

MEET KELSEY PELEGRIN, POSTER CHILD FOR TOMORROW'S FOREST INDUSTRY WORKFORCE

By Hans Peter Meyer

Photo: Hans Peter Meyer



Kelsey Pelegrin (centre), an Aboriginal woman and a talented machine operator, is part of the new workforce the forest industry needs to attract.

Kelsey Pelegrin is the kind of employee the forest industry needs to attract. As a young aboriginal woman she's part of a demographic that could help meet the industry's labour market needs. She's also talented and ambitious, coming second in a class of 17 heavy equipment trainees.

But it wasn't talent or force of will alone that got Pelegrin into the operator's seat at K&L Contracting as soon as she graduated. She had some help with a targeted training program. It's this kind of support that others in the industry are hoping will lead to more jobs for First Nations men and women in the near future.

A Labour Force Crisis

The near future is where the industry is focused when it comes to recruitment. A recent study by the TLA underlines what most members already know: it's hard to find trained employees.

Anyone familiar with the industry knows how and why we've lost some of our best and brightest to other industries in the past decade. One of these is the perception that there's no future in the forest industry. The TLA study suggests otherwise: It's estimated that within 10 years attrition alone will create 5,000 jobs. If the super-cycle kicks in, the number could be a lot higher.

How to Fill the Gap?

One way to fill the gap is to work more closely with First Nations communities. Home to the youngest and fastest growing demographic in BC, these communities represent a wealth of raw talent. Additionally, many of these communities are located in remote parts of the coast—next door to forest industry operations. With strong geographical and family ties, there's the hope that First Nations workers will welcome the op-

portunity of working close to home.

Anna Celesta works with First Nations through Sto:lo Aboriginal Skills & Employment Training (SASET). "There's still a gap in awareness for First Nations' youth," she says. Like so many others, First Nations youth are generally not aware that forestry is on the 'upswing' as an employment opportunity. For those that do see the opportunity, SASET is there to help.

SASET: Helping Raw Talent Become Job-Ready Operators

Pelegrin says her interest in running machinery wasn't inspired by the opportunities in the forest industry. Instead, it was stories about excavator operators laying live pipelines. "They became my idols," she says. She signed up for a HEO program being offered at Seabird College in partnership with Thompson Rivers University. As a member of the Bridge

River Indian Band residing in the SASET catchment area, Pelegrin was eligible for funding to support her training.

The importance of SASET can't be overemphasized. K&L Contracting's Lincoln Douglas has commented that more than skills training is needed to transform the raw talent in First Nations communities into job-ready workers. Stepping into a non-Native working context can be very challenging for young men and women from First Nations communities. SASET helps, by finding the right "fit" for clients. Celesta says that "fit" is based on employability/life skills, training, labour market analysis, and individual's strengths and interests. "This helps individuals, whether they're status or non-status, on- or off-reserve successfully take the next steps on their career paths."

In Pelegrin's case, SASET helped her beat a significant funding challenge. It

also matched her passion to be an excavator operator with a program that gave her classroom time plus lots of hands-on, in-the-field experience with excavators, front-end loaders, dozers, graders, rock trucks, and backhoe. Louie Edwards, Pelegrin's supervisor at K&L Contracting, is impressed with the results.

"I can't say enough good things about her as a worker," Edwards says, "When I give her instructions, she visualizes the big picture on how it's supposed to look. She's very successful at whatever we throw at her."

Growing Demand, Shrinking Training Capacities

When it comes to transforming raw talent into job-ready worker, Kelsey Pelegrin is a success story that bodes well for the forest industry. But Celesta is cautious about being too optimistic. SASET has experienced financial cuts from the prov-

ince this year, and ASET agreements with the federal government have not seen a budget increase in 20 years. "We know there are labour force shortages and labour market opportunities in the forest industry," she says, "but limited funding on the training side is a challenge."

Pelegrin may be a poster child for the future of the forest industry, an example of the growing pool of young talent in First Nations communities. Organizations like SASET certainly have a record of helping these men and women become valuable employees. The question remains, can these organizations meet growing demand, given their limited capacities?

For contact information for the Aboriginal Skills & Education Training Services program (ASETS) in your area, visit www.tla.ca/training.

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