

QC: Jake Sinclair brings entrepreneurship and community together

Jake Sinclair hopes his success and passion for economic development paves the way for other Indigenous youth to become entrepreneurs.

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Jake Sinclair, owner of Anytime Fitness, inside the gym on Tuesday, December 21, 2021 in Regina. PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Jake Sinclair still cuts his own hair.

He doesn't have to anymore, but the simple act serves as a reminder of his home community and the rippling impact of economic development — how community and business are inextricably intertwined.

Growing up on George Gordon First Nation, Sinclair soon learned how to cut his own hair. The closest hairdresser was in Regina, located about 130 kilometres south of the community. Few were willing to make the drive over a quick trim at home.

Now George Gordon has a hairdresser. Sinclair can't help but smile when he thinks he might have played a small part in making that happen.

"I always try to promote economic development and entrepreneurship because it also has spin-off effects of employment and trying to make sure that people are happy," he says. "That's very near and dear to my heart."

That passion for entrepreneurship surfaced early in Sinclair.

As a young boy, he could often be found at the final hole of his father's golf course, trying to sell other players used golf balls.

He loved golfing — and a host of other sports, including hockey and football — but business always came before the game. Only after collecting his precious product from around the course and selling it did he let himself play a round.

"A lot of my entrepreneurial spirit is from the golf course," says Sinclair, recalling long days spent shadowing his father, Kenneth Sinclair, as he kept the Regina Beach Golf Club running.

But that spirit certainly didn't stay on the golf course.

At age 31, Sinclair now owns two Anytime Fitness locations in Regina. Surrounded by one of the location's brightly coloured walls and reverberating music, he recounted the many business ventures he has undertaken.

"After I establish a couple more businesses, then maybe I can identify as a serial entrepreneur, but my goal is to build things up and then pass them on to somebody else so that they don't have to put in the groundwork," he says with a laugh.

"My core value is legacy. I'm trying to make sure that whatever happens to me as an individual, at least I can make some kind of contribution. Whether I'm here or not, there's something lasting that I've helped develop."

Despite the early exposure to life as a business owner, after graduating high school Sinclair spent a year working long, exhausting hours in the mining industry near Saskatoon.

His dad pulled him aside one day and told Sinclair he could keep doing what he was doing and make good money if he wanted. But there were other options, too. He could go to school and become a business owner.

Sinclair didn't need more convincing. If he was going to work such long hours anyway, it might as well be to build up something of his own. He studied economics at the University of Regina before switching over to business.

He soon began working for the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority, but when his dad passed away in 2011, Sinclair waded into the world of entrepreneurship. He bought his father's shares in the Regina Beach Golf Club, which included the onsite bar and restaurant. He owned the golf course for four years before selling.

Through the years since then, he has taken on many projects focused on entrepreneurship and economic development. He helped George Gordon create the Workforce Development Program in 2015, which Sinclair estimates has already helped employ around 1,000 people. He also helped develop a virtual reality training facility in Regina through that program.

In 2019, Sinclair had a desire to try something new, something that combined his passions with those of his wife Kimberley.

He merged his own entrepreneurial spirit and love of fitness with Kimberley's degree in kinesiology and personal trainer experience. Together, they opened two Anytime Fitness locations in Regina in the summer of 2019.

It would prove to be a difficult time to open a gym.

Less than a year later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Saskatchewan. Gyms across the province were ordered to close and remained shuttered for months. Even after they were allowed to reopen, stringent capacity limits and cleaning protocols made business challenging. A staff member had to be on site at all times to screen for COVID-19 symptoms, and Sinclair worked many early mornings and late nights at both locations to give his staff a break.

While other gyms declared bankruptcy or closed locations, Anytime Fitness thrived. Existing members remained loyal. New members signed up.

Sinclair believes it is his commitment to tie his business to the community that allowed the gyms to survive the worst of the pandemic restrictions.

He makes a point of hiring people from his home community and is always involved in supporting others. Once a month, Anytime Fitness does a fundraiser or campaign to help a local charity or business. They've donated to a local women's shelter. They did a drive for Carmichael Outreach after the organization suffered a break-in. Twice a year they do a blood drive. There's often a donation bin in the gym to which members eagerly contribute.

"They see that we're not only trying to make a living here and we're not (just) trying to provide a service, but we're also giving back to our community. We're actively here," Sinclair says.

“Every single person that comes in, we try to get to know them on a personal level.”

As dedicated as Sinclair is to Anytime Fitness, he realized the need to take a step back when his daughter Saige was born in February 2021.

“I started thinking ‘I’ve got to work on the business and not in it.’ I’m more effective like that, and so I really stepped out,” he says.

“We just hire great people and let them do what they do and we provide oversight.”

Stepping back from the day-to-day operations also gave him more time to focus on his full-time job as vice president of business development for George Gordon First Nation.

In recognition of Anytime Fitness’s success, the Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation recently awarded Sinclair the SIEF Entrepreneurial Spirit Award.

Despite his many accomplishments, Sinclair says he is proud first and foremost of his daughter. Second, he is proud of winning a community role model award from George Gordon several years ago.

He hopes his example shows Indigenous youth that entrepreneurship is a path they too can take.

“That was something that I wanted to instil and continue to try to promote within my community is that entrepreneurship is a route,” he says.

“I want to try and make sure that they see more entrepreneurs.”