

Aboriginal Youth Inspiring Others to Brew Success Blending Caffeine and Determination to Turn Struggling Youths' Lives Around



(Left to right, Tawnie Joe at Starbucks; top, Tawnie Joe; bottom, Tawnie Joe and Eric)

Being a female Aboriginal youth in B.C. can be tough, but Tawnie Joe is percolating her way to success. She is the mother of cherubic five-year-old Eric who smiles broadly and often. Eric is happy. At this stage in his development, he is unable to understand his mother's difficult life, and Joe does what she can to shield him from it. He is her motivation for everything.

In December 2016, Joe began working at [Starbucks](#) as a barista. After eight months, she was promoted to shift supervisor. Recently, she won a [Store Partner of the Quarter Award](#) that recognizes one employee's significant contribution to their store. Joe seems to be steeping in success, though some days are better than others.

Joe has overcome more crushing life challenges than most of us could ever imagine, and those challenges are too personal to list in detail. Her challenges included the impact of poverty, insecure housing, and the intergenerational fallout from Canada's residential schools. At times in her past, she turned to substances to numb the pain.

Joe is Lil'wat First Nations. She spent her childhood years growing up in Pemberton living on a reserve. She had typical big dreams as a child; she wanted to be a lawyer. "I wanted all the bad guys to go away," she says.

When Joe was in high school, her and her mom moved often in her mom's attempt to find a suitable partner. They landed in the City of Vancouver. "I saw the res life and then I saw the city life," Joe says. "There are no jobs out there. People have to go to camps or the city to survive."

In the city, Joe graduated high school and then worked random dead-end jobs. In her mid-twenties, she had Eric. Shortly thereafter, she realized she wanted a better life for herself and Eric. Not wanting to rely on her partner for money all the time, she applied to the [Baristas Training Program](#) offered by [PCRS](#) in partnership with [Starbucks](#) and [BladeRunners](#). The Baristas Training Program is an award-winning service that prepares at-risk youth for employment at Starbucks by providing them with support, guidance, and training. Joe knew she needed a new set of skills to attain a more sustainable job, and she knew she liked coffee a lot. "Ever since I quit drinking about three years ago," she says, "coffee has been my go-to."

She applied and was accepted into the Baristas Training Program. During her time in the program, Judy Crooks was the program coordinator, and Tomoko Kajiyama was the program facilitator and job coach. Crooks and Kajiyama say that when Joe first started the program she had a nurturing, motherly quality about her. "She took care of others," Kajiyama says, "and she

was the first to help with lunch prep and end-of-day cleaning.” Crooks adds that Joe isn’t afraid to step out of her comfort zone; when she commits to something, she sees it through.

Joe explains that finding a babysitter was the biggest challenge during the program, but she went on to say that she experienced a number of other challenges, too. She slipped once and cracked her ribs; Eric got so sick that he had to be hospitalized; and her father and grandmother passed away within one week of each other. Her mother passed away, too. Still, she showed up for her work placement at Starbucks in Vancouver’s City Square, where she continues to work.

Karen Zaharuk is Joe’s manager. Zaharuk says that Joe communicated a desire to become a store manager early on in her Starbucks career. Zaharuk says that Joe has stayed focused on that goal, despite a year of personal loss, because she knows what will happen to her life and her son’s life if she gives in. Joe continues to use the skills she learned in the Baristas Training Program to keep her on track to achieve her goals. “She uses the resources available to her,” Zaharuk says. “Everything from childcare to nutrition advice to grants for work shoes, and of course Starbucks benefits. She used grief counselling when her mother passed away and continues to reach out for help and support when she needs it instead of retreating from life.”

For some people, success comes easy. For others, especially marginalized groups, success can be harder to achieve. For female Aboriginal youth, it is harder yet. According to the 2013/2014 First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey ([FNREEES](#)), more than 60 per cent of First Nations youth felt they were not ready to enter the labour market because they did not have the in-demand skills needed for employment. Furthermore, in 2015, the FNREEES found that 25 per cent of First Nations women were

unemployed, with unemployment being highest for youth. With determination and persistence, Joe defied the odds against her.

Now, Joe's aunt and uncle help out with Eric. They pick him up from school and take him to their house until Joe can pick him up. They are also raising their three grandchildren, so Eric has lots of time to socialize and play. Though some days Joe comes home emotionally and physically drained, she never wants Eric to see her struggle. Her life's mantra is to never give up. "It might be hard one day," she says, "but the next day will be a new day."

To all the struggling youth out there, Joe's advice is to always choose a positive thought, and then put it out into the universe, because life is sweet, like a salted caramel mocha with one pump mocha and one pump white mocha — her drink of choice.

