

Bernd Christmas

Mi'kmaw lawyer contributes at home

Bernd Christmas of the Membertou First Nation in Cape Breton Island was one of 14 people honored at the recent 2006 National Aboriginal Achievement Award ceremony in Vancouver. Christmas was recognized in the Business and Commerce category.

"Membertou has terrific leadership in three dynamic individuals. Chief Terrance Paul, Dan Christmas, who is senior advisor to the chief and council of the band, and Bernd Christmas," said Owen Fitzgerald. As director of the YMCA Entrepreneur Centre of Cape Breton, Fitzgerald partnered with the leadership of the Membertou First Nation in 2005 to fulfil a growing need for entrepreneur training and small business development in the area.

The first Mi'kmaw to become a lawyer in Canada, Bernd Christmas obtained his law degree in 1991 from York University in Toronto as a graduate of the Osgoode Hall Law School. In 1993, he accepted a position in corporate and commercial law with Lang Michener, where he also expanded the firm's Aboriginal practices. However, when Chief Terrance Paul requested his services in 1995, Christmas gave up his lucrative and promising career as an elite corporate lawyer to return home and assume the leading business role of Chief Executive Officer of Membertou. At the time, the First Nation was operating a \$1 million annual deficit and unemployment was rampant. A decade later, the results of his decision have been dramatic. Through sacrifice and a renewed sense of accomplishment as the deficit was cleared, the community now boasts a \$65-million budget and the number of people employed has jumped from 37 to 531. The vision of Bernd Christmas and

the other leaders has led to financial independence and self-determination as they successfully identified three strategic areas that would lead to a new future for its members. These included forging a new economic frontier, launching a Membertou Corporate Office in downtown Halifax, and initiating education and career-related training programs. Today, the success of that vision is obvious.

"Membertou is now leading the efforts in economic development for the entire area of Sydney, of which it is a part. People from all over the area are coming to Membertou, which is something that just wasn't the case a few years ago," continued Fitzgerald. "This doesn't happen by accident. It takes people that are determined, smart, well-educated and who are great leaders, and that is what Membertou has." The First Nation is not just leading the way in Aboriginal communities, but in the entire Cape Breton area, he added.

Since he began practicing law, Christmas has assembled an impressive list of accomplishments. In 2003, he was appointed by then-prime minister Jean Chrétien to the External Advisory Committee on Smart Regulation. From 2000 to 2002, he was one of three Canadian commissioners to the International Commission for the Conservation of Tuna. He is a member of the National



DEBORA STEEL

Bernd Christmas— Achievement Award recipient for Business and Commerce.

Aboriginal Economic Development Board and of the executive committee organizing the Governor General's Conference on Leadership and Diversity, and was appointed to the Board of Directors of CBC Radio Canada for a three-year term. As well, as a negotiator for several First Nation bands early in his career, he developed a deep understanding of Aboriginal perspectives, and he has been recognized as one of Atlantic Canada's Top 50 CEOs.

Since his return to his home community and with the support of his chief and council, Christmas has set an impressive precedent, signing significant business arrangements with numerous national and multinational companies, which has benefited the people of the region. Throughout this process, he made national news when he was instrumental in obtaining certification by the International

Standards Organization (ISO) for Membertou, the first Aboriginal community to obtain this status. He has also devoted much of his time to working with other First Nation communities interested in obtaining ISO certification.

"Developing these kinds of partnerships takes vision and courage," said Fitzgerald. "He has travelled extensively, while juggling family and community commitments, and has taken on the larger vision of where Membertou can sit on the national and world stage." In the process, he has worked towards the good of all Aboriginal people, in addition to those of his own First Nation. "This is one reason that I'm glad to see him recognized by the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation for this award. In his very professional, thoughtful, and articulate way, not in a demanding way, Bernd has created an amazing future for Membertou," he said. The young lawyer exudes an effective diplomacy, showing he is willing to listen and then begin to work with others and create a joint approach to opening up more doors for all parties concerned.

"He is able to knock on doors that a few years ago would have been impossible," said Fitzgerald. An example is his recent appointment to the board of CBC Radio Canada. "It's a huge, national media organization and a large business, and has a lot of influence."

"I've been very excited and proud to be working with innovative people like Bernd Christmas," he said. "We have a great respect for each other and the partnership with the YMCA has been mutually satisfying and beneficial."

Another recent example of the responsibility shown by the determined young man is the

trade and convention centre at Membertou.

"It's one thing to raise the money to build it, but another to operate it successfully," said Fitzgerald. "Bernd had the vision to put a major centre at Membertou that now attracts people from all over. Membertou has become an integral part of the overall community and is recognized as the best facility of its kind in Cape Breton. And it has a fabulous restaurant, too, the best in the Sydney area."

One of the most impressive achievements has been the huge psychological shift that has occurred, said Fitzgerald.

"The success of recent developments, led in no small part by Bernd Christmas, has given the people of the community a lot more confidence and hope for a bright future."

For the Membertou band, Christmas negotiated contracts or agreements with Georgia Pacific, Sodexo Canada, Clearwater Fine Foods, Lockheed Martin Canada, Jacques Whitford Engineering, Dexter Construction, Grant Thornton, Boeing, and SNC Lavalin. He also brings extensive experience on national and international boards and commissions.

"Trillions of dollars are traded in the world economy each day," said Bernd Christmas recently. "I encourage all First Nations peoples and governments to step up to the plate and demand their piece of the pie. Our success lies in building on the innovations of today while at the same time, incorporating Indigenous knowledge based on the principles of conservation, sustainability of resources and reverence for the lands and the waters."

Article by Heather Andrews Miller