

FORMER PM DEVOTES TIME AND MONEY TO ABORIGINAL PRIORITIE

Don Cayo

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Paul Martin is the first recipient of the Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Relations for his long history of involvement in native issues

What does a guy do with himself at the end of a successful career in both business and politics?

If you think the answer's predictable - a retired big shot does whatever he wants - you're no doubt right. But how former prime minister Paul Martin chooses to spend his time in retirement has nothing to do with fishing poles or rocking chairs.

For the last five years Martin, now 73, has been investing massive amounts of both his energy and his wealth - estimated at \$225 million back when he was still prime minister - into his twin passions for aboriginal education and entrepreneurship. Then, as time permits, the legendary former finance minister who slew Canada's chronic deficit, trots the globe. He works on issues as diverse as saving rich countries from their spendthrift ways and saving the Congo Basin rainforest from people so poor they'll risk long-term sustainability to meet life-and-death shortterm needs.

I caught up with him at his hotel when he was in Vancouver for Thursday's annual meeting and gala of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. Martin was the star of the show, selected as the first recipient of what is to be the annual Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Relations.

As an author of the much-heralded but now-defunct Kelowna Accord - a series of federal-provincial agreements that sought to improve education, employment and living conditions for aboriginal people - and with a long history of interest and involvement in native issues, Martin is being honoured for lifelong activities. But two of his retirement projects - a \$50 million capital fund to support aboriginal entrepreneurship, and the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative - are being singled out.

He sees those two interests - education and entrepreneurship - as closely linked. And when he speaks of education, his focus is elementary and high school.

"If you look at what Canada's universities and colleges have done over the course of the last two decades, you see tremendous progress has been made. Similar progress has not been made in terms of early learning - elementary school or high school.

"And if you don't graduate from high school, you don't get to go to college, to university, or you don't get a trade - you don't get to be an apprentice."

So his education initiative has four components:

- A promising practices website where aboriginal teachers can develop and share classroom techniques and resources.
- A mentoring program with Canadian chartered accountants to expose aboriginal students to career possibilities they might otherwise never consider.
- A model school program, now in the pilot phase, to develop ways to turn around under-performing schools and, in time, extend the method to others.
- An aboriginal entrepreneurship program based on the idea that teaching kids at risk of dropping out about business gives them skills whose value they can see, unlike teaching them algebra,

which may not. The program is being run in several schools across Canada, including in Prince Rupert and at Britannia Secondary in Vancouver.

"I've funded this," Martin said. "Now, as it takes off, we want to bring the business community in."

Several companies - mining firms like Vancouver-based Teck and Goldcorp and others - have already bought into the entrepreneurship fund, which operates on basic business principles of investing in enterprises with good prospects and credible business plans.

Martin concedes that some aboriginal communities in Canada are much more ready and able to move on opportunities than others, but he notes these kinds of differences exist everywhere and among every group. And the techniques his initiatives are stressing will work for those bands that are home to individual entrepreneurs as well as those that prefer to focus on communitarian enterprises - a kind of band-owned version of Crown corporations.

But no matter how enterprises are organized, "You've got to make it possible for the go-getters to go as far as they can and set an example for the others to follow."

This concept of role models is already proving its worth, he says. Business successes in scores of bands across Canada - in Osoyoos, or Kelowna, or many more - are setting the bar for other communities to aspire to.

"I think we're about to make a major breakthrough," he said. "There's more understanding among Canadians of the need, and there's a far, far greater number of aboriginal leaders who recognize what has to happen."

"What's really important, there's the confidence that progress is going to be made. That confidence will make all the difference."