’re going through growing pains or trying to get to the next level. Traditionally, most banks don’t want to look at you unless you’ve been in business for five years.” Thus, Cameron wonders where Indigenous entrepreneurs can find assistance (especially if traditional banks are not interested in helping) and whether Indigenous financial institutions are providing adequate support for new companies or expansion funds at the five-year mark.

These challenges make Cameron’s success all the more impressive and prompt others to ask if she had a mentor to help her along the way. “I get asked all the time who is my mentor,” she said. “And to me, the only person that comes to mind is my mother. My mother was the hardest-working woman I have ever met in my entire life. And still is. She will always be my mentor on how to work hard and how to give it everything and provide for your family.” Cameron added that it also would have been difficult to find another Indigenous business to emulate. “Twelve years ago, when I started my company, there [weren’t] very many successful Indigenous companies to look up to,” she explained. “I know some of the funding agencies want you to find a

mentor now. Indigenous businesses only make up 1.7 percent of the businesses that are active in Canada. And that's a really low number. So, if you think about that and trying to find an Indigenous mentor, how do you find one in that small, small pool?"

Cameron added another topic she is often asked about is reconciliation. "I get asked this all the time—what [does] reconciliation mean?" she said. "It means a lot of things to a lot of people. But for me, first off it means before we can look forward, before we can reconcile anything, we have to have a common ground. We need to have an understanding of what has happened in Canada, the history of it like the residential school survivors and why we are the way we are. And for me, reconciliation means a partnership. It means working together. Reconciliation in action. And I think it's important that non-Indigenous organizations start supporting Indigenous businesses for a lot of reasons."

Cameron also has a parting message for youth: "I always say chase your dream. And for me, that's what it was. It was a dream growing up. And it was still my dream until my mid-30s when I got into business. I never let that go, that passion, that drive to create my own company and that's really what drives me—that burning desire to do more. And I always tell people to dream big. I set my goals way up here so that even if I hit milestones, I'm still climbing. And I'm still trying to find more things that I can attain."