

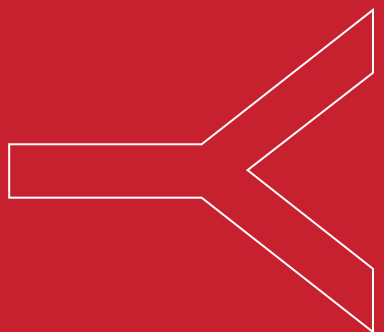
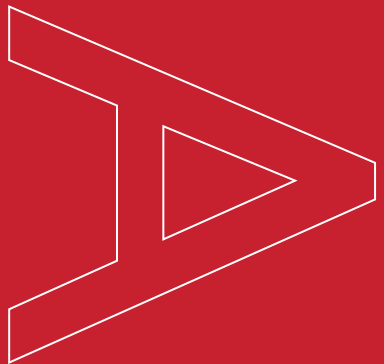
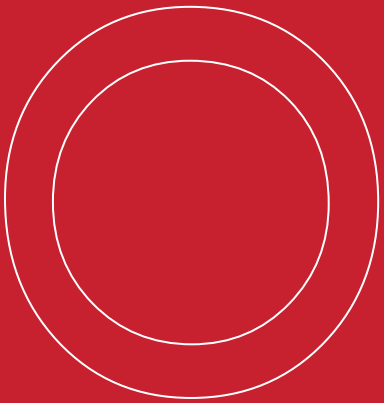
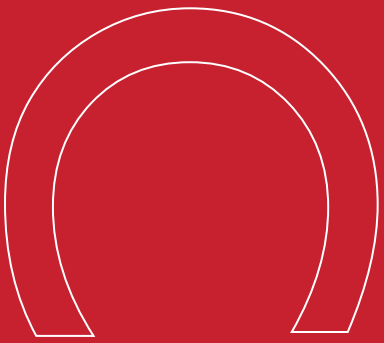
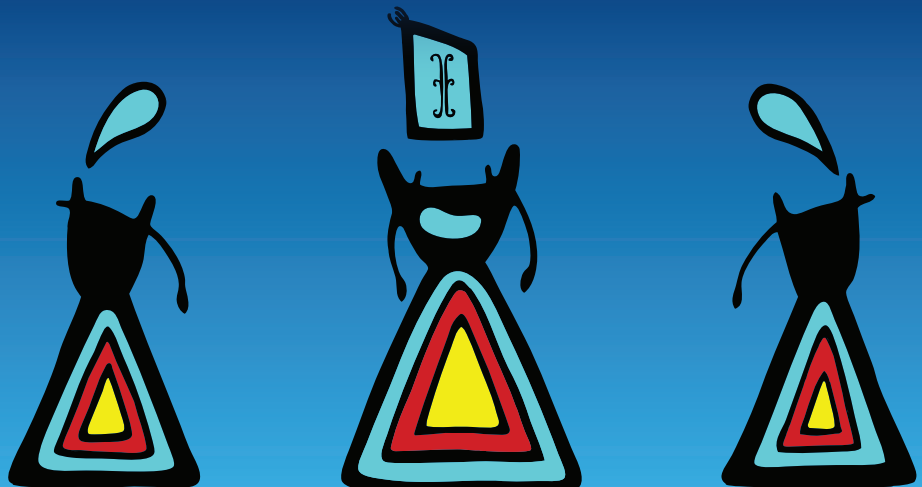
INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

Brokenhead Ojibway Nation

Gabrielle Donnelly

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
ST. FRANCIS XAVIER UNIVERSITY

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Igniting Leadership

The Coady International Institute is a unique, world-class leader in community-based, citizen-driven development education and research. In collaboration with global partners, the Coady Institute is committed to advancing community self-reliance, global security, social justice and democratic participation. Through innovative and effective adult education approaches, research and programs, the Coady Institute provides citizen leaders with the knowledge and practical tools needed to bring about the change they want for themselves. Today, thousands of Coady graduates and partners are working with people in 130 countries to build a fair, prosperous and secure world.

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About the Indigenous Women in Community Leadership program logo (front cover illustration)

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it, you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary, Brokenhead Ojibway Nation (2011), by Catherine Martin.

Brokenhead Ojibway Nation

Introduction

Driving north of Winnipeg through the richest agricultural areas of Manitoba—fields of wheat, canola, alfalfa, barley, and oats—you'll soon arrive at the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg and the Brokenhead 4 Reserve. Brokenhead is home to about 500 Ojibway people (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012), one of over a hundred bands that had migrated west from Lake Superior shores prior to European contact. The Ojibway people are one of the largest groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, surpassed in size only by the Cree and the Inuit.

The South Beach Casino & Resort marks the entrance to Brokenhead and is symbolic of the changes occurring on the reserve. The people of Brokenhead have long harboured a vision of developing on-reserve Aboriginal-owned businesses to attain economic sustainability and independence from federal government funding. Therefore, the launch of the South Beach Casino in May 2005 and the opening of an adjacent 95-room hotel in August 2008 were important events in the recent history of this Aboriginal community. Due to the insightful leadership of the Band's Chief, Deborah Grace Chief, the hard work of many community members, and collaboration with neighbouring First Nation communities, Brokenhead was able to take a big step towards implementing its vision of economic self-sufficiency.

Themes

A Vision for the Community

The proposal to establish a gaming and entertainment centre was conceived by Brokenhead's leadership as part of its strategy for achieving economic independence. In May 2000, the proposal was recommended for approval by the Manitoba First Nations Casino Project Selection Committee. This newly-established provincial agency had been mandated to select up to five on-reserve gaming facility projects in Manitoba that clearly demonstrated the ability to provide sustainable economic benefits to its Aboriginal residents (Manitoba First Nations Casino Project, 2000). The Committee's recommendation triggered a complex implementation process, which involved years of discussions with the federal and provincial authorities. In addition, a referendum was held among Brokenhead residents, and effective partnerships were built with six other First Nation communities¹ in designing and developing the projected enterprise.

To this day, Deborah Chief has a hard time believing the project has materialized:

Sometimes I have to stop and look at it to remind myself that it is really here. It's a dream come true, we never gave up. It's a tribute to past chiefs, past Councillors. Everybody wanted to see it happen.

¹ Besides Brokenhead, the First Nation communities that have developed and own the South Beach Casino & Resort include: Black River, Bloodvein, Hollow Water, Little Grand Rapids, Pauingassi, and Poplar River.

In the few years since its opening, the South Beach Casino & Resort has already generated substantial economic benefits and opportunities for the people of Brokenhead and adjacent First Nation communities. The enterprise boasts a 240-person staff composed mainly of Aboriginal people who are employed in all capacities, from support staff to high-level management positions. In addition, several small ancillary businesses have recently opened in Brokenhead, and the Band Council is working to spur further development, including the establishment of a business park.

Aside from acting as an economic catalyst, the South Beach Casino & Resort has also contributed over two million dollars in donations to a variety of educational, recreational, health, and cultural initiatives. Many of these endeavours are aimed at enhancing the well-being of children and youth in Brokenhead and surrounding First Nations (South Beach Casino & Resort, 2011).

The opening of a gaming facility on the reserve has also created some challenges. Brokenhead now has to cope with a large transient population of casino visitors and patrons, some of whom are bringing drugs into the community. However, this and other challenges were anticipated early in the planning process, and it is believed that they are more than offset by a broad range of benefits brought about by the casino and related businesses. Deborah Chief sums up her thoughts on this subject in the following way: “Our community will never be the same—that’s for sure. We knew that we could never turn back on going ahead with the development.”

A Woman’s Journey

Deborah Chief has been instrumental in spearheading Brokenhead’s efforts towards achieving economic self-reliance. Her life story highlights experiences that are likely to resonate with other Aboriginal women navigating a path of leadership.

Deborah was born in a log house built by her father on land of Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. Similar to many Aboriginal youth, she found it difficult growing up on a reserve. At a very young age, she dropped out of school and began working odd jobs, but after a while decided to return to school to further her education. She then moved to Winnipeg in pursuit of better work opportunities, but her ties to her native community were never broken:

There are a lot of people who leave the community because there is always pain that we carry. There is always pain that has happened in our community and growing up in the community is tough. You want to escape but something always brings you back.

In Winnipeg, Deborah found a job at the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre, a non-profit organization offering the city’s Aboriginal population counselling on matters of employment, housing, education, health and other community services. While working there, she developed an interest in financial management, which would not only make a profound impact on her career but also influence the future development of her community.

Eventually Deborah yielded to the pull of home and returned to Brokenhead, where she found that she had to gain further professional skills in order to start fulfilling her desire of serving the Band. Her application for a secretary position at the Band Office seemed destined to be turned down when it became apparent that she could not type. Yet Deborah convinced the Band administration to hire her on the condition that she would take evening classes in computer literacy.

In the ensuing years, Deborah worked in various capacities at the Band office, learning as she went along and earning increasing respect among her fellow community members. With her im-

peccable service record, it stood to reason that she was the successful candidate in the Band's by-election to fill the chief's position, held in 1994, becoming the first female Chief in Brokenhead's history.

Since her first tenure as Chief, Deborah has continuously served at the helm of Brokenhead's administration, either as its Chief (re-elected in 2006, 2008, and 2010) or as an elected Band Councillor (between 1996 and 2006). All the while, she has been upgrading her education, obtaining a number of leadership certificates, a degree in financial management, and finally a master's degree in business administration through Athabasca University. Deborah is the first woman in her community with a master's degree and the first Chief in Manitoba with an MBA.

Deborah sees her mission as fighting inequality within her community as well as helping close the gap in the standard of living between Manitoba's First Nations, Aboriginal and other Manitobans through the development of economic and educational opportunities for people living on reserves. One of the Band Councillors, Remi Elliot Olson, describes her as a servant leader: "I've seen our community slide backwards and it all depends on the leadership. [It falls apart] when it becomes a dictatorship and that's not [the leadership style] Debbie brings." Deborah speaks of herself as quiet, but learning to be assertive, and committed to "doing a hundred and ten percent." She is constantly encouraged because she sees the myriad ways to help bring about the change that she envisions for her community.

Building an Effective Governance Structure

When Deborah started her as-yet-uninterrupted tenure as the Chief of Brokenhead in 2006, she clearly saw that its transformation into a self-sufficient community required building an effective team at the Band's helm. Prior to that time, no clear organizational structure had existed to coordinate the work of the Band Council. As a consequence, the specific roles and duties of individual Councillors were often unclear to community members, including the Councillors themselves, which not only hampered the Council's decision-making capacity regarding both strategic and daily matters, but also undermined its overall credibility.

Deborah and the Council members set out to develop a system of governance with clearly-defined areas of responsibility for the Chief and each Councillor. The Council structure they have designed is organized into four departments: Administration Services; Lands and Businesses; Public Services; and Health and Education. Each of the four Council members is assigned to a certain department as Lead Councillor and also serves as Support Councillor in one of the remaining three departments. The Chief is responsible for overseeing all departments and providing strategic guidance on policy, governance, legal, financial, and economic development matters (Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, 2012).

It did not take long for community members to recognize the merits of individual accountability and teamwork within the Band's leadership that the new governance structure helped foster; in April 2008, the Chief and all four Councillors were re-elected. In a post-election interview, Deborah underscored the significance of the vote of confidence they had collectively received:

I think that's important for our leadership as a team and we're going to continue to work as a team. It's giving us a message as a council that we are doing a good job. That's the sense

I get. We hope to be able to continue with our positive leadership and get as much done as we can in this term (in *Interlake Spectator*, 2008).

She could have repeated this statement word for word after the April 2010 elections, when Brokenhead's entire leadership team was elected to another full term.

Such continuity of leadership is rarely found among Canada's Aboriginal communities. As Brokenhead's Councillor Paul Harvey Chief has observed, "It is hard to work with any other First Nation, because councils keep changing year after year. . . . Hence, it is very difficult . . . to focus on what we actually want to attend to, when visions, people and priorities change almost monthly." (in *Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples*, 2009). His fellow Council member Remi Olson offers a simple yet compelling explanation of the remarkable stability of Brokenhead's elected leadership team: "We listen to the people. We don't just hear; we listen. That's a big difference."

The Role of Mentorship

An avid learner with an extensive and varied educational background, Deborah Chief considers good education as a key factor for achieving both personal and community well-being. However, while being a staunch advocate of expanding the opportunities for Aboriginal youth to obtain a high-school and post-secondary education, she firmly believes that the education process should not be restricted to textbooks and classrooms. She deems informal education, particularly mentorship, just as important for helping young people reach their full potential, and speaks of herself as "a coach and guide in this area."

One of Brokenhead's young residents whom Deborah is currently mentoring for leadership is the Band's Membership Manager, Naomi Nicolas. Naomi's only childhood experiences of her birthplace were annual holiday visits, which she didn't actually enjoy. However, the developments she has observed there during the recent years have prompted her to return to Brokenhead and make a home for herself and her newly-created family. "I didn't like coming out here because it was so lonely. It didn't feel like a community," she remembers. "And now . . . I'm proud to say this is my home. . . . We are flourishing."

Naomi makes it very clear how she and many other residents of Brokenhead, especially women, feel empowered by the example of leadership that Deborah provides:

People want to talk to Debbie, she is a true leader. She is approachable and she listens. She has overcome hardship and she took that and used it and she's still going. And that's what women need to do when something like that happens to them. It's about taking that negativity and making it into something positive that you can work with and helps you grow.

Perhaps the most crucial impact of Deborah's mentoring that Naomi observes in her own life is the strengthening of her self-confidence: "I am proud of who I am and what I can do. There is something inside of me that needs to be let out, and [the question is] whether or not we allow it to happen within ourselves." These words give us a hint of Deborah's core gift as a mentor: it lies in helping people develop and make the best use of that special "something" which can be found in each person, whether it be skills, talents or aspirations.

Conclusion

The Brokenhead Ojibway Nation has set economic development and business creation as its top strategies for enhancing community well-being and achieving self-sufficiency by 2025. The opening of South Beach Casino & Resort has been a big step towards implementing this strategy, but it is certainly not the only venture the community is developing. Aside from launching a number of businesses associated with the gaming and entertainment centre, Brokenhead has recently bought several parcels of land totaling 465 acres in East St. Paul, to be used for a multi-phased development of commercial and light industrial facilities (Winnipeg Free Press, 2010). This ambitious new initiative clearly attests to the strength of the “we-can-do-it” spirit that the Band’s leadership has been painstakingly nurturing in the community for a number of years. Deborah Chief is certain that this spirit will enable the people of Brokenhead to build a solid foundation for their future: “Our people will have what they need, and we can say to our young people, ‘You take it over, this is what we have created for you.’”

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