

Spotlight On:

Blair Mirau | CEO

Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Economic Development Corporation - Rupert Lawn & Garden, Est. 2014

Born and raised in Prince Rupert, Blair graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 2011 with a degree in international development. Upon returning home he began his career as a grant writer for the City of Prince Rupert. Then in 2013, following one of Blair's free grant writing seminars he hosted at City Hall the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society chief executive Greg Grayson approached Blair to become an economic development officer. The organization's businesses grew under their direction and when Grayson left in 2016, the board quickly found a ready replacement – Blair Mirau.

Blair became the visionary behind the development of the Economic Development Corporation and was tasked with the society's goal to achieve economic self-sufficiency over the next 10-15 years, a \$1M price tag. With the freedom and flexibility to do whatever it took to get to business and start making money to be able to fund their own programs and services, Blair took a risk purchasing a small local garden centre and lawn care business. At the time with only two lawn cutters and a rusted Ford F150 Blair saw so much potential and it has "really paid itself off in spades."

- What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

Job creation was a really specific part of my mandate. A big motivation for me was finding a business that was relatively labour intensive as a way for us to not just generate margins on the labour but to create good, sustaining, family paying jobs. That is why the yard care subscription model was so appealing to me.

- Who is your role model?

The founding members of the society are our role models for success here. They had the vision and leadership to see that Nisga'a citizens in Prince Rupert could be its own community and stand on its own two feet.

- How has mentorship or networking played a role in where you are today?

Frankly we wouldn't have been successful without some of the key partnerships that we were able to create, particularly with our local credit union who took a risk on us where other traditional lenders may not have – they saw what we were trying to do.

- What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

Since we started in 2014 we have generated over \$1million in payroll, and for a business that only did \$180,000 in gross revenue when we bought it in 2013, to be able to do \$1 million in payroll in the first 4 years, to me that is my greatest accomplishment.

It is money that has gone into our employees' pockets, spent in town and cycling back through the local economy.

- What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

With five bosses, I've learned you have to put everything in writing so there are never any surprises - that's the biggest thing for me.

- What has been your greatest reward to date leading a not for profit?

The biggest reward for me is to see that in running a social enterprise not only can we remain competitive with other businesses in town but we can also grow and succeed while also giving back. We try to maximize the amount of good we do because we are intimately linked to the place we do business.

- What unique challenges do indigenous entrepreneurs face when starting a small business and how can they overcome them?

The biggest challenge by far is start-up capital – the cost of doing business is always increasing. From our experience, the way to overcome that is to reach out to a cross-section of funding programs that are available. There is a lot of money out there for Indigenous entrepreneurs and start-ups. The unique thing is that there are often training supports and mentorship opportunities that come with the financing.

- Looking back, what advice would you give to aspiring Indigenous entrepreneurs from your experience?

It may sound cheesy, but it's the "Five P's" – Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. If you can spend the time up front preparing and thinking through all the different options, potential pitfalls and opportunities, ultimately it will prevent you from making a lot of mistakes.

- Tell us a little known fact about your company.

Stayed tuned for our next venture – we have a salmon smokehouse underway that will combine traditional recipes in a modern context and facility.

- Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

I'm biased on this, but I would have to say the Nisga'a lava beds in the Nass Valley, particularly the hot springs – it's definitely one of my favourites.

The Bottom Line:

- Rupert Lawn and Garden has quadrupled their subscription client list and has grown from four to 16 staff
- 2018 BC Business Top 30 Under 30
- Stayed tuned to their next venture – a salmon smokehouse is underway that will combine traditional recipes in a modern context and facility