

## The Star: Project to develop business acumen in Ontario aboriginal communities

Founder sees program as way to help natives break away from government handouts

While most computer techs wage daily battles with destructive viruses, self-described "geek" Devon Meekis has to fight an affliction which can be even more debilitating than the most insidious spyware program.

Meekis, an aboriginal who started his own IT company about a decade ago, says he encounters jealousy and ridicule from within his own community.

"We have this theory we call the `crab syndrome,' where if somebody is pulling themselves out of the pail, all of the other crabs will try and bring them back down again," says Meekis, whose business is based in Thunder Bay.

Add to that prejudice and misconceptions from the white community, and it's no wonder aboriginals have a hard time breaking into the business world, says Meekis.

That's why he's joining 24 other young aboriginals in Project Beyshick, a mentorship initiative aiming to foster and sharpen the business acumen of First Nations communities through an intensive, week-long program of seminars, presentations and workshops.

"I'm seeing how hard it is for people like us to make it &ndash; for people who grew up on the reserve especially," says Meekis, who named his company FLI &ndash; which means "for little Indians.

"I figured that the best way to show somebody that they can make it is to make it yourself."

Project Beyshick, which started Saturday with orientation sessions in Peterborough, also gives participants from northern Ontario's Nishnawbe Aski Nation, serious face-time with some of Canada's top business leaders.

Meekis is set to spend three days this week job shadowing with Karen Dunk-Green, who works for TD Bank Financial Group.

"This year, I want to learn how to effectively manage people &ndash; how to effectively be hands-off while still keeping your ideas alive," said Meekis, 32.

Project Beyshick, which is now in its third annual edition, is the brainchild of Aditya Jha, a Nepal-born businessman and philanthropist who moved to Canada from India and started a software company called Isopia Inc. in 1999.

Jha, who sold Isopia Inc. for more than \$100 million in 2001, says he was spurred to start the project after witnessing the social problems and Third-World conditions rife within aboriginal communities.

Jha says that getting aboriginals more heavily involved in the business community could be an effective alternative to the system of government handouts which have kept aboriginals locked in a cycle of poverty.

Greg Baas, a participant who owns and runs a fishing and hunting lodge in the remote town of Sioux Lookout, echoes those sentiments.

He adds most aboriginals in his community don't have the support necessary to start businesses. "There are programs right now to help aboriginal businesses, but it's just having the courage to try and do it. It's not easy to run a business and not everyone wants to do it."

Baas, 32, is set to spend three days shadowing Ken Folwer, the investment wizard who heads one of the country's top investment and management advisory firms.

TVO CEO Lisa De Wilde, also acting as a program mentor this year, says the program is a unique tool.

"It does something that's concrete and it delivers something to young people that I think is unique across Canada."

Last year, Wilde mentored a 16-year-old girl from Timmins, who was exposed to an entirely new world. "She had a real eye-opening experience. She was so sweet. She said, "I've never been exposed to a woman that runs an organization."

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