



Kahkewistahaw Gas and Convenience Store is an independent Petro-Canada station located in Yorkton, Saskatchewan that has won numerous awards for outstanding service and commitment to employee development. Owned and operated by the Kahkewistahaw Band, it is open seven days a week, 24-hours a day, and employs 24 people - 98 per cent of whom are First Nations.



**T**he next time you visit Yorkton, Saskatchewan, drop by the Kahkewistahaw Gas and Convenience Store. It is more than your average service station - it's an award-winning operation, thanks in part to a commitment to developing employees' Essential Skills.

When General Manager Doug McRae was hired in 2004 by the Kahkewistahaw Band to run the newly constructed gas and convenience store, his mandate was clear: create employment for First Nations people and help them develop skills for success in the workplace.

anywhere between a Grade 8 education and some post-secondary."

His first task was to assess their skills and build a team, which he did with the help of Parkland Regional College.

Before the service station opened, the 17 new hires attended a seven-week program at the college where they benchmarked their Essential Skills with a TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) assessment.

It proved to be a learning experience – and not just for the new employees.



**"They're part of a team that has been recognized for outstanding customer service and sales growth."**

Only a few years later, McRae has achieved that goal – and more. The people he's hired have not only increased their skills and boosted their self-confidence; they're part of a team that has been recognized for outstanding customer service and sales growth.

But it wasn't easy... "The first group of employees was diverse," says McRae. "They were 18 to 60 years old, and they had

"Even though we explained what TOWES is about and that you couldn't fail, the participants were stressed before the test," explains Susan Lyons, Career and Student Support Services Manager at Parkland Regional College. "We learned that you have to take more than 45 minutes to explain it."

McRae agrees. "You have to sit down with all the folks and talk about what you are trying to do and what your objectives are."

When the results were in, employees did better than they expected, and it motivated them to learn. McRae recalls one employee who really changed his attitude about his abilities. "He said, 'You know, I could be a lawyer.'"

Using the college's resources and the Measure Up website (<http://measureup.towes.com>), participants increased their Essential Skills scores, often by one or two full levels. They also received training in everything from e-mail etiquette and customer conflict to handling dangerous chemicals. To prepare for working as a team, they explored personality styles and, on their return to the worksite, they had a chance to practice their skills before the gas and convenience store opened its doors.

The program was offered through Job Start Future Skills, a provincially-funded partnership program, with support by a national Essential Skills project to integrate Essential Skills in the workplace.

Since the gas and convenience store opened in 2004, two employee groups have completed the program.

"Some have stayed long-term with Doug and others have moved on to bigger and better things," explains Lyons, "and that's okay with him. We often see people come back to the college for other programs because they are excited about learning."

McRae says there are many opportunities for staff who wish to stay. "The Band is developing the 11 acres we sit on. There will be a hotel, an office complex and a new casino. We'll need staff."



*"It helped point out what my abilities are, and what I mean to a whole team. Whether you are a leader or not, your effort counts just as much."*  
— Valerie Pelletier



*"Our First Nations people are realizing that they are now changing to be involved in an economic industry, taking responsibility for their own growth."*  
— Albert (Bud) Wasacase



*"Training was great. It made me think a lot, and I learned a lot about myself and my co-workers."*  
— Ivan Cote