

Indigenous entrepreneurs are not looking for 'handout, but a hand-up,' says BDC's Monica James

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Monica James, from the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation in Manitoba, is BDC's Regional Manager, Client Diversity. THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Monica James is a Cree woman from the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation who grew up in a small, northern Manitoba town called Flin Flon. After her mother drove her to pursue higher education in Winnipeg, she studied athletic therapy before learning it wasn't her calling. She went on to study commerce and is now on a mission to help Indigenous entrepreneurs as Business Development Bank of Canada's regional manager, client diversity.

How did being Indigenous impact your growing up?

Growing up I wasn't exposed to many First Nations traditions. It wasn't until I joined the Aboriginal Business Education Program at the Asper School of Business that I learnt more about my First Nations culture, history, and traditions.

I'm a third-generation residential school survivor. By sharing my story, my hope is to educate Canadians and ensure we do better for those that have been silenced and affected by residential schools.

At a very young age, both of my maternal grandparents were forced to attend residential school. My grandpa was an orphan by the time he was seven and was sent to residential school from the age of nine to 16. The purpose of residential schools was to 'kill the Indian in the child,' which was the case for my grandpa. While attending residential school, the church changed his family name from Saulteaux to Saultier. It was a French twist on his Indian name, which they wanted to eliminate.

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My grandma and her three sisters were taken from their father, a single parent who lost his wife during childbirth of their youngest daughter. The girls were sent to two separate residential schools, which would later affect their ability to bond as family. When all four girls returned to their community, they were stripped of their identity, language, youth, and culture. They didn't feel acceptance or pride in who they were as First Nations women.

At the age of nine, my mom contracted tuberculosis and was sent to Clearwater Lake Indian Hospital where she stayed for 11 months. Her older sister was also at the sanatorium, but they were forbidden to see each other. She was forced to stay on her bed for most of the day and was prohibited from interacting with the other children, and the nurses would take the gifts and fresh fruit given to her by her mother. Once a month, my grandma would travel 90 kilometers by taxi to see her two daughters. My grandpa worked on the railway and was gone most of the time, leaving my grandma to raise 11 children on her own.

One big effect that residential school had on both of my grandparents was that they weren't shown love. This transcended into their relationship with their children. My mother broke the cycle. I like to say that I came from a life of privilege, but we didn't have a lot of money. We were a family of six living on a single income. My privilege instead came from the love and support my parents showed me and my three older sisters.

How did you get into commercial banking?

While pursuing my commerce degree, I worked at one of the big five financial institutions as a summer student – one month as a teller, one month as a retail banker and one month in commercial banking. That's when I knew that I wanted to be a commercial banker. I started with BDC in 2003 and always had a passion and desire to help Indigenous people.

I got started working in the Indigenous business community when I became a founding member of the first Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce in Canada, which is in Winnipeg.

Four years after I joined BDC, I started working in the Indigenous Banking Unit (IBU) where I would stay for 14 years until it was dismantled in March 2021, after operating

for 28 years. When I first learnt that the IBU was going to cease operations, my gut reaction was to leave BDC. I understood the reasoning from an operational perspective, but I struggled with it personally. I felt that the bank was moving in the wrong direction.

My husband saw how torn I was, deciding whether I should stay or leave the company. He supported me no matter what I decided, but he told me to give it time before giving up on a company that was always in line with my morals, values and beliefs. Within six months, I knew that the bank made the right decision.

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I used to think you had to be Indigenous to have passion and a desire to help Indigenous people. I was wrong. There are so many great people at BDC that share the same passion that I do. Together we move the needle of change one degree a day.

At BDC, I know that my voice matters. I feel empowered, heard and recognized as I guide and support the organization's reconciliation journey by honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action #92.

Has your way of communicating through storytelling been difficult in the business world?

Indigenous people use storytelling to share teachings, which are passed on from one generation to the next. In my line of work, people are constantly bombarded with information. I use storytelling to help others conceptualize the information or point I'm trying to get across.

Where is the fastest growth with Indigenous entrepreneurs?

The fastest growing entrepreneurial segment is Indigenous women entrepreneurs (IWE). They're outpacing all other entrepreneurial segments. Indigenous women have been in business for many years, from trading goods and living on a trapline. We're seeing and hearing more from IWE because they're survivors and they've found their voice.

Do Indigenous entrepreneurs tend to be in some sectors more than others?

A Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business report estimates that there are about 60,000 Indigenous entrepreneurs in the country. Although, there is no steadfast number, we know that there's a resurgence of entrepreneurship amongst Indigenous people. The most common industries are construction, tourism and service-based businesses.

How can non-Indigenous people be better allies?

People need to sit in discomfort because that's when we grow the most. It's important that Canadians use their voice in everyday conversations – professionally and personally. There's also a lot of power in people's wallets – who you choose to buy from makes a big difference.

What advice would you give to young Indigenous entrepreneurs?

Know that you're not alone and ask for help. There are a lot of free resources to help you succeed and organizations such as Futurpreneur, Aboriginal Financial Institutions and BDC are here to help.

Your biggest competitive advantage is your story. Who you are and what you're about is why consumers would choose to buy from you. I believe that Canadians are changing their purchasing decisions, especially since the pandemic.

The number of Indigenous entrepreneurs, professionals and mentors is increasing every year, but they can be tough to find because of the Indian Act. Prior to 1951, First Nations people had to choose between a professional career and their Indian status because the Indian Act wouldn't allow them to have both.

What are some key things your parents taught you?

The two most important teachings my parents bestowed on me relate to empathy and positivity. We should never judge anyone because we don't know their story or what's going on in their life. Everyone has a story, which shapes who they are. I am a glass-half-full type of person and I have my parents to thank for that. They always told me not to worry about things that I couldn't change and to focus on things that I could. Many things are out of our control, and we are gifted with certain life experiences because we were meant to have those teachings.

The discovery of the 215 graves woke up all of Canada. I was talking to my mom, and she said: "My girl. We've been saying this forever. And finally, they believe us because they have proof."

Indigenous people are looking to be invited to the table and to be given a fair opportunity. They're not looking for a handout, but a hand up.

Monica's suggested readings:

- 21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act by Bob Joseph
- Daughters of the Deer by Danielle Daniel
- Daughters of Copper Woman by Anne Cameron
- Resource Rulers: Fortune and Folly on Canada's Road to Resources by Bill Gallagher

About the series

Canada has a long history of dispossession, oppression and discrimination of Indigenous peoples. The future, however, is filled with hope. The Indigenous population is the fastest growing demographic in Canada; its youth are catalyzing change from coast to coast to coast. Indigenous knowledge and teachings are guiding innovative approaches to environmental protection and holistic wellness worldwide. Indigenous

scholars are among those leading the way in exciting new research in science, business and beyond. There is no better or more urgent time to understand and celebrate the importance of Indigenous insight, culture and perspective.

Optimism is rare in media. And coverage of Indigenous peoples often fails to capture their brilliance, diversity and strength. In this weekly interview series, we will engage Indigenous leaders in thoughtful conversation and showcase their stories, strategies, challenges and achievements.

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Jennifer Robinson is a resident physician at McGill University Health Centre in Montreal. She has been a consultant on health care and health policy in British Columbia and for the Assembly of First Nations. She is Algonquin and a member of the Timiskaming First Nation.