

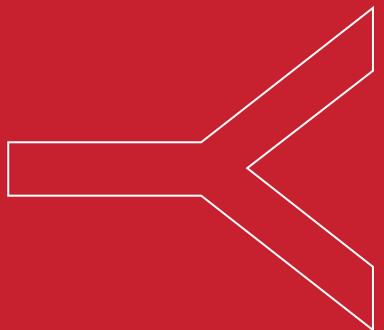
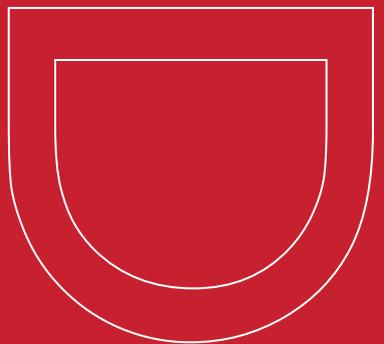
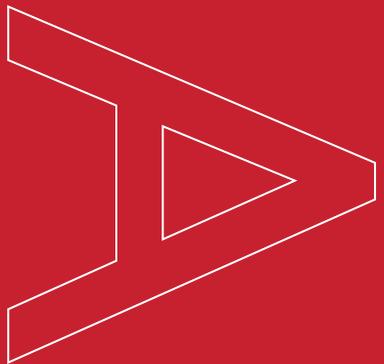
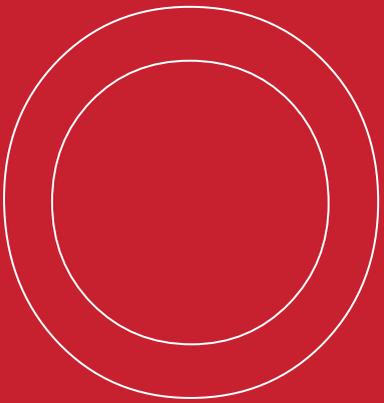
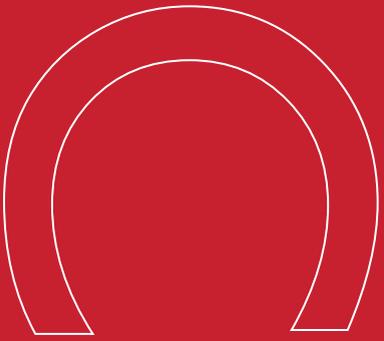
# INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

## Membertou Cape Breton

Gabrielle Donnelly

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP  
COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE  
ST. FRANCIS XAVIER UNIVERSITY

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### **About the Indigenous Women in Community Leadership program logo (front cover illustration)**

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it, you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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Gabrielle Donnelly

Thank you to Coady Institute staff and associates  
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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary, Membertou, Cape Breton (2011), by Catherine Martin.

# Membertou, Cape Breton

## Introduction

The community of Membertou has come a long way to be crowned the “Jewel of Cape Breton.” Once a small and thriving reserve in the heart of Sydney – a city perched on the northeast shores of Cape Breton Island – it was forcibly relocated from its premium lands on the harbour in the 1920s. Remnants of this event shaped the community for most of the 20th century and even 15 years ago the average resident of Sydney would not have had reason to set foot in the relocated community of Membertou. Today however, it is a key economic driver of the region, providing 700 jobs in peak season – close to half of them to non-Aboriginal people – and grossing annual revenues of \$75 million from band-owned and operated businesses.

This case study explores the process of Membertou’s transformation from a welfare reserve completely dependent on federal funding to one of Cape Breton’s economic bright spots. In delving into the community’s story, we will see that in order to transform itself, Membertou mobilized its most important asset - its people. The inherent skills and capabilities of its community members, combined with traditional Mi’kmaq values and forms of governance, created the necessary conditions for change. The community is now navigating the challenges and opportunities that have surfaced through this process, balancing tradition and growth as it moves forward.

## Context

The Mi’kmaq people of Membertou and their ancestors have lived in the area in and around Sydney, Cape Breton since before the arrival of the first Europeans. During the 1800s, Membertou band members became prosperous together with the non-aboriginal residents of Sydney as it experienced a steel and coal boom. However, the peaceful relationship enjoyed between these two communities changed as the band’s land (King’s Road reserve) became prime real estate for the growing industries around it. In the late 1800s, certain Sydney residents began to lobby for the relocation of the Mi’kmaq of Membertou, claiming they were in the way of development and were undesirable neighbours. After ongoing debate and court proceedings, a 1916 order of the Exchequer of Canada decreed that the Mi’kmaq of Membertou should be relocated (Membertou Heritage Park, 2008).

Through negotiations, the Membertou band avoided relocation to a number of inappropriate sites, and between 1926 and 1928, all households were moved to the current location on St. Peter’s Road. Just three kilometers from Sydney, Membertou was forgotten by its neighbours for most of the 20th century as it was placed “out of sight, in a wooded area.”

While the plight of the Mi’kmaq of Membertou appeared to fade in the consciousness of the residents of Sydney, the relocation made a more permanent mark on the people of Membertou. Dan Christmas, Senior Advisor and Community Liaison for Membertou, describes the pain the move inflicted on them, “Our members felt very strongly that [Sydney Harbour] was our home, this is where we’ve always been and we’re not moving. It is a sad history of this area that the residents didn’t want us. They wanted us far from town, not seen and not heard.”

Conditions on the reserve were challenging; as a federally-funded reserve now outside the boundaries of Sydney, the people of Membertou did not have access to municipal services such as electricity, water or sewer systems. Overcoming the often difficult conditions within the community required a collective effort. Sister Dorothy Moore, a Mi'kmaq educator and human rights advocate, fondly remembers after a snowstorm how the men would be called to a Pe'lalik – which means “working together” in Mi'kmaq – to dig out the roads by hand. Their ingenuity, adaptability and willingness to work together were valuable assets to the community. Despite the commitment of the people to build and maintain the community, full dependency on the federal government for financial support had resulted in a welfare reserve with high unemployment and poverty.

With reduced economic opportunity at the new location, community members survived by learning trades and working off the reserve. However, Membertou began to lose its youth to opportunities elsewhere because there was so little to keep them on the land. Some young men made their way to Manhattan to work as “sky walkers”, the men who helped build the city's early skyscrapers.

In 1994, Membertou hit financial rock bottom, registering a \$1-million deficit on an operating budget of only \$4-million, almost all of it federal funding. With payroll and social services payments in jeopardy, something had to be done. The stress of being a welfare reserve was detrimental to the community; in Chief Terrance Paul's words, “not a good way for any community to live.” Looking back, Dan Christmas has compassion for reserves that are still dependent on government handouts. “I feel sorry for communities who think that the only way to get by in this world is to rely on government. If you rely solely on government, in my mind, that's a formula for poverty.”

With the potential collapse of Membertou, the motivation to change was born. Rebuilding from rock bottom, the people of Membertou created a community that is a primary economic hub in the region. Ironically, Membertou is once again in the centre of the Regional Municipality of Sydney due to the growth of the city and surrounding area. As Dan Christmas expressed, “We've become more prosperous and independent – where we were in the early 1900s.”

## Themes

Following the financial crisis in 1994, Membertou's current leader, Chief Terrance Paul (Chief Terry), was unable to avoid the grim financial reality faced by the community. He affirmed a mission to turn Membertou's fortunes around while ensuring that indigenous forms of knowledge, inclusive governance, consensus and sustainability guided the process.

### *People: the Primary Asset*

Chief Terry took a hard look at the situation in Membertou, “We didn't have the right people working for us. We didn't have people who were well educated.” He believed it was crucial for people who had these qualities to return home and lead the community towards prosperity. And back they came; in the late 1990s, Membertou witnessed the return of educated professionals from New Brunswick, British Columbia, Ontario and overseas. Notably, Bernd Christmas, a corporate lawyer in Toronto took a significant pay cut to become CEO of the Band and steer Membertou towards financial health. There were also health directors, education directors, financial managers. “That

gave us the critical mass, the leadership, the experience and the talent to be able to take the community and go forward.”

Further, many of the educated and talented professionals who came home were young adults who were attracted by the proximity to the college and university in the area, providing them with educational opportunities to build their future. Membertou’s location as an urban reserve, and the opportunity to work in and contribute to a community with vision and leadership were also important factors in their return.

Dan Christmas describes the vision that sparked this opportunity “We recognized that the best resource we had was people, people, people.”

## *Financial Sustainability*

The necessary next step – once the human capital was established – was to stop the financial bleeding and rebuild the economy. It was clear that the status quo could not continue and that living within their reduced means was necessary if the people of Membertou were going to improve their situation. However, it was not easy to live within these new limitations. Dan Christmas describes those early years as “very, very painful... people in the community were saying, this is terrible, it is too much.” But, the Council persevered with the leadership and know-how of Bernd Christmas, and by 2000 the band was in the black with a balanced budget.

The second financial step, following the balancing of the books, was to establish an economic base for the community. Through inclusive decision-making processes, two economic development sectors were identified as good starting points by the community; gaming and fishing industries.

A successful gaming negotiation with the Province of Nova Scotia led to a significant revenue stream that was needed to wean the community off of federal funding. According to Dan Christmas “The original idea [for gaming] was defeated in the community when it was built on a private entrepreneur model where the profits would go to the individual. We changed this and now the five different gaming buildings are all owned by the community where the profits go to the community.” Over 90% of the gaming customers are from outside the community and bring in significant revenue. Additional social innovations were implemented to respond to community concerns about social ills that might result from the gaming industry and the influx of tourists.

The potential for establishing a successful fishing industry was bolstered by the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision in the Marshall constitutional challenge recognizing First Nations’ hereditary fishing rights. Membertou was able to start a fishery that today boasts a fleet of seven vessels (Hanes, 2008). According to Dan Christmas “From 2000-2001, we began the process of developing a fleet of vessels here in Membertou, buying licenses, buying a lot of gear, training a lot of fishermen from the community. And over the years we’ve developed significant revenues and employment and a lot of experience and know-how about the fishing industry.”

While these economic initiatives have provided the revenue crucial to the success of the community, the symbol of renewed Membertou prosperity is the Trade and Convention Centre. Opened in 2004, it is a \$7.2 million, 47,000 square foot facility that caters to events, conferences and concerts. A grand structure, with a graceful dream catcher in view upon entering, it is attracting a host of visitors as well as wealth to the area. With majestic views and fine dining, it fittingly represents

the Membertou First Nation. Chief Terry has been pleased with how Cape Breton and surrounding places are accepting the facility and using it. “We didn’t realize how important it would be and how much people would accept the facility.” Again, Membertou’s urban location, and renewed access to needed services and infrastructure, has made this kind of project viable.

These business successes are not the only achievements that mark Membertou’s success. In January 2002, Membertou received official notice that it had attained International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9000 certification, the first Aboriginal government in the world to become ISO certified. Membertou has since helped other First Nations do the same (Membertou Community, 2011), and is now poised for further growth in a variety of industries including offshore oil and gas, aerospace, geomatics, consulting, environmental cleanup, real estate and information technology (Hanes, 2008). To pursue and support business opportunities outside the reserve, Membertou established its corporate headquarters in Halifax in 2000.

Entrepreneurship is also an important factor in the development of a vibrant Membertou business community. With limited land available, the band came up with the idea of a Street Mall – the “Membertou Business Centre” and brought in some anchor tenants. Dan Christmas explains the importance of creating a business environment for entrepreneurs: “All the businesses in the Business Park are owned by the community, and over the last 10 years, we developed an economic base here in Membertou. Now we are attracting thousands of people every day to Membertou. This has given the opportunity for small business owners here in the community a chance to develop and grow their own businesses....But it’s primarily for entrepreneurs in the community, to give them the opportunity and the space to open their small business.”

With all of this growth, Membertou has been able to improve the quality of life for the community through the creation of jobs, improved infrastructure, housing developments, and support to businesses. Further, the Membertou band contributes over half a million dollars a year to charities. According to Dan Christmas “We employ a lot of people for the municipality. We contribute heavily to the economic success of this part of Cape Breton, and I think we’ve become one of the economic drivers of this area.”

## ***Governance and Traditional Values***

The traditional Mi’kmaq values of consensus, fairness and collective good constitute an important compass for the leadership and governance of the community. These values have laid a strong and lasting foundation, and serve as a model for community building. According to Dan Christmas, “Traditional Mi’kmaq leadership was always very inclusive, always involving everyone, not autocratic but persuasive...as much as possible about trying to find a consensus.”

Chief Terry’s leadership exemplifies many of these principles. He believes in building the community through consensual decision-making and transparency, and his approach has been shaped by a commitment to fairness and honesty. According to Dan, “Terry is able to achieve consensus. It is a unique aspect of leadership that Aboriginal peoples have to share with others... When you want to make decisions you want to make sure you have everyone involved and as much as possible you try to find a consensus that everyone could agree upon, and I think Chief Terry does that remarkably well.... He is able to achieve that consensus in difficult times and at the end of the day all of us are going in the same direction and are grateful that we are moving in that same direction.”

The band council prides itself on striving to do what is best for the community, taking priority over individuals or families. This emphasis on collective fairness has cultivated a real sense of trust in the community and a confidence in its leadership. Dan continues “I think that has played a huge role in our community’s confidence in their leadership. They know that we are not there for picking favorites or are out for anything for any personal gain. We really want to exemplify that we are there for the community and we want to do things that are community first and looking out for the collective good.”

And this commitment to fairness starts at the top. As Dan notes, “Chief Terry is all about doing things the right way.... He is very, very fair with people, no matter who they are in the community... We don’t always agree but at least when we disagree we do it in a respectful way. We make sure that we listen to people... I often think that we are very fortunate but that leadership style taps into a lot of traditional values. There is an underlying reservoir of Mi’kmaq values about how you treat people and how you do business.”

## Challenges for the Future

The most significant pressures that the community faces today are the challenges that accompany accelerated growth. The population of Membertou has grown from 300 to 1,200 people in 20 years. In terms of home construction, these numbers translate into 274 homes being built in the past 15 years. The questions that are most challenging relate to how Membertou will be able to deliver programs and services, making opportunities available to small businesses and creating jobs. For Dan Christmas, “growth is our biggest challenge in Membertou and not easy when you’re growing fast” and he explains “Our land base is very, very limited, so it’s been a real challenge to manage the growth through the community, not only in terms of size but also how we continue to deliver all these programs and services. Do we continue to make opportunities available for small businesses or for jobs or employment or training?”

As we will see in the case study “Women of Membertou” that explores women and the role of education, another challenge for Membertou is the inevitable loss of culture that can follow in the wake of growth, and some of the ways in which traditional practices can be cultivated for future generations.

## Conclusion

Membertou is a story of rags to riches. The strategies that made this happen leverage people assets and combine contemporary business practices with Aboriginal knowledge and values. It is a bright example of a First Nation community forging a new path, moving from dependency to resilience, and to a role of leadership in their region.

Dan Christmas sums up the strengths of Membertou with these words: “It’s all about adaptive strategies. We are able to adapt to any environment, no matter what it is. It is a part of who we are as people. I continue to be amazed by our ingenuity, our determination, our wealth – we can practically adapt to anything!”

The leadership and development of governance based on consensus, fairness and working for the collective good have all contributed to the success of the past 20 years. The identification of Membertou’s assets including the people, natural resources such as the fishing industry, and entrepreneurial spirit of community members, have contributed to the success.

The growth and development have not only prospered the Membertou community, but also the surrounding areas of Sydney and Cape Breton. Perhaps more importantly, Membertou’s success story has changed the misconceptions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike about this Mi’kmaq community, and has inspired communities across Canada and around the world to rethink their situation and their own potential.

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## Additional Resources

- Band / Aboriginal Organization Operated Enterprise of the Year: Unama'ki Benefits Office <http://www.ulnooweg.ca/awards2010.php>
- “Making the Indian Act irrelevant”: Membertou’s journey towards self-government [http://www.fngovernance.org/news/membertou\\_0310.htm](http://www.fngovernance.org/news/membertou_0310.htm)
- Membertou Corporate Website <http://www.membertoucorporate.com/>
- Mi'kmaq Gas and Convenience <http://www.ulnooweg.ca/awards2006.php>
- NCFNG Governance Toolkit: Best Practices, Accountability and Reporting [http://www.fngovernance.org/toolkit/AR\\_Membertou.htm](http://www.fngovernance.org/toolkit/AR_Membertou.htm)
- Provincial Business Nova Scotia Robin Googoo <http://www.ulnooweg.ca/media/flv/Robin%20Googoo.flv>



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