Six Questions for Michael Roberts, President and CEO of First Nations Development Institute

Mike Scutari | December 23, 2022

Michael Roberts (Tlingit) is the president and CEO of First Nations Development Institute, a nonprofit based in Fredericksburg, Virginia, that seeks to improve economic conditions for Native Americans through direct financial grants, technical assistance and training, and advocacy and policy.
He was born and raised in Ketchikan, Alaska, and holds an MBA degree from the University of Washington and a bachelor’s degree in architecture through the environmental design school at the University of Colorado.

From 1992 to 1997, Roberts served as First Nations Development Institute’s chief operating officer and as a research officer. For the next five years, he worked in private equity at Alaska Native corporations and for tribal councils. He returned to the institute in 2002 and was appointed President and CEO in 2005. In 2021, Unboxed Philanthropy Advisors named him one of the 100 most significant individuals in philanthropy committed to innovations in transforming society and advancing justice.

I recently caught up with him on a wintry day in Colorado to discuss his biggest influences, why he’s only marginally optimistic about the state of philanthropy for Native-led organizations, and to hear more about the institute’s forthcoming conservation fund. Here are some excerpts from that discussion, which have been edited for clarity.

**How did you initially land at First Nations?**

I had just got my MBA, and I saw an ad in the paper. I had never been east of Oklahoma, and my plan was to do the interview and see the monuments in D.C. I had no desire to move and assured my wife as much, as we were loving living in Seattle at the time.

Then I met with the founder of First Nations, Rebecca Adamson, who was a kind of rock star among...
philanthropic folks in the ’80s and ’90s. I realized they were doing amazing work and they didn’t have many staff who were fluent in business and finance skills, so I had to convince my wife that we should move to Fredericksburg. Now, it’s an exurb of D.C., but at the time, it was kind of a John Grisham sleepy Southern town [laughs].

**Who are your biggest influences?**

I grew up in a fairly segregated community in Ketchikan and watched my grandfather and my father suffer for being Native in a predominantly white community that controlled the power. I was always struck by why they didn’t stick up for themselves more, and it was only later that I recognized that they didn’t have the economic freedom to do so. It would have cost them their livelihood and probably would have impoverished their families.

They were willing to make huge sacrifices for me to get out of Ketchikan and get an education, and I realized that I should be willing to do it, too. So I came back to First Nations because there were folks like me engaging in Ketchikan and folks who have yet to come needed a voice and a champion.

**What’s the best piece of advice you ever received?**

When I came back to First Nations in 2002, Linetta Gilbert was a program officer at the Ford Foundation. She had two daughters and informally adopted lots of brown sons in the world, and I was lucky enough to be one of them. That network included people like Marcus...
Littles, who’s with Frontline Solutions, and Mark Constantine, who’s now running the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation.

Mark told me that I had two jobs as a nonprofit leader. One was to raise money. The second was to sweat the details, which really resonated with me since I have an architecture background. This advice has helped us build a resilient and trusted organization. We sweat the small stuff and make sure all of our back office works really well — on time, on budget, no drama.

**What makes you optimistic about the state of philanthropy for Native-led communities?**

Honestly? Not much. One of our recent studies found that only 0.23% of philanthropic funds are awarded to Native-led nonprofit organizations, and it’s been that way for 30 or 40 years.

If there is a bright spot, it’s not really in private philanthropy in general — it’s MacKenzie Scott. We’ve been told forever that it is hard for philanthropy to invest in Indian programs and institutions, and she came out of the gate and showed it could be done. She’s a bright spot, but I don’t know if I would put her in the category of private philanthropy because she looks so much different than everybody else in the space.

It’s been interesting to watch philanthropy criticize her way of giving, because I think it threatens their way of doing business. Philanthropy has built an industry, and to have her make life-changing grants to organizations
in her own unique way threatens the narrative that philanthropy knows what it’s doing.

We had one conversation with folks at Bridgespan and one conversation with her philanthropic advisor, and maybe a total of an hour in conversation before we got a grant from her. [The First Nations Development Institute received an $8 million gift from Scott in 2020.] You name the large foundation — I can tell you how many more hours it takes to get money from them, and a lot less money with a lot more restrictions.

I also saw a stat in the Chronicle of Philanthropy that showed that private philanthropy had given more money in the first year of the pandemic to BIPOC-led institutions than in the previous seven. So that would be another reason to be optimistic — the idea that this trend is holding.

**And therein lies the importance of seeing that foundations follow through on those pledges.**

This is kind of the other side of the question that you asked — what makes you pessimistic. The most awful phrase we’ve heard in the last year is that people are getting “racial equity fatigue” in philanthropy. It leaves you crestfallen when you hear phrases like that.

**What’s the last great book you read?**

The book is called “Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own,” by Eddie Glaude Jr., who is a professor at Princeton. I dogeared and underlined so many different passages,
more so than any other book in probably five or six years.

I’m thinking it’d be really cool to compile all of the book recommendations from our Q&A interviewees into one big list.

That would be really interesting. Actually, since you mentioned it, we ask our staff to suggest books for people who are interested in learning more about Indian Country, and created a list of about 40 books on topics like culture, history and politics on the website. It’s one of the most popular pages for visitors to the site.

First Nations will be launching the Tribal Lands Conservation Fund in 2023. Can you talk more about the initiative?

If you look at the way philanthropy funds BIPOC-led institutions for conservation and ecological stewardship work, all you have to do is look at the Green 2.0 report and see that it is pretty pitiful.

Much like the rest of philanthropy, we’ve been trying to get more investment into that space for communities we work with, because we recognize that the lands and resources that natives control in this country are pretty vast. And not only do they have ownership, but they also have tribal jurisdiction, which is an incredible asset, so policy change and other opportunities can really have an impact in the conservation world.

Now, if you look at funding for large conservation groups like the Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife
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Who Created the Grand Foundation, Conservation International, you see that the majority of their funding comes from their base of individual donors. Recognizing this, First Nations will be launching the Tribal Lands Conservation Fund with an emphasis on recruiting individual donors to invest in conservation work in Native communities and Indian-controlled institutions.

We’re really optimistic because of the world’s attention on climate change and the need for different voices. We think the voices in Native communities, who hold huge amounts of traditional ecological knowledge and non-Western science at their disposal, can really add to and change the conversation around conservation.

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