

## Finally, employment progress

By Michelle Thompson - Cowichan News Leader and Pictorial - February 09, 2008



Joseph Tom is happily employed by the Cowichan Tribes family services department after returning to school as an adult.  
*Andrew Leong*

Finally, employment progress

As a high school dropout, he spent years jumping from job to job, never certain when the next cheque might arrive.

As a father, he sacrificed an education to stay home with his children.

And as a resilient aboriginal who eventually completed schooling before falling in love with a job, Joseph Tom isn't reflected in government statistics.

Much has been written about today's rosy job market on Vancouver Island. Little of that, however, has been applied to Coast Salish communities, where the 2001 census reported more than half of residents were government dependent.

That appears poised to change.

A growing number of Coast Salish leaders say those statistics are stale and tell an inaccurate tale; things are already better and they are getting more so every day.

"Things are going to start swinging the other way fairly quickly," says Danny Henry, executive director of Coast Salish Employment and Training.

"We know enough about the problem. We've been analyzed by the government enough," Henry says. "Let's talk about the solutions and not talk about the problems."

Indeed, employment insurance claims in the Cowichan Valley have dropped — albeit slightly. In 2005, more than 1,400 people filed claims here; the following year, less than 1,200 residents did, according to Service Canada.

How aboriginals fit into those numbers was not available, but Henry maintains workers at the Coast Salish Training Employment agency helped the trend.

The non-profit agency leads First Nations communities toward self-reliance by helping them meet employment needs.

Its next-door neighbour, the House of Friendship, does the same through employment training and life skills lessons.

The HoF helped push 43-year-old Tom in the right direction.

Now working for Cowichan Tribes' child and family services department, Tom says taking life skills training at HoF gave him the confidence he needed to move forward.

"It's a really good feeling, actually," he says. "Landing full-time employment in your community shows the whole community you've come a long way."

While Tom's story is a successful one, it is still not typical, and that leaves some concerned.

First Nations author Calvin Helin, who penned *Dances With Dependency*, is concerned the government has socialized Canadian aboriginals into a dangerous state of dependency.

And since the First Nations population throughout this country is on the increase, Helin has predicted governments will be in trouble unless more aboriginals start becoming dependent on themselves.

"I wrote the book because the current system is causing more misery and delivering more trouble to First Nations people than anything I know of in the Western world," Helin told the *News Leader Pictorial* last March. "The dependency mindset has become a barrier preventing Aboriginal people from moving forward.

"There's a whole psychological attitude that comes with being dependent."

In his book, Helin reported government reliance will eventually take a devastating toll on the Canadian economy.

Right now, around 70 per cent of Aboriginals aren't living on the reserve and Helin says there's a reason: there aren't any educational or economic opportunities for people there.

"At the end of the day, you have to be able to offer people some hope," he says. "The system is clearly not working and you have it. In order to change it, you have to start talking about the problem."

That problem began more than a century ago, says the Cowichan Tribes chief, when the federal government began legislating fisheries.

"Our people were very active in the industry," Lydia Hwitsum says. "People were gaining a moderate livelihood by accessing resources."

The affects of fisheries legislation are still felt today, the chief says, and there are a number of other factors that make it difficult for aboriginals to find employment.

"There's so many pieces to this," Hwitsum says. "There's a larger context."

While some Natives grapple with issues of self-esteem and self-worth, Hwitsum says some employers have prejudiced views about hiring them.

"The fact is, there's still a lot of misconceptions and lack of understanding of Cowichan culture," she says. "We've got a lot of misconceptions around Cowichan people when it comes to employability."

"I think we've made progress. But there's still a lot of prohibitive factors."

Low aboriginal graduation rates are considered to be among the primary issues contributing to high unemployment rates in Coast Salish communities.

Within School District 79, the number of graduating aboriginal students increased 17 per cent in the past five years.

Even with that boost, only 39 per cent of students enrolled in Grade 8 in 2000 completed their Grade 12 education.

Those figures concern Hwitsum, who has been initiating conversations with SD79 officials to determine how to lift that number.

"That's hugely significant," she says. "We want to be working on that to see what we can do to work with Cowichan leaders."

Creating partnerships and opportunities are two of the ways in which the Tribes leader intends to help break down barriers for her people.

"A lot of it is about getting over the hurdles," Hwitsum says. "And also, to really encourage the people who are successful because we do have a lot of successful people."

Tom wasn't always successful.

After dropping out of school in Grade 10, he began taking odd jobs before returning 14 years later to complete his education.

"I would say there's no other way to go," he says. "Without education, you can't really do anything."

Tom's first attempt at completing his college schooling lasted a year.

"Then I quit because I had little ones at home," he says. "I stayed home with the kids while the wife continued her education."

The NDP's aboriginal affairs committee recently completed a study on post-secondary education in Canada and the results were telling for MP Jean Crowder.

"Education is an important factor contributing to the unemployment rate," says Crowder, the NDP's aboriginal affairs critic.

"There are a variety of issues around the low graduation rate. There isn't one simple answer."

Some children have trouble studying in overcrowded households, Crowder says, while others aren't given the support they need in public school. They fall through the cracks in secondary school as a consequence, she says.

Crowder believes aboriginal people should be steered toward trades training; it is anticipated there will be a demand for that in the Valley for many years.

Recognizing that First Nations learners are under-represented — and that many face financial barriers that prevent them from pursuing post-secondary education — the province has thrown money at the cause.

Last April, the B.C. government announced a \$65 million "aboriginal post-secondary education strategy" aimed at leveling the playing field for Natives and non-Natives wishing to continue studying at college or university.

For Tom, education is the only option.

"In my eyes, everybody's got an equal chance of getting a job," he says. "Everybody has got a free shot at it."