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Rooted in the North, Theresa Dufresne's Journey in Aviation

Theresa Dufresne still remembers the call that changed her life. She just finished school in La Ronge when her cousin phoned from Stony Rapids. There was a job opening at West Wind Aviation, a predecessor of today's Rise Air. Could she be at the airport in 30 minutes for an interview? She said yes. That was in 2011. She's been there ever since.

Today, Theresa serves as Assistant General Manager for Snowbird Aviation Services, a subsidiary of Rise Air. Her journey began at the front counter as a check-in agent. From those early days, she learned almost every aspect of ground operations. Theresa stepped into a supervisory role when West Wind merged with Transwest Air, then became Base Manager in La Ronge after ground operations transitioned to Snowbird Aviation Services.

Snowbird Aviation Services manages ground operations across Rise Air's northern network. While Rise Air manages flight operations and network planning, Snowbird teams handle ramp services, ground handling, and frontline operational support. In short, when the plane lands, Snowbird is there. This integrated structure is essential in Northern Saskatchewan, where aviation is critical infrastructure and communities depend on safe, reliable service.

In her role as Assistant GM, Theresa now supports bases in La Ronge, Prince Albert, Buffalo Narrows, Stony Rapids, Fond du Lac and Wollaston Lake. No two days are the same. Weather delays, equipment issues and staffing challenges are part of the job. She has even stepped in as Acting General Manager when needed. Through it all, her focus remains steady: supporting her teams and keeping communities connected. For Theresa, "Leadership in aviation is about showing up consistently, for your teams, your partners, and the communities you serve."

Theresa's connection to the North runs deep. A member of the Little Red River Cree Nation, Alberta, she was born in Edmonton, but her mother grew up in Camsell Portage and Uranium City. Theresa's summers were spent visiting family in La Ronge before her family moved north for good. She has now lived in La Ronge for 25 years.

One of the most meaningful moments of her career was travelling to Camsell Portage last year. "The emotions I felt just being there, standing on the beach where my mom once played, were overwhelming," says Theresa. She also notes that meeting relatives she had never known was emotional and grounding. It reminded her why her work matters.

"I want to continue learning how I, and our company, can contribute to better opportunities for our northern bases," she says. She takes pride in fully staffing the Wollaston and Fond du Lac bases with local



Theresa, her husband, Tristan, their son, Lincoln, and their pups, Oakley and Storm, enjoy life in La Ronge

community members. Creating local employment and welcoming northern residents into aviation careers is important to her. "Giving northern residents the opportunity to work with us and bring their knowledge to the company is something I will always welcome with open arms. I want to create an environment where everybody feels supported," she says.

Theresa describes herself as eager to continue growing in her role and ready for more responsibility. She does not believe she has reached the top of her career ladder at Snowbird or in the aviation industry. Her leadership style is rooted in integrity, honesty and transparency. Theresa says, "Maintaining the respect of our employees and ensuring they feel comfortable coming to me with anything they need is important to me. I hope people see me as I intend to be, as a determined leader who sets clear expectations, addresses issues and is fair with people. I strive to model integrity, honesty and transparency, not just with our staff but also with all community members."

Outside of work, Theresa is a wife and mother. In 2023, she and her husband, Tristan, a Twin Otter captain with Rise Air, welcomed their first child, Lincoln. She loves raising her son in the North, on the lake in summer and on a snowmobile in winter.

For Theresa, leadership is simple: show up, listen, and support your people. In a region where aviation is more than transportation – it is connection, opportunity, and lifeline – she is proud to play her part. 🌱

Athabasca Basin Development is continuing to look for new opportunities for investments – both to strengthen its existing investments as well as outside of its existing industries. "There are lots of opportunities out there and we are continuing to seek solid investment opportunities. I would encourage business owners who are looking at succession planning to consider us as a potential fit and to contact us to discuss opportunities – there may be a fit either with Athabasca Basin Development or with one of our investments."

Employee Reflections



Pictured (L to R) Skilled Labourer, Zarren Toutsaint - Fond Du Lac Denesuline First Nation, John MacDonald, Senior Construction Planner - Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Skilled Labourer, Smy Tsannie - Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation, Equipment Operator, Ivan Stalthanee - Black Lake Denesuline First Nation, Equipment Operator, Keisha Daigneault - Birch Narrows Dene Nation

By John MacDonald, Senior Construction Planner with Points Athabasca

Just shy of my 3rd anniversary with Points Athabasca, I reflect on the successes, challenges, and opportunities I have experienced within this great organization.

We often talk about the unique role we play as an Indigenous Construction business, and what our success means for our seven impact communities in Northern Saskatchewan's Athabasca region, who together make up 75% of our ownership structure through Athabasca Basin Development. As an Indigenous employee, I feel a deep connection to our mission of Building Capacity, and it is always at the forefront of my mind when I enter a new project. I continually ask myself, "How can we do better?"

Last fall, I was presented with an opportunity to tackle a small project at one of our main clients' northern mine sites. This particular project was replacing a steel culvert under a road crossing at the mine site's final effluent release point. While nowhere near the most technical work we do, it was one of the most fulfilling jobs I have worked on for our company in the past three years.

I look back on this project because I had the rare opportunity to lead an all-Indigenous team. It's not often that the onsite team at one of our worksites is 100% Indigenous, and while this might not mean much to some people, it meant a lot to me on a deeper level. The team's efficient teamwork, crew-safety culture, and individual problem-solving skills filled me with pride. This crew would have held their own

against any construction team I have worked with over 30 years in the Saskatchewan Mining Industry.

We are "Building Capacity," a key theme for our company that shapes how we do business. At our core, we are about people. We believe in building beyond the project, and our slogan, "Building Capacity," speaks to our deep commitment to engaging people in local communities. This small project was a great example of that and a reminder that what we are doing here at Points Athabasca is working.

On a side note, we completed this project ahead of schedule and on budget. We were then tasked with an additional culvert replacement, which we completed on schedule. 🌱

Optek Learning: Building Skills, Confidence and Capacity

Optek Solutions has always been about supporting organizations with a robust managed IT services offering across Saskatchewan. With the launch of Optek Learning, the company is taking that commitment even further by investing in people.

For Kevin Aebig, CEO of Optek Solutions, the new division is an exciting new chapter in the company's five-year history. "As we've gotten to know our clients, many have expressed a need for corporate training in Prince Albert, the region and the North," says Aebig. "Topics such as cybersecurity, using Microsoft Office tools, and information on AI [artificial intelligence] are important to our clients, and with this new division, we're able to offer exactly the kind of training our clients want and need to strengthen their operations."

Cherise Arnesen came on board to head up Optek Learning as its Executive Director. With a background in business ownership, college leadership and curriculum development, she understands the pressures employers face and the needs of adult learners. Whether in mining, agriculture, retail, industry, or beyond, many employees use digital tools every day, yet many have never received formal training. "Many workers don't have training



Optek Learning's center is located in Prince Albert

in common applications like Microsoft Teams or SharePoint or in Adobe Acrobat," says Arnesen. "Most are self-taught or rely on help from coworkers. Although they're getting the work done, maybe they could be getting it done better."

Optek Learning is designed to meet that need. The focus is on practical, hands-on training in the most commonly used tools and features: the ones that make daily work easier and more efficient. Arnesen cites research from the World Economic Forum showing that over 90 per cent of cyberattacks are caused by human error. "Learning about cybersecurity is an investment in

a strong risk prevention strategy," says Aebig.

One thing that sets Optek Learning apart is its recognition that time matters. "We know everyone is busy with their work duties and they don't want work to pile up," Arnesen explains. "That's why most courses are offered in half-day or one-day formats."

Learners have already requested soft-skills training, including conflict resolution, and Optek Learning is developing new courses. Their goal for all their courses is to build skills and confidence. According to Arnesen, "When workers feel confident using digital tools, they are more productive. When organizations reduce risk and improve skills, they become more sustainable."

Optek Solutions is Saskatchewan's largest Indigenous-owned IT company, established in 2021 and swiftly growing to 40 employees in offices in Prince Albert, Regina and Saskatoon. "Together, the IT division and the learning division help our clients and shareholder communities stay strong and be competitive," Aebig says. "In a world where almost every job touches a computer or digital device of some kind, the need for short, practical education in this area is crucial for everyone." 🌱

Author Kristy Jackson's 2025 Athabasca Book Tour

In late 2025, Kristy Jackson, Athabasca Basin Development's director of marketing and communications, packed up a stack of books and headed north to visit students across the Athabasca region. Her goal was to share stories, encourage reading, and remind young people that their own ideas and experiences can become stories too.

Kristy visited schools in Fond du Lac, Hatchet Lake, Black Lake, Wollaston Lake, Stony Rapids and Uranium City – six of the seven northern Saskatchewan communities that own Athabasca Basin Development (Camsell Portage is the seventh). At each stop, classrooms were filled with curious students eager to ask questions, share laughs, and talk about books.

It was Kristy's second visit to Uranium City and Stony Rapids as a published author. She visited those communities to launch her first book in 2024. But Kristy is no stranger to the north. She's worked for Athabasca Basin Development for 14 years and visits the communities regularly. A member of Whitefish Lake First Nation #128, Kristy shared how she became a writer, where her story ideas come from, and why reading can open up new possibilities. "I've always believed books can take you places," Kristy told students. "Sometimes they show you a world you didn't know about, and sometimes they help you see your own world in a new way."

Kristy introduced students to her two middle-grade novels, *Mortified* and *Touching Grass*. "Touching Grass was inspired by my time in Athabasca communities," says Kristy. "I wanted the students there to have a book where they could see themselves and their own language and culture. Participating in a culture camp at Black Lake, visiting the cultural centre at Fond du Lac, touring the land around Uranium City, and working closely with Rosalie Tsannie-Burseth and




Author Kristy Jackson presents at Ben McIntyre School in Uranium City

Ronelda Robillard from Hatchet Lake all contributed to the story." *Touching Grass* tells the story of Tristen, a serious gamer who would rather stay indoors. Released in September 2025, the book has already been shortlisted for awards, bringing a whole new generation of readers more awareness of life in the north.

Throughout her presentations, Kristy encouraged students to try writing their own stories. "Your stories are beautiful, amazing and important," she says to the students. "I hope one of you is standing up here talking about your books someday."

Supporting literacy and education throughout the region is one of the many ways Athabasca Basin


Development continues to invest in the strength and future of its northern communities. Other literacy events include author David A Robertson, author-illustrator Miriam Korner, literacy camps, sponsoring Foundations Learning to do activities in the region, and book fairs.

"We are always looking for ways to give back to our shareholder communities," says Jackson. "We've sponsored many events and speakers in the past, like Rebecca Strong last year, or coaches for fastball, or even Persephone Theatre. It was a strange experience for me to be on the other side of the stage, but I really enjoyed a chance to encourage other Indigenous writers out there to write their stories." 

Northern Spirits Showcase

By Glen Strong

This year at the Prince Albert Winter Festival, the Northern Spirits Workshop and Showcase made a comeback due to the efforts of LJ Kimbley and his brother, Kyle Kimbley. Forty-five youths from Northern Saskatchewan took part in the Program. The Athabasca Basin had six youths who participated in the four-day event, including Mayna Dantouzze, Dahlia Fern, Robbie Alphonse, Mariah Yooya, Melanie Nilghe, Zackary Sandypoint, and Teacher, Annetta Whetham.

The event was sponsored by Prince Albert Grand Council, Prince Albert Friendship Center, Community Arts Mentorship Program, Sask Music and Points Athabasca. This diverse Showcase promoted amazing young guitar players, musicians, singers, actors, stagehands, dancers and an emcee. The continuation of this Program is an important component of creating Northern Leaders. 



Mayna Dantouzze, Dahlia Fern, Robbie Alphonse, Teacher-Annetta Whetham, Mariah Yooya, Melanie Nilghe and Zackary Sandypoint

SPECIAL SECTION: SANTA IN THE NORTH



Deht'anuhzeh Noey helps a student from Father Megret Elementary school in Fond du Lac with her present from Santa.

From Student to Elf

By Deht'anuhzeh Noey

About fifteen years ago, I stood in the small airport in Wollaston Lake, bundled in my 40-below winter gear, my cheeks still pink from the cold. In a northern community where winter settles in ever so deeply, and travel is never simple, whether it is winter or summer, that visit from Santa felt extraordinary. I remember holding my gift, feeling not just excited, but seen — like someone had made the effort to reach us, all the way up north.

This past Christmas season, I wasn't the child waiting in line. I was back in Wollaston Lake, this time inside the Elementary school, helping set up tables lined with carefully arranged books. Snow stretched endlessly

outside the windows, the halls filled with decorations, the sky pale and quiet, while the building buzzed with anticipation. I dressed as one of Santa's elves, ready to hand out presents and spread Christmas cheer to every student in the school.

As the children filed in — boots thudding against the floor, ski-pants ruffling, laughter echoing down the hallways — I felt the weight of that full-circle moment. I watched each child receive their gift and then pause thoughtfully at the tables to choose their own book. There was something powerful about that choice. It wasn't just about a present; it was about giving them a story to read, an adventure to imagine, something to take home and make their own.

The littlest ones were the most expressive. Their eyes widened when they saw Santa. Some were shy, some

bounced with excitement, and a few looked up at me, grinning and giggling, declaring that I was a very "tall elf." In their joy, I could see myself fifteen years ago — that same wonder, that same feeling of belonging.

In northern communities like Fond du Lac, Wollaston Lake, and the overall Athabasca region, events like this mean more. They remind us that even in remote places, where distances are vast and winters are long, connection remains strong. Being part of that experience — not as the child this time, but as someone helping create the magic for the youth — filled me with so much pride and joy, like one of those moments where I thought, "Wow, I really made it."

What once shaped my childhood, I was now helping shape for someone else. 🌟

Santa in the North: A Tradition of Partnership and Care

For a quarter of a century, the annual Santa in the North tour has been far more than a festive tradition. It's a heartfelt expression of community partnership and shared care across northern Saskatchewan. Each year's journey takes months of planning, beginning early in the year as Rise Air and Athabasca Basin Development work closely with over 22 sponsors and donors, and local schools and communities, to ensure that when the aircraft touches down, children in remote Athabasca Basin communities are greeted with smiles and gifts.

In 2025, the 25th Annual Santa in the North program marked a milestone as Santa and his crew flew to Black Lake, Stony Rapids, Wollaston Lake, Fond du Lac and Uranium City, bringing holiday cheer and more than 1,500 gift bags filled with Christmas candy, healthy snacks and age-appropriate surprises.

"It takes a village to make this happen," says Kristy Jackson, Director of Communications at Athabasca Basin Development, reflecting on the careful preparation that spans much of the year and the collaboration that powers the tour. "Providing books by Indigenous authors and illustrators helps encourage kids to read. Thank you to Santa, our ongoing sponsors, and the new donors who came on board in 2025 to help make this happen."

Dan Gold, Rise Air's Director of Marketing and Stakeholder Relations, has noted the importance of these partnerships. "We couldn't do this without our amazing partners, sponsors, volunteers, and, importantly, the schools themselves for supporting this annual event."

As the season's warmth lingers in memory, plans are already underway for the 2026 edition of Santa in the North. The organizing team looks forward to deepening partnerships, welcoming new supporters, and continuing a tradition that brings light to the far north each holiday season. 🌟



Allison Strong, Marketing Coordinator with Optek Solutions, helps a boy from Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake choose a book by an Indigenous author during Santa in the North

Many thanks to all our book sponsors: Arctic Beverages, Athabasca Basin Security, Flyer Electric, Long Lake Insurance, Optek Solutions, Points Athabasca, Points North Group of Companies, Team Drilling, Tru North Recreation Superstore, and Athabasca Basin Development.



Santa says thank you to all our amazing sponsors of gifts, toys, treats, and Santa's sleigh: Cameco, Graham Construction, Kelly Panteluk Construction, Orano, Uranium Energy Corporation, Uranium City Bulk Fuel, Saskatoon Co-Op, The Saskatchewan Roughrider Foundation, and Rise Air.

Pictured (left to right) Felicity Naldzil, Fond du Lac, and Dan Gold, director of communications and Stakeholder relations with Rise Air. Dan is a key member of the organizing team for Santa in the North.

Extreme Conditions Mean Extreme Safety

By Glen Strong

A 2026 season full of transportation challenges has those dedicated workers looking at the safety issues of working on ice and in extreme weather conditions.

We'd like to recognize the organizations involved in ensuring that residents get through to their communities and semi-trucks get through with goods and supplies. Most of the following are northern businesses:

- SAB Contracting, Ice Road Contractor
- Curtis Contracting, Ice Road Contractor
- Hailey's Contracting, Overland / Ice Road Contractor
- Athabasca Lakeside, Ice Road Contractor
- P and M Contracting, Overland / Ice Road Contractor
- Black Lake Ventures, Road Contractor
- PAGC Education
- Pawistik Resources, Jim MacDonald-Trainer / Instructor
- Ashton Montgomery, A2Z Safety Training

There are approximately 250km of overland road, as well as over 150km of ice road throughout the Athabasca Region from Points North to Uranium City. Lonona works with all of the road contractors to provide the necessary safety training for working in extreme weather conditions, with the ever-changing conditions of an ice road. A two-day safety training program on ice rescue is provided for the employees working on the ice roads, as well as a day that will

focus on extreme weather survival. The week of April 20 - 24, 2026, will wrap up with two days of First Aid/ CPR training.

Thank you to the Prince Albert Grand Council Education for the funding they provided. Also, a big thank you to the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure for their continued 25-year relationship with Lonona and the Athabasca Entrepreneurs. 🌟



2025 Ice rescue training

Clarence Neault Fly-in Career Fair

By Deht'anuhzeh Noey

In January, I travelled north to participate in the Clarence Neault Fly-In Career Fair.

The trip began on January 6, when a big group of exhibitors travelled to Stony Rapids. From there, we loaded up our career fair materials and drove about 20 minutes to Father Porte Memorial School in Black Lake, the first stop of the tour.

Once set up, the day quickly filled with conversations with students from grades 6 to 12. To keep students engaged, organizers ran a bingo-style activity where students collected stamps from booths for a chance to win the grand prize of a laptop. Between presentations and conversations, the day moved quickly.

The following morning, we travelled to Fond du Lac for the second stop of the career fair at Father Gamache Memorial School. While waiting for students to arrive, I took some time to walk through the halls of the school. Being back there brought a wave of memories – spending time in the library, running through the elementary wing with friends, and growing into my teenage years in the high school halls.

Fond du Lac is my hometown, which made this stop especially meaningful. Throughout the day, I saw familiar faces – people I had grown up with and educators who had once taught me. Many shared kind words about the person I had become and reminded me of memories I had long forgotten.

One of the most special moments came during lunch, when I had the chance to visit my childhood home and share a meal with my mom. My grandfather, knowing I would only be in the community briefly, had prepared traditional food. That simple act made the visit even more meaningful.



Flyer Electric CEO Terry Tessier with his booth at the Clarence Neault Career Fair in Black Lake. Students were very interested to learn about careers in the electrical trade

The final stop of the trip took us to Father Megret High School in Wollaston Lake, where I admired the incredible artwork displayed throughout the halls. Once again, the hospitality of the community stood out, with staff preparing delicious soups and Bannock for lunch – something many of us happily returned for seconds.

The school day soon came to an end, and with it the final stop of the career fair. We packed up our booths one last time and boarded our flight back to Saskatoon.

Over the course of three days, we travelled to multiple northern communities and met hundreds of students. It was more than a work trip. It was a reminder of where I come from, the importance of giving back, and how meaningful it can be to return home and encourage the next generation.

Athabasca Basin Development is proud to be the Gold sponsor of the Athabasca Clarence Neault Fly-In Career Fair. Thank you to our investments who participated: Flyer Electric, Optek Solutions, Rise Air, and Points Athabasca. 🌟



Deht'anuhzeh Noey attends the Clarence Neault Fly-In Career Fair in her hometown of Fond du Lac

Giving Back

"Building a Future Through Investment" is accomplished by building wealth for the Athabasca communities, donations, community distributions, building a reputation, and building capacity. The key to making all benefits possible is building wealth for the communities – without this foundation, the other benefits would not be possible. Here are a few recent examples of the ways Athabasca Basin Development and its investments give back:



The Athabasca Student Dinner is an annual tradition stretching back over fifteen years. Each year, we bring students from the region who are studying in the south together for a celebratory dinner. We celebrate their achievements and recognize their experiences being away from their home community. Close to 200 people gather in Prince Albert each November, and Athabasca Basin Development is proud to be the primary sponsor of this event, with donations from Points Athabasca, Rise Air, Flyer Electric, Optek Solutions, Graham Construction, Tru North Recreation Superstore, Long Lake Insurance, Cameco, Points North, Team Drilling, East Hill Esso & Car Wash, Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources, Lonona Contracting, and Orano. 🌟



We are proud to support high school graduates in the region. Each year, Athabasca Basin Development provides \$15,000 to support activities that celebrate graduates across the communities. Pictured: students from Father Porte Memorial Dene School. 🌟

Literacy is a crucial skill, and providing support early can make a difference. Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority hosted book fairs at each of the Athabasca schools this year, and Athabasca Basin Development provided \$20,000 so students could choose a book of their own to take home. 🌟



Father Gamache Memorial Dene School book fair, October 2025



Father Megret Memorial Dene School

Long Lake Insurance: A Year of Growth, Innovation, and Milestones

By Nancy Blake

It's been a busy and exciting year for Long Lake Insurance, marked by growth in new communities, new digital tools for clients, and meaningful celebrations with our team. As we look ahead, we're carrying that momentum forward with the same focus we've always had: serving people well, staying connected to our communities, and supporting the staff who make it all possible.

New Branch Opens in Kenaston

On February 1, we opened our newest Long Lake Insurance branch in Kenaston, Saskatchewan. Kenaston is a strong, close-knit community, and we're excited to be part of it. This branch, under its previous ownership, has served the community for 115 years, and we're honoured to be carrying on this legacy and building long-term relationships here.

Recognizing 22 Long-Service Team Members

This fall, we recognized 22 long-service employees who reached major milestones with Long Lake Insurance. Their years of dedication, many spanning 5, 10 or even 42 years, represent thousands of conversations with clients, countless renewals and claims, and the kind of steady leadership that shapes a workplace. Long-term commitment like this creates stability for clients and culture for our internal teams. It's something we're incredibly proud of.



Long Lake Insurance's Long-service awards, December 2025

We are Social! Follow us.



About Athabasca Basin Development

Athabasca Basin Development is an investment company committed to building and investing in successful businesses. Investments include partial or complete ownership in construction, industrial security, electrical, diamond drilling, logistics, road maintenance, aviation, and more. The company is owned by the seven communities in northern Saskatchewan's Athabasca region.

Watch for our next newsletter Fall 2026.

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