

Northern



OIL SAND OPERATOR: Bouchier Contracting employee Russell Shott supervises the company's contract on the Imperial Kears project.

Persuasion

Hard work, local expertise and one terrific partnership are behind the success of a little contractor that could

BY MIFI PURVIS

David Bouchier had a good thing going on.

It was 2004 and he was in his 10th year as manager of the Fort McKay Group of Companies. Bouchier helped grow the group's expertise in oil and gas support, the mainstay of the business side of the Fort MacKay First Nation (located near Fort McMurray). In addition to his job, Bouchier ran a small contracting company on the side, called Kan-Dave Contracting.

Over the course of that decade, Bouchier built up the Fort McKay Group's equipment inventory. "When I started, they had three pieces of heavy equipment," Bouchier says. "Over time, I bought about \$40 million worth of machines." He added a few more pieces to Kan-Dave, too.

His wife, Nicole Bourque-Bouchier, had a good job too: senior external affairs representative with Albian Sands. Yep, things were going well for the pair. And then they went and changed it up.

The Bouchiers had been toying with the idea of packing in their jobs and going full time with Kan-Dave in an effort to take the side business to the next level. It wasn't an easy decision. Bouchier had a responsible management position at the Fort McKay Group. He had worked his way up for 10 years, earning the support of his mentors, guys he respected, like mine development manager Jeff Stibbard and CEO of the Fort McKay Group Jim Carbrey.

Bouchier started Kan-Dave in 1998 with the purchase of a single Caterpillar 1978 D6D dozer. He used the machine seasonally, brushing and clearing roads and pads for rigs for Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. "It had no bells and whistles," he recalls. "We had to tarp it up and use a space heater."



David Bouchier

After months of talking themselves in and out of it, the Bouchiers took the plunge. Leaving their jobs to refresh and build Kan-Dave, which they renamed Bouchier Contracting Ltd., was the obvious thing to do. Between the pair of them, they had the perfect complementary skills, and the drive to start a fire under their business.

“Nicole brings the office side of things to the equation,” says Pat Boeker. Now Finning’s general manager of sales and marketing in Edmonton, he first met the Bouchiers when he was in general line sales in Fort McMurray. David could work just about any machine in any conditions and knew what to expect from a job as well as how to accurately price it. Mostly, Boeker recalls, David had that rare drive that few can claim – the commitment to see a job through.

“Guys like Dave always make themselves known,” Boeker says. “He’s incredibly industrious. He’d be up at 5 a.m. and working hard all day. He took over for any sick employee.” It was that drive that caught the attention of his Fort McKay Group mentors, Stibbard and Carbrey, and also of Boeker and his successor, current rep Kelly Black.

When they launched Bouchier Contracting, David bought more equipment from Finning, seven or eight pieces in 2004: D6Rs, D6Ts,

excavators and loaders through an account granted basically on the strength of his and Nicole’s reputation.

“It can be tricky for new companies starting out,” explains Boeker. “You need the big contracts to get dealers to hand over equipment. But you have to demonstrate you have the right equipment to win the contracts.”

Finning’s expertise in the oil sands and track record dealing with David gave the company the confidence to start an account with then-new Bouchier Contracting. “We had no doubt it was a good bet,” says Boeker. “David Bouchier deserves his success. He’s a demanding customer and it wasn’t always easy, but I am so pleased for him and Nicole.”

“Finning helped us build our business,” says Nicole. “Right from the beginning, they sat down with us to come up with a plan. And the plan was basically ‘we’re going to give this to you and we know that – eventually – you’re going to pay us for it.’” They did pay, and they kept buying more equipment. “Sometimes we do a lease-to-own,” Nicole says. “We can recover 80 per cent towards the purchase price.”

Today Bouchier Contracting Ltd. and the Bouchier Group of



CAT FLEET: Bouchier Contracting uses Caterpillar equipment on the Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. Horizon site.



ON THE HORIZON: Bouchier Contracting equipment at work on Canadian Natural's Horizon site, about 26 km north of Fort McKay.

Doubly Blessed

David Bouchier and his wife, Nicole Bourque-Bouchier, have four kids: one his, two hers, one theirs – but really, they all belong together.

Two years ago, Nicole was nearing the end of her pregnancy with the youngest of the clan. With two boys, then 8 and 11, Nicole's experience with infants was a little more recent than David's. But David was going to have to flex his diaper-changing muscles big-time: his daughter Kandis, then 20, was expecting too.

As it turned out, Kandis was a little late and Nicole was a little early. On Sept. 19, 2008, David Bouchier became a father to Blaize and a grandfather to Kayleigh.



At Home in McKay

"We want to see people here succeed," says Nicole Bourque-Bouchier. A member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation from Fort Chipewyan, she has lived in the Fort McMurray and McKay area since she was six. Her husband and partner in the Bouchier Group of Companies, David Bouchier, is a member of the Fort McKay First Nation.

Fort McKay, about 65 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, was first settled about 8,000 years ago. More than 500 people live there now, mainly Chipewyan, Cree and Métis. Until the 1960s, most people lived a traditional lifestyle of hunting and trapping. Many people, including David, still make a point to get out on the land. Hunting, though no longer a life-or-death requirement, is still an important skill.

"We live here, we raise our kids here," says Nicole. "Our workforce is about 65 per cent aboriginal. In this neck of the woods, that's pretty high. Most other companies are averaging about 30 per cent." They help build technical skills in the workforce and give back to the community. Nicole serves on the Keyano College Foundation and is the president of the Northeastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association. David is a band councillor for the Fort McKay First Nation.

Nicole says that in addition to other new plans the Bouchier Group of Companies has, she'd like to see them get into reclamation. "We're aboriginal," she says simply. "We see that the land has changed. We'll still be here to help put it back together."

Companies is a multimillion-dollar venture that employs 325 people and owns a fleet of more than 70 pieces of heavy equipment, including dozers, ploughs, skid steers, loaders, excavators, rock trucks and water trucks. About 90 per cent of it is Caterpillar equipment. According to David, Finning was the clear choice.

"Finning responds quickly. They bring out the oil and lube truck," says David. "We use the SOS Fluid Analysis lab. Once it showed some metal filings in the oil of new machine, so Finning fixed the problem, no cost to us, no downtime. They give us good service on the machines we have."

The Bouchier Group uses those machines to provide top service to their existing customers and long-term contracts that helped them grow through the recession, including continuing work at Canadian Natural Resources Ltd.'s Horizon site. "We were there on day one," says David. And Bouchier has just inked a three-year contract to maintain Imperial Oil's Kearl site. It keeps them busy, and busy is good.

But again, the Bouchiers are messing with a good thing.

"After year five, we're back to working like it's year one again," Nicole says. "We're growing year by year, and now we plan to diversify." The Bouchier Group is hiring a new management team – including a CFO and COO – purchasing new software systems and moving out of crowded rented trailers. Soon they'll move into new digs, a space that's being purpose-built in Fort McKay.

"I'd plan to expand to the next level," says David. "I've got four 40-ton rock trucks and five 30-ton ones. I'd like some 100-tonne 777s to go after those big muskeg removal jobs."

The coming changes will bring upheaval, but no matter. It seems that every time the Bouchiers mess with a good thing, it gets better.