



Indsights

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

Case Study

Bentwood Skateboards

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Bentwood Skateboards

Meet Brenda and Jason



Bentwood



Meet Brenda and Jason

Brenda Knights and Jason Bothe are co-owners of Bentwood Skateboards of Fort Langley, British Columbia, an Indigenous-owned — defined as at least 51% owned and controlled by an Aboriginal person (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, 2022) — skateboard company specializing in skateboard decks and apparel. Together, they make a formidable pair bringing their life experiences and expertise to make their business work.

Brenda is from Kwantlen First Nation, just outside of Vancouver. Her lineage can be traced back to the Grand Chief Wattlekanium, who helped relocate the Kwantlen people to Fort Langley, British Columbia. She has completed college and worked across a variety of industries over the course of her business management career. Before starting Bentwood Skateboards, she worked closely with her First Nation to launch their economic development initiatives and spent close to 12 years building various businesses for her community. Brenda currently serves as the CEO of Vancouver Native Housing Society, an organization that helps Indigenous Peoples living in an urban setting find safe and affordable housing.

Jason has been involved with skateboarding for over 30 years, mainly as an emcee (master of ceremonies) and as a skateboarder. Over the course of his career, he has partnered with large brands such as Nixon, Hurley, and DC Shoes. He has helped launch smaller skateboard brands and considers himself to be a “marketing mascot” — comfortable in front of the camera, creative, and personable.

Combining Jason’s expertise and industry connections with Brenda’s business acumen, they launched Bentwood Skateboards.

Community Profile



Community Profile

Kwantlen First Nation is a First Nations band government and community located primarily in what is now Fort Langley, British Columbia. Kwantlen Traditional Territory extends from Richmond and New Westminster in the west to Surrey and Langley in the south, east to Mission, and the northernmost reaches of Stave Lake. The name of this First Nations group is interesting because it incorporates an environmental consciousness. First Nations have been stewards of the lands in the Fraser Watershed since time immemorial, and they continue that important role today.

The Kwantlen First Nation is one of many First Nations living in the Fraser Watershed. Kwantlen translates to “tireless runner,” which speaks to the Nation’s tireless spirit and work to preserve natural resources for future generations. Before Europeans arrived in the 1800s, the Kwantlen were settled in many now-urban areas such as New Westminster, Surrey, Mission, and Langley. At one point in history, they controlled large swaths of what is now mainland British Columbia. They moved up to Fort Langley when colonialists arrived. To this day, they follow a traditional system of government that blends customary and modern-day governance practices.



Currently, the Nation has approximately 300 registered members, according to the Government of British Columbia and community-managed demographic data.

Like many First Nations in British Columbia, it is worth noting that Kwantlen does not participate in the treaty negotiation process forced on many other Indigenous communities across the country. Kwantlen First Nation is a member of the Stó:lō Tribal Council (STC), which helped establish it as a flourishing Indigenous community without being pushed into an agreement that saw them surrender their lands.

Contemporary Community/Business Profile

There are many examples of the Kwantlen First Nation asserting their economic autonomy. In 2017, the community signed a revenue-sharing agreement with Tretheway/Big Silver Hydro, a subsidiary corporation of the Government of British Columbia. In addition, they signed two consultation and revenue-sharing agreements with the province in 2016 and 2019 related to any forestry work done on their territory. While these are important economic developments and demonstrate the First Nation's negotiating power, one of the most critical agreements came in 2006 as an Interim Agreement on Forest Opportunities. This agreement with the province recognizes Indigenous title over lands.

The agreement states:

"They [British Columbian Government] are committed to the reconciliation of Aboriginal and crown titles and jurisdiction and have agreed to implement a government-to-government relationship based on respect, recognition, and accommodation of Aboriginal title and rights."

The Kwantlen First Nation has worked hard to maintain control over its lands and have a voice in how they will be utilized for economic development. Drafting, upholding, and respecting these agreements is something that all governments should strive to do with the Indigenous communities within their jurisdiction.

Kwantlen First Nation also has its own economic development corporation. Seyem is a group of companies that works to economically support the programs and services of their growing community and be a viable contributor to the local and regional economy. Their ventures include commercial development in the city of Langley; fisheries and resource habitat enhancement projects throughout Kwantlen territory; a fully licensed security services company; and partnerships in various construction activities on Kwantlen reserve lands and territory.

This type of economic development organization is a source of economic prosperity and pride for many Indigenous communities across Canada.

Kwantlen Beliefs and Values

"Since time immemorial, we live by the seven traditional laws that guided our ancestors: health, happiness, generations, generosity, humbleness, forgiveness and understanding. Through learning, family, health, our culture, and traditions and looking after our lands and resources, we are tireless in our spirit to make a better world for our future generations. In working together and learning from our Elders, we are respectful, proud, independent, and responsible."

The Inspiration Behind Bentwood Skateboards

The Inspiration Behind Bentwood Skateboards

Finding the inspiration to start a business can come from various avenues. Sometimes, meeting and surrounding yourself with the right people can play a factor in starting a business. For Brenda and Jason, having each other helped launch the business. They both brought something unique to the table.

With her background in running businesses, Brenda was able to apply those skills to the business to ensure its successful launch. Whether it was bookkeeping, registering the business, or getting a trademark, Brenda was able to take what she learned from the past and apply it to the launch of Bentwood Skateboards.

For Jason, his industry experience helping other skateboard brands provided the insights needed to help get Bentwood Skateboards off the ground. For Brenda, a social component must be embedded in the framework of the business, which remains firmly grounded in her First Nation's teachings:

“In my nation, we're taught to live by seven laws, and it's health, happiness, humbleness, generations, generosity, forgiveness, and understanding, and we try to bring those principles to the business.”

Currently, Bentwood Skateboards sponsors a young Indigenous skateboarder — Deighton Atkins — and hosts an annual skateboarding event. For Brenda and Jason, in creating Bentwood Skateboards, they felt that they were creating an outlet and providing an opportunity to show others that if they can do it, so can a young entrepreneur.

Seven Sacred Teachings

- Health
- Happiness
- Humbleness
- Generations
- Generosity
- Forgiveness
- Understanding



Particularly with Indigenous youth and young entrepreneurs, the goal is to show that they can break the cycle of intergenerational trauma by moving forward and providing opportunities for future generations.

The goal for Bentwood Skateboards is to see an Indigenous skateboarder participate in the Summer Olympics.

Indigenous Values and Culture



Indigenous Values and Culture

Brenda admits that she has been on her career and cultural journey and consistently tries to incorporate her First Nation's traditional teachings into the day-to-day operations of her business. This has led her down a path of change and adaptation. When working in government, she noticed how rigid these environments could be, and this experience gave her a better appreciation of her culture and heritage.

“I’m trying to incorporate some of the traditional teachings. So, for example, I’ve been taught that we’re all given gifts. And in a community – in my community, we lived in a longhouse in the winter months, and we all had different people – you were put with your aunties and uncles where you could develop those gifts. So, if you were a fast runner, you were put with the hunters. If you were good at art, you were put with those that could do art. If you were a weaver, you were put with those that could do weaving.”

When it comes to Bentwood Skateboards, Brenda strongly believes that we are meant to work with people that are doing what they are meant

to be doing and using their gifts to their fullest potential. She points to this as why her partnership with Jason has been so successful – “it’s allowing him to do what he’s good at and allowing me to do what I’m good at and what I was born to do.”

When faced with a challenging or frustrating situation, Brenda turns to the Seven Laws for guidance. These laws ground her and provide her with the necessary teachings and tools to look at the situation from a place of understanding and forgiveness, which, in turn, allows her to focus on the positive and drown out the negative chatter.

When a situation calls for change, Brenda turns to her teachings, particularly that it can take seven generations for change. This teaching has helped her develop a certain level of patience. As she puts it, it takes time for a change, and these teachings have helped her realize this. She points to a quote that an Elder once told her: “A leader is never thanked till long after you’re gone.”

People will recognize your efforts so long as you are doing things from the heart and treating people with respect.

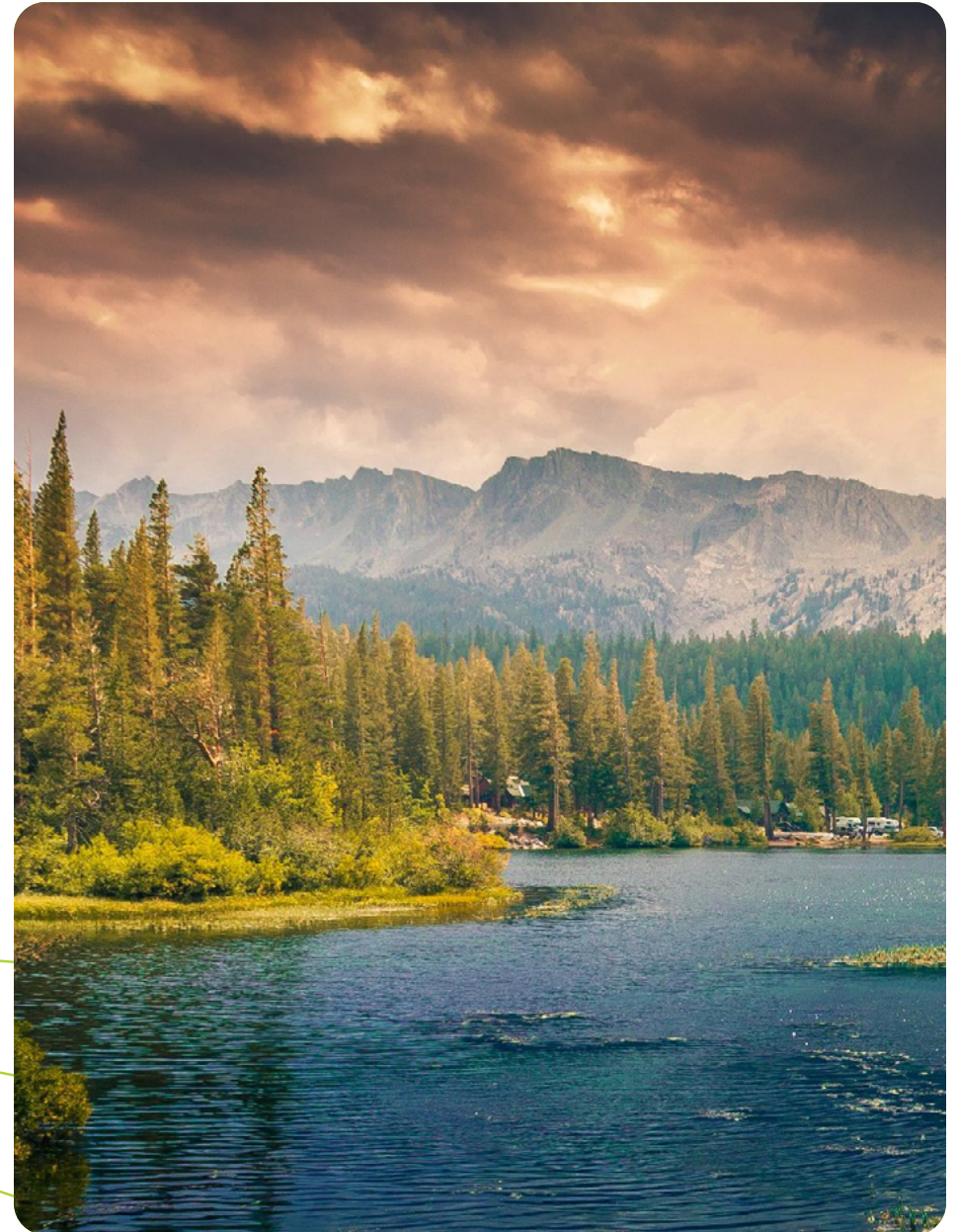
Combining Indigenous Values and Modern Business

Combining Indigenous Values and Modern Business

Brenda is fortunate to have her traditional teachings to turn to when needed and can bring these teachings with her into the modern business world. She has noticed a shift in mainstream management styles, from a more militant and coaching style to a more servant-type leadership role that is trending across the business world.

For Brenda, she recognizes that this is not a new concept within her culture as leaders have been servant leaders since time immemorial – leaders that work for their employees, as opposed to the person who gives orders and directs people on what to do.

It is important to get to know your culture, understand its values and teachings, and incorporate them into your business. This is particularly necessary in an age where consumers can turn to Google to learn more about what your business stands for. Consumers look to businesses like Patagonia to set an example. Brenda believes that this shift has come because businesses are incorporating more Indigenous teachings and culture into their business practices.



Bentwood Products

It is important to recognize that Bentwood Skateboards is the first Indigenous-owned skateboarding brand in Canada and internationally. Competing in an industry dominated by large, deeply entrenched American brands is difficult. However, Bentwood separates itself by remaining true to its roots. They have worked with a Métis designer, [JP Langlois](#), and have used his art to design their skateboards. Given the importance of contributing to the Indigenous economy and creating opportunities for other Indigenous entrepreneurs, it was important for Bentwood to showcase his art and provide a platform for further exposure to his work.

While they value including traditional artwork in their designs, Bentwood understands the need to cater to their core demographic — young people. To this end, they sought feedback from their younger customers, resulting in their decision to move away from the traditional Indigenous colourways (red, black, and yellow) and incorporate new colours, such as pink, blue, and green, into their designs.

Having respect and understanding of your core demographic while understanding that they may have different tastes was an important takeaway for Brenda.

“Respecting the youth and hearing them and respecting — showing them respect — by actually doing what they ask and not necessarily doing what I want.”





The Impact of Bentwood Skateboards

For Brenda and Jason, the impact that Bentwood has had on communities is unparalleled, particularly within First Nations communities. At large, the skateboard community is very welcoming so Indigenous youth have felt very welcomed amongst the larger community. Brenda and Jason recognize that there is an emergence of skateboarding amongst Indigenous communities. As a result, they have organized an Indigenous-hosted pro skateboarding event in Vancouver, which they credit as a tool to help heal their communities. In light of the tragic discovery of children's unmarked graves at the Kamloops residential school and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brenda and Jason felt that the event was successful in alleviating some of the stressors that may have arisen from these tragedies.

Both acknowledge that skateboarding is a way for youth to maintain a healthy lifestyle and credit its impact on the younger generation's health. They also feel that Bentwood provides social value to those who purchase their skateboards. Skateboarding is a relatively inexpensive sport. One can purchase a board for \$100, and skateboarders can skate wherever there is asphalt. In past generations, youth would have access to soccer and baseball fields, many of which are in disarray. These are big expenses for First Nations to repair, but offering another extra-curricular activity, such as skateboarding, can help youth stay on the right path and out of trouble.

As Brenda puts it: "For parents working, it's hard for them to get kids to activities. In my community, we don't have a bus service, so the kids can't get to soccer teams or baseball teams or hockey teams and that sort of thing. But with skateboarding, they can go, again, outside in their driveway."

Challenges

Challenges

There will always be challenges when starting and running a business. For Bentwood, these challenges are often compounded by objections from those within a highly competitive industry. For example, Brenda has faced criticism from those within the industry because she does not skateboard. For herself and many Indigenous business leaders, there is often a knowledge gap and a lack of expertise in certain business fields. However, these barriers can be overcome by partnering with those who have the knowledge and expertise to share. These partnerships can be crucial for Indigenous entrepreneurs to build capacity and be able to enter a sector without having a lot of experience.

Bentwood was able to navigate these challenges by leveraging Jason's industry connections to its advantage. For example, Jason has a long-standing relationship with Kevin Harris, a pioneer in the sport of skateboarding in Canada. Harris owns Canada's largest skateboard distribution centre and was a key ally in helping Bentwood launch. In turn, their partnership has had a profound impact on Harris himself. Harris has recognized the importance of partnering with Indigenous entrepreneurs and a need to further Truth and Reconciliation within Canada. Harris has looked to Bentwood as an opportunity to highlight successful Indigenous businesses within the industry and uses their example to draw attention to some of the challenges and obstacles that Indigenous businesses face but can ultimately overcome.



Like any business owner, the day-to-day running of your business can often be the biggest challenge or stressor. Whether it is keeping track of inventory, ensuring your website is up to date, completing paperwork, bookkeeping, and so on, these things take time and are often the monotonous part of the business that can get overlooked. These can be particularly challenging when trying to balance other life obligations, such as raising a family or a second job. But for Jason and Brenda, the thought of giving up has never crossed their minds.

“You must keep going, and once you get over that initial hump, things will start to fall into place.”

Challenges



Personal Challenges

Further objections from Brenda’s community have also been a challenge. For instance, there is often pushback because her business partner Jason is non-Indigenous, and Brenda herself does not “look Indigenous,” as she described it. To combat this, Brenda turns to her First Nation’s Seven Laws and recognizes that when you are doing something positive in business, you’re going to have people who are going to be jealous and tear you down. She tries to surround herself with people who can uplift and support her business and are:

“Part of the movement of trying to move our people forward in a positive way and trying to leave a legacy for future generations.”



Risks

Starting a business during the COVID-19 pandemic was extremely challenging and risky, as there were logistical and supply chain issues around the availability of skateboards. However, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise as Jason was able to leverage his existing industry connections, allowing Bentwood to launch while many companies were struggling to get access to skateboards. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is slowly coming to an end, the same challenges may arise in the future. A key factor to the success of Bentwood Skateboards has been their ability to use their connections to their advantage and seek out strategic partnerships with friends in the industry and other business contacts that they have established along the way.

Bentwood Skateboards emerged because of Jason’s passion for skateboarding and Brenda passion for business management. They have been able to run a successful business while pursuing those passions, and their business has had a great impact on the communities that they both represent.

The Skateboard Industry

Skateboarding has come a long way since its inception during the early 1900s when kids would attach roller skate wheels to scrap pieces of wood (Hawk, 1998). As technology changed and advanced, skateboards eventually became commercialized and more mainstream (Hawk, 1998). In California, during the 1960s, skateboarding was popularized by local surfers who were looking for a way to practice their surfing skills while the tide was low - known as sidewalk surfing (Hawk, 1998). As the sport began to spread and branch out to other participants, the need for skateboards grew exponentially, resulting in the development of the first commercial skateboards available for the public to buy. With these developments came the need to develop skateboard teams and competitions, with the first competition being held in Hermosa Beach, California in 1963 (Hawk, 1998). The sport gained popularity in the 1970s when skateboard parks and ramps were built in public spaces. At the same time, the equipment began to modernize — for example, the invention of the urethane wheel. Further booms during the 1990s centred around figures like Tony Hawk and his influence on popular culture through various media platforms, which saw the sport grow to levels not previously seen.

While the sport originated and grew out of California, it eventually spread around the globe and to Canada. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when skateboarding landed in Canada, but research indicates that it appeared on Canada's west coast, particularly in lower mainland British Columbia in the mid-1970s (Cheung, 2021).

Like the early days of skateboarding in California, the sport took off in Canada and saw its boom largely because of local talent like Kevin Harris. Harris holds world records, has skated with the Bones Brigade, launched his skateboard park, published Canada's first skateboarding publication, and opened a world-renowned skateboarding distribution company (which Bentwood has a partnership with) (Thor Media Designs, n.d.). Harris was instrumental in helping the sport grow in Canada and globally, along with other professional skateboarders.

Skateboarding is a global sport that recently made its debut in the 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan. For many within the sport, having skateboarding as an Olympic sport adds validity to skateboarding, which didn't exist in its early stages, where riders were looked at as being outcasts.

As the sport rose in popularity, so did the need for skateboards and apparel. It is estimated that the global skateboarding industry will be worth 2.4 billion dollars in 2025 (Tighe, 2020). Youth aged 6 to 17 make up the largest participants in the sport, and it is estimated that close to 3.25 million American youth participated in the sport in 2020 (Statista Research Department, 2022). Close to 500,000 Canadian youth hopped on a skateboard that same year (Armstrong, 2021).

With this growth and love for the sport has come increased competition among skateboard companies. A quick search on Google will find hundreds of skateboard companies available that sell decks and apparel. For a smaller company, it can be hard to differentiate itself from the larger brands that have brand and name recognition.

The Skateboard Industry

Top global brands such as Element Skateboards, Skate One, and Plan B, for example, make up about 25% of the global sales of skateboards (TheExpressWire, 2022). Furthermore, legacy brands, such as Santa Cruz and Powell Peralta, are still held in high regard amongst consumers. Smaller brands will need to distinguish themselves from larger companies by continuing to offer skateboard decks that are made from high-quality products

Overcoming the Obstacles

Brenda understands that people within her community are in various stages of their healing journey. Turning to her teachings and sharing the knowledge that has been lost over the years is vital:

“Our people’s way was we did get along very communally and supported one another. We lived together in communities, and everyone had gifts to bring. And those gifts were what made us strong as a community, and we supported one another.”

She recognizes how important her role is in setting a positive example for future generations and helping her people continue to grow. She strongly believes that it is important to stay grounded and to stick to your heart, follow your path, and do things not solely based on ego.

Wanting to Become an Entrepreneur?

Brenda and Jason agree that finding your passion and owning your passion are important. While those around you may have their ideas of how to navigate life, it’s okay to follow what you love and pursue those passions.

Money is important, but it should not be the focal point of your business pursuits, genuinely loving what you do will lead to a more fulfilling life.

For those interested in starting a business, getting an education is important. It is important to learn those skills and to make connections during that learning period. Networking is important, and using these connections can benefit your business as you never know who may be able to help. Having an elevator pitch and knowing how to talk to people are important skills to have. Not everyone is naturally gifted in these areas, but it is possible to learn and grow these skills. As Brenda put it: “Your network is your net worth.”

It’s also important to use the resources available to you, for example, Brenda points to organizations like the Canadian Council of Aboriginal Business (CCAB), which offer grants and loans and provide information on grants and loans available to Indigenous business owners from external partners. They also offer business courses for those who need to upgrade their skills.

Other organizations, like the Business Development Bank of Canada, offer loans to future entrepreneurs who may not be able to get capital or loans through traditional outlets. They also offer resources to those who need assistance with developing business and marketing plans. These are free resources available to those who wish to use them and are excellent tools for those who may not have any business experience.

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