

Choosing to Make Futures Better: Education Means Investing in Yourself

January 2003 - By Beverley O'Neil

"Where do you want to be in 5 years? How about 10, 20, or 30 years?" Perhaps these are better questions to ask youth. I remember being asked when I was a child, "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

Aboriginal people who long ago left high school are now returning. As a matter of fact, the Aboriginal post secondary school student is on average older than their non-Aboriginal counter parts. It's good to know that Aboriginal people are returning to school and that they're investing in themselves. However, the profile of the Aboriginal post-secondary student is changing. Adults are completing their degrees and young people are continuing their studies in non-degree /credit courses or making up for courses they didn't take in high school or do very well in.

The Native Education Centre in Vancouver has seen a noticeable increase of young adults in their Adult Basic Education program. This is not an anomaly; the same is occurring in other post second institutions too. You have to ask, "Why is this taking place?" when so many of these young people just left high school. Was the education they received inadequate? Were their grades too low to qualify for the program or school they wanted? Did they realize that they needed extra courses? Did they leave school by choice? Or were they like me, they just messed up?

Growing up in a small town, education wasn't really emphasized. I think the brighter students were told to "Go to school, finish high school and go onto university, get a degree, get a career or get a profession." Others, who were not considered "academia", were in metalwork, welding, mechanics, woodwork, sewing or cooking classes. Many of my classmates planned to work where their parents worked -- for the boys it was at the local sawmill, gypsum mine or provincial forestry office. As for the girls, it was the town's retail stores or office secretary or bank clerk or marriage. The guys would get jobs. Not many of my classmate's parents owned businesses; self-employment wasn't an option. I think people believed then they would be able to follow in the footsteps of their parents, paths that were often absent of any formal education making good money in high paying labour intensive jobs... that is if their parents completed high school at all. Since graduation, back home the mines have shut down, stores closed and the sawmill has been downsizing, it doesn't hire anymore.

When my parent's asked me, "What I was going to do when I grew up?" it just seemed too far away then. I figured I had the rest of my life to think about it. I knew then I wanted to work on typewriters (personal computers didn't exist when I was a kid), and of course I would take business management and secretarial courses. All girls took typing and the only guys to be found in these classes were the ones that "ogled" over girls and goofed off. I took typing and accounting and computer courses, and Algebra 11... by choice. I liked Math and English. Then when it came time to select courses for Grade 12, the only teacher for Algebra was the same one that taught the Grade 11 course. I didn't sign up because I slept through most of the Grade 11 class due to boredom. I finished High School with honours, no senior science courses, no second languages, and no Grade 12 Math, but I was confident in my mind that I would be in business. No body told me what courses were required; you could still qualify for quality post-secondary institutes with grade averages of C and C+s.

Well, thinking doesn't get you anywhere, only action does.

By the time I thought about applying to university or college, my Grade 12 year was almost over. I didn't have enough credits or courses for many courses, and so then the College programs I could apply to were over subscribed. I was on waiting lists and had no idea what I was going to do that fall. The next spring I completed Legal Secretary courses and it was

another four years before I was finally in a Business Diploma program. In those four years in between, I could have completed a degree.

When I look back at the years since high school and post-secondary, I think of all the opportunities that passed me by. I think of the numerous First Nation communities whose leaders now face the challenge of creating strong communities in an ever changing environment where knowledge and skills determine the future of many generations to come. I think of all the young people with and without degrees today that will take over the roles of Chief and Council for their nations.

I think of my business friends and colleagues who too talk about the degrees they wished they had and we comfort ourselves by rationalizing that 15 and 20 years ago our communities needed bright minds now. Yet we know that now, today, our communities need people with degrees and professions and trades, not just intelligence and ambition. We know now that education is necessary and no longer a choice. It is the basis for the choices for the future. And we talk about the steps we need to take to get those degrees we didn't have time for then.

I think of the vast array of careers and trades in Canada and overseas that require applicants to have degrees, and I wish I knew then what I know now. I wish back then I would have invested in me more. In the scheme of things, four years for a degree is nothing. It is only 5% of an 80 year-olds life, and a little more than an hour a day. And those four years invested in the first quarter of your life can make the next 60 years great! That one hour can mean the difference between a comfortable life where your family is happy and healthy, and you're free of poverty and not dependent on somebody else's handouts.

It makes me wonder why more young people today don't spend more time investing in themselves rather than wondering why they can't get the jobs that earn them a \$100,000+ annual income. And I wonder why they settle for grades that are only good enough to pass and not high enough for university or college courses or scholarships or bursaries... especially knowing there are more people entering and returning for post-secondary studies making it even more difficult to get into.

When I look back at the choices I made as a teenager, add in the changes since then in technology, industry and business, and coat it all with the knowledge and experience I've gained, I wish I could go back and fix my mistakes. I'd take Science, French, Spanish, German and my First Nation language courses... and I'd force myself to stay awake through Grade 12 Algebra. With those credentials I know the opportunities would be numerous and choices for the future would be mine.

**Blueprint for the Future Career Fair for Aboriginal Youth will be in Vancouver
February 4, 2003. Information: www.naaf.ca.**

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