



## NEIL OKABE

### *Simoogit K'oom, Ganhada Waap K'oom*

This bio depicts the changes we in the north have had to adopt and includes focussed training and educational change most have had to endure in order to thrive and survive.

Born in Prince Rupert General Hospital to parents who for almost their entire working life was spent employed within the commercial fishing industry. At the age of six our family relocated to North Pacific Cannery where fishing and cannery work was not only the norm, but was a meaningful opportunity to earn a respectable income.

At a young age I fished with my father until I was given a chance to rent a decrepit old wooden gillnetter from the Company. As this was not only seasonal employment it was also a huge gamble where there was no guaranteed income, you earned what you delivered.

My father was a shipwright, and my brothers as did I also became shipwrights. Over the years I also learned shipyard management and was fortunate to manage a repair facility (Cassiar Cannery) where we serviced a fleet of 54 gillnetters for Gitxsan Industries. In 1989 after experiencing off season work shortage I moved to Vancouver and was hired to manage a repair facility for the Musqueam Indian Band.

I later went on to manage the Southern Loan Portfolio for the Native Fishing Association followed by six years creating and managing a Development Corporation for a Nisga'a entity.

Years of hands-on carpentry work and project management in the construction industry followed.

Today I am forever grateful to be given the opportunity to work for Kitsumkalum as the housing coordinator, to wherever possible assist the community in addressing its many housing needs from renovation or upgrade to new residential housing.

The housing shortfalls that I have witnessed and experience daily includes a lacking repair budget for homeowner's who simply cannot afford repairs of any kind, the result is that a small deficiency then becomes a major problem where now a major renovation must be prepared and submitted with no assurances for success.

The other shortfall occurs within the elder community, almost all elders live on a fixed income and from time-to-time they need help. It is time that Kitsumkalum looks to create two funding programs; one for the elder community to address small basic household repairs and maintenance, and the second would be to create a repair and maintenance assistance program for homeowners whose annual income does allow for basic repairs and maintenance.

Economic Development can be a huge stepping stone and many First Nation Bands have and continue to capitalize. Kitsumkalum has invested in many promising ventures including: the former Nechako Northcoast site and the Kasiks Wilderness Lodge. Both of these investments have humongous potential; however, Kitsumkalum must continue to aggressively advance those developments in order to achieve maximum success and a return in investment would be a good starting point.

Education and training is the path forward to successful employment. Ensuring that Kitsumkalum members receive focussed training and education is important so that each member who has been trained is both prepared and eager to join the workforce for the long-term.

As one who has been given the honor to hold and wear a Simoogit name has been something that was never imagined. Having lived off-reserve for the majority of my life has brought challenges in learning, understanding and practicing the culture of our ancestors, however as a member of the Kitsumkalum Indian Band I accept this role and will continue to promote and participate in cultural activities to ensure we continue to practice and grow our culture proudly.

Lastly if elected to Kitsumkalum Council I will work diligently yet responsibly to ensure our Nation and our people are provided every opportunity for success.

