



**Rupert's Land
Institute**
Métis Centre of Excellence

Impact Story 3: Holden Ekeberg

**Region 4:
Training to Employment**



In 2020, there were over 60,000 Indigenous-owned businesses operating in Canada and these entrepreneurs have contributed \$50 billion dollars to the Canadian economy in the same year. Despite the crippling effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, Métis entrepreneurs have shown their resiliency throughout.

Rupertsland Institute's Métis Training to Employment department supports clients in their journey to self-sufficiency. Each client's journey to self-sufficiency looks different, and Rupertsland Institute responds to those differing journeys by offering a variety of programs. In addition to traditional employment search and supports, Rupertsland Institute encourages, empowers, and supports current and aspiring Métis entrepreneurs through their workshops, up-skill support, and small-business loans/grants in partnership with Apeetogosan. With the tools available, all that is needed is for motivated Métis entrepreneurs to take the leap into starting their own business.

Holden Ekeberg is one of those people.



Holden Ekeberg's gaze remained steady on Kristin, pen in hand ready to record, as she took a deep breath and lifted the barbell off the ground once more. It was the final deadlift of the set.

"You got this," he said gently as the laboured breathing from Kristin increased. A relieved exhalation filled the air as the weights were finally put to rest.

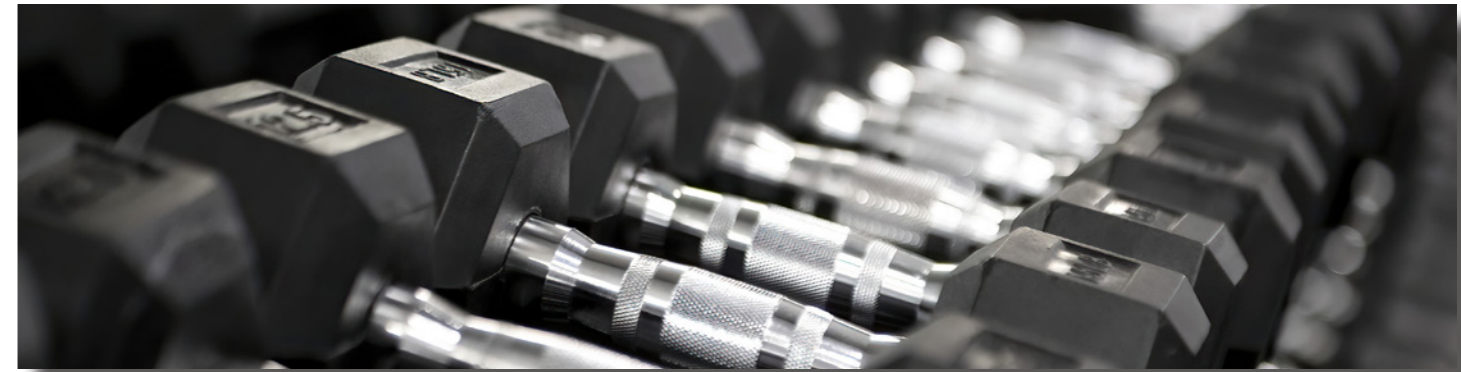
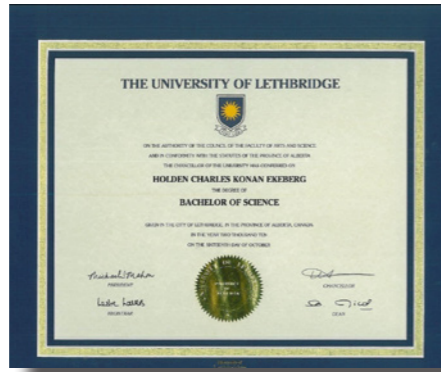
"Amazing. That was great!"

Holden said, "You're getting stronger." She smiled in response. Still out of breath.

Holden, a 37 year-old, tall, fit man quickly scribbled notes and weight amounts onto the sheet of paper held by a clipboard. Holden put

his hand on Kristin's shoulder and thanked her for showing up. She has been coming to the gym in the basement of Holden's house for just over a year in Sherwood Park, Alberta.

Despite being a home gym, it would not be a stretch to assume it was a commercial gym by looks alone. The gym is filled with all manners of neatly laid out machines and weights, with the new rubber smell prevalent. "I just got these machines last week. Only one more delivery and the place is complete," Holden explained. His business has not been immune to the global shipping challenges that plague a post-COVID world. It took him nearly a year to get to where he is at now, with challenges both in and out of his control. However, with the support of Rupertsland, he overcame all of them.



“I actually have my degree in neuroscience.” Holden laughed — not a degree expected of a personal trainer. “I just loved the idea of understanding on how brains work and function.” A jack-of-all trades might not be sufficient to describe the skills and experience that have made up Holden’s journey to this point.

Out of high school, Holden completed his Registered Apprentice Program where he worked in a shop at the local Dodge dealership. Less than a year after a visit to a friend at the University of Lethbridge gently nudged a 20-year-old Holden into a bachelor’s degree in pre-engineering in 2006, he would switch to a BSc with a major in neuroscience. To get himself through the first year of university, he took a job in B.C. in the first summer break as a heli-portable seismic blaster. Holden’s stories of his time in remote B.C. sounded right out of an action movie, with a young man jumping from helicopters into the wilderness with only a stick and his wits to defend himself from potential bears. He would see no bears that summer.

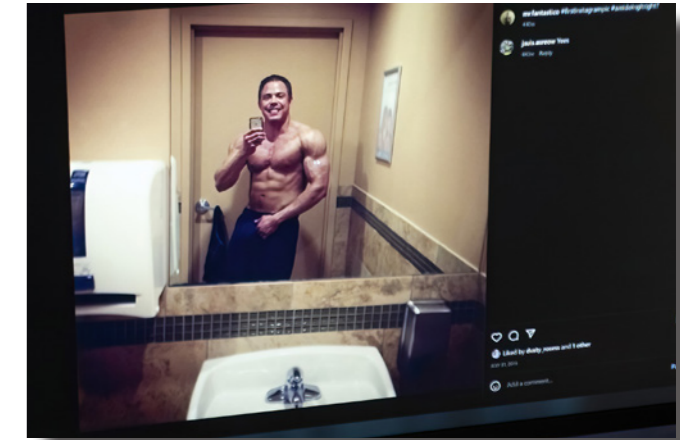
The following summers, he worked as a labourer from 2007 to 2010 which was supported by the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) Region 1’s collaboration with the Local 92 Labourers Union, which made a program that encouraged Métis membership in the Union. Throughout his careers, Holden has embraced the many supports that are available to him as a Métis man, whether from the MNA or Rupertsland Institute. The MNA covered his application fees to get the union jobs and break into the industry. This work gave Holden a financial self-sufficiency to pay for his education on his own.

“I was able to make enough money during the remaining summer breaks working through the Local 92 union to help cover my university cost.”

Holden graduated from the University of Lethbridge in 2010 but soon went back to school for a degree in power engineering from Portage College. After being laid off once again, Holden took a long look at his career and what he wanted to achieve. In order to find fulfillment professionally, he turned to a passion that had given him fulfillment personally for years.

“Body building was always a part of my life, ever since I was young.” Holden said as he flipped through photos on his computer of a younger Holden, posing to show off his muscular form. In the pursuit of personal excellence, Holden was once trained by a world-renowned body building coach Shelby Starnes, who had trained some of Miss Olympia, the pinnacle of competitive body building.

Holden thought deeply about what impact he was making in his careers and was disappointed with his conclusions. He wanted to make a difference, and he reflected that in the past, he had done just that with helping others on their



fitness. “I helped a lot of my friends along the way.” Holden said. “I really enjoy doing that. So I thought I would try out personal training to get into something I found more meaningful and rewarding.”

By helping his friends, he saw that he could make a difference in their lives through encouraging those friends to make working out and a healthy lifestyle part of their everyday lives, to the point of being routine and mundane.

“I wanted them to view working out like brushing their teeth.”

While not competing in body building anymore, a career in fitness would give Holden the fulfillment that he was looking for -- and a career that he was in the drivers seat from day one.

“I envisioned doing this home-based business and I knew I’d have to become a personal trainer.” Holden said. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was just emerging, and the fitness industry was hit hard by the subsequent lock downs. Despite this, Holden forged ahead and reached out to Rupertsland for support.





“ applied through Rupertsland for that [Métis Training to Employment] and I explained my situation.”

The program’s goal is for training to lead into employment directly upon completion and Holden made a case that the job he intended to begin would be one of his own creation. In order to become a personal trainer, Holden needed experience, both practical and formal.

Rupertsland Institute provided the funding for his classroom learning and, in 2019, he began an accelerated program for his Personal Training Certification as well as his Corrective Exercise

Specialist Training. The intensity of the program required all of Holden’s attention and focus, so Rupertsland Institute was able to provide income support in addition to the tuition support for both his programs.

“They gave me a chance, and thanks to them I was able to go to school and take the time off and do my studying as I chose a pretty comprehensive course. I ended up getting my certification in just over a year,” Holden said.

“I don’t think I could have done it without the income support.”





In 2020, Holden and his partner Melissa moved into their new house together, and both were excited about where their lives were going. It seemed to them that their hard work was beginning to pay off. 2021 was filled with exciting developments. Holden began working as a trainer at Goodlife Gym to build experience working with clients for the eventuality of managing his own. New house, new certifications and a new career on the horizon were just within reach. It was around this time that the couple went through one of the hardest periods of their lives.

In July 2021, through a court decision, they were informed that Emmett's mother was granted permission to move to Manitoba, taking Emmett (Holden's son) with her. This dramatically reduced Holden's time with his son. While grieving, further heartbreak would visit. On September 15th 2021, Melissa, who was pregnant, lost their child. This would be the first of two children the couple would lose in the span of a year. The two grieved the loss of their child, and any progress towards Holden's certification was put on pause.

"It was a really hard time in our lives." Holden said quietly.

"I felt like I had lost two children."



"Part of my job is to have empathy and understanding," Avery Enzenauer, Holden's case manager, said.

Rupertsland Institute's Métis Training to Employment program sets goals for clients to find employment after the completion of their program with support from their case managers. Avery understood the need for flexibility with Holden, given the immense grief the family was experiencing. "I make sure that I understand and listen to their individual challenges. For Holden, it was completely understandable that he takes a break to grieve."

"He did share with me a lot of those hardships that he was going through and you know I always want to be accommodating to people and kind to meet them where they're at." Avery supported Holden's extended journey to explore new employment opportunities after the completion of his training.

"Going through everything we went through at that time, having to work would have made it impossible. Rupertsland was super understanding and supportive. I am really appreciative of that".

"Yep, we survived. When it rains, it pours."





The puppy barely fit in Holden's hand, shivering and curling tighter between his fingers to hide from the outside world. The dog, named Bumpy Johnson, had arrived just the day before. Bumpy Johnson was the name of a mobster in the 1950s — a particularly fierce one at that. His canine namesake has much to work towards to earn that reputation.

The tiny dog was just the newest feature in a growing household, one that found itself underfoot often. Holden apologized profusely for being caught off guard as the puppy had just made quite the mess in his kennel and Holden hurried to the kitchen sink to clean off the filthy puppy.

The couple even had a snake, Sidrick Slytherin, who was slowly swallowing his weekly meal of a frozen mouse in a small cage on the kitchen counter. Holden's partner, Melissa, had just finished a Zoom meeting in the other room and walked into kitchen to start making lunch. She made a point to describe the time, much to her chagrin, when they thought the snake had escaped in the house.

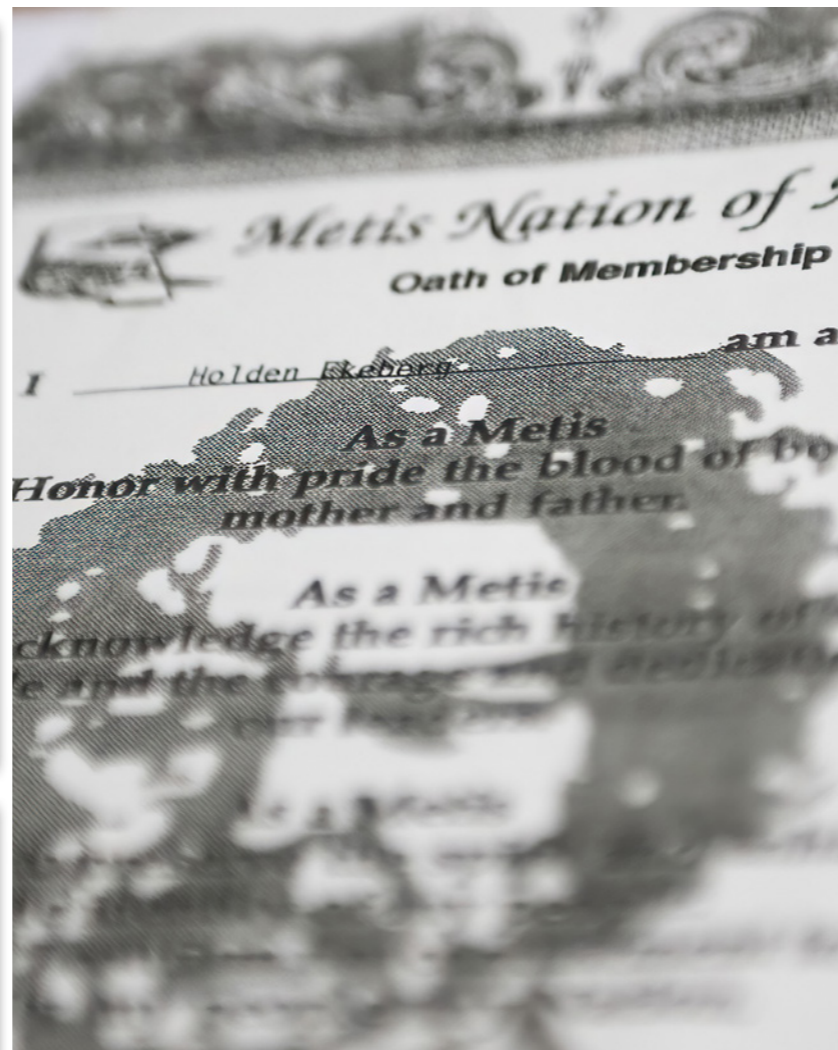
There was a rhythm to the home that gave a sense of constant movement and effort from the two, but rather than chaos, there was a synchronised and practiced order to it. Holden met Melissa in 2016 around the same time he had been laid off again in Lloydminster, where she had been working as a children's speech pathologist. The pandemic had actually made her job surprisingly easier with the widespread transition to Zoom being a convenient method of meeting her clients for speech therapy. The two met online on Tinder. To this day, Melissa continues to joke about his photos on the dating app.

"Ask him to show you his Tinder photos!"

She exclaimed with no hint of sarcasm. "Tell me that they don't scream 'gymbro' to you."

The photos from the early 2010s featured a younger, flexing, and shirtless Holden, with muscles prominently displayed. Despite playfully teasing Holden, Melissa did concede that she not only matched with him but is very much in love with him.





Holden brought out a folder with a stack of photos on top. Inside were dozens of pages chronicling his entire Métis lineage all the way back to the 1700s. It was evident that his organizational skills went far beyond just pertaining to his business.

"This is where my family first came over from England." He pointed to a John Pruden, born in 1778, in Middlesex, England. Throughout his well documented lineage, names of his male ancestors were often paired with "Cree Woman" — a sad reality of the status of women at the time. Holden pointed out that only after the death of the man did many of these women finally get a name, John's wife Nancy was listed as such. Both John and Nancy are buried at a lot in St John's Red River Settlement. Holden even knows the lot where his ancestors still rest today; 209.

Holden flipped through the dozens of pages in the folder. His Métis ancestry is deep and well recorded. One of his ancestors listed well over a dozen children in the 1800s. Many of the children did not live long. Another, Joseph Ladouceur, and his wife Josephthe Cardinal from L'Île Perrot, Quebec were Métis voyageurs who journeyed to Fort des Prairies Ladouceur in 1804 along with 5 children and 8 others.

"There's Métis throughout my line, right from the start." Holden said with pride, but the conversation would soon darken when the realities of Métis history could be seen repeating on every page.

"Scrip payment. \$160. 1888" "Scrip payment. \$165. 1890." "Scrip payment. \$160. \$12 dollars to each child. 1854." The legacy of loss plain to see in Holden's folder. A legacy that still impacts their descendants today.

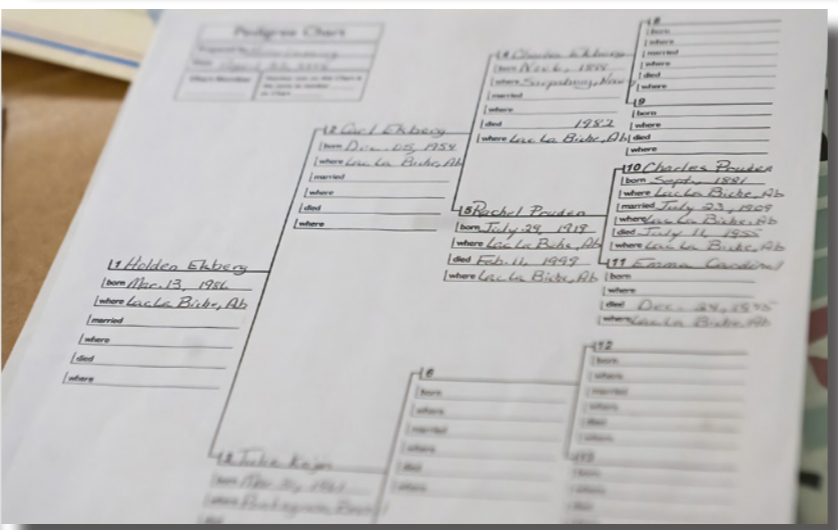
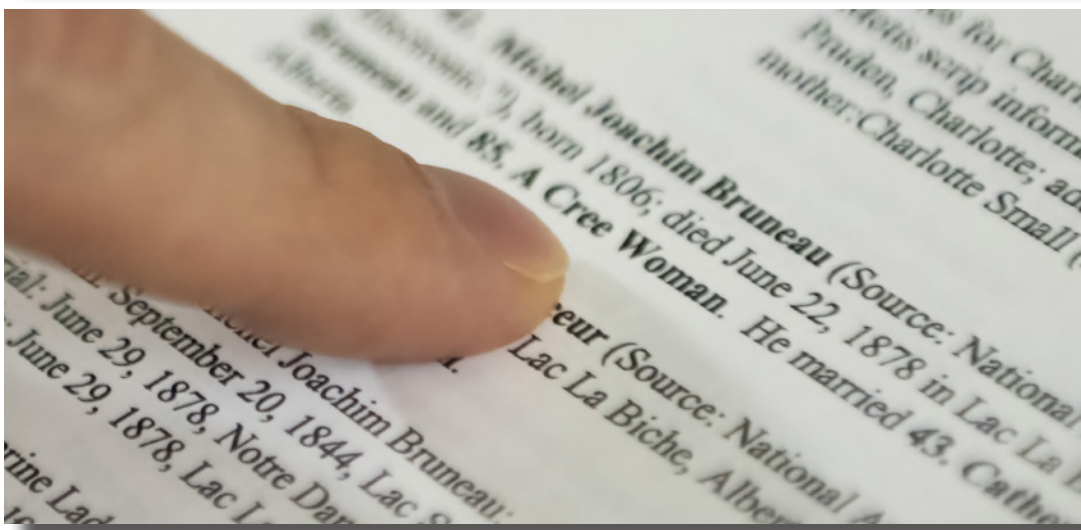
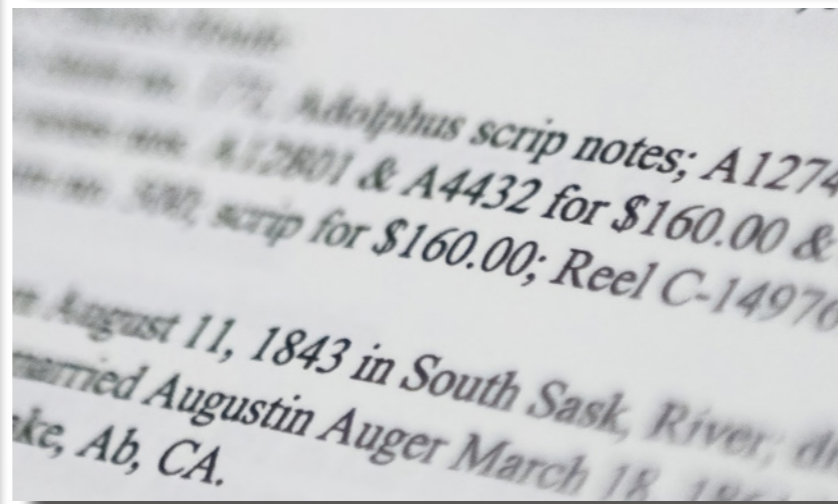
In a phone call with Holden's uncle Edward Ekeberg, someone who Holden expressed would better recall some of the family's history, a story was shared that still stings when told. Holden's Métis great-grandfather, Charles Pruden, worked as a fur trader for the Hudson Bay company and eventually settled on a plot of land south of Lac Le Biche where he raised Holden's grandfather. They lived on the homestead until 1955, when Charles died. As a result of the legacy of scrip and the transfer of it, after his death, the land claim could not be proven and was given away to people from Quebec, who subsequently barred anyone from visiting the property. To this day, Holden's family is unable to access their historic homestead.

"His grave is still on that land, and we're not allowed to visit."

Holden remarked sadly. To add insult to injury, the family who owns the land consider Holden's ancestors as squatters.

"They've got the nerve to call our great grandfather a squatter." Holden said with a hand covering his mouth in frustration. He, nor any member of his family have been able to visit the grave.

While his families' past holds a legacy of loss, the future holds much to be proud of for Holden. He wears his Métis heritage with pride, understanding his family and nation's rich past and building a bright future for both his son and his future children.





In 2022, he was approved for a business loan through Apeetogosan and, more than two years after first approaching Rupertsland on starting his own business, in the summer of 2022, he began his home gym, Forward Fitness. Apeetogosan Métis Development Inc. and Rupertsland Institute partner on the Métis Business Loan/Grant Program to support and encourage Métis Entrepreneurs to achieve their self-employment journey. Rupertsland Institute's contribution aids with access to additional business planning supports, assists with interest costs, and additional grant programs to ensure successful self-employment for clients accessing the program.

Holden's approach as a personal trainer is one of understanding and flexibility, just as he had been shown throughout his own journey. Working out can be a daunting and often intimidating process for those just starting out. Sitting on a bench in his gym, Holden reflected on this approach.

"I'm trying to be more inclusive, and I want people to feel comfortable coming here."

"Especially people [who] may not be comfortable going into more public settings on their own."

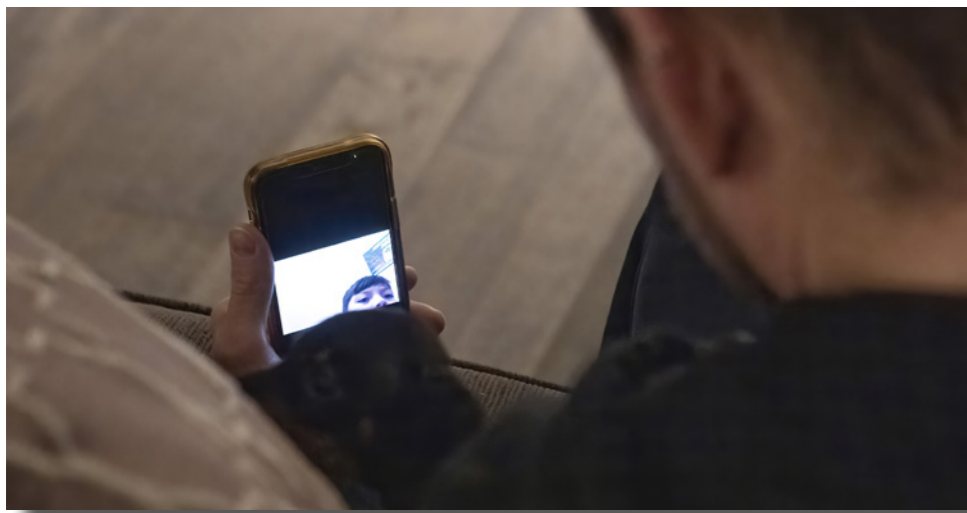
Building self-confidence seemed to be even more of a focus for the business than building muscles. According to Holden, creating a safe space for people to be vulnerable allows healthy routines to become easier to make.

"I also hope too, if and when they decide to stop seeing me — because that's inevitable and it's fine — I want them to be confident and comfortable to go out on their own."

While hoping your clients leave you for a larger commercial gym may not seem like a sustainable business plan, it is one that Holden encourages as the right path if building confidence in people is your goal. Holden proudly says that he has clients every day and in turn his business has achieved self-sufficiency. Beyond the financials, Holden said with pride that his job finally makes a difference in the lives of his clients.

"I want [my clients] to see that living an active lifestyle is an honourable way of life and it's still a very fun fulfilling life."





Holden waved to the small screen on his phone, where the upper half of his son Emmett's face was displayed. The two try to have frequent calls, but the distance wears on Holden. Holden became a father in 2015. While he is no longer with Emmett's mother, his son remains one of the most influential and guiding forces in Holden's life.

"It's tough. I don't see him as much as I want to."

Despite living with his mother in Winnipeg for most of the year, Emmett is deeply loved by Holden and Melissa, and every mention of him lights up their faces. Walking upstairs, Holden walked to the boy's room next to theirs. It was filled with toys and posters typical of a five-year-old boy. Dinosaurs were a prominent feature.

Melissa gestured to a set of bookshelves near his closet, full of a wide range of books.

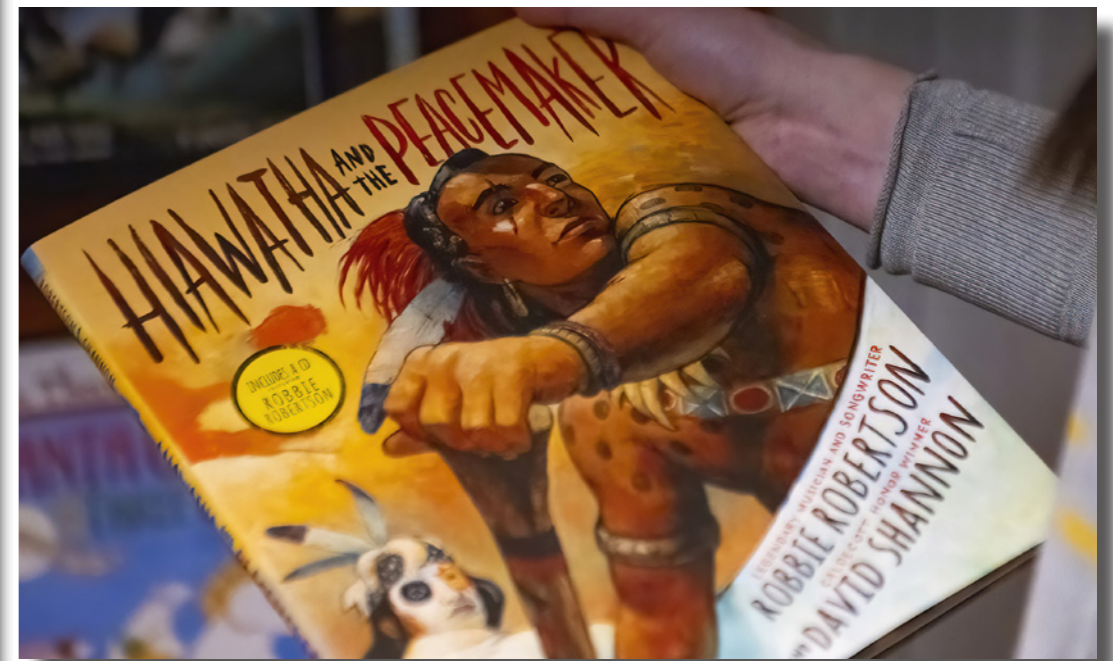
"We think it's important that he not only sees himself in books," Melissa said as she picked up a book that prominently featured an Indigenous child. "But that he sees other kinds of children as well." She gestured to another cover that read Pink is for Boys and Blue is for Girls. The home is a loving home where inclusion and diversity is not only practiced in Holden's gym but in their parenting as well.

Emmett's maternal grandmother was First Nations, making Emmett both First Nations and Métis. Emmett's culture is a source of immense pride for the family. With Holden's Métis heritage being an integral part of his own identity, it's something he is eager to foster in his son. Just as Holden had described his own Indigenous heritage in a matter-of-fact way, he looks forward to having his son embrace his Indigenous heritage the same way.

Holden and Melissa faced many challenges together, and while at times, it was difficult, they never wavered on their own support and support for this family. With Holden, Melissa, Emmett, Bumpy and even the snake, the house and their hearts were full. They clearly had a surplus of love and support, which is a good thing. Melissa is pregnant again.

"I'm due in August"

Melissa said with a smile that made her face shine. Holden could not help but glow as well.







Holden described walking to accept his award in Calgary, during the 2023 Rupertsland Institute Entrepreneur Excellence Awards to a cacophony of cheers and applause. The same wide smile plastered across his face as he described being handed the shadow box award featuring beading from Métis artist Krista Leddy, a sash proudly hung, and a plaque highlighting his business.

“It’s just great to be noticed,”

Holden said, the week after he was awarded the Rupertsland Start-Up Recognition award on Jan 20th, 2023. Holden was selected by the committee to be recognized for his success in starting up his new business. His business is a testament to the spirit and drive that all entrepreneurs strive for.

There must have been some intuition by Holden’s

case manager Avery, in the understanding and advocacy that was shown to him, as the drive and will to succeed was clearly present in him. To undertake the journey of self-employment at the height of the pandemic is brave on its own, but to do so in the fitness industry while gyms across the globe were shutting down is beyond bold. Holden’s personalized, inclusive, and empowering take on the industry was clearly what many people needed.

“It was absolutely worth it.” Avery said with pride about the time, effort, and commitment that she and Rupertsland Institute showed Holden. “It’s not like he just found a regular job and we closed him out, but he actually pursued a self-employment endeavor and is working at that to meet self-sufficiency.”

“He makes me feel comfortable working out,” Maggie said, sweat still beading on her brow. She had just finished her weekly work out and despite the strain evident a wide grin spread across her face.

“I’ve been with him for a year now and it’s been amazing,” she said, while packing up her gym bag. She sees Holden three days a week and the confidence that she showed was a testament to Holden’s approach. “It’s the compassion and care,” she said when asked about what brings her back to Holden, who couldn’t help but blush a little.

No more than 10 minutes after Holden said goodbye to Maggie, his next client of the night walked into the front door and made his way

down to the gym. Melissa made her way to her office for another Zoom call and Holden down the stairs to the gym to start another program. The rhythm of the house goes on.

Holden’s journey to where he is today is one of compassion and care. He was shown compassion and care from the Rupertsland Institute when he needed it the most, and he continues to share that in his business to those who need it the most. With the Avery’s support and most importantly the foresight of RLI, Holden was able to see the potential of success in his dreams. By enabling the success of Holden’s business and by effect the impact Holden has made on his client’s lives, the life changing support from Rupertsland Institute’s Métis Training to Employment programs are multiplied in unknowable ways.

