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Future vision: Calvin Holin's finance and legal savvy has made him a standard-bearer for aboriginal business in the new millennium—11



OUT OF SIGHT

Calvin Helin's finance and legal savvy promises to make him a standard-bearer for Native business in the new millennium

By Rosemary Eng

With salmon sizzling on the barbecues and curious tourists looking on, a procession of federal ministers and fish-farming officials recently stepped up to the podium at Canada Place to praise a new report on the economic potential of B.C.'s fish-farming industry.

One guest took a look around the crowd and shot a criticism at the absence of any Native people. "They were invited and they didn't come," he said.

Yet among the select group of invitees was Calvin Helin, son of the late Tsimshian Chief Nis-kooh-a-Noos. Helin is a lawyer and dresses like one — a habit that often makes him an invisible aboriginal.

"People have no idea what I am," he said. "I've been taken for Italian, Greek, Japanese, you name it — anything but an aboriginal person. When I was younger, people wouldn't believe I was an Indian. I can't be an Indian; I'm not drunk and not on welfare."

But with the settling of aboriginal land claims and a growing awareness of business opportunities with the native community, Helin may soon shed that invisibility to typify the aboriginal for the new millennium.

At age 38, he is founding chair for Aboriginal Global Investment Management Ltd., the management company for the Aboriginal Global Investment Fund, a new mutual fund that has set a target of \$10 billion in assets within 10 years.

He is also the founding president of the Native Investment and Trade Association, which coordinates conferences, trade shows and research projects to promote native business opportunities. NITA organized the recent Future of Aboriginal Aquaculture in Canada conference to encourage B.C. bands to capitalize on aquaculture.

As well, Helin is president and majority shareholder of Global Aboriginal Travel Inc., an Ottawa company that specializes in travel for big business and non-governmental need for Inuit organizations, aimed by the Assembly of First Nations.

"We are retained," he said. A major equity holder and Helin is also a

chair of Praxis Performance Support, Inc., a technical-training business that sets up Java-based training systems and remote-learning programs.

His primary work is for his firm, Calvin Helin Personal Law Corp. "My law practice is paying the bills. [It] allows me to do deals," he said.

Helin's entrepreneurial bent is one of the mixed blessings that came of his grandfather's loss of Indian status nearly a half-century ago.

"Back in the '50s and '60s my grandfather worked for Canadian Fishing Co. as a senior manager. He was running their bigger fishing boats and servicing a lot of fish camps all over Haida Gwaii and the north coast," said Helin.

"To do that, he had to become bonded. In terms of the Indian Act an Indian was not a competent person, so they could not be bonded. To do his work he had to give up his status even though he was a hereditary chief.

"He technically became a non-Indian person. My grandmother, a hereditary chieftain as well, became a non-Indian person and his kids became non-Indian persons, even though by blood we were more Indian than a lot of people in our community," he said.

Pushed outside of the reserve boundaries of the Ixw Kw'akaams people at Port Simpson to qualify for a job, Helin's grandfather also cut his family off from government benefits under the Indian Act.

While reserve Indians waited for government cheques, Helin remembers his father's lesson: "If you don't get up early in the morning and work hard and persevere, you're not going to make it."

Sealing the fate of severance from government dependence was an opportunity Helin took as a boy to leave his community.

Greg Millbank, a former teacher at the Port Simpson reserve school, had decided he and his wife, Fong, could take on one child to care for among their own when he left the reserve school after differences with the Department of Indian Affairs.

The offer went to Helin. "Calvin was espe-

cially bright and did very well in school. And he was a non-status Indian, which meant he would get no help from anybody, except his family," Millbank said.

Helin was 12. "Was he scared? Yup," recalled Millbank. "But you'd have to understand how horrible things were up there — unemployment over 85 per cent, serious alcohol and drug problems. Kids aren't stupid."

Helin grew up mindful of two works. He speaks with admiration of his father's values as a hereditary chief.

"My dad has had people living with us that he's personally taken care of. I know of about five to 10 people we had living in our family that he just looked after. In the English sense of doing things, just taking someone into your house would be a huge invasion of privacy, but not in our society. It was his responsibility."

"I think he's going to be a prophet without honour in his own land. But he might end up wealthy as a consolation"

He said Millbank continues to be a mentor. The two once failed at a fishing business together. And they are partners in the Praxis venture. Helin still spends hours talking to Millbank, who once set out Helin's demanding boyhood reading program on native history, culture and spirituality.

Helin earned his law degree in 1991 from the University of B.C. and worked with Ferguson Gifford, a law firm with a specialized First Nations Law Group. In his private practice, he still works in affiliation with Ferguson Gifford on cases involving laws pertaining to aboriginal people.

Ever mindful of his heritage, Helin is driven to push his people away from colonial dependence. The Indian Act, he believes, is "a 150-year-old piece of legislation which controls every corner of life and has hampered the ability of [aboriginal people through its system of fostering dependence]

from developing a private sector."

He visits tribal groups, offering to set up economic development commissions to handle tribal business ventures. He said the strategy has proven successful with American Indians.

As an administrative branch of tribal government, an economic development commission can function as the business-generating body of the tribe, he said. Ideally, a tribal EDC would include several non-aboriginal board members who can provide specialized business expertise that aboriginal groups lack.

In contrast to aboriginal government, which is social-welfare-driven, weighed down by tribal bureaucracy and heavy with patronage, an EDC would be profit-driven, focusing on needs that could be met by business services and goods.

Setting up EDCs could be developed as a specialty for his law firm, Helin said.

His other primary project is launching the new Aboriginal Global Investment Fund. Open to all investors, this fund was set up primarily as an investment vehicle for aboriginal people.

Money generated from reserve-based assets such as oil has been attracting only about a two-per-cent return because of strict federal guidelines which limit investments to a few vehicles like government bonds, he said.

The idea for the fund came from Great Pacific Management Co. investment adviser Alick Muxlow of Abbotsford, whose family is from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario.

Investment strategy will be handled by Thomas Hansberger, the high-performance former president and CEO of Templeton Worldwide Inc., who now operates Hansberger Global Investors Inc. Hansberger is a

friend of Great Pacific president Russ Isaac, said Muxlow.

Helin was chosen to do the legal work in setting up the fund, then joined the management board.

As a result of a marketing launch started a few months ago, many native bands across Canada are deciding to place investments that could be collectively worth "a couple hundred million dollars," Muxlow said. Helin and Hansberger were recently in Toronto pitching the fund to members of the Assembly of First Nations.

Hansberger has worked with native groups in the U.S., many of which — like the Cherokees — maintain big investments, he said. But nothing in the U.S. compares to what Canadian aboriginals are doing.

"American Indians have no common voice in Congress. Calvin recognizes the value of developing a single voice," said Hansberger.

Helin was nominated this year by Swinton & Co. associate Mari Worfolk as a candidate for an Entrepreneur of the Year award. He was also chosen as a top 40 Under 40 entrepreneur by *Business in Vancouver*.

His efforts tend to be more admired by people outside his own community than within, observed Millbank.

About the time Helin was finishing high school he went up to Port Simpson to "lead the charge against Dome Petroleum," which was going to set up a plant considered too risky for a more heavily populated area such as Prince Rupert and which would provide no employment benefits to Port Simpson's native community, said Millbank.

Helin thwarted Dome's effort.

And five years ago, Helin worked to get a collapsed fish canning and freezing business up and running again. It has since ceased operations once more.

"He's done a lot of things for Port Simpson and he's not loved for it," said Millbank. "There's a lot of jealousy in the native community."

"What Calvin preaches, they don't want to

hear — that you take life into your own hands and don't wait for people to feed you," said Millbank.

"I think he's going to be a prophet without honour in his own land. But he might end up wealthy as a consolation."

Millbank warned Helin as a boy that by leaving the community and opting for more opportunities, "you're going to lose a lot of your Indian culture. It's inevitable and it's going to hurt."

Helin said he and his wife Vernita of the Nl'akpmx people in Merritt try to teach their four children as much native culture as they can. But "I'm a pretty multicultural type of person myself," he admitted. He's grown up with the Chinese influence of Millbank's wife, Fong. He is devoted to Japanese martial arts. He's built a gym in his Richmond home where he can practise.

Though his mother taught the hereditary language in the schools, Helin said, "I can speak more Chinese and Japanese than I can my own language. To tell you the truth it's a really odd situation."

He did not grow up knowing the traditional songs and dances of his people: "I'm trying to learn as much as I can, but it's a real uphill battle."

And Helin still has not been given an aboriginal name.

"My dad's name is thousands of years old. That name, passed on from person to person, is a highly prized piece of property. He had to act in a way that would not dishonour that name," he said.

Helin is in the process of changing affiliation from his mother's tribe (under the matrilineal system) to his father's.

"When I'm adopted into my dad's tribe, I might receive a traditional name at that time."

"My father's name goes on to his oldest nephew who becomes the chief. I'm the youngest son and I have two older brothers, so my status is pretty low on the totem pole," Helin says. "I will never get a real high status name. I don't fall anywhere in the traditional system." ♦