



CATALYST IN ACTION

Darrell Brown



by Indigenous Clean Energy
Photos submitted by Darrell Brown

"It's about protecting the land and caring for the health of the people that live on the land."

Darrell Brown's business ambitions have always been centered around serving Indigenous communities. Darrell is a Cree entrepreneur based in Treaty 1 territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is the founder of [Kisik Commercial Furniture](#) and [Kisik Clean Energy](#); Kisik is Cree for sky.

Darrell's journey of entrepreneurship began in his early twenties when he used his savings to buy his first business. Darrell learned many lessons about how to own and operate a business, but he admits that his first attempt at business ownership wasn't an overwhelming success; after managing DB Amusements for four years, he sold it for only half the price he bought it for. However, he was dedicated to learning more about business operations and he returned to school, where he received an advanced diploma in international business from Red River College in Winnipeg.

PROFILE

Equipped with his education and a supportive mentor, Darrell's second attempt at business ownership was much more successful. In 2003, he founded Kisik Commercial Furniture, which supplies and installs commercial interiors for governments, private corporations, and Indigenous communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Northwestern Ontario. The company is a proud member of the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce and received a certificate for the Climate Smart program in 2019, which is a program for businesses committed to taking action on climate change and reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. After over ten years with Kisik Commercial Furniture, Darrell's journey in clean energy commenced with a presentation from Chris Henderson, executive director of Indigenous Clean Energy (ICE). In 2013, Darrell attended an Indigenous mining conference where he saw Chris delivering a presentation about his concept of an Indigenous-led clean energy learning and capacity-building program: 20/20 Catalysts. Darrell was fascinated and eager to participate. "I hounded Chris for three years after that, telling him that I wanted to be in the first cohort," he says. In 2016, when ICE announced the launch of the 20/20 Catalyst program, Darrell seized the opportunity.

Although he loved his commercial furniture business, his motivations for clean energy were rooted in a drive to help Indigenous communities across Canada.

"Renewable energy is meaningful. I knew that First Nations and other Indigenous communities were struggling with their power supplies and rates, whether it was diesel or on-grid. They needed help. They needed guidance. They knew that they needed to get into the energy game to offset their costs and emissions," he says.

As a 2016 Catalyst, Darrell reflects that his favourite part of the program was the three week-long on-sites.

"I remember there was well-layered support for the Catalysts. We were joined by personal coaches, mentors, faculty, and industry experts," Darrell says.

"We did a lot of learning in the classroom, but we also went out on the land and toured other Indigenous renewable energy projects that are up and running. We got to touch everything and talk to the owners and the people that developed these projects. Those were the biggest impacts that I experienced from the program."

After graduating from the 20/20 Catalyst program, Darrell worked as a clean energy advisor for Lumos Energy; he assisted an off-grid First Nation to integrate solar energy and reduce their diesel dependence. For Darrell, his renewable energy goals are rooted in traditional beliefs. **"It's about protecting the land and caring for the health of the people that live on the land. It's important for any First Nation to care for their land, which is often limited in land area mass because their reserves are so small. Their traditional lands are a lot bigger, but when it comes to on-reserve land for First Nations, they understand that carbon-based fuels are not good for them, the environment, the earth, or the sky,"** he says.



2016 Catalysts cohort visiting Dokis First Nation.

PROFILE

Although Darrell enjoyed working for Lumos Energy, he recognized that in order to create the greatest impacts for First Nations communities, he needed to have his own renewable energy company. Since he already had a holding company with Kisik Commercial Furniture, he opened Kisik Clean Energy under the same brand. Darrell navigated the initial challenges of opening a business, such as building a brand, getting insurance, and creating a website, but the process of creating his clean energy business was much easier than past endeavours.



Darrell Brown with fellow 2016 Catalysts at the very first 20/20 Catalysts program onsite in Wakefield, QC.

“ There's an investment in the start-up of your company, but I felt good because I already had a network. I already knew the need was there. It was just a matter of making connections to potential clients and seeing if they were interested. **”**

At Kisik Clean Energy, Darrell and his team serve the regions of northern Manitoba and northwestern Ontario. They are often hired by utilities or other firms to conduct consultations with Indigenous communities. However, many of his clients are off-diesel First Nations, who contract Kisik Clean Energy to design, construct, and commission a renewable energy project in their communities. His role is to oversee the development of the renewable energy project, understand the community, and protect them and their rights. He then hires and partners with external advisors to assist him with financial account management, legal contracts, feasibility studies, and procurement.



Indigenous Clean Energy Board of Directors with Ambassador David L. Cohen at the 2022 ICE Gathering.

PROFILE

Some of his projects to date, include the Gull Bay First Nations microgrid project, where Darrell worked as a junior project advisor for Kiashke Zaaging Anishinaabek - Gull Bay First Nation, a remote Ojibway Nation located on the western shores of Lake Nipigon. The Nation's microgrid project is Canada's first fully-integrated remote renewable energy-storage microgrid, which combines solar photovoltaic power, battery energy storage, and a microgrid controller connecting to the existing Hydro One Remotes diesel generating station. The microgrid provides clean energy to the community and off-sets approximately 110,000 liters or 25% of diesel fuel a year.

Darrell became involved with Gull Bay First Nation during the early stages of negotiation and engagement. "Gull Bay was told by their utility that they're never going to get on the grid. The chief and council knew that they wanted to integrate renewables and they saw an opportunity to own assets, drive revenue, and create employment," he says. The project has recieved national recognition and Darrell is confident that the microgrid is one more step towards sovereignty for the community.



Geotechnical drilling of bedrock for wind tower mounting. Photo owned by SDFN courtesy of Kisik Clean Energy.

Currently, Kisik Clean Energy is working with Sayisi Dene First Nation, a remote diesel-dependent community of 350 people in northern Manitoba. The community burns 600,000 litres of diesel every year, but they plan to offset 60 per cent of their annual consumption with a combination of wind turbines, solar panels, microgrids, and battery storage. Darrell and his team have recently completed the geotechnical investigation and topographic survey for the study of renewable energy integration in the Nation.



Aerial view of diesel plant and tank farm in Sayisi Dene First Nation. Photo owned by SDFN courtesy of Kisik Clean Energy.



Community engagement and renewable energy bingo with students at Sayisi Dene First Nation. Photo owned by SDFN courtesy of Kisik Clean Energy.

PROFILE

In addition to managing his two companies, Kisik Clean Energy and Kisik Commercial Furniture, Darrell has received accreditations for corporate governance, including a Certificate of Indigenous Leadership, Governance and Management Excellence from the Banff Centre and a designation of ICD.D from the Institute of Corporate Directors under the Directors Education Program. In 2019, he was elected as the Board Chair of Indigenous Clean Energy (ICE). Darrell believes that **“governance is the backstop of any good corporation.** Of course, you trust your managers and your senior team, which is in the operations side, but strong governance allows you to listen to what the market and your membership are calling for.”

Darrell hopes to inspire and uplift other Indigenous entrepreneurs in the clean energy space. His first piece of advice for Indigenous youth is to get a mentor. Darrell has had a business mentor for the past 20 years and he serves as a mentor for ICE through Generation Power. **“Mentorship goes a quite a long way in preparing you for your business launch and your business growth. You have to surround yourself with brilliant people that you can draw on for advice and for support. It's important to have a good foundational support from your family, your friends, and then also from your professional network.”**

Darrell works hard and puts in countless additional hours to actively maintain both of his companies. Although his journey of entrepreneurship has not been linear, he has persevered through the roadblocks and challenges in order to serve Indigenous individuals and communities. He advises Indigenous youth to seek out learning opportunities to improve themselves, because it may lead you one step closer to your goals.

The **20/20 Catalysts Program** is an award-winning interactive three-month program that connects First Nations, Inuit and Métis Catalysts to a network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Clean Energy Project Mentors and Coaching Specialists involved in clean energy project development – including: energy efficiency, solar, wind, hydro, biomass, and geothermal, both on and off-grid.

Learn more at: www.indigenouscleanenergy.com

