

Natives get a hand up from Indo-Canadian

How can people in a first-rate country like Canada be living in Third-World conditions?

That disturbed Aditya Jha, 52, president and CEO of Karma Candy Inc. -- one of Canada's largest contract confectionery manufacturer.

Seeing conditions of First Nations people on the reserves, Jha decided to do something to help. He met Grand Chief Stan Beardy of Nishnawbe Aski Nation and kicked off a new job sharing and leadership program targeted at young, educated people.

That was four years ago and since then, Jha, with the support of Beardy, has brought 60 young people to Toronto for job shadowing with the heads of major corporations.

Called Project Beyshick, some of these young First Nations people were among the more than 100 people who turned out last Friday at Prego Della Piazza on Bloor St. W.

"Let us join together and encourage tomorrow's entrepreneurs," Jha said in the invitation.

Beardy says Jha "looks like us, same brown skin, same manners and that's why I am able to work so closely with Indo-Canadian business people as my young people can identify with them.

"A lot of my young people have the education, training but they don't have the confidence in themselves," he explained in an interview.

This mentoring program "is for confidence building as my young people need a little push so that they can get confidence. After spending a few weeks in Toronto job shadowing, these young people are totally different than when they come here," Beardy said.

At the end of the two-week program, participants submit business plans. The person who submits the best one receives \$15,000 to pursue their plan.

Darcy Kejick -- chosen for the program two years ago -- submitted a business plan for a grocery store and gas station. Judged the best, he received a cheque for \$15,000 -- seed money for him to implement his business plan.

Standing with Beardy at the reception, successful Kejick was all smiles.

"Yes, I have paid off the entire loan to the bank. I am very happy with the mentoring and job shadowing program. It has helped me to achieve my goal to start a new business." he said.

Jha came to Canada in 1994 and worked with Bell Canada before starting his own software company -- Isopia -- with some partners in 1999.

A few years later, that company was acquired by Microsystems Inc. for \$100-million US. Jha wouldn't say what his share was, but he established a few endowments to help mostly the First Nation people: "My endowment at George Brown college is for \$250,000. I have an endowment at Trent University for \$100,000; another one at Ryerson for \$440,000 and at York University for \$25,000."

He also has an endowment at Roy Thompson Hall where he gives out up to 100 tickets a year to First Nations' people for functions they otherwise could not afford to attend.

He knows from experience that "no community gets respect and recognition until some of its members have succeeded financially in the mainstream world."

Jha pointed to Indo-Canadians as an example.

"During the last 10 years or so, our image has changed as many of us are no longer just professors and doctors -- those are very successful professions -- but now we have dozens of Indo-Canadian CEOs, presidents and founders of major multi-million-(dollar) companies," he said. Jha wondered about the possibility of helping people from First Nations succeed in the same way.