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Funding and mentors help aboriginal youth start ups

Daryl-Lynn Carlson, Financial Post

Published: Friday, January 30, 2009



Courtesy Strongfront TV

Aboriginal entrepreneur Jesse Green has set his goals of achievement high after receiving funding and support through the Business Development Bank of Canada

Aboriginal youth in Canada face significant barriers to business. Government of Canada research has asserted these young people are more likely to hail from communities beleaguered by poverty, high rates of violence and substance abuse. They are also entering adulthood feeling pressured to celebrate their culture while resisting social stigmatization, which combined, fosters a sense of hopelessness.

But several initiatives across the country to assist and inspire Aboriginal youth with both guidance and funds are seeing more of them attain success as entrepreneurs.

"The Aboriginal market has huge potential," says Wilson Neapew, national director for Aboriginal Banking with the Business Development Bank of Canada. The BDC is one of several organizations that provide demographic-specific programs and funding that are generating interest by youth. "Recently we have seen an increase in requests from Aboriginal youth across the country, so their eyes are opening more and more."

Jesse Green has set his goals of achievement high after receiving funding and support through BDC's assistance: The president and chief executive of Strongfront AV Productions, a film and television company he founded, is moving forward with purpose, undaunted by the economic slump.

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He envisions his Winnipeg-based company soon opening a location in Canada's film hub, Toronto, and is in the throes of developing a television series for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN).

Mr. Green admits the process wasn't easy. "I had approached the banks for funding about four times and in all those times I was always told I needed more of something," he says.

Even with the organizations through which he was successful, he said he had to "approach all the funders a minimum of four times before getting the funding. And I had five years of books to show them."

Eventually, he received startup loans and grants from the BDC and a provincial arts funding program to propel his business forward.

Before launching his production company, Mr. Green led a band called Peacemaker that recorded two albums. He studied media through various courses across Canada and opened Strongfront AV Productions before securing financing.

Recognizing the hurdles he and other young Aboriginal entrepreneurs face, he touts mentorship as a formal mandate within his company. He says he encourages his mentees to "work hard, persevere and get all your information in order" before even thinking about making a formal pitch for funding.

The BDC's programs include E-Spirit, an online business plan competition for Aboriginal high school students. Through E-Spirit, students - individually or in teams - use the online learning modules and templates to research and prepare a business plan, which they submit for an annual competition.

The competition is hosted at various universities across the country; this year's is at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. Competitors are treated to a one-week stay on the university campus where they are required to maintain a schedule of meetings and activities to get a taste of the academic lifestyle. They also must present their business plan formally in front of their peers in an exercise to build confidence in public speaking, and then demonstrate their concept at a trade show. The event culminates with an awards gala and an opportunity to network with business leaders who volunteer as mentors.

The BDC's Aboriginal programs are delivered in partnership with corporate sponsors, along with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency.

Similarly, two other programs affiliated with schools are assisting Aboriginal youth with entrepreneurial skills with a focus on financial literacy.

A program by Advancing Canadian Entrepreneurship Inc., or ACE, hosts an annual Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) competition through which the winner competes in an international forum. ACE has tailored its entry preparation to include special mentoring sessions for Aboriginal student competitors at the University of Saskatchewan and Brandon University in Manitoba.

Another program introduced as a pilot project this fall encourages Aboriginal youth to pursue careers in finance and accounting. Called the Martin Aboriginal Initiative (MAI), the program was founded by former Prime Minister Paul Martin and his family in conjunction with the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants to rally volunteers from leading accounting firms who could inspire Aboriginal teens attending high school.

Unveiling the program late last year, Mr. Martin noted that almost half of Aboriginal Canadians do not have a high school diploma. "In the race of life therefore, too many begin at a tremendous educational disadvantage," he said. "There is such promise in the power of example as it is much easier to find your way to the top when the trail has already been blazed."

MAI programs are running in three participating schools in Ontario - two in Brantford and one in Fort Frances - and there are plans to expand the project to other provinces, as well as other professions such as engineering, to ensure Aboriginal youth get exposure to top career paths on which to build their future.

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