

**Parliament Hill Panelist:  
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

**Mr. Don Kelly**

**Parliamentary Restaurant, Parliament Hill  
Ottawa**

**May 6, 2010**

*[Traditional Introduction]*

I want to thank my fellow panelists, the Honourable Senator and her staff for inviting me here. And, most of all, I want to thank all of you for being here.

I started by introducing myself in my traditional language of Ojibway. I gave my traditional names, my community (the Ojibways of Onigaming, in northwestern Ontario) and my Clan, which is Lynx Clan.

It is a little intimidating being here with our other distinguished guests.

But I have been able to find balance in my professional life which has allowed me to pursue a number of professional opportunities. They may seem unrelated but to me it's all about "communicating".

One of the jobs I do is to serve as a Strategic Communications Advisor to the Assembly of First Nations and the National Chief, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo. The AFN is the national organization representing First Nations people in Canada (sometimes called North American Indians or Native Canadians).

"Communications" basically means a lot of media and public relations and communications strategy. I say that because I've told people I work in communications and they say: "Me too!? What kind of cell phones do you sell?"

What it really comes down to is: what are the important issues we want to raise and how do we raise them and build public support for them (that's the "proactive" side); and if something becomes an issue – because of media attention, let's say – how do we ensure our point of view is heard and understood? (that's the "reactive")

I do other work as well.

I currently host a TV show on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network called “Fish Out of Water”. Does anyone watch APTN?

It’s a fun show. I get to travel to different Aboriginal communities – First Nations, Métis and Inuit – across North America and I learn – or, more often - *try* to learn - the traditional skills of the Aboriginal people in that territory.

The twist is, I am not Survivor Man. I am “Are you okay, man”? “Is Anything Broken, Man”? Truth is - I’m an urban Indian. I’ve spent most of my life in the city. I don’t even like camping. For me, “roughing it” means I don’t have my hair dryer in the morning. One of the Elders we worked with called me a “Concrete Indian”, which I thought meant that I was solid, firm, strong...and he said “No – it means your feet have touched nothing but concrete!”

The show is a lot of fun and I’ve been able to do some wild things (literally). I got to handle rattle snakes with the Osoyoos Indians in southern BC. I got to do a “quick catch” by jumping on the back of an alligator with the Seminoles in Florida. I got to get into a pen full of full grown, wild buffalo in Blackfoot territory in Alberta. And I got to go surfing with the Polynesians in Hawaii. Hey, I get to have a little fun!

The show really captures the way Aboriginal people teach and learn.

Senator Poy spoke to “learning by living”. In some ways, that is how we taught and learned.

Traditionally, we didn’t sit our children down and make them read a few chapters and take a test before they did something. We teach and learn by doing. And when you learn by doing, you make mistakes. And when you make a mistake people don’t get mad. We laugh. We laugh with each other and at each other. The messing up is part of the fun and part of the process.

In fact, the slogan for Fish Out of Water is: “No Don, honestly – we’re laughing *with* you.”

I’m glad when people say they watch it because I like people seeing Aboriginal people having fun, because humour is a big part of our culture.

And I also like the fact that people see us doing the skills that weren't just done a hundred years ago – these are things people are still doing. It's who we are.

I got into hosting not because I did any acting. I got into it through stand-up comedy. I've been doing it for more than a decade now and I've been lucky enough to do my own specials on CTV and CBC, festivals, work the clubs theatres across North America.

What drew me to stand-up comedy was the way it connected people. I remember, as a child, listening to a Bill Cosby record at my Uncle's house in Fort Frances, Ontario. And the whole family was laughing – me, my Mom and Dad, the Aunts and Uncles, the grandparents – everyone. And it struck me that humour is powerful. It brings people together from all ages and backgrounds. No matter how different we are, we can connect through humour. That is a powerful communications device.

So I'd always wanted to try stand-up comedy. And I admit it is a weird thing to want to do. When you look at people's biggest fears, the top two are always public speaking, and dying. And stand-up comedy has a wonderful way of combining both those fears into one big knot of anxiety.

But if you've ever thought of trying it, try it! And don't worry if you don't do well your first time, or your tenth time or your one hundredth time. The only way to get better is to get up and do it.

Very few people are good their first time out. Some of your favourite comedians struggled for years. You're just seeing the end product. There are very few "naturals", but if you keep at it, people will eventually think you're a "natural". Everyone needs time to discover their voice and who they are up there.

I love it. It's fun to get up in front of a crowd and get a room full of strangers laughing together. On a good night, getting paid is a bonus. But believe me, there are nights when you think: "at least I'm getting paid for this."

I'm always surprised there aren't more Native comedians because there are so many funny Native people. If there's one stereotype about us that's true, it's that Native people are funny.

I think the humour has always been there. A lot of our traditional stories and legends are hilarious, especially the Trickster stories. We called him “Nanaboozhoo”, a mischievous, sometimes vain, playful spirit that loves playing tricks and making people look silly, to bring them back down to earth. And by the same token, any time he’s feeling a little too smug or clever, he splats right into the mud (or worse!).

The moral is: be proud of yourself, but don’t think you’re better than everybody else; we all need to rely on each other to work together as a community.

Humour helps us communicate, and communication helps us understand each other.

And that’s important, now more than ever.

Believe it or not, **you** are not typical Canadians. Typical Canadians are old. In the next few years more Canadians will be retiring and leaving the workforce than entering it. The exception is Aboriginal youth. Half our population is under the age of 25. And for all of you in the room, you’re going to be part of that generation. You’re going to be driving this country. You are the artists and entrepreneurs, the poets and politicians, the builders and business owners...and all of you – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – will be working side-by-side to keep this country strong.

So let’s reach out and get to know each other. Let’s learn our shared history, and how we learned to live together. Canada was not born in bullets and bloodshed. It was founded through peaceful agreements called Treaties that are based on sharing and respect. We should be proud of the Treaties.

Humour is not the be all and end all, but it can help us heal and help us bond. Someone once said that “rock and roll won’t solve your problems, but it lets you dance all over them.” Well, humour won’t solve our problems, but it let’s us laugh right through them.

And when we’re laughing together, we’re sharing. We will travel farther and faster when we travel together. And that’s no joke.

*Thank you/Meegwetch!*