

Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation (SIEF) presents “Entrepreneurial Spirit Award” to COTE MARKET of Cote First Nation



COTE MARKET wins SIEF Entrepreneurial Spirit Award. COTE MARKET of Cote First Nation. Accepting the award on behalf of Cote Market is (left to right) Amanda Cote, Shelly Cote, Jennifer Tourangeau, Chief George Cote, SIEF Vice-Chair Trevor Acoose and Gerald Marcoux, Director of Operations, Cote First Nation.

Nestled in the heart of Cote First nation lays something unexpected - a thriving food mart that includes a fully functioning grocery store and gas station. Even more surprising is the fact it has been in operation since 2010. Cote First nation is located approximately 90 kilometres northeast of Yorkton near the Keesekoose and Key First Nations.

In a community wrought with many social ills, the small business in Cote First Nation has become a beacon of hope because it stands as a testament of what can happen when everyone works together. In the eight years it has been open, it has only been broken into twice, each time by someone outside of the community.

“I think that speaks volumes about what it means to the community,” said Gerald Marcoux, interim director of operations for Cote First Nation. It hasn’t been smooth sailing. However, with dedicated employees who weathered the storm together, the community is beginning to reap the rewards. Since opening its doors in October of 2010, Cote Market has gone through its share of ups and downs. The staff believe it has finally turned the corner, as last year it showed its first profit and has grown from 5 employees to 22 employees. Another indication of its continued growth is having suppliers now compete for its business. The market attracts patrons not only from Cote First Nation but also from neighbouring First Nations and the town of Kamsack.

Marcoux played an instrumental role in helping create the market, though he admits initially he was skeptical of the project. However, as Cote’s economic development officer, he began researching what needed to be done to convert an abandoned bingo hall into an on-reserve food market. Marcoux learned all he could about the commercial food industry online and later spoke with food store managers directly. Through his research, he knew a food market wasn’t the most lucrative business to get into, but it was the kind of business that could help the community. Marcoux said the only option to get groceries other than in Kamsack was in Yorkton, and that is nearly 100 kilometres away.

Having previously settled a Treaty Land Entitlement claim, Cote First Nation was in a good financial position to take the risk. When the Cote Market opened its doors, it made history by becoming the only fully functioning on-reserve grocery store south of La Ronge, complete with its own bakery. Marcoux credits much of the business’s success to employees like Shelley Cote, the store manager. Shelley Cote was one of the first employees hired. Despite some hard times, she didn’t quit. From the start, she knew the business had potential to have a positive impact on the community, so she stuck it out despite the rough patches.

Cote said the best part of the job is being able to provide opportunities to the youth living on reserve. Cote said the store struggled to stay afloat in the early years, but

once it added the gas bar and tobacco sales to its list of services, things began to shift. The market became a one-stop shop, which attracted more customers. Cote said the key to being successful on-reserve is to keep the environment neutral when it comes to politics, as well as providing excellent customer service. Marcoux believes that in order to keep the store thriving it needs to provide Cote First Nation and the surrounding communities with services they need. He said the bakery cannot pump out the product fast enough to meet the current demand. One thing that sets the bakery apart from any other bakery is that it offers bannock, which has proven to be very popular. Most recently the market has started offering a hot lunch option for customers. Marcoux believes there is potential for future growth within the market, but the key is to find the right combination.

In the future he hopes to turn the market into a co-operative so the community can fully embrace the store as its own. Each year, the Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation (SIEF) recognizes a First Nation business by awarding the SIEF Entrepreneurial Spirit Award. In 2018, Cote Market was selected from the applications received. The award is given to a First Nation entity that is an individual, business, corporation, organization or First Nation that exemplifies forward movement and involvement to create sustainable economic development for First Nations of Saskatchewan. The irony is that neither Marcoux nor Cote knew such an award existed. The application for the award was received at the band office and Marcoux said the store fit the criteria. In September, Marcoux dropped the application off at the market and suggested they should apply. Manager Shelley Cote was blown away when she received the news that Cote Market had been selected. "I am so proud of it," said Cote. "the acknowledgement of our work alone, it makes me so proud." She hopes the recognition can inspire other First Nations to develop their own businesses on reserve as a way to provide services for their own people.

Cote said every First Nation has the potential to start a business - it is just a matter of figuring out what will work for them. "The way I see it (businesses) create jobs," said Cote. "On-reserve jobs are hard to come by." Cote has grown to love the business and can't foresee a time when she will walk away from it. She said keeping the business successful is what motivates her to stay. Marcoux said it took some time to get the Cote Market to where it is today and believes that same business model can be applied to other potential ventures. He added that receiving the SIEF Entrepreneurial Spirit Award and recognition from SIEF has just been the icing on

the cake. Congratulations to Cote Market. This is an excellent example of a First Nation community business working to make their First Nation a better place. The work you have done to establish this business is very important in furthering the First Nation business community. SIEF congratulates the 2018 winner of the SIEF entrepreneurial Spirit award, Cote Market.