

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WINNERS ANNOUNCED FOR THE 33RD ANNUAL NADF AWARDS

www.nadfawards.com

Thunder Bay, ON: The Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF), together with Bearskin Airlines – A Division of Perimeter Aviation, proudly celebrated Indigenous entrepreneurship and leadership at the 33rd Annual NADF Awards on Thursday, October 23, 2025.

Held at the Delta Hotels Thunder Bay, the gala welcomed more than 200 guests for an evening dedicated to honouring Indigenous business success across Northern Ontario.

Since 1991, the NADF Awards have recognized outstanding achievements that contribute to strong economies and thriving communities. This year, six exceptional recipients were added to that legacy, bringing the total number of award honourees to 205 over 33 years.

Awards were presented in six categories:

- Partnership
- Startup Business
- Young Entrepreneur
- Small Business
- Excellence in Leadership
- Business Excellence

Brent “Mooselegs” Edwards returned as Master of Ceremonies, guiding the celebration with his signature humour and warm presence. The evening also featured a special performance by Indigenous comedian Howie Miller, adding a fun and entertaining moment to the program. Guests enjoyed a three-course dinner, networking, and powerful stories of perseverance, vision, and community impact.

Proceeds from the 33rd Annual NADF Awards support the NADF Community Care Fund and the NADF Mikinaak Bursary Fund for Indigenous Students. The NADF Community Care Fund provides financial support for cultural, wellness, and community-based events that celebrate Indigenous culture and promote healthy living. The Mikinaak Bursary helps Indigenous students pursue post-secondary education by easing financial barriers and investing in the next generation of leaders. Launched in April 2025, the Mikinaak Bursary supported six Indigenous students in its inaugural year, helping them to pursue post-secondary education by easing financial barriers and investing in the next generation of leaders.

For 33 years, the NADF Awards have proudly recognized the spirit of leadership and vision that fuels Indigenous entrepreneurs, uplifting communities, empowering future leaders, and building a prosperous future for Northern Ontario.

33rd ANNUAL NADF AWARD RECIPIENTS

PARTNERSHIP OF THE YEAR

Sponsored by: Ontario Power Generation

**Ryan Besiallon, Mississauga First Nation, and Diane Pearson
Partners, Clean Cut Contracting, Matheson, ON**

When Ryan Besiallon and Diane Pearson founded Clean Cut Contracting in August 2023, they didn't just start a business, they built a partnership defined by trust, balance, and shared vision.



L to R: Ryan Besiallon; Diane Pearson; Brian Dietrich, VP Western Region, Ontario Power Generation

What began as two parents connecting through their children quickly evolved into a powerful collaboration rooted in respect and complementary skills. Ryan, with his extensive construction experience and disciplined work ethic, leads field operations. Diane, with her keen financial acumen and organizational expertise, manages budgeting, administration, and strategic planning. Together, they form the backbone of a business that lives up to its name: clean, precise, and professional.

In just over two years, Clean Cut Contracting has become one of Northern Ontario's most promising new construction firms. Their project roster reads like that of a seasoned company, including the new community centre in Iroquois Falls and a 15,000 sq. ft. gas station in Hearst. These large-scale projects

are testaments to the confidence clients have in their workmanship, reliability, and ability to deliver safely and efficiently.

But beyond their work sites, Diane and Ryan are deeply invested in their communities. They regularly support local initiatives, sponsor youth sports, and give back through volunteering and donating to community events and fundraisers. For them, success isn't only measured in square footage, it's measured in the positive impact they have on the people and places around them.

Their reputation for integrity and safety is second to none. They engage licensed trades and safety inspectors on every project and uphold the highest standards of workmanship. This dedication to doing things right the first time has earned them the trust of clients and partners alike.

Clean Cut Contracting's growth has been strategic and sustainable. By carefully planning their investments and hiring administrative support, Ryan and Diane have positioned their business for long-term stability. Their disciplined approach ensures that each step forward strengthens their foundation and contributes to community development.

As a majority Indigenous-owned company, Clean Cut Contracting embodies the entrepreneurial spirit that uplifts both business and community. Ryan and Diane's partnership demonstrates how collaboration, hard work, and shared values can build not only great projects, but lasting prosperity for Northern Ontario.

START UP BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Sponsored by: TD Bank

Craig Hyatt, Fort William First Nation

Owner, Rainy Lake Electrical, Fort Frances, ON

Craig Hyatt is a member of Fort William First Nation, and the founder of Rainy Lake Electrical. Born and raised in Fort Frances, Ontario, Craig's upbringing instilled in him a deep respect for nature, community, and hard work. It's these values that continue to guide both his personal life and professional journey.

Craig's path to entrepreneurship began with a natural curiosity for how things worked, from dismantling toys to building car audio systems as a teen. After working at the Fort Frances mill, Craig pursued his dream of becoming an electrician and launched Rainy Lake Electrical, a 100% Indigenous-owned business, on September 25, 2024. A one-man operation, Craig took on every role - owner, operator, and master electrician - and he is driven by a vision to build something lasting for his family and community.

The road to success wasn't without challenges. Craig describes the first year as a period of steep learning, filled with unexpected hurdles, moments of doubt, and lessons learned through persistence. Balancing every aspect of the business on his own tested his determination but also strengthened his resolve to succeed. His perseverance paid off. In its first year, Rainy Lake Electrical has secured two major contracts: a government project across six facilities in Fort

Frances, Rainy River, and Pickle Lake, and a large-scale LED lighting upgrade for Rainy River First Nations, including their powwow grounds. These early achievements set the stage for growth, allowing Craig to invest in new equipment and to give back locally. Rainy Lake Electrical has donated to the Fort Frances High School Muskie Football Club and the Kitchen Creek Golf and Country Club.



L to R: Terry Copenance, Sr. Business Development Manager, TD Bank; Craig Hyatt

Operating within Couchiching First Nation, Rainy Lake Electrical has built a strong reputation and a growing base of repeat clients, including Nanicost Ltd., Gizhewaadiziwin Health Access Centre, and McDonald's, which named Rainy Lake Electrical its official electrical contractor.

Craig Hyatt exemplifies the spirit of Indigenous entrepreneurship, and his journey reflects the power of dedication, vision, and collaboration. Rainy Lake Electrical is more than a business. It is a growing legacy rooted in culture, family, and the belief that success is meant to be shared.

YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR

Sponsored by: Neegani Investment Management Inc.

**Jessica Mamakeesick (Robinson), Keewaywin First Nation
Owner, Mamakeesick Roots, Thunder Bay, ON**

Jessica Mamakeesick is an Indigenous artisan and entrepreneur whose creative journey has blossomed into a thriving business rooted in cultural expression and community impact. A member of Keewaywin First Nation, Jessica spent her early years in Sandy Lake, a remote fly-in community in Northwestern

Ontario. Today, she lives and works in Thunder Bay, where she runs Mamakeesick Roots, a business that showcases her original Indigenous artwork across a wide range of products.



L to R: Brian Davey, Managing Director, Neegani Investment Management Inc.; Jessica Mamakeesick

Jessica's path to entrepreneurship began in 2021 with a vivid dream of painting a feather in an Indigenous style. That moment sparked a powerful connection to her heritage and inspired her to begin creating art that reflects her identity and culture. Drawing inspiration from her father, Saul Mamakeesick, himself an Indigenous artist, Jessica chose to honour her family name through her business.

What started as painting for personal enjoyment quickly evolved into a professional pursuit. In 2023, she opened a storefront in Goods & Co. Market, a local artisan hub in Thunder Bay. As a sole proprietor, Jessica designs and produces a variety of items including prints, journals, apparel, planter pots, greeting cards, and more. Her work has gained national attention through collaborations with organizations such as Ontario University Athletics, Lakehead University, and Xspex Goggle Company. Her designs have been featured on hockey sticks for championship MVPs, university ceremonial gifts, and ski goggles sold across Canada. These achievements reflect not only her artistic talent but also her growing influence in Indigenous entrepreneurship and design.

Jessica is deeply committed to giving back. She speaks to youth about her journey, donates to community causes, and provides paint kits used in art therapy and wellness programming. Her work promotes healing, empowerment, and cultural pride.

Receiving the Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award is a celebration of Jessica's courage, creativity, and leadership. Her story is a testament to the power of following one's passion and embracing cultural identity. Through Mamakeesick Roots, Jessica continues to inspire others to dream boldly, create fearlessly, and walk proudly in their own paths.

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Janet Fletcher, Moose Cree First Nation

Owner, Coffee and Catering Services, Smooth Rock Falls, ON

Janet Fletcher is the founder and owner of Coffee and Catering Services, a 100% Indigenous-owned mobile catering business based in Smooth Rock Falls, Ontario. A proud member of the Moose Cree First Nation, Janet's entrepreneurial journey is rooted in resilience, community, and a lifelong passion for cooking.



L to R: Janet Fletcher; Jen McIntosh, Senior Manager, Tax, Doane Grant Thornton

Before launching her business, Janet worked in the trades as both an electrician and a welder. Her transition to catering came after a back injury during the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to continue in physically demanding roles. Drawing on her culinary skills and determination, she turned a personal setback into a thriving business opportunity.

Coffee and Catering Services serves a wide region across Northern Ontario, from Hearst to Moose Factory, offering full-service catering for events ranging from small meetings to large community

gatherings of up to 500 guests. Janet is known for her hands-on approach and her ability to adapt under pressure, including successfully serving a hot meal to 150 people during a power outage.

Now in its third year, Coffee and Catering Services continues to grow through word of mouth and repeat clients who value Janet's exceptional cooking. Her menus reflect both creativity and comfort and are tailored to suit each event. Janet prioritizes hiring local staff in the communities she serves and remains deeply committed to giving back to her community. Each year, she organizes free events such as the Children's Halloween Party and the Christmas Craft Party in Smooth Rock Falls, using food as a way to bring people together to create lasting memories.

Entrepreneurship runs in Janet's family. Her parents owned several businesses, and her mother was the Businesswoman of the Year at the very first NADF Awards in 1991. Inspired by that legacy, Janet continues to build a business that reflects strength, creativity, and community care.

Janet's story is one of perseverance and purpose. She has not only built a successful business but also become a role model for Indigenous women and aspiring entrepreneurs across the region.

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP

Sponsored by: Hydro One

Jacob Dockstator, Oneida of the Thames Nation

Executive Director, Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord

Jacob Dockstator is Mohawk and a proud member of Oneida of the Thames Nation. With a strong foundation in traditional education, Jacob pursued academic excellence, earning an undergraduate degree in Indigenous Studies from Trent University, a Juris Doctor from Osgoode Hall Law School, and an MBA from the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University.

Since 2021, Jacob has served as the Executive Director of the Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord, a regional development organization founded by Lac Seul, Slate Falls, Cat Lake, and Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nations. Under his leadership, the Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord has secured over \$22 million in project and grant funding focused on skill development and capacity building, and \$17 million in debt financing for a 48-unit residential development in Dryden owned by the Signatory Nations.

Jacob's vision for Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord is rooted in creating barrier-free, sustainable prosperity for Northern Ontario's Indigenous communities. Through initiatives like the Sioux Lookout Mining Centre of Excellence, the Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord has delivered tuition-free training to over 250 individuals since inception, equipping them with in-demand skills and ensuring local communities benefit directly from regional resource development.

Before joining Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord, Jacob worked in private debt finance in Toronto, managing a portfolio exceeding \$200 million across Western Ontario and the Prairies. His transition to

Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord was driven by a desire to align his professional work with his Indigenous roots and to lead impactful, community-driven initiatives.



L to R: Simmer Anand, Director, Indigenous Partnerships & Business Development, Hydro One; Sumit Malra, Director of Finance, Sioux Lookout Friendship Accord (*accepting on behalf of Jacob Dockstator*)

Jacob is also a filmmaker. His 2020 documentary, “I’m Not an Indian”, explores the history of Dakota Plains First Nation and one of Canada’s longest-serving Chiefs. The film won Best International Documentary Short at the Los Angeles Culver City Film Festival and was later licensed to Bell Media.

In 2023, Jacob was named a David Rockefeller Fellow by the Trilateral Commission, joining a select group of emerging leaders under 35 recognized for their potential to address national and global challenges. That same year, Jacob received Trent University’s Young Leader Award for outstanding leadership as a young alumnus.

Jacob Dockstator exemplifies excellence in leadership and business, combining strategic vision, cultural integrity, and a deep commitment to community advancement.

BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

Sponsored by Bearskin Airlines – A Division of Perimeter Aviation

Kateri Banning, Fort William First Nation

Owner, MarKat Construction and Electrical Services, Fort William First Nation

Kateri Lee Banning is the proud owner and operator of MarKat Construction and Electrical Services, a 100% Indigenous company and construction team, serving remote First Nations across Northwestern Ontario. A member of Fort William First Nation and a mother of three, Kateri's journey from childhood dreams to construction leadership is a powerful story of resilience, vision and community commitment.



L to R: Kateri Banning; Carlos Castillo, VP Northern Division, Perimeter Aviation

From a young age, Kateri was drawn to building, crafting intricate paper cities from cardboard and Kleenex boxes. Despite facing personal challenges in early adulthood, she chose a new path, enrolling in trade school at Confederation College in 2003. As one of only two women in her class, she earned the nickname “Princess”, which became a badge of honour as she proved her skill and determination.

After graduating in 2005, Kateri co-founded Skaarup Construction and helped grow it into a multi million-dollar business. In 2015, she made the bold decision to start anew and launch her own company, a choice rooted in her commitment to providing the best future for her children. Today, MarKat Construction & Electrical Services is a thriving enterprise employing more than 20 skilled professionals, including Red Seal carpenters, Master Electricians, plumbers, and HVAC specialists. Kateri's company, MarKat, builds homes and infrastructure in communities like Kingfisher Lake First Nation, Big Trout Lake First Nation. In 2024 she assisted in the creation of a plan for council, for a 28 home subdivision, with the anticipation of a Spring 2026 start date. Her team also provides year-round operations and maintenance, airport and water treatment repairs, as well as winter road rescue missions.

Beyond construction, Kateri and MarKat are committed to giving back. MarKat regularly supports Evergreen a United Neighbourhood and well as The Underground Gym, and have recently launched a bursary program for the Indigenous trade students, awarding \$12,000 annually to empower our next generation.

Kateri and MarKat's mission is clear; To build safe homes for families and strong communities for our people. Her work is guided by the principles of building for the next seven generations, ensuring that Indigenous Youth see the trades as a path to empowerment, sustainability and pride.



L to R: Ryan Besiallon, Diane Pearson, Craig Hyatt, Kateri Banning, Sumit Malra, Jessica Mamakeesick. Missing: Janet Fletcher

Quotes:

*"Indigenous entrepreneurs are shaping the economic future of our region with determination, creativity, and purpose. Their success strengthens communities, inspires youth, and reflects a long-standing spirit of leadership and vision. We are honoured to celebrate these leaders and the incredible impact they are making across Northern Ontario." – **Brian Davey, CEO, NADF***

*"Bearskin Airlines – A Division of Perimeter Aviation has been proud to stand alongside NADF since the very first Awards. For 33 years, these celebrations have honoured the dedication and innovation of Indigenous entrepreneurs across Northern Ontario. We're deeply proud to continue supporting this tradition and to celebrate the leaders who are building stronger, more connected northern communities." – **Carlos Castillo, VP Northern Division, Perimeter Aviation***

About NADF

Incorporated in 1984, the Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF) is a not-for-profit Indigenous Financial Institution dedicated to advancing Indigenous prosperity across Northern Ontario. NADF provides a range of financing solutions, including loans and grants, along with business advisory support to help entrepreneurs start, grow, and scale their businesses. Serving First Nation communities

and Indigenous entrepreneurs throughout Treaty 9, Treaty 5 (Ontario), Treaty 3, and the Robinson-Superior 1850 territories, NADF's work strengthens local economies, creates opportunities, and supports long-term community well-being.

About Perimeter Aviation

Founded in 1960, Perimeter Aviation LP, along with its eastern division Bearskin Airlines, is one of Canada's largest regional air carriers, providing scheduled flights, charter and cargo services, and emergency air ambulance operations throughout Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario.

For more information about the awards, contact:

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