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He's North America's first Indian symphony conductor

By Dan Zakreski
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SASKATOON (CP) — John Kim Bell — Mohawk Indian, symphony conductor and arts entrepreneur — starts breaking stereotypes the minute he steps on stage.

Nattily dressed in a brown, double-breasted suit and silk tie, he moves away from the podium microphone to prowl the front of the stage.

He delivers his message with assurance and an easy humor, punctuating his remarks with thrusts of an invisible baton.

"I started out as an Indian . . . but then decided at a very early age I wanted to become a musician," he told delegates at a weekend Saskatchewan Arts Education Conference.

"I was about five years old and waiting in front of a roaring fire at home to tell my father about my decision. The problem was, we didn't have a fireplace . . ."

Bell eventually did tell his parents of his aspirations and, at age 17, began his professional career when he was hired as the assistant conductor of a touring company performing a Broadway musical.

Had to struggle

Despite an abundance of natural talent, Bell said realizing his goals has been a struggle.

"The arts are a very tough business. Being a native is a tough business. If you try to start an arts organization for natives, you're really looking up from the bottom of the totem pole."

Bell, 36, is from the Kahnawake reserve near Montreal. Over the last two decades, he has become North America's first Indian symphony conductor, worked on Broadway and

with international orchestras, and written and produced a full-length ballet based on Indian legend.

Along the way, he created the Canadian Native Arts Foundation to realize his dream of helping native youth pursue an education in the arts.

The key to Bell's philosophy, repeated like a mantra through the freewheeling 45-minute presentation, is persistence.

"I lived 10 years in New York where I learned no one gives you anything. You have to take it."

Learn lessons

Producing the million-dollar ballet *Spirits* in 1988 taught the conductor the value of determination and the intricacies of fund-raising.

"I was surrounded by a world of naysayers, people who said I had no staff, no money and no experience. I just shut it out and, in the end, we did it."

One of the keys to the ballet's financial success came from the realization the arts are a business and must be marketed. Potential corporate sponsors must be convinced that a thousand people will be reached for every dollar they contribute.

"I had to bring forward a production with native content which carried my message but which also appealed to a mass market."

To penetrate corporate circles, Bell began reading the *Financial Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Report on Business* with an eye for stories on merging companies.

"There's always dollars to celebrate, so I get copies of the annual reports and send letters to all board members and directors. I explain how helping the foundation will benefit them."