

## Toronto Star: Native entrepreneur tries food for thought

Contributed by Prithi Yelaja / Staff Reporter  
Thursday, 08 March 2007

Winning business plan pits produce against rampant diabetes

Fresh fruits and vegetables are scarce commodities in the remote northern community Darcy Kejick calls home.

The lack of healthy food choices, along with a lack of exercise, help explain why diabetes is rampant in North Spirit Lake, a tiny Nishnawbe Aski Nation community about 600 kilometres northwest of Thunder Bay.

That's why Kejick plans to use the \$15,000 prize he collected as the winner of a business plan competition &ndash; sponsored by a South Asian entrepreneur in Toronto &ndash; to open a new grocery store in his hometown of about 300. His store would be stocked with fresh produce, dairy, bread and organic products, all to encourage fellow residents to eat healthier.

The number of people with diabetes in Ontario doubled between 1995 and 2005. Aboriginal people are among those at highest risk because of diet and lifestyle, according to a new Toronto study.

Kejick, 34, knows this first-hand.

"I'm a diabetic myself. You could say it's an epidemic on the reserve, so I'm just trying to do my part to curb the problem," says Kejick, whose parents are also both diabetic.

For 10 months of the year, fresh produce has to be flown in from Red Lake, near the Manitoba border. The lack of a store with adequate refrigeration and cooling facilities in North Spirit Lake means those supplies go fast.

Of the two existing stores, one is run out of someone's bedroom, the other is "more like a shed," says Kejick.

"Both tend to stock a lot of junk food and stuff you can store for a long time, like canned items or stuff you can throw in the microwave and heat up fast." Frozen french fries are a big seller.

Kejick picked up his award, sponsored by the POA Educational Foundation, at an elegant high-tea ceremony at Queen's Park this week.

"The only route for First Nations people to achieve prosperity is entrepreneurship," says Aditya Jha, 50, the Toronto businessman who started the foundation along with his two partners, who prefer to stay out of the limelight, as a way to uplift aboriginal people. (POA represents the initials of the partners' first names.)

"If I can do it, they can do it. In Canada, no community gets respect until they make money in a mainstream business," says the straight-talking Jha.

He should know. He immigrated to Canada from India via Singapore in 1994 and became a multi-millionaire when he and his partners sold their software company to Sun Microsystems in 2001, for a reported \$100 million (U.S.)

Jha was alerted to the plight of Canada's aboriginal people when he heard Stan Beardy, grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, speak at a black tie dinner in 2005.

Since then, the foundation has created a \$100,000 endowment fund at Trent University for aboriginal students.

He has also announced plans to raise \$5 million to establish an "incubation centre" at Ryerson University to foster aboriginal entrepreneurship, and kick-started it with his own \$500,000 donation.

Kejick was part of a mentoring program, Project Beyshick, now in its third year, which pairs a dozen or more native people with senior executives at large Toronto companies. Participants in that program were eligible to take part in the business plan competition.

For a week last summer, Kejick job-shadowed Geoff Hoy, a senior vice-president at HSBC Bank in Toronto.

Kejick's new store, next to the gas station he operates in North Spirit Lake, is slated to be open for business by September, with the help of a bank loan.

"He's already a successful guy, so he'll do well," says Jha. "The promised land is here for him to grab."

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