

CHARLES COFFEY, RBC FINANCIAL

Charles “Charlie” Coffey vividly remembers the day that he became a champion for Canada’s Aboriginal people. It was the day he met Phil Fontaine in Winnipeg in 1989. At the time, Mr. Fontaine was Grand Chief of the Manitoba Assembly of First Nations. Charlie Coffey was a Vice-President of what was then the Royal Bank of Canada.

“Your bank is no friend of ours,” Phil Fontaine said to Charlie Coffey, “because we can’t borrow, we can’t even cash cheques.”

“That meeting transformed my life,” says Coffey, “and the life of RBC Financial. It taught us that Aboriginal inclusion isn’t just good citizenship - it’s good business as well.”

Eight years later, Coffey was given the highest honour that an Aboriginal community can give a non-member. It made him a Honourary Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. And the man who put the Chief’s headdress on Charlie’s head? Phil Fontaine.

With Coffey’s guidance, RBC has become one of Canada’s outstanding companies in supporting Aboriginal advancement at every level: students, teachers, employees; business people, entrepreneurs and community builders.

RBC supports the educational achievement of youth through its Stay-In-School Program and the Aboriginal Student Awards Program. The bank works with Friendship Centres across Canada and supports a Youth Skills Development Program for Aboriginal Youth in trade and technical schools. Its Summer Employment Program provides summer jobs for Aboriginal students across the country. RBC also supports Canadian Executive Services Organization and provides funding for MBA students working on economic development projects in Aboriginal communities.

The bank now employs a number of Aboriginal banking managers in its commercial departments across the country and has seven branches and four agencies in Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

In 2004, Coffey received the Order of Canada. “He is a very kind, open, interested and genuine individual,” says Jaime Koebel, coordinator for education, language, culture and youth for the Métis National Council, who spoke at a recent retirement function for Coffey. “He is truly interested in seeing the successful development and growth of Aboriginal youth, even at a time when it wasn’t popular to be aboriginal.”

Advice of a Change Master:

“To my colleagues in other businesses -- the people who are experienced and knowledgeable - - those who’ve begun to see the business benefits of constructive relationships with Aboriginal people -- I would urge you to speak out. Talk to your peers. Share your experiences. Convince others they have a role to play and much to gain from building relationships with the First Peoples of Canada.”