

# Paul Martin, Prime Mentor

by Robert Colapinto

Photo by Michael Razman / MAEI

**How a former prime minister, CPA Canada and accountants paired with aboriginal youth in a project to help develop qualified financial managers**

Paul Martin, founder of MAEI, interacts with students in his undertaking to foster quality education for the First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth

“I knew mentoring had to come from the heart. And that’s the vibe I got when I stumbled into KPMG”

**D**ELAYED ON THE TARMAC FOR A SHORT HOP TO TORONTO, Paul Martin turns to a conundrum that has long concerned him. While musing, a senior partner from a CPA firm plunks down beside him. Pleasantries dispensed with, Martin voices his frustration that within the fastest-growing segment of Canada’s population — aboriginal youth — an infinitesimal number consider business-related postsecondary degrees. The CPA adds that his firm has reached out to this group but has been stymied by the students’ lack of awareness of the possibilities in the world of finance. By the time they land, Martin has cobbled together a plan, and he knows just who can help get it off the ground.

This chance meeting was in mid-2008, during the early stages of one of the former prime minister’s more ambitious charitable ventures, the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative (MAEI). The Martin/CPA Canada Accounting Mentorship Program (AMP) would fit hand-in-glove with his determination to build a nationwide undertaking to foster quality education, entrepreneurship and role-modelling mentorships for the young people of Canada’s First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

Likely around the same time as Martin was on his flight, Colton Clause was on his daily 35-minute bus commute from his Six Nations of the Grand River reserve to high school in Brantford, Ont. — plenty of time for the Onondaga Nation, Beaver Clan 10th-grader to contemplate an uncertain future. “A modern, fast-paced world passes by,” Clause recalls, “and I did wonder, given where I’m from, how and where I’d find my place.” Now in his third year at Brock University, one of the AMP’s first students remembers a teen unsure of what was achievable in the wider world. “Expectations are low on-reserve,” he says. “Some kids might look no higher than security guard at the smoke shop, but I wanted more.” A little help navigating the unknowns “out there,” learning what was possible in life and a career was all Clause needed. “It didn’t matter if it were accounting or bird-watching, a guide or role model for those possibilities really makes a difference.”

In part, Clause — a biology major with an eye on veterinary school — is a product of an agreement by seven of the profession’s top firms (KPMG, PwC, BDO, Deloitte, MNP, EY and Grant Thornton) to invest time and expertise in an effort initiated by Martin and old friend Kevin Dancey, president and CEO of CPA Canada. Martin’s message to the firms was simple: “One of the problems we’re encountering is that these kids don’t know anything about accounting; they don’t know about accounting firms. They don’t know much about business; they’re just not being given the access. If we could set up a mentoring program through your offices, we could make a dramatic change in the outlook of a number of these young high-school students.” The firms’ reaction was more than Martin could have hoped for. “It took, I would say, a 10th of a split second,” he laughs, “and everyone said yes. There was no hesitation.”

For Lloyd Posno, national coordinator for the AMP, the accounting profession was ideal for this initiative, given its use of mentorship strategies as an integral part of accountant training. “Young CPAs, particularly in the firms, can’t just hole up in their offices working their files,” he says. “They’re encouraged to share and learn and teach and to be open to the world around them.” As well, the profession is uniquely suited to offer the students exposure to a wide spectrum of businesses, professions and connections to that wider world. “We give the students a real look at the possibilities out there,” he says, “and simply because you find CPAs working pretty much everywhere.”

For Clause, the idea of altruistic mentorship was fine and good. But he admits to an initial suspicion as he entered KPMG’s Hamilton office in 2008 that if these white-collared do-gooders had volunteered to enhance their careers or out of guilt for what has been inflicted on Aboriginal Peoples over the past three centuries, the whole process might be, if not a waste of time, a little more than stilted and uncomfortable. “Even as a teen I knew mentoring had to come from the heart,” he says. “And, thankfully, that’s just the vibe I got when I stumbled into KPMG.”

The AMP’s purpose is to pair CPAs with aboriginal youth in the expectation that they will be inspired to seek university degrees — and for those who develop an interest in business and finance from this experience, careers in accounting. Clause’s first visit to KPMG was a whirl of “the new,” as he describes it. Accountants were moving in and around something called the “bullpen;” animated hallway confabs were happening at every turn. “It was serious people doing and knowing stuff that was entirely mysterious to me,” he says. “It made me want to know more.”

The AMP’s mentoring program began with two pilot projects. KPMG’s Hamilton office mentored students from the reserve at Six Nations of the Grand River, and accountants in BDO’s Fort Frances, Ont., office paired with students from reserves in the Fort Frances-Rainy River area. As of 2013, 16 high schools in 10 cities and five provinces — Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and BC — have coupled accountants from seven firms to students who aspire to post-secondary education. (The Alberta school has since dropped out.)

Six Nations’ band member and Brantford native education counsellor Sherri Vansickle is ecstatic about the program. Currently, five students, including Clause, from the 2008 pilot project are attending university or college. “I see the creation



Right to left: Colton Clause with Roberta Jamieson, former chief of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, and his mother, Peggy Clause, at the 2011 Egerton Ryerson Awards

of immense social capital for the children,” Vansickle says. “By that, I mean the accountants, because of their connections in business, industry and education, create this incredible web that covers the country. So the doors of opportunity for the kids just fly open.”

The AMP high-school students join with their local mentors in job-shadowing and workplace activities, including community and charitable events, and social bonding activities such as going for pizza or attending local hockey games. “You have to get comfortable and trusting with your mentor first,” says Clause. He and his mentor went to a Hamilton Bulldogs hockey game and other events before they could open up to each other. The mentor was in the throes of UFE exam study and Clause was working hard to keep up his top marks. “What my mentor did for me was put work into perspective — study plans, balancing a social life, helping me figure out my finances and how I was going to survive once I was accepted at Brock — and just being there over the years to bounce off questions and ideas,” he says. “Anyway, it was cool to understand that he was sweating with studying as well. We’re all just people, which for a reserve kid can be a bit of a revelation.”

“I think any time you’re able to connect with younger people and where they want to go and what they want to be, it’s incredibly enriching for the mentor,” says Curtis Temple, coordinator of 10 CPAs at Deloitte’s London, Ont., office, who was immediately attracted to the AMP. “When Posno came to us, I realized there were a lot of older people — mentors — who I looked up to and relied on to provide me direction,” he says. “So I thought of this as an opportunity to give.” It didn’t take long for Temple and his colleagues to learn that proper mentoring and access to opportunity was what was needed for these teens.

From Vansickle’s perspective, all the kids need is a level playing field. Many arrive at city high schools from on-reserve elementary schools that are so poorly funded teachers are unable to adequately prepare the children for their next level of education. By some estimates, non-native elementary schools in Ontario, for example, receive government funding in the

\$11,000-per-student range. On-reserve schools receive approximately \$6,000 per student.

The home life of aboriginal children is also very likely to be fraught with a panoply of challenges. “We get hit harder with the hardest stuff,” says Vansickle of the effects of poverty and diminished opportunities that so often lead to unfulfilled lives. “There are so many barriers, and not just perceived barriers; they’re very real.” For Clause it was his mother’s powerful influence — her constant reinforcement of the value of education, no matter the barriers — that kept him away from the pitfalls on-reserve. “But I can’t discount the example of a mentor — someone who’s made it — to show you what can happen when you stay clear of the bad stuff,” he says. “It’s a tremendous challenge,” says Vansickle of the goals of the mentorship program. “When I look at Mr. Martin and Mr. Posno, they could be retired and ‘gone fishin’;’ but instead they’re making this huge difference for our kids.”

It was as a young man working on the shores of Hudson Bay and barges along the Mackenzie River, that Martin came face to face with the disheartening poverty from which his aboriginal workmates had come. “When we pulled up to shore at night, the bunch of us would sit around and talk,” he says. “I noticed that these young guys did not have the same hope, the same excitement that my friends down south had. This lack of excitement about life, to be honest, is what we [as a nation] directly imposed on them. I just think it is the single greatest moral issue that we face as a country.”

The contrast decades later at the 2011 Egerton Ryerson Awards — an annual gathering honouring Canadians who have excelled in the advocacy of public education — must have been something. Martin’s MAEI achievements were being recognized, and it was Clause at the lectern to thank the former prime minister and stand as an example of the program’s success. “I’m presenting this award to a PM with all these tuxedos, suits and fine dresses around,” he says later. “And there I am: the fanciest thing I have is a traditional and very turquoise native ‘ribbon shirt’ my grandma made for me. I was proud of it

and proud to be one fairly lame model of what can happen to people when they recognize they just might have a chance at realizing their potential. Too many in our aboriginal communities have what it takes, but they just don't know it."

Squandering such potential in Canada's 600-plus First Nations communities may well become as much a major economic issue as a moral one. For MNP's Randy Swanson, AMP's regional coordinator for Western Canada, the country can hardly afford to ignore the plight of First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth. According to a Statistics Canada spring 2013 survey, 28% of the nation's indigenous population is age 14 or under, compared with 16.5% for non-aboriginals. And the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics predicts that between 2013 and 2020 the province will need an infusion of another 186,000 people working in a wide range of occupations, the majority of which require some post-secondary education and training. Samson, a Winnipeg-based Métis and blood brother of the Rolling River First Nation says, "MNP does a lot of work with First Nations across the country. Everything we do [in the AMP program] leads to higher employment, more people in excellent careers and earning an income and less people on social assistance; and then more role models out there for the following group of kids. Former prime minister Martin is dead on when he says we've got to get more resources behind this, because all the problems First Nations People face are also [Canada's] problems. The sheer weight of demographics/economics is at play and something has to be done about it," he says. "So we said let's join Mr. Martin and see if we can make a difference."

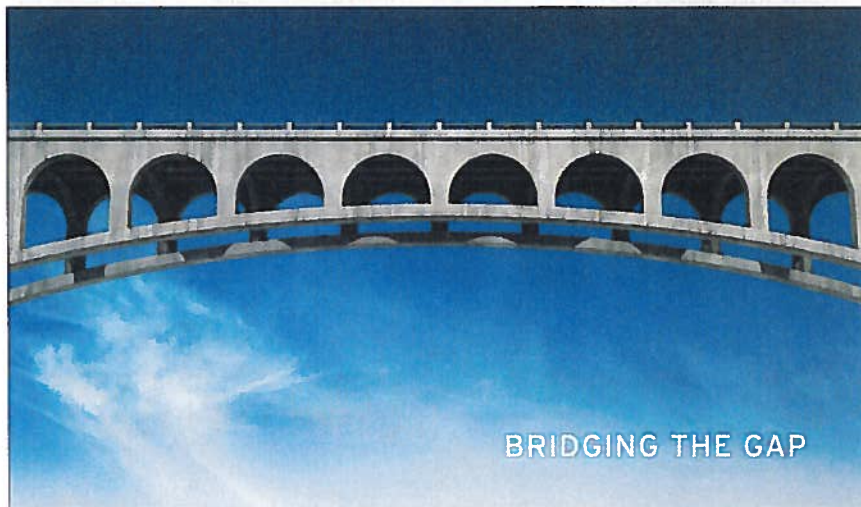
And Clause is already having an impact. He and some friends have revived a once moribund Brock Aboriginal Student Organization (ASO). "We want and deserve to have our voices heard," says Clause, ASO president. And perhaps because of his experience, Clause is an active student-mentor for any bewildered newcomers who cross his path.

Martin wants to make clear that MAEI is sensitive to the history, culture and traditions of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples and that the students' families and local band leaders are fully involved as CPAs enter their children's lives. The program's main thrust is not to produce accountants, though that would be ideal and much needed. "They want their children

to have the choice," Martin says. "The problem is they don't have the choice. On-reserve they do need accountants. But they want to have their own people with accounting backgrounds."

The program, which Martin and Posno hope to expand nationwide in the coming years, offers both choice and hope. "Before I became PM and as finance minister and then before that in business, I spent much of my life arguing with accountants," Martin laughs. "All I can say now is thank God for them."

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