

Macleans: Mentorship program fosters entrepreneurial spirit in aboriginal communities

Jealousy, ridicule within communities prevent aboriginal youth from pursuing education, training

Access to education and training is widely considered to be a crucial part of improving the state of poverty in many aboriginal communities. Canadian universities and colleges have created programs to assist aboriginal youth with everything from transitioning into urban living to studying aboriginal science. However, one aboriginal entrepreneur says that it is not only access to programs that stops aboriginal people from pursuing higher education, but their communities as well.

Devon Meekis, who started his own IT company about a decade ago, says he encounters jealousy and ridicule from within his own community, which can be debilitating for many young people. "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," said Meekis, whose business is based in Thunder Bay, Ont.

Add
to that prejudice and misconceptions from the white community, and it's no wonder aboriginal people 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—;for people who grew up on the reserve especially," says Meekis, who named his company FLI, 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, Ont., 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 - 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 aboriginal people more heavily involved in the business community could be an effective alternative to the system of government handouts that has 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, Ont., echoes those sentiments. He adds most aboriginal people 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," he said. 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, Ont., 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.'"

-with a report from CP