

2024 IBA Awardee – Backgrounders

Young Entrepreneur of the Year:

Mo Dawson Creative

City: Victoria

Mo Dawson is an Indigenous graphic recorder based on the unceded territory of the Lekwungen Peoples. He is Dzawada'enuxw from Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet, BC) and Gitxsan with roots in Gitanyow and Gitsegukla, BC. Mo has a background in professional cooking, working with top chefs across the country for nearly two decades. He trained in graphic recording with Shift-It Coach Christina Merkley and was mentored by Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier of White Raven Consulting.

His experience includes working with public agencies, non-profits, governments, and post-secondary institutions. Visual communication has been a vital part of his culture for generations, and Mo combines his artistic skills and Indigenous values to provide a unique graphic recording experience. At Mo Dawson Creative Graphic Recording, ideas come to life through visual storytelling, transforming complex concepts into engaging visuals that inspire and connect audiences.

Business of the Year – one-to-two person enterprise:

Rad Relish Co.

City: West Kelowna

Rad Relish Co. established in 2021 by Garrett Millsap, traces its origins to his grandmother's zucchini relish recipe. Observing a scarcity of Indigenous-made food products in Canada, Millsap introduced Rad Relish, which has since expanded into a national brand available in local markets, grocery stores, and online. The product line features British Columbia-grown produce and is vegan, gluten-free and available in three flavors—Original, Smoked, and Spicy. The company has recently transitioned to environmentally friendly flex packaging, reducing its carbon footprint.

Garrett, a member of Métis Nation BC and a board member of the Kelowna Métis Association, is committed to supporting and mentoring Indigenous entrepreneurs. His vision includes hiring Indigenous employees and promoting Métis products. Rad Relish, inspired by Métis elder Peggy Millsap's zucchini recipe, combines unique flavors of turmeric, mustard seed and is made with West Kelowna-grown zucchini.

Business of the Year – three-to-ten person enterprise:

AshFireWear

City: Cranbrook

Ashley O'Neil, a member of the Ktunaxa Nation, is the owner and designer of AshFireWear. With nearly two decades of firefighting experience, both as a structural and wildland firefighter, Ashley identified a gap in women-specific personal protective

equipment (PPE). Prior to firefighting, she worked in the oil patch, where she realized the absence of fire-resistant gear for women. In response, she founded AshFireWear in 2020, offering custom-fitted, environmentally friendly PPE made from 100% natural materials. The company's products include eco-friendly fire-resistant spray, brass zippers, and cotton-wool blend thread, and cater to female firefighters, miners, oil field workers, and others.

Beyond her business, Ashley coordinates training programs on BC reservations, teaches and certifies new firefighters, and is bringing back cultural burning practices in the Kootenays. Additionally, she works with non-Indigenous communities with prescribed burning practices to mitigate uncontrollable wildfires. As a respected instructor, medic, and crew leader, she is dedicated to enhancing firefighter safety and efficiency.

Business of the Year 11 + person enterprise:

KICA Contracting Ltd.

City: Dease Lake

Kimberly Marion is the visionary behind KICA Contracting Ltd., a 100% Tahltan-owned business she founded to address the lack of Indigenous employment opportunities in the resource sector. Starting with just four staff members in a small catering operation, KICA has grown into a thriving enterprise, employing over 100 people and servicing up to eight camps. With 85% of its workforce composed of Tahltan staff, KICA empowers Indigenous peoples to advance their careers while promoting fair wages and employee well-being.

Originally from Iskut, BC, Kim splits her time between Telegraph and Dease Lake. For the past 25 years, she has been deeply involved in her community, particularly through volunteering in recreational sports and her dedication to the Dease Lake Recreational Centre Society. Kim tirelessly works to complete the Centre, including the installation of an ice plant, and enjoys organizing fundraisers to support this dream. Her commitment to both her business and community showcases her unwavering dedication to uplifting her people.

Community-owned Business of the Year – one entity:

Ahous Adventures

City: Tofino

Ahous Adventures, an eco and cultural adventure tour company owned by the Ahousaht Nation, is dedicated to promoting authentic Indigenous experiences. The company fosters a guest-host relationship based on traditional Ahousaht values of respect and reciprocity. Through its tours, Ahous Adventures shares the beauty and wisdom of Ahousaht haḥuulii (territorial lands, waters, and culture) with visitors, contributing to economic development, environmental stewardship, and cultural revitalization within the community.

Located in Načiks (Tofino), British Columbia, Ahous Adventures offers a variety of excursions, including tours to Hot Springs Cove, whale watching, and bear watching. The company aims to promote Ahousaht culture, language, history, and storytelling through immersive tourism experiences, providing employment opportunities and generating revenue for the community. Ahous Adventures also supports environmental conservation and cultural revitalization initiatives, empowering future generations to uphold Ahousaht traditions and values.

Community-owned Business of the Year – two or more entities:
Nch'kay Development Corporation
City: West Vancouver

Nch'kay Development Corporation (Nch'kay) aims to promote sustainable economic development and empowerment for the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) and the Skwxwú7mesh Stélmexw (Squamish People). The company strives to create opportunities for socio-economic growth, preserve cultural heritage, and foster self-sufficiency for the Nation and its People. Nch'kay supports the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw by generating wealth and creating prosperity through economic opportunities for current and future generations in a way that is consistent with Skwxwú7mesh values and teachings.

Founded in 2018 with two employees, the Squamish Nation's economic development arm has grown significantly in recent years; today, Nch'kay has 122 employees, including 58 Squamish People and 13 members of other First Nations across its head office and operating businesses. Since its inception, Nch'kay has made notable progress in expanding its project portfolio, diversifying revenue streams, and establishing itself as a leader in Indigenous economic development.

Notable projects include the Seńákw development, which, alongside various other real estate development projects on the horizon for Nch'kay, will transform Vancouver's landscape and deliver long-term socio-economic benefits to the Squamish Nation community.

Business Partnership of the Year:
Seven Generations Environmental Services
City: Mission

Seven Generations Environmental Services (SGES), an environmental services company owned by six Stólō First Nations communities, (Sq'ewá:lxw First Nation; Chi'yaqtel First Nation; Yeqwyeqwí:ws First Nation; Leq'á:mel First Nation; Áthelets First Nation, and Sq'ewqéyl First Nation) was established in 2011 as a result of an Impacts Benefit Agreement with BC Hydro for their Interior to Lower Mainland Transmission Project. This hydro project provided an economic opportunity for Stólō communities to participate in a major project within their territory, leading to the formation of SGES/Seven Generations Environmental Services Ltd.

SGES was founded upon the traditional and cultural values of their Stó:lō owners and is dedicated to sustaining natural resources and the environment for future generations. The company aims to become a leading Indigenous-owned provider of environmental monitoring and site restoration services in BC. With a team of environmental professionals, SGES offers services including environmental consulting, construction and infrastructure monitoring, compliance monitoring programs, and planting and restoration. The company's core values include building Indigenous capacity through education and training, promoting self-reliance, and developing creative economic strategies.

Award of Distinction for Lifetime Achievement

Robert J. Dennis Sr. (Emchayiik)

City: Anacra

Robert J. Dennis Sr. (Emchayiik) is a distinguished leader who exemplifies the essence of the Indigenous Business Award of Distinction, having dedicated his life to fostering Indigenous business activities for his Nation. With a career spanning decades, Robert has played a pivotal role in advancing the economic and political landscape of the Huu-ay-aht First Nations (HFN).

Serving as elected Chief Councillor for HFN from 1995 to 2011 and again from 2015 until his final term in June 2023, Robert's leadership has been marked by a commitment to the prosperity and self-determination of his people. Prior to his tenure as Chief Councillor, Robert spent 12 years as a Councillor and three years as Band Manager, laying the groundwork for the significant achievements that would follow.

As HFNs Chief Negotiator for 14 years, Robert spearheaded the implementation of the Maa-Nulth modern treaty in 2011, a landmark achievement that has allowed the Nation to benefit from self-government and transition from a rights-based discourse to one centered on economic reconciliation. His vision for a stronger future is rooted in an economic development and business-based agenda, steering away from entitlement and towards sustainable progress.

Beyond his political service, Robert's background as a fisherman and logger provides him with a profound understanding of resource management in his Territory. This hands-on experience fuelled his drive to learn from the past and embrace a more inclusive approach to achieving shared goals. He is committed to forging innovative and unique partnerships with businesses, believing that collaboration is key to unlocking new opportunities for the HFN.

Robert embodies the HFN Sacred Principles: ʔiisaak - Greater Respect; ʔuuʔaʔuk - Taking Care Of; and Hišuk ma ćawak - Everything is One. His perfect combination of vision, tenacity, and courage has made him an exemplary leader who continues to inspire and create lasting impacts in his community. His work stands as a testament to the transformative power of economic reconciliation.