

## **Belcourt, Herb. (1931-2017)**

Herb Belcourt was a recipient of the Order of Canada (2010), a University of Alberta Honourary Doctorate Degree (2001) and, the Queen Elizabeth Golden Jubilee Medal (2003). In 2006, he received the National Aboriginal Achievement Award (Indspire). A park was named for him in Sherwood Park, Alberta (2017), he was inducted into the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business Hall of Fame and the Salute to Excellence Community Service Hall of Fame in 2017.

In 2006 Brindle & Glass published Herb's book *Walking In The Woods: A Métis Journey*, which was nominated for the Wilfred Eggleston Award for Non-Fiction 2007 Alberta Literary Competition. It was re-printed in June 2017 with a new preface by Herb.

Herb Belcourt

By Clint Buehler, *First Nations Drum*, April 18, 2015.

Métis entrepreneur, philanthropist, and activist Herb Belcourt is among the latest group of Canadians selected to receive the Order of Canada. His rise to prominence is a classic tale of what can be accomplished from humble roots in this country. “Neither ethnicity nor lack of formal education was a barrier in a career which embodies the kind of entrepreneurship that validates and makes the enterprise system thrive. If ever there was a perfect model for a true-to-life, grassroots entrepreneur, that model is Herb,” Fil Fraser wrote in Alberta Venture.

Herb Belcourt was born in a log cabin near Lac La Biche in 1931, the oldest of 10 children. His father was a successful fur trader making a comfortable living even during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Though his father died unexpectedly on a trading trip, Herb has proudly noted that his father was so well respected that when his body was discovered, the large amount of cash he had been carrying remained undisturbed on his person.

Herb left home at age 15 to work in logging camps—typical for many young people of that time, not just Aboriginals. Later, Herb worked in Saskatchewan uranium mines and on electrical line crews in the Northwest Territories. “His father told him, ‘Save your money and work for yourself, because if you don’t you’ll carry a lunch pail for the rest of your life,’ Fraser wrote. “Belcourt made a solemn promise to himself that he would succeed in business.”

Married and a homeowner by 1958, Herb started an upholstery business with money he had saved after discovering both a need and an opportunity. “Everybody had those chrome and plastic chairs,” he told Fraser. “You had them for a month and the plastic split.” He set out to fix his own chairs with “leatherette” bought from Eaton’s. Then, he says, “I put an ad in the paper—I thought there had to be a dollar made in fixing these chairs. I was swamped with kitchen chairs, and I was charging \$6 or \$7 a chair. I made nothing but money.”

Three years later, he sold the business at a good profit and formed a company to meet a new need he had identified: installing and servicing rural telephone lines. It was the early 1960s, and farms and smaller communities were just getting connected. All Herb owned was a half-ton truck and a long-handled shovel, but he had the capital to buy the additional equipment he needed. “I didn’t need a bank,” he says. He constructed 40 miles of telephone lines. Five years later, in the spring of 1965, he sold the company—again for a solid profit—and within a month, he created Belcourt Construction, applying his experience working on power-line construction as a young man in northern Canada.

Herb was ready to play in a bigger league. He negotiated a contract with Canadian Utilities and paid cash for a fleet that included a brand new earth-boring machine and three trucks of varying sizes. But when he was ready to begin work on the contract, he only had enough cash to cover salaries and fuel for about two weeks. He needed working capital, and that’s when he had his first real experience with the world of banking.

After being repeatedly turned down for a loan by various banks that wanted co-signers despite his collateral, he finally found a Royal Bank branch that gave him the \$25,000 line of credit he was seeking. By the time he sold this business in 1980, his line of credit had grown to half a million dollars and the company had 250 employees.

Not content to celebrate his own success, Herb joined forces with his cousin Orval Belcourt and a friend, Métis lawyer George Brosseau, to create Canative Housing Corporation, a non-profit organization providing affordable housing to Native people. Between 1971 and 2005, the company bought 179 homes in Edmonton and 49 in Calgary, renting them to Métis families at affordable rates. Canative became the model for similar organizations in Nova Scotia, Ontario, New Brunswick, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, and Belcourt became president of the Native Urban Housing Association of Canada.

In 2001, the directors of Canative established the Belcourt Brosseau Métis Awards at the Edmonton Community Foundation to support the educational dreams of Métis youth and mature students in Alberta. Gifts to the fund total \$12.5 million, much of it from proceeds of the sale of Canative homes when the organization wound down. The balance in the fund, including reinvested investment income, is approximately \$14.5 million, not including outstanding commitments to award recipients. Since 2002 these awards have provided more than \$3 million to over 400 Métis learners in more than 100 different post-secondary and trade skills training centres throughout Alberta. Awards ranging from \$2,000 to \$9,000 are given based on a holistic assessment of financial need, commitment to studies and pursuit of gainful employment, community involvement, volunteer service, and individual circumstances. Students entering the first year of a program or trade are considered high priority, and funds help cover education-related costs such as tuition, fees, and books.

Each year, a celebration is held to recognize the achievements of award recipients. Recipients have told their stories and have spoken of the tremendous impact of the awards as a means of financial support and cultural connection. In his 2006

autobiography *Walking in the Woods: A Métis Journey*, Herb Belcourt wrote that the pleasure and satisfaction of helping Native people in many different ways was a privilege and honour that he could never measure in money. Still active in semi-retirement, he has battled health problems to continue doing what he believes in. His goal is to create a situation where no Native person will have to say, “I can’t get an education.”

Herb never forgets where he came from. Writing *Walking in the Woods* has changed him, he says. “It taught me how much the white man doesn’t know about Natives. The white man says we must educate the Natives. I think we have to reverse that and educate the white man.” The first and most important lesson he emphasizes, is “Respect the Earth.” He told Fraser, “If I were prime minister (or premier) for a day, I would insist that industry come up with better solutions to the ways they affect the environment. They can afford it. We need a leader who has the guts to make them do it.” Native people, he insists, also have to step up to the plate and take more responsibility. At the same time, he argues that governments need to make more room for Aboriginal people, both in government and in bureaucracy. Belcourt would not be averse to some kind of affirmative action to create a better balance. “There are barriers,” he says.

Herb Belcourt served for years on the board of governors of Athabasca University. In 2001, the University of Alberta awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Laws degree, and in 2006, he received the National Aboriginal Achievement Award. He currently serves on a committee examining how police in Edmonton handle Aboriginal issues.

#### References:

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