

## INDIGENOUS BUSINESS LEADERS

# Treading Tradition & Contemporary Success

By Kiran Malik-Khan

**W**hen I moved to Canada from the USA in 2001, it was important for me to understand Indigenous intergenerational trauma” to “Indigenous history, and also why Canadians fail to comprehend it. Nobody has taught me more about Indigenous history than Dr. Martin Brokenleg. I was fortunate enough to hear him live a few years ago in Fort McMurray. Dr. Brokenleg, an American psychologist/author, who specializes in

trauma/resilience, and Native American studies spoke about intergenerational trauma, which generates grief, not “expressed, acknowledged, nor resolved.”

He spoke of reconciliation through a Canadian lens, emphasized to “speak the truth; start with the facts; start with trusted people; accept that the past will not be changed,” and also focused on “naming the hurt.”

I continue to educate myself; and as a writer prioritize telling Indigenous success stories. The following is part of these ongoing learnings.

## Corie Flett

Learning about Corie Flett, a partner in Muessele Flett Law LLP was insightful. Her honesty impressed me. Corie started her business in 2019.

“My partner, Waverly Muessele, and I worked at a law firm together. But, we wanted to create a work-life balance as mothers while providing quality legal services.”

The firm has a full-time staff of five. Corie notes “being an Indigenous business in Fort McMurray has its advantages with business support from organizations like NAABA (Northeastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association). There’s a sense of community in that Indigenous businesses want to support each other.”

A member of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN), reflecting on her relationship with the land, Corie shares, she grew up in Fort Smith, NT until 1995. Then her family moved to McMurray.

“My family is spread across Fort Smith, Fort Chipewyan and Fort McMurray. I don’t speak my Indigenous language nor practice our cultural traditions as my dad and grandmother attended residential schools. My grandmother is deceased, but my father has just started his healing journey. Our family was robbed of its cultural identity through the extreme abuse and racism suffered at those schools. It’s a

sad reality and hard to navigate being Indigenous, looking Indigenous, but feeling that lost connection to my history and culture because of the impact of residential schools. So, unfortunately, I don’t have much connection to the land.”

A community supporter and champion, Corie is now a Benchler for the Law Society of Alberta, a volunteer role estimated at approximately 500 hours/year. Previously she sat on the board of the Northern Lights Health Foundation (NLHF), Fort McMurray Airport Authority, and Community Futures and volunteered for the local Free Legal Clinic.

“Our sponsorships include youth hockey, dance, United Way, NAABA, Community Responders Golf Tournament, Fort McMurray Public Schools food program, and we’re the title sponsor for the upcoming Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce Awards.”



A portrait of Chris Wilson, a man with a full beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

## Chris Wilson

A well-known local name, Chris Wilson is the CEO of Birch Mountain Enterprises (BME). Born in Fort McMurray and raised in Fort McKay, Chris is a proud member of the Fort McKay First Nation. From a modest start in 2005, Chris has grown BME into a well-respected brand, with over 375 employees and 200 units. And now, as a proud member of the Fort McKay Group of Companies, BME, under Chris' direction, is an industry leader for Pressure, Vac and Fluid Hauling.

BME's success is grounded with Chris' connection to the community. He is currently on the board of the Local HERO Foundation, a member of the Fort McKay Land Code Committee, a YMM Start-Up business mentor, a NAABA advisory committee member and a volunteer at the Fort McKay fire department.

Chris is recognized for his generosity in supporting a long and growing list of local social, athletic, and cultural organizations, with an emphasis on the youth. Chris has played a key role in supporting the Keyano College Foundation, Local HERO, and is a champion for the NLHF, donating more than a half a million dollars over the years.

A strong community supporter, Chris takes great pride in BME's promotion and encouragement for Indigenous employment/businesses, setting standards that continue to raise the bar. Chris actively leads BME in fulfilling its purpose to survive generations and benefit the communities in which we live and work.

## Melanie and Lloyd Antoine

I met Melanie Antoine, CEO, A.P.E. Maintenance when I served with her on the NLHF board. She was the chair. A consummate community advocate, my respect for her grew exponentially as I saw her support the region, while championing her Indigenous heritage. I connected with her for this feature, and here's what she shared about her husband, Lloyd, their relationship to the land, and being an Indigenous business leader.

"Lloyd is from Fort Chipewyan; a member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation. He grew up in the bush with his family and learned the importance of hard work at a young age."

"As local entrepreneurs, we try to encourage folks to get out and enjoy, but respect the land as we do year-round," shares Lloyd, who is a director for NAABA and NLHF.

"I grew up in Fort Chipewyan and am a member of the ACFN. My parents were proud of our ancestral lands. My father was the ACFN Chief for many years and always taught us the importance of our lands and rights as an Indigenous person. Lloyd and I have regional ancestors going back hundreds of years. We are Indigenous to the region; proud of who we are, who we have become and hope our children look up to us when they become adults."

The couple started A.P.E. Maintenance (Antoine's Pump & Equipment) in 2008; a 100% Indigenous-owned company - celebrating 15 years in 2023. For the first two years of the business, they had only one Millwright (Lloyd). Today, they have 100 full-time employees.

"Becoming a NAABA member played an important role as we launched our business. Their events created many networking opportunities to gain work," notes Melanie.

Speaking of some of the opportunities and challenges of being an Indigenous business, Melanie highlights a few myths.

"There are many local opportunities.

Indigenous businesses play an important role in the region's economy. However, being an Indigenous business has its challenges as you compete in a global market. There are many misperceptions regarding Indigenous businesses such as it's easier to gain contracts because you are Indigenous. This is false, all Indigenous-owned businesses we know have worked hard for their achievements, work isn't handed to them on a platter."

"Like everyone else we must be competitive, outbid and prove our value to the client. Indigenous businesses work just as hard as non-Indigenous businesses, often the only difference is we operate locally," comments Melanie, who is a director for the Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development & Tourism.

"APE supports many local organizations. We sponsor the mascot for the Arctic Winter Games, we give back to the community as much as we can so it can thrive, and that's important for us. We plan to retire in this region, this is where our ancestors have lived for hundreds of years, where our family lives and where our kids were born. Like many others, we only want the best for this place we call home."

Custodians of the land, thriving in a modern world. ■

