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## New initiative seeks virtual mentors, crowd-funding support for First Nations business enthusiasts

By **Mustafa Eric - Ponoka News**  
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Following the success of a project encouraging business start-ups among the young people of Hobbema, a new initiative is aiming at expanding both the outreach of and support to the project with a view to reducing unemployment and creating more wealth on the reserve.

Under the first stage of the project, in less than two years, some 15 micro-businesses have been created with -- and run by -- aspiring young First Nations entrepreneurs from Hobbema, thanks to on reserve coaching in Samson Cree Nation, according to a press statement by the organizers of program.

Among the small businesses created were a soup-and-sandwich lunch delivery business, a hairdressing shop, a janitorial business, a commuter taxi service, auto detailing, a used furniture shop and many others, creating a direction and employment for young entrepreneurs on the Samson Cree First Nation reserve in central Alberta.

“Now the “Change it Up!” initiative is looking to scale up their success with the support of crowd-funding and “MentorNation,” a new program to enlist volunteer small business coaches across Canada to mentor their Aboriginal protégées through cyberspace,” said the press release.

Change it Up!, an initiative of non-profit Classroom Connections, is led by Heather MacTaggart, who spends two of every five weeks on the reserve, working on what she calls “the rock face of arguably Canada’s most destructive and intractable social and economic malady: the devastating shortage of economic opportunities for too many aboriginal people.”

MacTaggart: says of the young entrepreneurs; “They’re making the move from lives of often numbing boredom watching TV or just hanging out to a whole new life -- tapping their inner strengths, business plan in hand. They’re betting on themselves and they’re on the way to creating real futures when most really didn’t think they had one.”

According to Derek Bruno, Band Councillor at Samson Cree Nation and successful Alberta entrepreneur, the local youth unemployment rate is over 70%.

“There’s no silver bullet to all this. But it’s quite possible that part of the solution may be at hand in the entrepreneurial movement that Change it Up! Is tapping into,” Bruno said.

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