



THE NORTHEASTERN ALBERTA ABORIGINAL BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

Strength in Numbers

BY DEBBIE HAHN

There is strength in numbers. This was what a few local Aboriginal entrepreneurs realized in 1993 when they came together to form a non-profit organization known as the Northeastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association (NAABA).

Now, NAABA provides support and training opportunities to their Full Members to ensure they have everything they need to succeed.

THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP

NAABA President, Justin Herman, says innovation is key when it comes to supporting their 127 full members and 165 associate members. "Some of the ways we are accomplishing this is hosting networking events, providing courses for our members, being more diligent with our policies and collaborating more with other organizations such as CCAB (Canadian Council for Aboriginal

Business), industry and First Nation owned businesses, and most importantly our full members," he explains.

Full Members – classified as at least 51 per cent Aboriginally-owned and majority controlled businesses in the Wood Buffalo region – are provided with an opportunity to do business with Industry. They receive more visibility, are provided access to industry representatives, and help

building their business from other experienced business-owner mentors.

Associate Members are non-Aboriginal businesses, or businesses outside of the Wood Buffalo region which have made a commitment to support Aboriginal business growth. They have the confidence that their commitment to supporting Aboriginal businesses and their development is behind businesses that are at least 51 per cent Aboriginally-owned and controlled. Their Associate Membership gives them visibility for their commitment; it also helps to create an environment that nurtures relationship with the Aboriginal business community.

Herman says the organization receives a lot of feedback about why being a member is beneficial, but the most common reason is how much NAABA has expanded the members' networks. "This happens not only through our events," Herman says, "but also the network that being a member of our organization provides."

THE OUTLOOK FOR ABORIGINAL BUSINESS IN NORTHEASTERN ALBERTA

Herman believes that the future of Aboriginal businesses in Canada is bright, but even more so in our region. "I believe that now more than ever industry and government recognize how mutually beneficial it is to work collaboratively with Aboriginal businesses. Even though we are going through an economic adjustment right now I believe that the future will still bring many opportunities for everyone," he shares.

According to Herman, the companies that are able to survive and thrive through these times will only become that much stronger once the market rebounds, serving as a good eye-opener for a lot of companies. He goes on to explain that Aboriginal businesses in the region have a proven track record of persevering and succeeding, something that has been made so much easier for the current generation because of past leadership and trailblazers from the community.

"People like Dave Tuccaro, Richard Sorge, Eric Newell, Nicole and Dave Bouchier and all the First Nation and Metis leaders from our region have already paved the way for us," says Herman. "Now it's up to us to decide which direction we want to take it."

NAABA remains very optimistic and passionate when it comes to Aboriginal business and the community. "In 2015 Aboriginal businesses performed over \$1.5-billion worth of work in the Wood Buffalo region," Herman shares.

"Even though we are experiencing difficult economic times right now there is light at the end of the tunnel and we will get through this."

Northeastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association is available as a resource and as a network to help support, sustain and expand business through Aboriginal strength, unity and opportunity. To learn more about what they do, visit www.naaba.ca.



YMM: You and your husband, Dave, own the Bouchier Group...one of the largest Aboriginal-owned and operated companies in Northeastern Alberta. Tell us a bit about the company, and how your story truly could be considered a "rags to riches" story.

NB: In the fall of 2004, with the upturn in our area and the Horizon Oil Sands site deciding to proceed with their project - both David and I saw an opportunity to take leave from our jobs and try entrepreneurship full-time. I was working for Shell Canada and David was the GM for the Fort McKay Group of Companies. Within six months, the decision seemed to be the right one, as we were working steadily with Bouchier. Ultimately we decided to resign from our positions and give the company 100% of our time. We both thought the worst that could happen is that we would fail at business, and we would then seek out employment as before. That was almost 12 years ago and we never have turned back since. It has not been the easiest path, and at times we have definitely

YMM recently chatted with local business owner, Nicole Bouchier, who has also been named one of Canada's top 100 most powerful women. Read more about the start of the Bouchier Group, her thoughts on our community, and the future.

thought about our choice, especially when it comes to family time. We are very proud of our progress and most importantly the team we get to work alongside each and every day!

YMM: You are known for being very committed to our community. Is this commitment something that was ingrained in you at a young age? Or has it grown over the years?

NB: We our just both big believers in family and community, this has been something we grew up with and it is important for us to continue to pass that along to our children. Fort McMurray (Fort McKay) have always been home for us, and we have been very blessed with the opportunities it has presented us with, so it really only makes sense to give back to a region that has given you so much! As a local resident, we are proud to call Wood Buffalo home and to raise our family here. It is discouraging when you see so many contracting companies that have benefited from the development in our region, many not local, but yet

are not always willing to give back to the community. To us, it just makes good sense.

YMM: From your standpoint, what are some of the challenges that face our community today, and how can we overcome them?

NB: Growing up, we felt a sense of community - you could not go any place without running into someone you knew, it was a real small town feel and the type of place that you felt okay leaving your front door open. Our population base has grown so much in the recent years, we feel one of our largest challenges is finding our identity as a community once again. I think one of the positives out of the more recent downturn is that you are really seeing our community come together....it always amazing me during a time like this when you still see such giving companies and giving people supporting each other. A great example of this has been the community support for Bo Cooper our local firefighter. We do not know

him or his family personally but are so proud of how the community is pulling together to support them.

YMM: You have been named one of Canada's top 100 most powerful women. First of all, congratulations! And second of all, take us behind the scenes of what has led up to you being named as such.

NB: David and I are really not the type of people to go looking for any special recognition, however a nomination came from Dr. Marie Delorme, Owner, Imagination Group whom I admire very much and was very honoured that she thought I was deserving of this recognition. Any time we can raise the awareness of the Wood Buffalo region, and the success of either Aboriginal businesses or women in business, especially in non-traditional roles we welcome the opportunity.

YMM: What does the future look like for you? Do you have some focuses and goals that you'll be tackling?

NB: We spent much of 2015 in a similar position as most organizations,

with the economic down turn a lot of time was spent on contractual cost reductions. As a business I think we will see this continue on for most of 2016 and being committed to our region, we very much want the continued opportunity to work on the projects we currently do, and maybe even expand. We recently took on a second Facility Maintenance contract that has Bouchier hiring a few more hundred team members at a local oil sands organization. This is a great opportunity for us to spend 2016 focusing on how we can continue to improve our business workstreams and become a contractor and hopefully employer of choice. We also will spend the year revisiting our organization structure to ensure we are maximizing our team's skill sets, and bringing in new applications to support what will hopefully be continued growth in the years to come. On a personal note, we look forward to spending much needed time with our family and maybe even travelling a bit more. [YMM](http://www.yymm.com)