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News Online First

Friends United founder nominated among Top 25 Immigrants of Canada

By Strait Area Reporter - August 23, 2021



Friends United founder Rolf Bouman was nominated by former Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald to be among the Top 25 Immigrants of Canada for 2021. He recently made the final cut to be considered among 75 candidates across the country and three from Nova Scotia.

Bouman is only Cape Breton immigrant in the group and said the honour will give Friends United “much appreciated attention.”

“Now we are into the final voting for the next three or four weeks still. Then that voting will decide, to a large degree, who’s going to be one of those top immigrants of the 75,” he told *The Reporter*. “We all firmly believe that if people vote, they would recognize, number one, Friends United, and number two, Cape Breton.”

Immigrating in 1988 from Europe as a mechanic and farmer, Bouman began work in Nova Scotia as a labourer/welder and in silviculture. According to his submission, working in multiple jobs helped Bouman finance his education as an English-German translator. This led him to work for government, law firms and real estate brokers.

Bouman made the move into land development in 1990, securing a small bank loan to open the Nova Scotia-based company Canadian Pioneer Estates Ltd. As his efforts became successful, Bouman added companies to his Canadian corporate group such as CANEC Land Developments Inc., (Ad)Venture Canada Publishing Inc. and others, which helped attract more than \$170 million in foreign direct investment to Cape Breton.

Bouman then created Friends United, a philanthropic initiative to connect Indigenous art and culture with the world. Through Friends United, Bouman’s corporate group invested \$4 million, without any government support, to construct one of the largest Indigenous art and cultural centres in Canada. He works closely with embassies around the world to promote Canada, its values, especially with a focus on Indigenous peoples.

For the work with Friends United, Bouman was awarded the Paul Harris Fellowship Award by the Rotary Club, shortly before he became a Rotarian. He was also awarded the Strait Area Chamber of Commerce Cultural Award of Merit.

Because of the positive attention on Friends United, the Richmond County facility hosted a two-hour meeting last week with former Premier Stephen McNeil and German government officials.

“We talked for a long time, and we all agree that immigration is important,” Bouman said.

As Friends United continues to grow, Bouman said they are planning to host a grand opening in October. At the grand opening, Bouman said they plan to unveil two 500-year-old totem poles which were carved by British Columbia Indigenous artist Gerry Sheena.

“They’re working on other ones as we speak,” Bouman said of smaller totem poles that will be ready for October.

One of 43 artists involved with the facility, Sheena is working on a third totem pole to be situated in the lobby of the centre. He created other totem poles already on display in other parts of the centre.

Bouman had two 500-year-old red cedar logs (about 80 feet in length) shipped 6,000 kilometres from British Columbia for the project.

Sheena said the logs were cut into seven, 10-foot-long sections which were used to make a table, blocks to create masks, and the rest for totem poles which he hopes to finish by the summer, before he has to return to the west coast.

On a sad note, Bouman noted that another Friends United artist passed away recently, Gordon Fiddler.

“I am so grateful that we can display the legacy here of nine people who have passed away and are able to convey the stories of those First Nations friends through their art to our future generations,” he said.

Bouman added hopes that his recognition will raise awareness of all the positive outcomes from immigration.

“It shows to the rest of the world that Cape Breton is a very important focal point,” he added. “Immigration does work.”

To vote for Bouman, visit: <https://canadianimmigrant.ca/canadas-top-25-immigrants/vote>.

Strait Area Reporter



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