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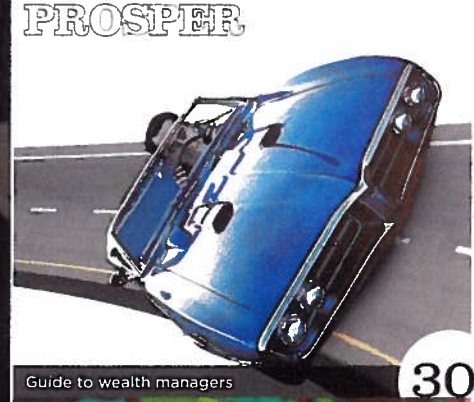
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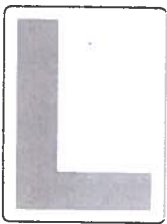
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Aditya Jha is dedicated to creating opportunity

# Northern Spirit

Building self-reliance among  
aboriginals is the shared passion of two  
Canadian entrepreneurs



Life for the Jha family in the 1960s was pretty typical, at least for those who lived in a place where the only thing above the roof of the homes was the roof of the world.

Growing up in the Himalayan village of Nadhawa in Nepal, young Aditya Jha walked four kilometres to school.

There was no electricity, running water, or paved roads. Like most village kids, Jha played soccer, though the balls were often patched together and the fields had only a passing acquaintance with grass.

**CHRIS ZELKOVICH**

WRITTEN BY

**CHRISTOPHER WAHL**

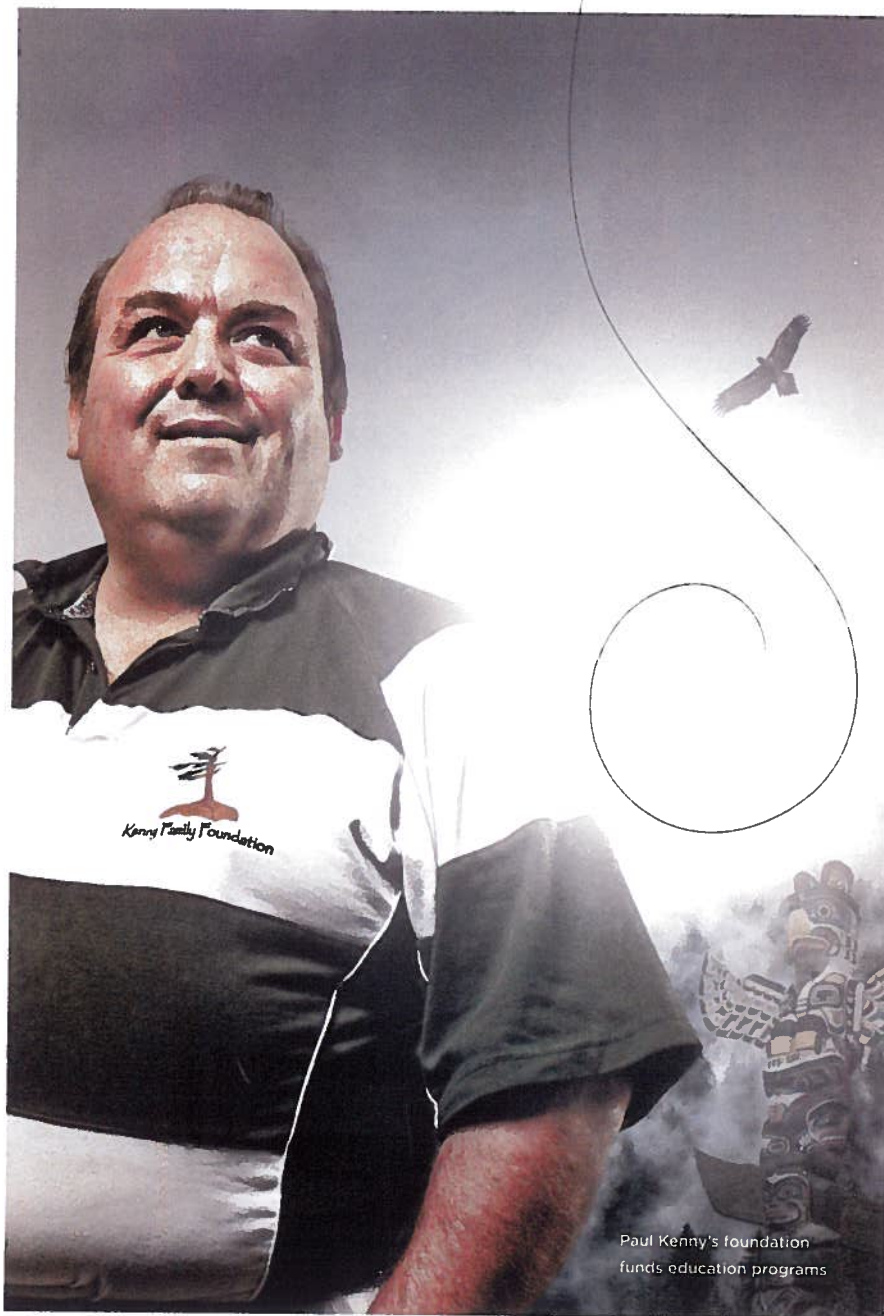
PHOTOGRAPHED BY



Around the same time, half a world away, Peter and Joanne Kenny were raising their four children in one of the toughest towns built on the thin soil of the Canadian Shield.

Their life in Sudbury, Ont., was typical of most northern families: long winters made survivable with hockey and skiing, short summers punctuated by hunting and fishing.





Though hardly a rich city, the working-class mining centre offered all the advantages that Canadians have come to expect.

The Kennys and Jhas have never met. They haven't even heard of each other. But despite the fact they were raised worlds apart, they have found a unique place in the universe where they share a common bond: a passion for using their good fortune to better the lives of Canada's aboriginal Peoples.

Since Jha set up his POA Educational Foundation in 2001, he has granted \$350,000 in university and college endowments to promote education for First

Nations youth. The foundation has also handed out \$300,000 in seed money and other projects to help Aboriginal Peoples start businesses.

The Kennys, through the Kenny Family Foundation, have given out more than \$700,000, mostly to Aboriginal education projects, since it set up in 2004.

Although they took very different routes, both Jha and the Kenny family have ended up at the same spot—and with the same basic philosophy. Instead of donating money to underprivileged reserves, they have used their wealth to foster education and entrepreneurship in the belief it will create a new spirit that will begin to undo centuries of paternalism, neglect, and failure.

While the path hasn't always been smooth—Kenny says it took him six years to gain the trust of people he says are still suspicious of southerners “who say they can fix all their problems in three days”—it has been a rewarding one.

### Worlds apart

The man from Nepal is now a Canadian through and through; has been for 17 years and now lives in Mississauga, Ont. Jha fell in love with Canada after arriving here in 1994 to work in the computer software field and says he realized very quickly he'd landed in the best country in the world.

That feeling was strengthened seven years after immigrating when he hit the jackpot—selling the software company he'd co-founded in 1998 to Sun Microsystems for US\$100 million.

It was about that time Jha, who is a strong believer in karma, decided to start giving back to his adopted country. He found many outlets back home, including charities in India and Nepal, but it didn't take him long to realize there was something also seriously wrong with the country he had come to love.

“I asked myself how it was possible that in this great country there are people suffering,” he says. “I could not understand why the first people who lived here had

been left so far behind. It's like the Third World was living in the middle of the First World."

The real eye-opener for Jha came in 2001 at a speech given by Nishnawbe Aski Nation grand chief Stan Beardy. Jha realized that simply donating money would only repeat the errors of the past. He wanted to instead foster a sense of entrepreneurship and replace the transfer of wealth with the creation of wealth—to build the road to self-reliance.

"The whole First Nations issue in Canada is a blame game," he says. "Is it the system? Is it the people? But what I see here is a sense of defeatism. The First Nations people are never expected to achieve anything, so they seldom do. Those who rise above it are truly amazing. I can see that if they're given the chance they can succeed."

**Making the investment**

In conjunction with Beardy, Jha started Project Beyshick, (meaning "number one" in Cree) a week-long educational program for aspiring Aboriginal entrepreneurs. He also began awarding seed money to community businessmen.

**"I could not understand why the first people who lived here had been left so far behind."**

One of his early successes was Darcy Kejick, the operator of a small food store on the Northern Spirit Lake First Nation in northwestern Ontario. Armed with \$15,000 from Jha's foundation, POA, the high school dropout now owns a gas station, grocery store, and motel on the reserve. Jha says he's now a millionaire.

This, he believes, is the most direct route to bringing Canada's first people into the first world. "Everybody thinks it's about job creation," Jha says. "Good jobs require good skills and you don't create those overnight. It might take a generation for that to work."

"We have to start thinking about wealth creation. Entrepreneurship is the perfect solution. You don't need a PhD to be an entrepreneur. All you need for that is drive and wisdom, and there's plenty of that on the reserves. People forget that before the Europeans arrived and

subjugated them, the First Nations were traders. We took that away from them and we hope to give it back."

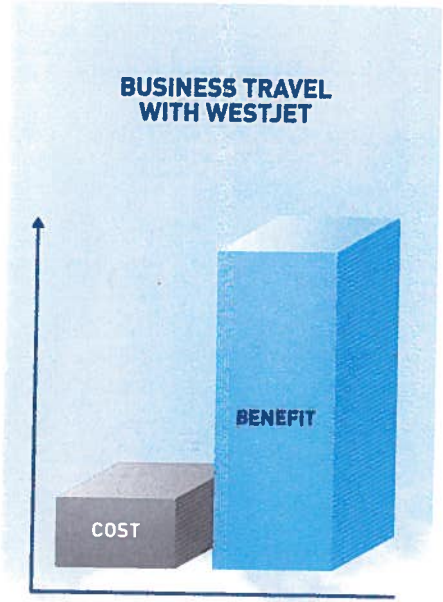
**Grand achievement**

Unlike Jha, the Kennys have been in Canada a long time and were very aware of the plight of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples. They didn't have to look far when they decided it was time to share the wealth that came in 1994 when Peter sold his auto parts plant, Neelon Castings Ltd., for seven figures. A few good gains in the stock market enhanced that and soon the family was looking for a more altruistic path.

"We came to the decision that it was time to share the wealth and use our money to create a better society," says Paul Kenny, the family's second oldest son and spokesman for the foundation. They just hadn't decided how.

Paul was in the throes of a mid-life crisis and took a break from his job as a food safety specialist with a B.C. company. He decided very quickly that creating and running the Kenny Family Foundation was what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Photographed by Peter Holst



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A family meeting produced a mission statement: To remove barriers to achievement.

In their minds, that meant education and they started scholarship projects aimed at improving the lot of women in Kenya and Uganda. But they wanted to make an impact closer to home and it didn't take long for them to decide on the First Nations peoples.

"Canadians have brushed First Nations issues under the carpet for 500 years," says Kenny. "Every member of Canadian society should have the right to self-reliance. Today, that's not happening."

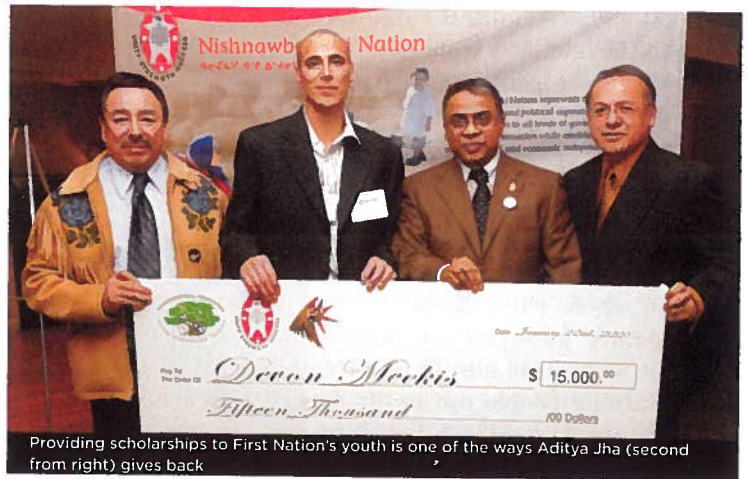


**Reap what you sow**

The Kennys believe strongly in social justice.

"I've grown up with a silver spoon in my mouth," says Kenny. "I had a smart Dad and a devoted mother, but like Buddha did when he looked over his wall and saw the abject poverty on the other side, I realized that you can't let this continue."

They focused on what they saw as the biggest problem—lack of education—and began funding programs



Providing scholarships to First Nation's youth is one of the ways Aditya Jha (second from right) gives back

that would advance aboriginal educational achievement, especially increasing the numbers of students completing secondary and post-secondary school. One of the most productive has been a project run in conjunction with Thunder Bay's Confederation College and First-Nation run Wasaya Airways that introduces youth to the aviation industry.

He also points out two reasons why all Canadians should invest in the First Nations.

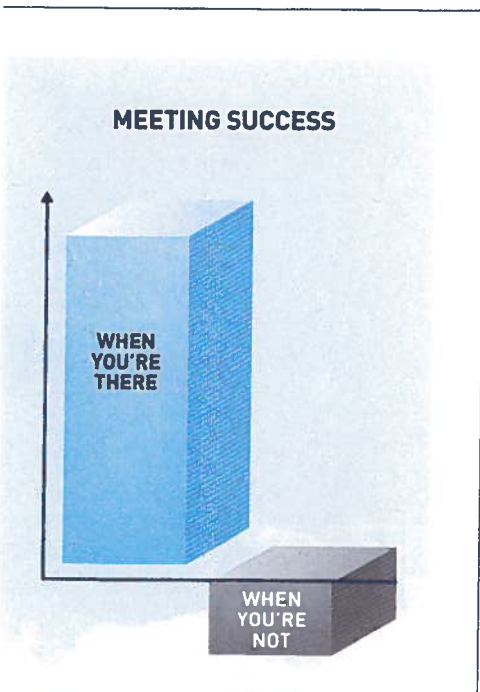
The first is the population time-bomb ticking on Canada's reserves and aboriginal neighbourhoods in big cities. The aboriginal population is the fastest-growing segment of the population and it's been estimated that 25% of Manitoba's population will be aboriginal by 2030.

"The social train wreck is coming unless we deal with the problems facing aboriginal youth," he says.

The other motive is purely personal. He takes a lot of satisfaction in seeing the good his family's grants and loans achieve and how some of the projects involve good jobs on the reserves, where they'll do the most good.

At a recent graduation ceremony at Thunder Bay's Confederation College, handing over grants to two students from remote Northwestern Ontario reserves who had just graduated from the airline training program nearly brought Kenny to tears. "I thought, 'that's two kids who are going to be self-sufficient, who are going to participate in the economy and will raise all boats in their communities,'" he says. "It's probably the biggest endorphin rush I'll ever get." ●

Chris Zelkovich is a journalist with the Toronto Star.



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