



Together

We All Can Succeed

My name is Justin Sky George; I am 34 years old and a proud member of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. I am one of many grandsons of the late Chief Dan George and Amy George.

My father Leonard George originates from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, which translates to “People of the Inlet,” the Burrard Inlet in North Vancouver, BC. My mother Susan (Edge) George is originally from London, England.

My traditional name is Qutsame, which my father has shared with me. I have been married to my loving wife Heidi for eight years and am the proud father of our daughter Sky Lynn-Eleanor George, 18 months; she is my new teacher in life. My family and this beautiful community, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, are my main passion and motivation.

The elders in this community and in many First Nation communities have endured so much. There has been so much misinformation and interpretation of our Nations, such as the many inferences in history books that our people were savages.

The missionaries came and enforced a new way of life and actually took children away from their Aboriginal homes and communities. In some instances children were beaten if they spoke their native language and adults were forbidden to gather and share songs or dance.



Justin and Heidi George, with daughter Sky, Grandpa Jack, and Grandma Pat

My father, who is in his mid-50s, was one of the last generations to experience the pains of residential school first-hand. He explains it as a time when it was not good to be a First Nation.

Mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuses hurt the identity and self-worth of many First Nations. Poverty, addictions, and a loss of identity were all a product of a cultural genocide. First Nations could serve in the army but they could not vote in a federal election.

I point out these facts only to educate and share what many of my elders have shared with me. Our Nation, prior to contact, was approximately 10,000 Tsleil-Waututh people. Today we have a membership of approximately 400 and growing.

I believe and have been taught by the elders of this community that it is important to recognize the past, but it is also important to grow from it and to heal from it. The Tsleil-Waututh Nation may be small in size but it has a large heart. We as a people recognize that today, we are living and making history and we are moving forward in a positive manner.

My father and many of my uncles, aunts, and elders were champion canoe-pullers. The dugout cedar canoes (war canoes) are raced throughout First Nation communities to celebrate the spirit and importance of the cedar canoe for Coast Salish First Nations. There are single-, double-, six-, and 11-paddle canoes, which are the highlight of a canoe race gathering. In the early 1960s, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation won many canoe championship titles.

The teachings around the canoe are as follows. Everyone paddles together. You paddle with one heart, one mind, and one spirit. You leave all negativity on the shore and you focus on the journey and the race

at hand. The pullers are dedicated to one another and committed to their training and to the success of the canoe.

It is with this in mind—the spirit of the canoe and our Nation’s journey into the future—that we continue forward.

Twenty years ago, we had very little in our community in the way of social, residential, and economic opportunity. We had limited staff, which included the Chief, the Council, and a social worker.

Opportunities were limited because of the limited resources available to our people. Approximately 13 years ago, the Nation formed a partnership to develop our lands. The result was Takaya Developments, an economic development company that is majority-owned by the Nation.

The goal was to create an economic base; we wanted to sell residential homes on 99-year leasehold reserve lands. Some questioned this and many doubted it could work. Today, however, we have developed multimillion-dollar projects and sold over 900 quality condominiums and townhouses in North Vancouver. We have built an 88-stall golf centre; we own an eco-tourism venture (Takaya Tours), which offers cultural canoe and kayak tours; we have a child daycare centre, an adult education centre, and a full-size gymnasium-cultural centre with an elders lounge.

Our administration has grown from a staff of four to a staff of approximately 44. We have a lands and resource department and an economic development department, public administration department, and a Human Resources department. Recently we purchased 800 acres of land up Indian Arm that would not have been at the Treaty Table. These lands allow us to build our forestry and fishery and they have tripled our land base.

These developments have coincided with a movement in our community to celebrate culture, to celebrate and feel good about who we are. For a long time our people suffered; our younger generation can only imagine how it was. Today we celebrate the endurance, strength, and vision of our elders, our Chiefs, Councillors, and our members.

Today we have hope and the elders have given us much, for they have given us a future. It is up to my generation and the generations to come to continue on in this journey and to continue to grow and build a better future for tomorrow, as our elders have done for us.

Most recently we have developed a relationship with the Royal Bank, at a local and national level. Candace Dennis, Gail Murray, Jay Leong, and Brian Williams have worked with our Nation to provide mortgage opportunities to on-reserve lands. For our community this is new ground. In the past we could only be eligible for low-income housing, which is limited in layout, design, and cost.

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Today the Royal Bank understands our vision and we understand theirs. Together we have built dream homes for 17 members, all of whom were pre-approved for their own mortgages under the guidelines of the Royal Bank and the Tsleil-Waututh Nation

Our future is today and our future is tomorrow. The elders in our community have given me this opportunity to own my own home and I want this for my daughter Sky and for all her cousins in our community . . . a future where there is opportunity, a future where you are not judged on how you look, but for the way you treat yourself and others.

I feel extremely blessed to have built my dream home on these beautiful lands. It was not long ago that I lived in an environment that is labelled poor—rich in love and support, but poor—according to the national average. One of my cousins used to tell people that the national sport on our reserve was throwing snowballs at cars, because we couldn’t afford any other sports. The quality of homes and the services was sub-par, compared to the national average.

As my father once said, “In the past we hunted with bows and arrows; they were the tools used for survival. Today, education, degrees, trades, and diplomas will aid in our survival. We also must work with and respect ourselves, our partners, and we must paddle together as one.”

When we do this, great things such as our new homes can be achieved. Together we all can succeed. ▲

