

Friends United Centre

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KEMPT ROAD: Those behind a state-of-the-art, multi-purpose facility in the heart of Richmond County are trying to get the word out.

Rolf Bouman, founder/president of *Canadian Pioneer Estates Ltd.*, who manages the Friends United Centre in Kempt Road, is in the midst of a public relations blitz promoting the facility which features a concert space, art galleries, a large common room, meeting spaces, a cafeteria, spaces for artists to create, and dozens of smaller rooms.

One aspect of this publicity campaign involved hiring the services of former *ATV News* anchor Nancy Reagan, who first visited the centre five months ago. Working with *Mirror Image Media*, Reagan has been tasked with conducting interviews with the major supporters of Friends United, which will be posted on their Web site, as well as on social media.

Not viewing this project as just another job, Reagan is an enthusiastic supporter of the centre and its goal of building bridges with and among First Nations. She said the facility can become a template for other provinces to

copy.

"It's about connection," Reagan told *The Reporter*. "It's about the connection of First Nation artists to nature, it's about the connection of First Nations artists to each other, and enhancing that and building a network. It's about First Nations with the rest of the Canada."

Describing the strong feelings she felt upon visiting the centre for the first time and the potential she sees in it as an educational resource, Reagan said she is proud to tell this story.

"I'm excited to play a role in telling this story because I believe that this story needs to be shared," she said. "I think it's inspiring, important and I think that it's compelling, and Canadians need to know about this initiative and they need to know and understand why it's happening."

On March 5, former Premier and current Gaelic College president Rodney MacDonald and Senator Mary Coyle were interviewed for the project.

"Rodney has been part of this from day one," Bouman recalled, noting that MacDonald first toured the facility approximately nine years ago. "He loved the project, he joined right away. Rodney MacDonald was the first premier in all of Canada to bring his cabinet together with

First Nations Chiefs, besides he taught in Potlotek..."

Upon leaving the Coady International Institute, and before being appointed to the Canadian Senate, Coyle worked as a consultant for the centre, interviewing between 40-50 people.

"Right now, she's very happy in Ottawa telling the story about First Nations in Nova Scotia," Bouman noted.

Later, Regional Chief Morley Googoo and Steven Augustine, Hereditary Chief and vice-president of Cape Breton University, were also interviewed.

One of the motivations for this PR push is to continue to raise the profile of Canada's Indigenous population and its integral contributions to the Canadian fabric, Bouman said.

"First Nations should have a lot more recognition in North America and that is much of what this centre is all about, giving them more recognition, giving them a place they really deserve," Bouman explained. "We're trying to revive whatever is left here on the east coast, for culture, art, heritage, and it's working actually quite well. It took a lot of time because we had to build trust with everybody with the artists, with chiefs, with national chiefs, with premiers, Prime Ministers, you name it. But I think it's coming together quite nicely."



The stakeholders of the Friends United Convention Centre are promoting spaces like this for groups to use for meetings, conferences or seminars.



Photos by **Jake Boudrot**

The Friends United Centre in Kempt Road contains dozens of rooms of various sizes and uses, including this one which showcases Indigenous art and culture.

keeps building bridges

Aside from the fact that First Nations are the fastest growing communities in Canada, another idea guiding this profile-raising effort, comes from the tourism potential. Bouman said Canada has a rich history which the facility showcases.

"Why do North Americans go to Europe, and many will reply, 'we go to Europe to see cultures that are thousands of years old, castles and pyramids,' well it's the same thing here," Bouman explained. "In Canada, except for First Nations, we have nothing that's thousands of years old. If we can revive that, there's much strength, there's much wisdom in doing that."

Since Bouman immigrated from Germany to Canada in 1986, he has been working on eliminating prejudice and on focusing the world's attention on First Nations people. After researching for many years and working to ensure long-term funding, Bouman founded in 2009 what eventually became the Friends United initiative. The idea for the convention centre started not long after when Bouman and other land developers were looking to give back to the community and do something socially

responsible with their profits.

The initiative and the convention centre complex are funded and supported by the Bouman Group, which consists of Canadian Pioneer Estates, *Canec Land Developments Inc.*, *Kelly Robertson Consulting Inc.*, and *(Ad)Venture Canada Publishing Inc.*

It was constructed for the purpose of honouring all Indigenous North American peoples and celebrating their culture and heritage. Bouman said the name Friends United arose from a desire to end adversarial relationships and have First Nations, governments, communities, businesses, and organization all working together.

"We call this whole product 'Friends United' because before we had some people maybe competing on a certain level, now they work together, the artists especially, that was important to give them an understanding that it is very important to work together," Bouman stated.

Bouman noted the centre is unique in Canada because it has never received government funding, remains neutral in partisan politics, and continues to work with current and former politicians of all stripes.

"While there is politics and parties sometimes out there that have different interests, the one thing, I think, they all realize, and that's the important part, First Nations is a point where we can all work together and we can do a lot more," Bouman said. "It connects us all and it goes a lot further."

He said this is the only facility of this kind and scope in Canada.

"Even in Vancouver and Toronto, they don't have anything along those lines," Bouman stated.

In addition to constructing the centre, the land developers also started a publishing house where the profits go back to First Nations communities. Bouman said the land developers have also initiated a program where artists trade their work for land deeded to them by the developers.

Reagan added that another beautiful part of the story surrounds the business mentorship for artists.

"These artists are becoming entrepreneurs and Rolf is supporting them at every stage in their journey," Reagan noted. "It's not too good to be true."



Photos by **Jake Boudrot**

Pictured at the Friends United Convention Centre in Kempt Road on March 6 were (from the left): Nancy Reagan, Indigenous artist Jay Bell Redbird, and centre manager Rolf Bouman.



Friends United Convention Centre manager Rolf Bouman points to the sign for the "Friendship Room" during a tour of the Richmond County facility on March 6.