

Community Microfinance Success Story

Meet Jason Baerg: Cree Métis visual artist, educator, and curator



Jason Baerg is a Cree Métis visual artist, educator, and curator specializing in drawing, painting, experimental art film, new media, and public works. Baerg is a successful artist, and he credits his work with Alterna's Microfinancing Program with helping him to get where he is today.

Over his 25 year career, he has exhibited work at the Banff Centre, the Toronto International Art Fair, the Santa Fe Art Institutes, Art Basel in Miami, and Royal Bank of Canada's UK headquarters in London. He helped develop the national Metis arts program for the Vancouver Olympics and founded the Metis Artist Collective. As an educator, Jason holds an assistant professorship at the Ontario College of Art and Design

and acted as an Adjunct Instructor at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.

Early in his career, Baerg received a loan through Alterna's award-winning Community Microfinance program, but that loan provided much more than a financial boost.

"Alterna offered me a small but much appreciated loan when I really needed it," says Jason. "But the money doesn't do the work; the network does."

The network Jason is referring to includes other entrepreneurs, guest speakers, and business people that he met as part of coaching and support that all members of the program participate in. He credits these supports, and program founder, Susan Henry, for helping get his career off the ground.

"I believe that the world changes because of individuals, and I really want to acknowledge Susan as one of those people," he says. "She created the spaces to meet others on the same journey - to network, share experience, share connections, support each other and expand."

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Having the support of an established financial institution provided the bridge that allowed Jason to secure other supporters and funders. The coaching he received helped him develop as a businessperson alongside his growth as an artist.

“The unknown is scary for new entrepreneurs, which is why the network and coaching and support is such an important part of the program – not just the money.”

Now, over 15 years later, Baerg is an established educator and visual artist, but he is still in tune with the challenges faced by young artists and entrepreneurs.

Susan and Jason maintain their relationship to this day. Over the years, they have continued to discuss the gaps and opportunities for Indigenous and arts communities. Jason praises Alterna’s commitment to engaging diverse, underserved communities to find and address their unique needs. Not all groups are the same, and different people need different types of support.

“Susan and I can call each other and we talk about how Microfinance could best work for various people as opportunities arise. We also discuss gaps that keep Indigenous people from actually accessing support mechanisms. I’ve always felt Alterna has done a great job supporting people in marginalized communities to jump through the hoops and find ways to access the supports they need to advance in their goals and objectives.”

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Jason is also quick to praise Alterna’s commitment to community building through the Microfinance program, even though the loans themselves are higher risk than traditional lending products.

“Microloan is a risky envelope. Alterna invests in small businesses that have no equity. They might be single mothers or artists, but they still see individuals as potential leaders - and I want to acknowledge that vision, passion and commitment to community.”

He also highlights the continuing need for support for emerging talent within cities, which are becoming less and less affordable.

“When I think about the impact art has on urban places it’s undeniable that New York is heavily impacted by art, fashion and film. NYC would not be nearly as cool as it is or as attractive it is if it wasn’t a capital of fashion and modern art or didn’t have Broadway,” he observes. “Canadian cities are the same. People fly to Toronto, stay in hotels and eat in restaurants because they went to a Mirvish show, or to the AGO or the ROM. That is why looking at the abstract value of artists in our community is so important.”

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Recognizing the value artists bring to our communities is just one of the ways Alterna sets itself apart from other, traditional financial institutions. “Alterna saw my personal art collection – my work, as assets - and allowed me to use that as collateral of the loan,” says Jason. This has led to great rewards for the communities who benefit from the diverse, innovative and exciting businesses that have developed with the help of Alterna’s Community Microfinance program.

Jason now shares the knowledge gained throughout his career, mentoring emerging artists and entrepreneurs and becoming part of the network of support that was so vital for him. “I would have found my \$5000 - but I also found validation and community; I found others to support me through it. “

To date, Alterna has provided over \$7.1M in micro-loans to a wide range of entrepreneurs, artists, tradespeople, newcomers, and many others, and the program is still going strong.

Learn more about Alterna’s Microfinance Program:

<https://www.alterna.ca/AboutUs/Community/ProgramsResources/>