

Golden Opportunities, Olympic Dreams: Vancouver / Whistler Winter Olympics 2010

By Beverley O'Neil

"The 21st Olympic Winter Games in 2010 are awarded to the city of Vancouver." Metallic red, gold and blue streamers went shooting into the air while bits of colored paper floated to Vancouver's GM Place floor as thousands of supporters waved Canada towels, hollered and cried tears of joy. After five years of planning, thousands of volunteers hours, hundreds of community presentations and events, costing \$34 million provided by governments and private and corporate contributors, the first 2010 Olympic dreams came true in a race that came down to a vote with Vancouver beating South Korea on the second ballot 56 to 53... a narrow win, the kind that we expect in the Olympics, the type of race that keeps us on the edge of our seats.

"Vancouver." That was all I needed to hear to bring back childhood memories of sit ups, gym sprints, hanging from the monkey bars at the elementary school playground, and dreaming of bronze, silver and gold... they were my own Olympic dreams. The 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics fostered them. I must have been around 8 or 9 years old at the time when the federal government had instituted a Canada-wide youth fitness program called "ParticipAction", and I was determined to earn a bronze badge. I soon learned that I was a wimp - I couldn't hang five seconds from the monkey bar - so a bronze was all I could hope for. Well at the end of weeks of training, I succeeded in qualifying for the bronze, and so I set my goals for the next few years - a silver badge next and then a gold the year after. After two years the program was cancelled, but I still proudly wore on the back of my purple polyester jacket until I grew out of it, my silver and bronze badges the way I'd seen other athletes, Olympic and World Champion, do on television. Though I realized I was never going to be an Olympic athlete, I still continued with sports playing high school volleyball and basketball, and then in the summer, softball, today running, learning how to play soccer, and later this summer to be in "My First Triathlon". The "ParticipAction" program and the Olympics affected my life... it influenced me to pursue sports, stay healthy, and most of all, to set goals and to dream.

Dreams didn't end there. My sisters, brother and I gathered around the television for the ensuing 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics, cheered and oooed and aaawweed as Canadians cleared high jumps, scattered sand, passed batons and then watched the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics. Canadians then bounded and twirled across gymnasium floors, swooshed down ski slopes, and cut edges in the speed skate rink. For years we've watched Canadians and Olympians from around the world do what we could only dream of... but we could always dream.

Our household wasn't the only home to have dreams. As a child Alwyn Morris, a Kahnawake Mohawk, while watching the 1968 Mexico Olympics with his grandfather said, "You know Gramp, I'm going to go to the Olympics." With the support and belief of his Grandfather, he did. He won gold and bronze at the 1980 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. Us kids cried as we watched this Indian man proudly raise an eagle feather above his head. He was the first First Nation Canadian I ever remembered winning an Olympic medal... there may have been others, but he was my first memory. I think he became the person that my generation would too hold in high esteem as he did with that eagle feather.

Since then many other Aboriginal people have followed in his footsteps, competing in track and field, water polo, hockey and many other sports. Few, however, have been able to take their dreams to the Winter Olympics. Perhaps the 2010 Vancouver/Whistler Winter Games will be where dreams will again be realized, having taken flight this July 2, 2003. But what we need is the means to help foster those desires... our children need a Winter Sports program that like Alwyn's grandfather is the catalyst for making those dreams

come true. Can an Aboriginal Youth Winter Sports Program become a part of the next stage to making the Winter 2010 Olympic Dreams become reality?

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FIRST NATIONS AND ABORIGINAL BUSINESS

Sports like community economic development, jobs and training, give our youth something to hope for... something that we need so desperately in our Aboriginal communities... hope... a future. Too many people have criticized the cost of the bid, but let's examine what we've gained... so far...

- First Nation and Aboriginal participation in this Olympic bid planning was unprecedented... no Canadian or North American Olympics has ever had so much support, let alone involvement by the First peoples in planning and directing the Canadian program, presence in ceremonies and marketing, than this bid;
- Never before have we seen First Nations Chiefs and Leaders at the forefront of a world watched event... the Chiefs of Squamish, Lil'wat, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh were there in Prague as part of the team and as well at the Vancouver and Whistler ceremonies;
- Aboriginal people and businesses were hired in the bid process;
- First Nations culture was woven throughout all marketing, ceremonies and programming leading up to the vote;
- Millions of dollars have been invested to date in First Nation cultural and community infrastructure promising cultural and community facilities in the Vancouver and Whistler areas... with many of these speeches being delivered in traditional languages; and,
- Our youth and Elders have been involved in cultural ceremonies surrounding the bid... helping to promote understanding and preservation of our cultures and languages.

So what happens next? While the Bid Society that was responsible for preparing the bid and generating support has completed its mandate, a transition organization is now being struck to start preparing for hosting the Olympics. First Nations involvement does continue. The First Nations will be a part of that expanded transition team, and as part of the implementation team. Opportunities for Aboriginal businesses will be examined in a focus group of Aboriginal business people on July 21 in Vancouver. The Olympic Team will continue to seek qualified suppliers of goods and services as employees and contractors... and as for our youth, they may too dream to be a part of the Canadian Olympic Team.

For More Information: www.winter2010.com

Beverly O'Neil is a citizen of the Ktunaxa Nation, and a consultant and trainer with O'Neil Marketing & Consulting, as well as a marketing strategist and media relations advisor in Numa Communications Ltd., as well as a freelance writer. Tel. 604-913-1905 Website: www.designingnations.com