



RAISING THE TIDE

By Bryan Hansen

Mi'gmaq trailblazer Victoria LaBillois draws on her experience to help Indigenous businesses gain a foothold in the national economy

Victoria LaBillois is a Mi'gmaq entrepreneur from Quebec who has made a name for herself in construction as the owner of Wejipeg Excavation and co-owner of Wejuseg Construction. More so, LaBillois has actively shared her passion for entrepreneurship and leadership with a wider Indigenous audience, earning her a reputation as a trailblazer in the community.

She is vice-chairperson of the National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEDB), and recently served as co-chair for a national Steering Committee with the Canadian Construction

Association. This coming May, she will also host CCAB's East Coast Business Forum and Award Dinner in Halifax.

Mentor, entrepreneur and role model all rolled into one, LaBillois serves as an inspiration to Indigenous entrepreneurs and business owners who are just starting out. She actively works to improve the business environment in Canada for Indigenous professionals and business owners, all while continuing to run her own construction businesses.

LaBillois's entrepreneurial journey began in 2011, when she launched Wejipeg Excavation, a company that manufactures excavation machinery that can work on windfarms. At the time, she didn't know the difference between a loader and an excavator, but LaBillois knew the wind industry was flourishing in Canada and recognized a good business opportunity when she saw one. "I'm a serial entrepreneur at heart, and I'm always looking for new opportunities to make an impact," she says.

She brushed up on the federal government's Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business (PSAB) and developed a business plan. While she worked on building her own business, LaBillois also committed herself to improving the status quo so all Indigenous businesses could access larger markets and bid on key contracts. As she puts it, "I've always been driven to make a difference in my community."

ECONOMIC STRATEGY

In an effort to support Indigenous business, LaBillois eventually took on her current role at the NIEDB, a body that advises Ottawa on Indigenous economic opportunities with the aim of improving policies to support Indigenous business. It was the NIEDB that brought to life the National Indigenous Economic Strategy (NIES) based on a recommendation that came out of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

LaBillois has been directly involved in the implementation of NIES. "A core group, an advisory group and a peer review group [came] together to work," she explains. "We were full of energy and ideas in the first meeting back in 2020.... Different organizations and people came together for Indigenous economic development."



"Economic reconciliation is about rekindling that relationship with the land and waters, and building our economies based on our traditional values of kinship and taking care of each other"

Victoria LaBillois, Wejipeg Excavation

Around the same time, the entire world was about to change with the onset of COVID-19, which LaBillois says presented a number of challenges as well as pluses. "We had to move meetings online but being virtual really was an advantage for busy people running various Indigenous organizations and companies," she says. "[It] allowed us to move the strategy forward in a short amount of time with virtual meetings."

On a personal note, working on NIES helped LaBillois keep stay focused at a time when construction came to a complete halt in Quebec. "It was perfect

for us all to put a deep dive in with our hearts and our minds to make [NIES] a reality," she says. "There were no limitations on what we could do or envision – it was fantastic."

NIES includes 107 Calls to Economic Prosperity, as well as four strategic pathways titled People, Lands, Infrastructure and Finance. It is designed for every organization in Canada regardless of size, as well as Indigenous entities and communities.

As many in the Indigenous business community know, Call to Action #92 of



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THE NEED FOR FINANCIAL LITERACY

Mi'gmaq businesswoman Victoria LaBillois is a strong believer in teaching financial literacy to Indigenous youth, something she says is integral to promoting entrepreneurship within Indigenous communities.

“Financial literacy is a foundational piece when it comes to promoting entrepreneurship among Indigenous peoples – we need to have a positive relationship with money and it’s crucial for young Indigenous people to understand how to manage their personal finances, credit, banking and understand capital,” she says.

This can sometimes be an uphill battle given the negative connotations around money that linger in some Indigenous communities. But it’s a resource that cannot be ignored, stresses LaBillois, emphasizing that a positive relationship to finance and money is key.

“The negative connotations surrounding money are not going away. So it’s essential for us to work with money in a way that aligns with our values and beliefs.”

the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada calls on corporate Canada to embark on meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples, ensure equitable access to economic opportunities, and educate their employees about Indigenous history. Corporate Canada can support these pathways to

socioeconomic parity for Indigenous peoples by reading, sharing and living up to NIES.

For LaBillois, “economic reconciliation is about getting back to a [pre-contact] place of abundance, where we take care of ourselves and the land. Our traditional economies were based on saving, trading and forming alliances of confederacies where the land and waters sustained us.”

Colonization, she adds, has been a destructive force that has led to a “lack of access to land, diseases introduced by settlers, and the residential school legacies. This has eroded the mentality of abundance. Economic reconciliation is about rekindling that relationship with the land and waters, and building our economies based on our traditional values of kinship and taking care of each other.”

NATURAL LEADER



LaBillois is in her element trying to open up new opportunities for Indigenous people in the world of business. She stresses, however, that for her, leadership is all “about lifting our people up.... It’s very much more about the collective rather than the individual.”

It’s also about drawing on her mosaic of lived experience – LaBillois has worked in Indigenous urban services at the federal, regional and local level – and using that experience to help turn Indigenous businesses from mere spectators to active participants in the Canadian economy. “[Indigenous peoples] were constantly just spectators of the regional economy. We watched as logging trucks drove by; we were excluded from commercial fisheries until Marshall became involved; [and] in forestry everything was a protest, a blockade, a fight,” she says.

When asked about her key messages to new, up-and-coming entrepreneurs, LaBillois stresses the importance of being open to asking for help when needed, accepting that help, and then passing it on to those who come after you – a basic tenet she herself lives by. One of her favourite quotes, she says, is “a rising tide lifts all boats – whether it’s a raft with a rope, or a 15-foot bass boat, we are all in this together and we are lifting each other up.”

LaBillois relates her collective concept of leadership back to NIES. “It’s the first time that Indigenous peoples are collectively coming together and writing out a strategy around Indigenous economic reconciliation and economic development,” she says, adding that when Indigenous people hold the pen, they can write their own story and outline their own needs. “This is what we need to see. We know in past years there’s been money thrown at the problem and yet there are still the same issues. [NIES] is [therefore] significant.”


Change may not happen overnight, but when faced with adversity, time and again LaBillois rises to the challenge. As she likes to say, “when the going gets tough, the tough put on lipstick.” For someone who made her mark in the rough-and-tumble, male-dominated construction industry, those are revolutionary words. They make it clear that when she sets her mind to something, LaBillois is a force to be reckoned with, and we can expect positive change ahead. ●

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