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Tara Brown: Deadly slang, positive energy and event photography

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Tara Brown, from Little Pine First Nation in Saskatchewan on Treaty 6 Territory, has lived in Edmonton for nearly two decades, but her entrepreneurial spirit has been with her much longer. Although her roots are there, she was raised in Maskwacis, Alberta. After completing high school, she left the rez and made Edmonton her home. She is also a proud MacEwan University alumna, holding a diploma in Human Resources Management.

"I've been in Edmonton for the past 19 to 20 years," she says.

When asked what got her into business, she reflects on how early the feeling started. "Even when I was younger, I always felt like I wanted to do something," she says. "I just didn't know what it was, and I always had that entrepreneurial spirit in me. I was always thinking, okay – what should I do?"

That question followed her into adulthood, alongside a series of early attempts at small business ideas that didn't fully take shape at the time. "I've tried a few things before," she says. "Not fully opened businesses, but different ideas and small ventures."

Over time, Brown built a career in community development and youth programming. Today, she works at CanDo, where she began as an assistant in special projects and has grown into the role of Special Projects Director, coordinating initiatives such as economic development youth summits and Indigenous coaching programs.

"I've tried a few small businesses before," she says. "Of course, those didn't work out, but I

kept going."

Much of her growth, she explains, came from being immersed in learning environments that shaped how she now approaches leadership and entrepreneurship, particularly through Indigenous coaching with Kendall Night Maker.

"I've been sitting in it for three years," she says. "And it's not the same scripted thing every session. I'm there in most of it, but he keeps bringing more – he shares more. He's an open book."

For Brown, that experience became more than professional participation – it became personal application. "So I'm sitting in this Indigenous coaching not just as a coordinator or manager or behind-the-scenes person," she explains. "I started listening to Kendall and started applying things that he was teaching to myself."

That shift in perspective eventually connected back to her own ideas. "And I knew that I had an idea," she says. "It was a photo booth."

But the idea itself didn't come from a formal business environment. It came from lived experience at events. "I attended an economic development conference in Kananaskis, and at the reception they had a photo booth," Brown recalls. "I was like, 'Oh, cool. That looks fun.'"

That simple observation became the foundation for something much larger.

Indigenous Camp Photo Booth is a mobile event service that travels to weddings, graduations, birthdays, conferences, and community gatherings across Edmonton and surrounding areas. What sets it apart is how it reflects Indigenous humour, language, and pop culture.

"I indigenized it with Indigenous slang props," Brown says. "Words like 'deadly,' inside jokes, and expressions we use in our communities."

Instead of standard commercial props, she created custom signage and visuals that reflect Indigenous ways of joking, speaking, and connecting. "Some of my props are a little bit crazy," she laughs, "but it's that we understand it. They understand it. I understand our humour."

For Brown, humour is central to connection and celebration. "I just want them to have fun and I want them to be celebrated," she says. "I want them to be heard."

She adds that being part of those moments gives the work meaning.

"And if that's the way I can do it – through pictures or little videos that I do, and I can be part of their celebration – that's always... yeah, that's how you add a good part to it."

"It's positive energy."

Brown's business model is intentionally flexible. Rather than operating from a fixed location, she brings the experience directly to clients. "No one else



Indigenous Camp Photo Booth founder and owner Tara Brown. Facebook photo.

comes to me, I'll go to them," she says.

While Edmonton has many photo booth companies, Brown saw a gap in cultural representation. "There are hundreds of photo booth businesses in Edmonton," she says, "but none of them basically cater to the Indigenous population. We understand each other."

Indigenous Camp Photo Booth is self-funded, launched using Brown's personal savings. "I started my own business from my own savings account," she explains. "It was just sitting there, and I knew I wanted my money to start growing somehow."

Brown's experience reflects a broader reality for many early-stage Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada; businesses are often self-funded at the beginning before external financing becomes accessible.

For small mobile service businesses like hers, startup costs are typically driven by equipment, branding, and transportation – often ranging from a few thousand dollars to around \$10,000–\$15,000 depending on scale.

"I did look into some grants," Brown says. "I think funding is a big issue sometimes for Indigenous people and our businesses."

Even with available programs, many entrepreneurs still rely on personal savings to launch and test demand before expanding.

Brown continues to grow through partnerships and community networks, including Indigenous organizations such as the Aboriginal Indigenous Corporation (AIC) and Five Applied. "I do a lot of partnerships with other Indigenous organizations," she says. "I'm really trying to utilize their resources."

Growth has brought new challenges as demand increases. "I've had to say no to some people because I'm already booked," she explains. "It would be nice to have another booth or two."

For Brown, entrepreneurship is deeply tied to personal growth and confidence. "It's independence, self-growth, and self-actualization," she says. "And confidence – I had to build confidence in myself to do this."

She admits that finding the words isn't always easy. "I'm not the best with words sometimes," she says. "The thoughts are all in here, but then it's like – how do I say it out loud?"

Still, her direction is clear. "So far, it's been a success," she says.

At its core, Indigenous Camp Photo Booth is about celebration – of people, culture, and connection. "You know, some of my props are a little bit crazy," Brown says with a smile, "but it works."

Through Indigenous humour, slang, and pop culture references, she is reshaping what event experiences can look like in Indigenous spaces and beyond – bringing representation, joy, and recognition into moments that matter.

"It's about being able to be different," she says. "And building something that feels like us. It's positive energy."

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Extreme wildfire conditions are becoming more common across Alberta, with recent years seeing an increase in both the frequency and scale of wildfire activity. While the risks are a growing concern, there is positive work underway to help reduce the risk.

FortisAlberta takes a proactive approach to wildfire safety

FortisAlberta's wildfire preparedness efforts combine advanced technology, real-time awareness of local conditions and coordination with local authorities. This approach supports year-round wildfire mitigation measures, including regular inspections, vegetation management around power lines, early-warning technology to detect issues and infrastructure upgrades to improve resilience in wildfire-prone areas.

In rare cases, if conditions such as strong winds, low humidity and dry vegetation create extreme wildfire risk, FortisAlberta may implement a Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) as a last resort safety measure. A PSPS involves temporarily turning off electricity in targeted areas where operating power lines could increase the risk of wildfire during these extreme conditions.



Although a PSPS event would be a rare occurrence, it's important that individuals and businesses are aware and prepared.

If conditions warrant, we will notify customers and coordinate with municipalities and emergency partners. We would also leverage social media to help warn residents and businesses that we will be shutting off power.

Denis Andre, Manager, Land Environment & Sustainability at FortisAlberta



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A community approach to wildfire mitigation

"Preparing for wildfire risk is a shared responsibility," says Lorena Charest, Crisis and Wildfire Communications Strategist. "Staying ready helps everyone. Steps such as keeping devices charged, assembling an emergency kit and staying informed about wildfire conditions and potential power outages can make a meaningful difference."

Alberta's provincial government advises individuals to take proactive steps to build wildfire resilience for their properties and be prepared.



Clear dead wood, pine needles, debris and firewood within 1.5 metres of your home to reduce wildfire risk.



Stay informed about local conditions and update your contact information with the retailer that issues your utility bill.



Build an emergency kit with water, non-perishable food, a flashlight, radio, medications and important documents.



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Controversy surrounds Red River Métis self-government bill

By Jeremy Appel, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Otipemisiwak Métis Government is proposing revisions to federal legislation that will implement a self-government treaty with the Red River Métis as some First Nations groups call for the bill to be scrapped entirely.

Bill C-21, the Manitoba Métis Self-Government Recognition and Implementation Treaty, was introduced for its second reading on April 22 by Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Rebecca Alty, who is also the Liberal MP for the Northwest Territories.

“The bill before us today is a co-developed, living document setting out rules, regulations and processes for self-governance crafted by the Red River Métis on their terms and agreed to by Canada, not imposed by the Crown,” said Alty as she introduced the bill’s second reading.

She noted that it “will be the first self-government treaty achieved with the Métis government in Canada.”

In 2021, the federal government signed an agreement with the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), which describes itself as the “democratically elected government of the Red River Métis, regardless of where they live,” recognizing the MMF as a distinct order of government for Métis people in Manitoba.

As Bill C-21 entered its second reading, MMF president David Chartrand said he hoped to “see all party support for this historic step forward on a Treaty that has been 156 years in the making,” referring to the 1870 Manitoba Act, which recognized the central Canadian province and put an end to the Louis Reil’s Red River Resistance.

“The Red River Métis have always loved the country we helped build, and the country we fought for in world wars, despite the poor treatment we received over generations,” added Chartrand.

“Our people will be watching closely as this second reading takes place, with the expectation that Canada’s elected officials are all ready to fix the mistakes of the past.”

The feds signed similar agreements with Métis governments in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario in 2023.

Otipemisiwak Métis Government (OMG) president Andrea Sandmaier told Alberta Native News that her government “fully supports all federally recognized Métis governments in achieving their own self-government Treaties.”

“However, it cannot come at the expense of others,” Sandmaier emphasized.

She’s proposed some amendments to Bill C-21 that ensure other Métis governments, including the OMG, aren’t precluded from signing their own Treaties with the Crown. Chief among them a “clarification that the definition of Red River

Métis does not encompass all Métis peoples.”

Sandmaier also wants the Treaty to “explicitly state” that the MMF needs to justify its involvement in Crown consultations outside of the Red River region, and that “Canada is able to negotiate Treaties and self-government agreements with other Métis governments.”

“The vagueness on the geographic borders of the Manitoba Métis Federation could allow them to reach into and consult on major projects in other provinces and overlap with other Métis governments and First Nations,” she explained.

First Nations leaders across Canada were harsher in their criticisms of Bill C-21, but echoed similar concerns as Sandmaier regarding the Treaty’s potential to infringe on their own rights.

“This piece of legislation must not proceed until First Nations’ voices are heard and our rights are respected, protected and upheld,” said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Woodhouse Nepinak in an April 23 statement.

Woodhouse Nepinak noted that First Nations weren’t consulted on the legislation, despite potential overlap between First Nations’ land claims and those of the Red River Métis.

“The undefined territorial scope of the Red River Métis within the Bill would set the stage for expansive Métis jurisdiction over areas that conflict with the existing rights and jurisdiction of First Nations,” she wrote.

“No treaty with the Red River Métis can supersede our existing First Nations Treaties, or our inherent right since time immemorial to self-determination.”

Woodhouse Nepinak is calling for the federal government to withdraw Bill C-21 and come back to the drawing board with First Nations’ input.

“Should the Bill continue to advance, the AFN will fully support First Nations rights-holders in any legal action to oppose this legislation, including injunctions, judicial reviews, and action in the Manitoba King’s Court and the Federal Courts,” she added.

In an April 24 statement, Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta went further than the AFN’s call for consultation.

“Treaty 8 lands are not available for redefinition, overlap, or shared jurisdiction without our explicit consent,” said the statement.

The legislation “creates dangerous uncertainty by failing to clearly define territorial scope, opening the door to expansive claims of jurisdiction over Treaty lands that might conflict with existing and constitutionally protected rights of Treaty First Nations,” it added.

Both the AFN and Treaty 8 First Nations of

Continued on page 6

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Blackfoot Crossing is driving Indigenous-led tourism in Alberta

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

As National Tourism Week highlights travel experiences across Canada, Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park is being recognized as one of Alberta's most significant cultural and tourism destinations both as a historic treaty site and as a living expression of Blackfoot history, governance, and identity.

Located on Siksika Nation, the site is widely known as the place where Treaty 7 was signed in 1877. Terry Goertzen, Vice President of Indigenous Relations and Economic Development for Travel Alberta, said Blackfoot Crossing holds deep historical importance as a gathering place where Nations came together during the treaty process that shaped the region.

He noted that Indigenous Nations including the Stoney Nakoda, Tsuu T'ina, and Blackfoot peoples were part of those historic gatherings connected to Treaty 7.

Goertzen emphasized that while the treaty is a key historical moment, it represents only a small part of a much longer story.

"The treaty is only 150 years ago. The Blackfoot story is many thousands of years," said Goertzen.

He said Blackfoot Crossing reflects both the treaty relationship and the long-standing cultural presence of Blackfoot peoples on the land.

"So Blackfoot Crossing is a place where you learn about the treaty signing, but more importantly, you learn about the history of Blackfoot nations that have been here for thousands of years," Goertzen said.

Goertzen also described the broader national and regional significance of the site.

"Blackfoot Crossing is where Canada started its relationship with Indigenous nations in Southern Alberta," he said. "Blackfoot Crossing is the place where Treaty 7 was signed and Canada was born."

He added that Treaty 7 represents the beginning of Canada's formal treaty relationship with Indigenous nations in Southern Alberta. While Canada had already entered into treaty relationships with Indigenous nations through Treaties 1 through 6 in other parts of the country, Treaty 7 marked the extension of those agreements into the southern Alberta region.

Today, Siksika Nation has developed Blackfoot Crossing into an immersive cultural and educational destination where visitors can engage directly with Blackfoot storytelling, history, and land-based knowledge.

For first-time visitors, Goertzen said the experience is intentionally designed to be immersive. "I think it's what we would call an authentic, immersive experience, where you walk through the history of the treaty signing, and then you walk into and back into the history of the Blackfoot culture and nations," he said.

Beyond the interpretive centre, Blackfoot Crossing now offers overnight accommodations and cultural programming that deepen visitor engagement.

"And on top of that now, you have the opportunity, because of the cabins and the teepee that we've supported, to stay overnight and then experience other Blackfoot culture activities or things like tanning hides, making pemmican, and experiencing Blackfoot food," Goertzen said. "So it's a really immersive, authentic, full Blackfoot experience."

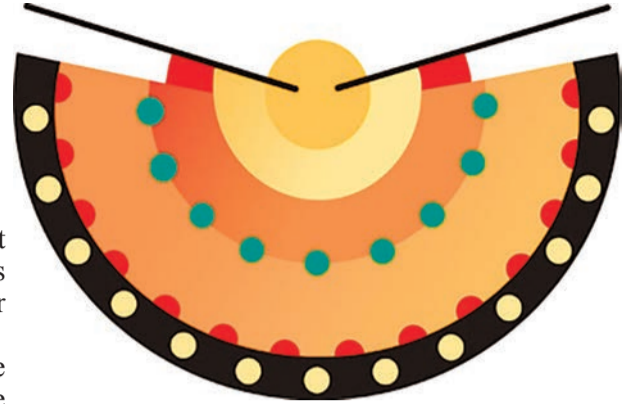
As Alberta continues to expand its tourism strategy, Blackfoot Crossing has been highlighted by Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta as part of on-going efforts to promote Indigenous tourism.

Last month Travel Alberta announced more than \$8 million in tourism investments across the province, with a focus on winter travel, rural destinations, and Indigenous tourism development.

Goertzen said Indigenous tourism is central to Alberta's long-term economic strategy, while also emphasizing its distinct cultural appeal. "We prioritize investments in Indigenous tourism because it's what sets Alberta apart," he said. "These are the authentic experiences that really resonate with people from around the world who are seeking something deeper."

To expand global reach, Travel Alberta works closely with Indigenous Tourism Alberta and industry partners through international travel trade events such as Rendezvous Canada.

"We work with Indigenous Tourism Alberta in travel trade when we go to Rendezvous Canada and other travel trade operators," Goertzen said. "We meet operators and work to



highlight these kinds of investments in Indigenous tourism."

He said familiarization tours known as FAM tours are another key tool for promoting Indigenous destinations. "These FAM tours bring journalists, travel trade professionals, and content creators into Indigenous communities so they can experience the destinations firsthand," Goertzen said.

Continued on page 8

The Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary

is celebrating a massive milestone, having assisted over 2,000 community members with status card services in just over a year. This essential program is now operating out of a new location at the Salvation Army Navigation Centre, offering first-time registrations and renewals with the added convenience of on-site photography.

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A rendering of the new cabins at Blackfoot Crossing. From L-R: Terry Goertzen, Dr. Lenora Rabbit Carrier, and Siksika Nation Chief Samuel Crowfoot. Photo supplied.

Workshop helps Indigenous filmmakers pitch their stories

By Troy Dumont, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Participants gathered at Kakio Studio Café on April 16 for a hands-on pitching workshop hosted by the Dreamspeakers International Indigenous Film Festival, where filmmaker and producer Joshua Jackson guided prospective creators through the fundamentals of presenting their work to potential producers and investors.

Jackson structured much of the session around the practical differences between a short elevator pitch and a longer presentation. He described the elevator pitch as a tool for quickly conveying the core of a project, clear, concise, and memorable, particularly in situations where time is limited. A longer pitch, he said, gives creators room to build on the story, establish tone, and outline where the project is headed. Throughout the session,

Jackson pushed participants to lead with their strongest hook and resist the urge to front-load their pitches with context and setup.

A key concept the workshop returned to was the MDQ, or major dramatic question, which Jackson described as the central tension that gives a story its momentum. He challenged participants to identify the driving conflict in their projects and to let that question anchor their pitch, rather than burying it beneath a plot summary.

The session also emphasized two questions Jackson said every filmmaker should be prepared to answer: why this story, and why now. He framed those questions as bridging the creative instinct behind a project and the professional case for making it, an argument for its relevance and why it deserves attention now.

“If someone believes in you, they are more likely to believe in your work,” said Jackson.

Confidence was a recurring theme. Jackson told participants that industry contacts and investors evaluate the person making the pitch as much as the project being pitched. Presenting with clarity and conviction, he said, is as important as the idea itself.

The session felt more like a working conversation than a lecture. Participants tested out their ideas, heard one another’s pitches and received immediate feedback. Jackson reshaped participants’ ideas in real time, pushing them to name the hook, tighten the language, and be clearer about the story they wanted to tell.



Filmmaker Joshua Jackson led an engaging workshop as part of DFF.



'Mary Margaret Road Grader' by Stephen Paul Judd was awarded best international short at the 2026 Dreamspeakers Film Festival.

Among the participants was Troy Grey Wolf, who serves on council for his nation near Fort St. John. Grey Wolf said the workshop was important to him because film work can feel distant from the north, stating, “Where I am, it’s isolating, and a lot of these things I don’t really have access to.” Grey Wolf’s pitch showed that empowering indigenous voices is a celebration as much as an act of cultural preservation. He was drawn to the festival because Indigenous filmmakers are increasingly telling their own stories from their own perspective rather than having those stories told for them.

The workshop was one of several events held as part of the Dreamspeakers International Indigenous Film Festival, produced by the Dreamspeakers Festival Society. This registered non-profit has been presenting Indigenous film, video, and new media from around the globe since 1993. The festival connects filmmakers, media artists, and industry professionals while celebrating the diversity and excellence of Indigenous art and culture.

Red River Métis cont. from p 4

Alberta, which broke from the AFN in 2022, expressed concern about Bill C-21 establishing a “hierarchy of rights,” pitting First Nations and Métis governments against each other.

Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations Grand Chief Joey Pete called Bill C-21 an “illegal piece of federal legislation” in an April 24 statement.

“We are the Rights Holders,” wrote Grand Chief Pete. “No legislation can create layers of new rights over our own. No legislation can create new forms of jurisdiction over Treaty Lands. Bill C-21 illegally proposes to do both of these.”

Conservative MP Billy Morin is the former chief of Enoch Cree Nation in Treaty 6 and the Official Opposition’s Indigenous services critic.

He told this newspaper that the Liberal government has “watered down” First Nations Treaty rights over the past 11 years.

Morin emphasized that he believes the MMF “has done amazing things” for its members, but he said the bill’s implications for Treaty First Nations “remains an outstanding question that needs to be answered in a more thoughtful way than the government’s doing right now.”

“Every First Nation has been consistent that the consultation process has been really, really poor and negligent from the First Nations perspective on a new Treaty in their territory,” said Morin.

He added that he shares the concerns of Métis communities.

“Métis, just like First Nations, have their own unique history based not just in Manitoba, but across different Métis communities,” said Morin.

“The federal government seems to be moving at speeds for one group and creating uncertainty for the future of other, even Métis, groups themselves.”



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AKSIS: On building economic space and Indigenous prosperity

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Marnie Suitor and Shelly Mandeville serve as co-Executive Directors of Aksis, the Indigenous Business and Professional Association based in Edmonton. Aksis is a membership-driven, not-for-profit organization that supports Indigenous entrepreneurs, professionals, and businesses by strengthening economic participation, professional development, and cross-cultural relationship-building within the urban economy. The organization also works to connect members with business opportunities, support capacity building, and promote Indigenous inclusion in regional economic systems, where the majority of Indigenous people in Alberta now live.

Aksis supports Indigenous professionals and entrepreneurs by creating space for economic participation, business development, and relationship-building across Indigenous and non-Indigenous sectors.

Marnie Suitor has been involved with the organization for approximately 14 years, holding several roles before stepping into executive leadership about two years ago.

Suitor describes Aksis as an organization focused on advancing Indigenous prosperity through economic development and professional growth.

“The easiest way to explain Aksis is that it is focused on Indigenous prosperity in the economic development space,” said Suitor. “The role of Aksis is to create safe spaces for non-Indigenous businesses and professionals to learn and share alongside Indigenous members, while increasing capacity to participate in the economy.”

Shelly Mandeville brings a complementary perspective grounded in lived experience as an Indigenous entrepreneur.

Mandeville said Aksis works to address structural and relational gaps in Indigenous economic participation within urban environments.

“There is a growing population of Indigenous professionals and entrepreneurs in cities, but the systems that support economic development were not designed with Indigenous participation in mind,” said Mandeville. “What exists is not a lack of participation – it is a lack of alignment.”

Suitor explained that Aksis was established in 2009 in response to gaps identified in Indigenous economic development supports in Alberta. Its early development was influenced by work connected to the Wicahitowin Circle of Shared Responsibility Society.

“At the time, there was a clear lack of focus on Indigenous economic development and on building professional capacity in business fields,” said Suitor.

Community leaders in Edmonton held a series of focus groups to identify gaps and opportunities. Aksis was formed with support from the City of Edmonton to address those needs.

Suitor noted that many Indigenous people are moving into urban centres in search of opportunity, but that transition often creates challenges around connection and belonging.

“There is a significant migration of Indigenous people into larger urban centres,” said Suitor. “In that transition, many can feel disconnected or unsure of where they fit, and that is where Aksis plays a role.”

In Alberta, more than 70% of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people now live in urban centres, yet coordinated systems to support Indigenous participation in urban economies remain limited.



Marnie Suitor and Shelly Mandeville.

Suitor said Aksis works through education, networking, and advocacy.

“Aksis provides opportunities for members to access information that helps move their businesses forward,” said Suitor. “There are also many networking opportunities.”

Suitor added that Aksis participates in policy discussions affecting Indigenous communities in urban settings. “Aksis sits at policy tables where decisions are being made, and Aksis consistently advocates for equity and fairness,” Suitor explained.

Mandeville added that Aksis functions as a form of economic infrastructure. “Aksis functions as connective tissue, linking Indigenous professionals, entrepreneurs, and opportunities within the broader economy... This relational infrastructure is often invisible in conventional models, but it is essential to how Indigenous economies function.”

Aksis is Indigenous-led and governed. The board consists of nine members, eight of whom are Indigenous. Voting structures at the Annual General Meeting ensure Indigenous members retain decision-making authority.

Continued on page 11

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Darren Weaselchild on art, elders, and cultural responsibility

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

For multi-disciplinary artist Darren Weaselchild, art is more than expression it is healing, education, and a responsibility to carry forward cultural knowledge in a good way.

"It's been mostly about the journey of turning my life experiences into art," Weaselchild says.

That journey became especially meaningful during a difficult season in his life, when creativity offered structure, purpose, and renewal.

"It was a tough year for me in 2025, but I was able to create a lot of great works around the city with the help of my collective, Apanii Art Collective," he says. "It got me through the year staying busy, staying focused."

Weaselchild says art became part of his healing process. "It helps heal," he says. "It helped me heal."

Now, through his residency at the Calgary Public Library, supported by TD Group, he continues to expand his practice while engaging directly with the public.

This opportunity with CPL has given him the space to create more works, he says.

The public studio space has become part of the artwork itself, with visitors regularly stopping to watch and engage.

"Folks from the Calgary area come in and we

talk about art," he says. "That helps my art and helps my creative flow keep going."

Over the past several years, Weaselchild has worked across multiple mediums and scales, refusing to limit his creative direction.

Darren's says, "My artistic practice encompasses acrylic, oil, and watercolour. My work includes contributions to murals and large-scale installations, including the painting of tipis throughout Treaty Seven."

Beyond technique, he says cultural responsibility and authenticity remain central to his work.

"Authenticity is very important when it comes to our traditional core beliefs and values," he adds.

Weaselchild believes youth should seek knowledge directly from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, rather than relying on online sources.

"It's really important that our youth go visit our elders and get the right stuff, the right information," he says. "Don't get your information off Facebook or online."

Instead, he encourages learning rooted in presence, respect, and relationship. "Go visit living elders that have the right stuff, the right qualifications to teach you," he says.

He adds that proper conduct is also part of that process. "Bring them gifts, food, take care of them," he says.

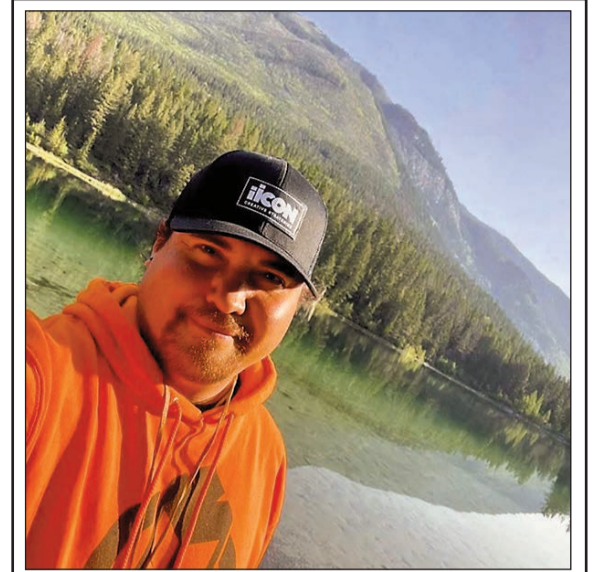
That teaching is grounded in relationship, respect, and responsibility passed down through lived experience and cultural guidance.

Weaselchild also extends his teachings beyond the studio, visiting schools through programming connected to the Calgary Public Library. There, he speaks with the public about teepee life, the land, animals, and respect for creation.

"I've used this residency to share with Calgarians a little bit about our true history, the signing of the Treaty, about the animals in the area and respect for the land," he says.

He reminds youth of their role in shaping the future. "You're our future leaders," he says. "You have to make sure you make the right choices in life and be good role models."

As a teepee owner who went through the proper cultural processes and teachings, Weaselchild



Artist Darren Weaselchild enjoying nature.

says he is careful and intentional about what he shares publicly.

He explains that his teachings focus on broader values of responsibility, growth, and family. "This means raising your children to be able to fly from the nest and be successful in life," he says.

Weaselchild also draws inspiration from dreams, which he says have long held meaning in Blackfoot teachings.

"It's always been a part of our culture as the Blackfoot," he says. "We believe that the Creator gives us dreams to help us along our way for survival."

After attending curator-led exhibitions and viewing significant Indigenous artworks including a walkthrough with artist Joseph Sánchez, Weaselchild says those experiences sparked vivid dreams that later became artworks.

"I would wake up and sketch them out as quick as I could before I lost it," he says.

Several of those dream-inspired works are now part of upcoming exhibitions, including pieces shown at the Calgary Public Library.

Looking ahead, Weaselchild hopes audiences continue to engage with his work in person and take something meaningful from it. "I'm hoping people will resonate with the art in some way," he says. "Some way to enjoy it as they look at it."

Through art, education, and cultural responsibility, Darren Weaselchild continues to emphasize a central message: authenticity matters.

In his work and words, he returns to the same foundation keeping culture grounded, respectful, and real.



Traditional Tipi by Darren Weaselchild.

Blackfoot Crossing

cont. from p 5

He added that marketing efforts also play a major role in expanding visibility for Indigenous tourism. "This last year alone, I think we have highlighted over 20 Indigenous operators through our marketing and content team, through all of our channels," he said.

Goertzen stressed that Indigenous leadership remains central to tourism development in the province. "We think it's important that Indigenous leaders and operators take the lead on tourism in their communities, and that's the kind of thing we support," Goertzen said.

He pointed to Siksika Nation leadership and pride in sharing Blackfoot history with visitors. "We heard today from Chief Crowfoot directly at Siksika Nation and how proud he is to share that Blackfoot story with everybody who would like to

hear," he said.

Goertzen said this reflects a broader shift toward Indigenous-led tourism development in Alberta. "That is the kind of thing that we are very excited about, Indigenous-led tourism with Indigenous stories that will invite the international and Canadian traveler to places like Blackfoot Crossing," he said.

As Blackfoot Crossing continues to expand through new infrastructure, cultural programming, and tourism development, it is also expected to create local employment opportunities within Siksika Nation, strengthening the connection between cultural preservation and economic development.

At its core, Blackfoot Crossing stands as a place where history, culture, and Nationhood meet offering visitors not only a chance to learn about Treaty 7, but to experience the living Blackfoot world that continues far beyond it.

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Indigenous Youth Entrepreneurship opens doors to business success

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly powerful pathway for Indigenous youth seeking economic independence, community impact, and long-term opportunity. At the centre of this movement is Amanda Muskego, a Business Services Officer with the Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Program (IYE), delivered through the Alberta Indian Investment Corporation.

Muskego, from Cold Lake First Nations and Denesuline, works directly with Indigenous youth aged 18 to 39 who are looking to start or expand their businesses.

“My role is to help Indigenous youth start or grow their own businesses through the IYE program,” she explained. “It’s a microloan program that provides up to \$25,000, and up to 45 per cent of that can be a non-repayable contribution.”

The Alberta Indian Investment Corporation (AIIC) is an Indigenous financial institution that has played a long-standing role in supporting First Nations economic development in Alberta. It was established in the 1980s as part of a national network of Indigenous Financial Institutions created to improve access to business financing for Indigenous entrepreneurs and communities.

As part of this network, AIIC provides business loans, development support, and business services designed specifically for Indigenous clients who may face barriers in accessing traditional banking systems. Over the decades, it has helped support hundreds of Indigenous-owned businesses across Alberta in sectors ranging from retail and construction to professional services and tourism.

Today, AIIC continues to focus on economic empowerment through programs like the Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Program, helping the next generation of Indigenous business owners build sustainable futures.

For those interested in the program, Muskego says the process is intentionally straightforward.

“If any Indigenous youth are interested in starting their own business or becoming an entrepreneur, they can contact us at the Alberta Indian Investment Corporation and tell us about their business idea – what they’re looking to start or grow,” she said.

Applicants are guided through a simplified business plan and a one-year cash flow

projection.

“We want it to be accessible,” she added. “The business plan guidebook is a simplified version so it’s not overwhelming. The one-year cash flow is really important because it shows all the money coming in and going out, and helps determine if the business is sustainable.”

The goal, she says, is not just approval – but long-term success. “We want these businesses to generate money and be sustainable for the youth.”

The Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Program was developed by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) and delivered through Indigenous Financial Institutions (IFIs) across Canada.

“The program was designed by NACCA and then given to Indigenous Financial Institutions to deliver,” Muskego said. “There are about 59 IFIs across Canada, and the Alberta Indian Investment Corporation is one of them.”

IFIs, she explained, are community-based financial organizations that provide lending and business support specifically for Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Muskego says the program plays a critical role in addressing long-standing financial barriers. “It lowers the barriers to entry when it comes to accessing finance for Indigenous businesses,” she said. “Traditional banks often have stricter eligibility requirements.”

Through IYE, clients are only required to contribute a 5% equity investment. “That helps people who may not have a lot of cash upfront but have strong business ideas,” she said.

The program also includes significant non-repayable support. “Up to 45 per cent of the funding can be a non-repayable contribution.

So on a \$25,000 loan, up to \$11,250 does not need to be paid back,” she explained.

While considered a microloan, Muskego emphasizes its real-world impact.

“\$25,000 is a microloan, but for someone starting out, it’s a meaningful amount of capital to launch a business.”

The program has already supported a growing number of Indigenous youth entrepreneurs, including two early clients who stand out.

One of the first was Tysheina McCoy, founder of Teemik Immigration Consulting Inc., based in Edmonton.



Amanda Muskego is a Business Services Officer with the Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Program.

Through her business, she supports individuals and families navigating Canada’s immigration system, helping clients understand and access complex processes.

Another success story is Beau Thomas, owner of KB Moving Rentals.

As one of the youngest clients at just 20 years old, Thomas used the program to purchase trailers and equipment to launch his Edmonton-based business.

KB Moving Rentals offers flexible moving solutions including trailer rentals, moving assistance, reusable moving boxes, and junk removal services – allowing customers to choose only what they need.

His business reflects a growing trend of young Indigenous entrepreneurs identifying practical gaps in their communities and building solutions around them.

For those interested in applying or learning more, Muskego encourages direct outreach.

“Anyone can visit AIICBusiness.org or email me at youth@AIICBusiness.org,” she said. “They can also call the office at 780-470-3600, or book a call online through the Indigenous Youth Entrepreneur Program page.”

Her message to youth is simple: “If you have questions, just reach out. Even if you’re not sure where to start, we’re here to help guide you through it.”

As Indigenous entrepreneurship continues to grow across Canada, programs like IYE are becoming key drivers of economic empowerment and community development.

By lowering financial barriers, offering flexible support, and investing directly in youth-led ideas, the program is helping reshape what business ownership looks like in Indigenous communities – one entrepreneur at a time.



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Dr. Alika Lafontaine: When health lives beyond hospitals

By Chevi Rabbit, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Dr. Alika Lafontaine says Alberta's healthcare system is carrying pressures that cannot be solved by hospital reform alone, arguing that health is largely shaped in community spaces long before medical care is needed.

He says the way "innovation" is discussed in healthcare policy often assumes that change is automatically beneficial, when that is not always the case. "When we talk about innovation, I think there's this cultural connotation that somehow it's positive," he says. "Not all innovation is positive, as sometimes innovation is just change for change's sake."

He points to healthcare settings that are already functioning well as examples of systems that may not require constant redesign. "One example is if you have a place that is functioning well, where patients are having good experiences and they're moving through quickly. If people have challenges, maybe they wait a few days, but if it's an emergency, there's always slots open for them to kind of pop in, if it's a primary care clinic or somewhere else."

Lafontaine says these systems are often targeted for improvement even when they are already working effectively. "People often look at those environments and say, let's innovate so we can be more efficient. But in reality, maybe you should just leave it alone. There are certain things that work well, and we should just support."

At the same time, he says there are areas of the healthcare system where change is urgently needed. "Now, there are a lot of places where things are not working well, and innovation is super important," he says. "But we had a time before this crisis where folks felt like the healthcare system actually was working well."

He also acknowledges that not all patients experience the system equally. "I'll just say an exception here... First Nations patients and Métis patients in this province have not had positive experiences."

He adds that experiences vary widely across populations. "That doesn't cut across all patient demographics, but some people have never had a good experience, and other people do remember having better experiences."

For Lafontaine, improving healthcare requires focusing attention where it will have the greatest impact.

"I think we have to target our attention to places where it can have the most impact."

That includes broadening how people access care and how demand is managed within the system.

"The healthcare system is trying to decrease demand and have people look elsewhere for care. I think maybe including other options in where

people can search for care."

He reflects on how community supports once played a central role in health and wellbeing. "I had a mental health crisis. I would turn to my family, I would turn to my community, but there were community centres, there were activities, there were community potlucks."

He says those supports were essential in helping people cope outside of formal medical care. "And I think if the healthcare system is going to have a chance of becoming sustainable, we have to think about health outside of healthcare."

He adds that this requires investing in the spaces that help build resilience before people reach crisis points. "And we have to turn to places and fund those places."

Lafontaine says many of these community-based supports have been reduced over time. "I do think that we have done this in the past, but we've really dismantled those community structures that really provided those offerings for people to have their health needs met in ways that didn't require the formal healthcare system."

He also cautions against assuming all community-based approaches should be absorbed into healthcare systems. "I think lots of folks nowadays are trying to formalize those more holistic kind of community-based ways of doing things," he says. "I don't think that's bad in all situations, but innovation sometimes should know when it's not needed."

He says strong communities should be supported rather than restructured. "If a community is doing really well with supporting its members, and there's a lot of social cohesion, and folks are objectively hitting those health markers that show people are thriving, I think we should just double down and continue to support those places."

He adds that this perspective is closely tied to his growing focus on upstream health factors. "I've become a much bigger advocate for the social determinants of health, but not within the healthcare system."

Lafontaine says governments should reconsider how funding is allocated, particularly where community-based supports have been reduced. "I think we do have to turn our attention back to those places that we've cut support and funding."

He also suggests reinvesting in those spaces as part of a broader strategy for sustainability. "And maybe one thing that the Alberta government needs to consider is, if it's looking at cutting costs in healthcare, maybe they should reinvest those funds into places where this care used to exist outside of healthcare."

Lafontaine also speaks to racism in healthcare,



Dr. Alika Lafontaine

saying many experiences are never formally reported and often remain within communities.

"I think we're starting to hear more about it, but I would say the majority of racism... most people don't share negative experiences with folks in the formal system."

He says patients often turn to family, community, or leadership instead of official reporting channels. "They may say it to their family. They may share with their community. They may go back and tell their chief or council member."

He says distrust in reporting systems plays a major role in underreporting. "But for the most part, people are really frustrated with the reporting system, and they don't really feel like reporting is going to make a big difference."

Lafontaine adds that the reporting process itself can be difficult and discouraging. "Reporting racism in the healthcare system requires a lot of effort and labour, and it can often lead to additional harm, and those costs are mostly carried by the people who are harmed."

He says this leads many people to question whether reporting is worth the emotional and practical cost.

"That's a good response, because it's true, actually, a lot of people don't want to. They say, what's the point if nothing's going to really change? It's ongoing."

He says the first step toward addressing harm in the system is acknowledging it exists.

"I think that these are the challenges that have to be thought through, but the first step is just acknowledging the fact that the harm is happening."

He adds that research suggests the issue is significantly underreported. "It's very, very likely, based on all the research that has been done over the last couple of decades, grossly underreported."

For Lafontaine, the broader challenge is ensuring healthcare reform does not focus only inward on hospitals and institutions, but also outward toward the communities that shape health every day.

Ultimately, he says, the sustainability of the system depends on recognizing that health is created far beyond the walls of healthcare itself.



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Electoral redraw raises questions about First Nations representation

By Troy Dumont, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Alberta's electoral boundary fight is becoming a test of what the province means when it talks about fair representation. On March 26, the Electoral Boundaries Commission tabled its final report recommending a new 89-seat map. Less than a month later, on April 21, the legislature created a new Select Special Committee on Electoral Boundaries to oversee another independent review, leaving the proposed lines and the controversy around them very much alive.

Boundary reviews in Alberta are normally governed by the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* and take place every eight to 10 years. The Act requires an independent commission to review the existing electoral map, hold public hearings before and after releasing its proposals, and submit a final report to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. Alberta law also says redistribution is not supposed to be based solely on population. The commission must consider "effective representation," including communities of interest such as municipalities, rural communities, Indian reserves and Métis settlements. The same statute requires Alberta to be divided into 89 proposed electoral divisions and limits how far most ridings can deviate from the provincial average population.

The current dispute turns on whether the proposed map follows that standard in practice. Gerrymandering does not always mean bizarrely shaped districts. It can also happen when a map breaks up communities that previously shared representation or expands surrounding electorates

in ways that reduce a community's collective political weight.

Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland is a single constituency encompassing Alexander No. 134, Alexis No. 133, and Wabamun No. 133A, better known as the Paul First Nation area, within a single electoral boundary. The three Treaty 6 communities are within 30 to 50 kilometres of one another, a close enough area that they may share many of the same political concerns, regional priorities and interests. Keeping them in one constituency gives Indigenous voters a chance to rally together around shared concerns inside the same electoral forum.

Under the proposed redraw, the area is to be broken apart. The Electoral Boundaries Commission report now redistributes the three nations among St. Albert–Sturgeon (83), Barrhead–Westlock–Athabasca (52), and Stony Plain–Drayton Valley (84).

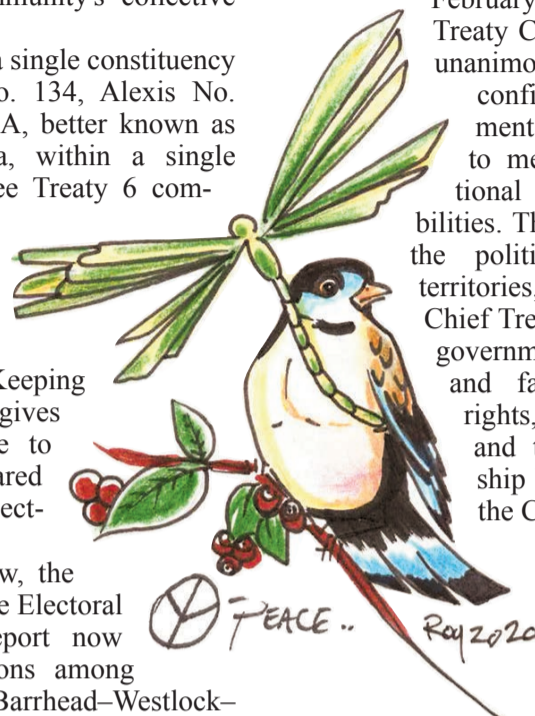
The history of indigenous voting rights in Canada makes the stakes harder to dismiss. The federal *Elections Act* was amended in 1948, removing race as a ground for exclusion from voting in federal elections. However, First Nations peoples still did not gain that federal right until 1960. Alberta did not grant Status Indians the right to vote in provincial elections until 1965.

For Indigenous communities in this province, political representation is one of the few ways marginalized voices can be heard, collective concerns can be brought into the legislature, and communities can push back when governments fail to reflect their interests.

That last point has been tested recently. On February 26, the Assembly of Treaty Chiefs of Treaty 6, 7 and 8 unanimously passed a vote of non-confidence in the UCP government, saying Alberta had failed to meet Treaty-based constitutional and governance responsibilities. The release tied that vote to the political climate on Treaty territories, with Treaty 8 Grand Chief Trevor Mercredi accusing the government of deepening division and failing to respect Treaty rights, constitutional obligations and the foundational relationship between First Nations and the Crown.

The electoral boundaries commission now has an opportunity to answer a straightforward question: Does the proposed map meet the province's own

legal standard of effective representation, particularly for Indigenous communities? If breaking up Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland scatters communities that share treaty history, the commission's rationale must go beyond a population calculation. For First Nations in Alberta, the right to vote is barely sixty years old. How Alberta answers that question will say a great deal about whose voices its democracy is prepared to protect.



AKSIS cont. from p 7

Suitor identified economic development and education as key pathways toward long-term change. "At Aksis, the belief is that the way out of poverty is through economic development and education," said Suitor. "These allow Indigenous businesses to earn a living, pay taxes, and fully participate in society."

Suitor referenced UNDRIP, Section 35 of the Constitution, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, noting that many commitments remain unfulfilled. "There needs to be a genuine interest in improving Indigenous prosperity – not just at the policy level, but in implementation."

Suitor also described ongoing structural challenges rooted in colonial systems. "These systems are rooted in colonial frameworks that people still have to navigate," said Suitor. "It is not about capability – it is about the systems placed in front of Indigenous peoples."

Suitor described these barriers as cumulative, comparing them to a "brick wall," where policy changes intended to reduce barriers often add new layers of complexity.

Aksis highlights ongoing gaps in data collection regarding Indigenous economic participation. While national tools such as the Indigenous Peoples Survey provide some insight, they often fail to distinguish between urban and on-reserve economic realities.

Mandeville noted that data collection is also shaped by trust and sovereignty concerns. "There are valid concerns around data sovereignty and how Indigenous data has been used historically," said Mandeville. "Much of the data focuses on deficits rather than capturing success, such as business growth and revenue generation."

Without a fuller picture, effective policy and investment design becomes more difficult.

Suitor said the vision for the future is full Indigenous participation in Alberta's economy. "The vision is for the Indigenous community to take its rightful place and be fully engaged in economic development and career opportunities."

Suitor also emphasized the importance of

working with allies committed to meaningful change. "It is important to align with those who are genuinely open to doing this work collaboratively."

Suitor shared an example where an allied company engaged Aksis during an RFP process and intentionally included Indigenous participation. Aksis supported connections to Indigenous subcontractors and professionals, resulting in Indigenous employment, subcontracting opportunities, and hiring outcomes.

Suitor encourages Indigenous entrepreneurs to engage with ongoing development across Alberta. "There is significant development happening, including infrastructure and resource projects. It is important for Indigenous businesses to be aware of these opportunities and prepared with strong business cases."

Mandeville added that this moment represents a critical opportunity in Western Canada's economic expansion. "The question is not whether Indigenous businesses want to participate. The question is whether systems are in place to support readiness and inclusion."

Mandeville noted that readiness includes access to capital, networks, procurement pathways, and information.

Aksis is currently collaborating with Run With It Synthetics, an Indigenous-owned data and systems firm, on an initiative focused on the urban Indigenous economy. The project aims to map barriers, pathways, and opportunities for Indigenous entrepreneurs

and professionals in urban centres.

"This is about building the foundation for a more coordinated approach to urban Indigenous economic development," said Mandeville. "The activity exists. What has been missing is the structure to support it at scale."

Aksis is seeking collaborative partners and investment to advance this work.

Suitor encourages Indigenous communities and allies to engage with Aksis. "This is not just for Indigenous people – it is also for allies committed to this work. Through collaboration, more can be achieved together."

Membership information is available at aksisyeg.ca.

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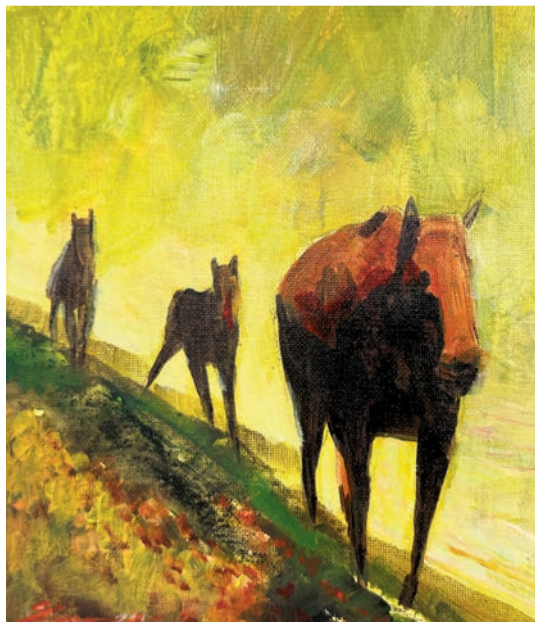
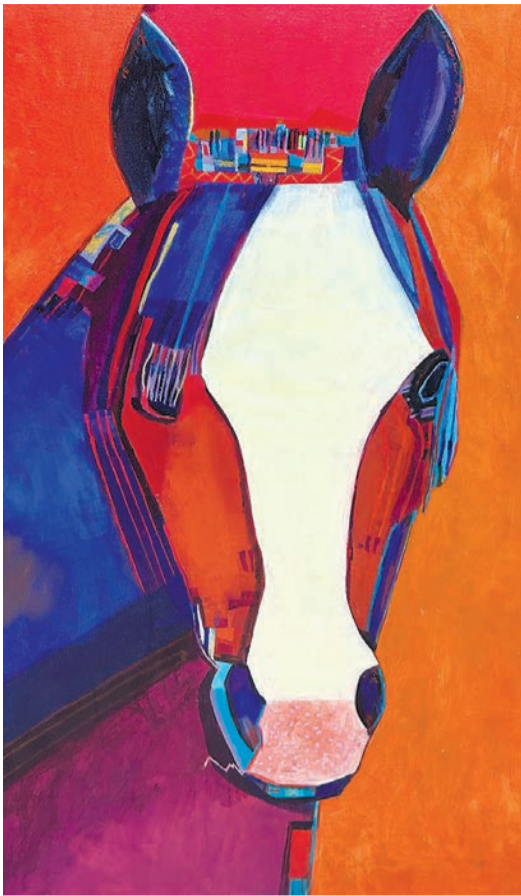
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