

2020 State of the Band Address

Delivered by: Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin

The Mille Lacs Indian Reservation

Tuesday, January 14, 2020

“We Will Be Good Ancestors”

Aniin, Boozhoo, Good Morning. Mr. Speaker and Members of the Band Assembly. Title 4, Section 6 (i) of our Mille Lacs Band Statutes requires the Chief Executive to present to the Band Assembly an annual State of the Band Address. It is my honor to appear before you today in this legislative session to share the State of the Band.

I am grateful to our Court of Central Jurisdiction, our guests, and especially our Band Members who have joined us to hear about the State of the Band.

Miigwech to Obizan for speaking on our behalf. What makes us unique as Anishinabe, are our ceremonies. Jim Clark used to say, “Niitam Asema” (First, Tobacco). We always start our meetings in this good way.

Miigwech to our distinguished elders, and also to our youth who are here. On that note, Happy Birthday to my sister, Tempy. By the way, she is the younger one. And Miigwech to all my family for being here today.

A special Miigwech to our brave veterans, our Ogitchidaag and Ogitchidaakwe. Our veterans are always ready to serve our community.

Today, as we stand at the threshold of a new decade, we hear the sounds of distant drums. Band elder Jim Clark once wrote, “Our ancestors believed that if we keep bringing out the drums, we would have protection forever. As long as we can hear the drum, as long as the Great Spirit can hear that drum among the Anishinabe people, there won’t be any aggression against our people.”

Amik told the story this way. In the late 1700’s, at the end of the Lakota-Ojibwe wars, a Band of Lakota were camped near the Red River. They had gained strength and were preparing to make final war on our ancestors living here. One night, a being appeared to the Lakota and told them that instead of making war, they were to build a Drum. They were given instructions and songs. They were told to give this Drum to the Ojibwe.

That summer our ancestors were camped on what is now Murray Beach. They could hear the drumming coming from the west. The Lakota were on the way. But when they arrived, they came in

peace, not war. They brought a pipe...and that evening, our warriors from both nations smoked the pipe.

The next day more Lakota arrived. They brought with them the Big Drum. As an offering, they gave the Drum to us.

For the rest of that summer, these Lakota and Ojibwe lived together on that beach, teaching and learning the songs and ceremonies until the long summer days began to shorten, and the Lakota returned west. From that day on, we have been allies.

This Big Drum, given to us by the Lakota people, has been protecting our soldiers who go into battle for centuries. That Drum is used today whenever we send our brave warriors off to fight overseas. Of course we have other Drums as well, and there are other amazing stories.

The sound of the drum still beats slowly and steady across this land. It speaks to our Anishinabe spirit. It even speaks to our babies. The drum feels soothing to them, because it was their first lullaby, even before they were born.

We hear the drum and our spirits rejoice. It is the heartbeat of our people. It beats the story of our ancestors, and the sound of their prayers.

This year, we have a priceless gift for Band Members. It is a book of stories from many of our elders, some who have walked on. It has been a joy to read their wisdom and teachings.

Beatrice Taylor believed that life was about giving to others. She wrote, "All I want to see when I leave this earth is that my children and grandchildren have homes, a good education, and good things like everyone else, but that they are also knowledgeable about their Ojibwe language." Those were her words.

It is what our ancestors prayed for. Mino Bimaadiziwin...the Good Life. They believed that creating a better future for generations they would never even meet...was the most important thing. They were good ancestors.

They fought to preserve our language and culture. For decades, they risked being arrested and sent to prison, just for attending a ceremonial dance. But they did it anyway, under the cover of darkness.

They fought against boarding schools kidnapping our children. Diane Gibbs told me, that when the Indian agents came to Aazhoomog, a whistle would be blown at the first home, giving families time to hide their little ones. Here near Mille Lacs Lake, many of our ancestors refused to move to White Earth even after the Mille Lacs County Sheriff burned down their homes in 1911 and 1920.

Our ancestors were Warriors. One of our veterans and Drum Keepers, Joe Nayquonabe Sr. said, "I learned that we owe our grandparents and ancestors for everything they did for us. My grandparents are watching me, so I behave better. One day I will meet them again, and what will they say to me? We owe it to our ancestors to be good ancestors."

As we enter this new decade, I think about Joe's words, because it seems that is the challenge before us. To be good ancestors for future generations. We will fight the battles we must. For justice, our

rights, and protection of our homeland. Long after those who battle us today are gone, we will still be here. Because we are the people who survived.

We are the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. We hear the drum, and with each loud beat we know that we will not be moved, we will not be defeated and we will never surrender our Reservation.

2019 was a year of growth and progress for the Band. We achieved success in many areas:

- Because of smart decision-making, our businesses earned nearly 3% more revenue than last year.
- 250 Band Members are employed by our casinos, and a record number are in leadership positions.
- We built a state of the art clinic that will expand health, wellness and dental services.
- We completed a new District 2 community center.
- We opened the Meshkawad Community Center in District 3.
- Elder homes were constructed and renovated in each District...
- And one million dollars were given in scholarships to 265 of our students.

There is so much happening right now in Band government that it is impossible to even speak about a small portion of it. So this year, we have prepared an Executive Annual Report for the Band Assembly and the Band Members. Mr. Speaker, I hereby submit this report to the Band Assembly for your review of our work in 2019.

None of this could have been achieved without the hard work of the Band Assembly. Speaker Boyd, and District Representatives Blake, Bruneau and St. John...miigwech for your hard work this past year. Speaker Boyd, you have made transparency and open meetings a hallmark of your leadership. This is an active Band Assembly, and it has been an honor to work with you.

Title 3 of Band Statutes governs the Legislative Branch. Title 4 governs the Executive Branch, which Band Members can find at the end of the annual report on your table. Of the duties listed for the Chief Executive, actually running the programs and services is not one of them. Band statutes assign those duties to Commissioners, who make day-to-day decisions.

Of the thirteen duties listed for the Chief Executive, besides supervising the commissioners, the most time-consuming duty is conducting external relations with other governments. This includes leading Band efforts to defend and protect our tribal sovereignty, and our right to healthcare, education, housing and other programs. It includes working with the State and the federal government. And it means leading our efforts to protect and defend our homelands.

At the State level last year, we worked closely with champions like Representative Mary Kunesh-Podein, who is Lakota. Rep. Kunesh-Podein and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan led state efforts to create the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's Task Force in Minnesota.

Representative Melissa Hortman, our Speaker of the State House, held the first-ever Tribal Sovereignty Day at the State Capitol. State lawmakers were trained about tribal sovereignty, our rights and our shared history. Speaker Hortman is here today – Miigwech, Madame Speaker, for making this historic day happen – and for attending today!

One year ago, a great man took office as our new Governor. Governor Tim Walz has already made huge progress for Indian tribes in Minnesota. I was very proud of the Governor when he selected Peggy Flanagan as his running mate. Together, they have made a big mark on improving the state's relationship with Indian tribes.

One of the Governor's first acts was to sign a new, stronger Executive Order requiring state agencies to consult with us before doing anything that would impact us, and it requires that all state leaders and employees to go through a 2-day Tribal State Relations training on a reservation. Mille Lacs just hosted a training last week.

The Governor also achieved new funding for tribal contract schools. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's Task Force has begun. The State is providing \$2 million a year for tribes to fight opioid addiction through traditional healing, and there is so much more.

Most important...Governor Walz has treated us as equals. He has met with us more in one year than most other Governors did during their entire six years, and he even required his entire Cabinet to go through the Tribal State Relations training, including himself.

He is a former school teacher, a veteran, and he is a leader who understands exactly what treaties mean... because when he was a U.S. Congressman, he had a sworn duty to uphold them.

He is the first Governor to ever attend a State of the Band Address on the Mille Lacs Reservation. Miigwech, Governor, for being here today, and for your words and commitments you made earlier!

The Chief Executive also has a duty to work with the U.S. Congress and the Administration. The Congress has immense power over Indian Affairs, that can be used for good or bad. On the good side, the Congress has sometimes used this power to protect tribes like passing important laws like Self-Governance and the Tribal Law and Order Act.

We are fortunate to have a strong bipartisan team in charge of Indian appropriations: Congresswoman Betty McCollum, a Democrat from Minnesota, and Congressman Tom Cole, a Republican from Oklahoma.

In addition, we now have two strong American Indian women in the Congress: Representatives Deb Haaland and Sharice Davis. They know our issues, and what makes them so special, is that we can relate to them.

We also have strong leaders from Minnesota. Senator Smith serves on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and has championed opioid legislation. We have a new Congressman for our District, Representative Pete Stauber. Within just weeks of taking office, he held a dinner meeting with tribal leaders at Fond du Lac to hear our issues. That was impressive.

In the Presidential race, of the twenty Democrats who first announced they were running for President, Senator Amy Klobuchar is polling in the top 5. Right after she announced, she called Mille Lacs and asked for our advice in putting together her Indian policy. If you read her policy, it is very strong on tribal sovereignty.

On occasion, the Chief Executive's work includes chasing down federal officials. On occasion, when there is national meeting somewhere and certain federal officials we need to speak with are on the agenda, sometimes our team asks me to attend that meeting primarily to try and catch that official

in the hallway after they speak, so we can talk about an issue, or remind them that we are still waiting for an answer to a question we already asked.

Making sure that Mille Lacs has a voice at the table is essential. One example of that is the Tribal Nations Leadership Council. It includes twelve tribal leaders who advise the U.S. Attorney General about

law enforcement and justice issues in Indian country. This came in handy during our law enforcement crisis, when the county attorney seemed to stop prosecuting most crimes committed on the reservation.

Our close contacts with Interior were also important during that period, when the county attorney wrote to every county in Minnesota and gave them false information, saying that our officers no longer had police powers, and threatened our officers with arrest for impersonating police if they did their jobs.

We were in close contact with federal officials in Washington, who sent the county attorney and the sheriff their own letter, warning them not to mess around with our officers, who were also federal deputies. Every day, we rely on our networking and contacts to protect the Band.

Our other work in Washington included collaborating to get federal funds set aside for tribes to target opioid addiction and treatment. This bill was called the "SUPPORT Act", and has resulted in new funding for our Four Winds Treatment Center.

Another priority was pressing the Congress to reauthorize the Tribal Law and Order Act, including a provision allowing Indian tribes to issue trespass orders, so we can exclude dangerous criminals from coming onto our reservation. After a lot of work, many meetings on Capitol Hill, and Senator Tina Smith championing the effort, I'm pleased to say this bill passed the Senate in 2019 and is awaiting House action.

The Tribal Law and Order Act allows for attorneys to step into the role of Assistant U.S. Attorney, in certain cases. But they have to be trained. Due to the backlog of cases in the U.S. Attorney's office, the Band worked hard to get increased funding so our Solicitor General could be trained to serve as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in certain cases.

Today, I'm happy to announce that Solicitor General Dogeagle will soon be authorized to prosecute federal crimes in federal court that are committed on our reservation. This is an historic exercise of our tribal sovereignty.

On Economic Development, we pushed for an extension of a New Markets tax credit before it was set to expire at the end of 2019. We actually used this tax credit to finance Eddy's Resort several years ago, and the housing development in Hinckley. We need the tax credits to continue.

We also pushed the Congress to change federal tax laws for our young people. We fought for new language that protects young Band members under 24 years of age from an unfair tax penalty when they first use their trust fund.

Then in November, something interesting happened. I was invited by Senator Klobuchar to attend an event called the "Women's Power Breakfast" in the cities on November 25th, when I received a call from my staff, saying that Attorney General Barr's office was urgently trying to reach me. He

wanted Mille Lacs at a meeting in his office the very next day. The message said it was about Missing and Murdered Indian women, which has been a priority of mine.

I had not packed for an overnight trip, but urgent phone calls from the U.S. Attorney General don't happen every day. So I rushed to the airport, jumped on the next plane, and did some speed-shopping for a change of clothes. Monday evening, I found out that this meeting was not in Attorney General Barr's office – it was in the Oval Office, and the President would be there. He would be signing an Executive Order creating a federal Task Force on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

Six tribal leaders had been invited, and four of us were able to attend, including Chairman Kevin Dupuis and Roger Smith from Fond du Lac. At first, we were told we would only witness the signing. When we arrived, we were told to stand behind the President...and that the shortest person should stand right behind him. That happened to be me. After he put his pen down, he began thanking each of us for coming. He said, "We have with us Melanie Benjamin, Chief Executive of the Mille Lacs Band of..." But he could not pronounce Ojibwe. Behind him, I quietly said, "Ojibwe...It's Ojibwe". When he suddenly turned around and said, "Would you like to say something? Could you say a few words? Come here, Melanie."

I'll tell you what, that was a surprise, because I had not planned on saying anything. But I did, and talked about the importance of doing something about our Missing and Murdered Indian women. Then the other leaders were also invited to speak, but the only reason that happened was because he could not pronounce "Ojibwe".

The Mille Lacs Band is moving ahead, and making progress. We are planning for future generations, as our ancestors wanted. I will now touch on a few of the highlights and challenges from our annual report.

In the Department of Health and Human Services, our new clinic is finally finished, and its doors will open soon, offering more services. This project would not have happened, were it not for former Commissioner Samuel Moose and his efforts to get it off the ground. Miigwech, Sam. (clap)

In 2019, Commissioner Nicole Anderson made big improvements to serving patients. Through a reorganization, we have doubled the number of patients seen daily, and even started a walk-in policy. Over 80 walk-ins were served the first month.

We are making progress in treating addiction. Over the past year, over 400 Band member clients received Rule 25 assessments, over 250 Band Members received out-patient treatment and aftercare. And Four Winds Lodge, our 6-week recovery program in Brainerd, treated 160 patients.

The biggest challenge we face in Health and Human Services today is the high rate of children being placed outside the home by the courts. Social Workers have the highest rate of burnout of any field, as high as 75% in some studies. We have 15 social worker positions, but only 9 are currently filled.

This is a crisis. The Band must devote more resources to this issue - our children must be our top priority. I have ordered an overhaul of this area. A higher salary scale for social workers has been approved, so we can recruit and hire the best social workers in Minnesota. Also, Family Services will be redesigned. When parents have done what the court requires, and the home is safe, we must focus on family reunification, but we need our social work positions fully staffed.

For 2020, I have also directed Commissioner Anderson to open a Women's Halfway House, and continue training and hiring Band Members as Service Coordinators and Recovery coaches. The priority will be placing counselors in Districts 2 and 3.

I also want to say a word about our Band foster families. Even when a birth parent is unable to care for a child any longer, that child will almost always feel an emotional bond with their birth parents that is unbreakable. Our Band foster parents make sure the child still gets that emotional connection, but in a safe environment...by maintaining some connection with their birth parents, extended family and culture. Miigwech to all our Band foster parents, who care for our children and ensure they stay in our community. You are our heroes!

2019 was a big year for Education as well. Under Commissioner Joyce Shingobe, leadership changes were made at Nay Ah Shing schools. We have been seeing so much progress in our schools. Student achievement is increasing, and our cultural programs are growing.

In higher education, over 40 Band Members earned their Technical Certificates, Associate of Arts Degrees, Master's Degrees, and PhD's. Also, first generation descendants with a Band Member parent are now eligible for scholarships. Miigwech to this Band Assembly for restoring this benefit.

For 2020, I have directed Commissioner Shingobe to work on opening an Alternative Learning Center at Nay Ah Shing. The goal will be to increase the number of high school graduates by recruiting and enrolling Band Members up to age 22, who dropped out of high school.

Our Community Development Department was busy in 2019 as well. One of its duties is running Mino Bimaadiziwin, which provided temporary emergency housing to 111 Band Members last year. 30% of those who left moved into permanent housing, and it is our goal to increase that number.

Over 3 million dollars was spent on building new elder and disabled homes in each District, and renovating existing homes. 23 homes were reconditioned and turned over to the rental program. The Band's zero percent home loan program has been a great success helping Band Members achieve the dream of home ownership. Because of these loans, 330 Band Members own their homes right now, and over 90% are up to date with their payments.

This year, the priority is to get final approval for a rent-to-own policy, so that Band Members who are renting homes, and who want to stay there, can achieve their dream of home ownership. We look forward to working with the Band Assembly on completing this policy.

In economic development, our commercial hotels are doing well, along with our two casinos. But we need to focus on doing well everywhere, across all three districts.

For 2020, I have directed Commissioner Nayquonabe to bring sustainable, well-paying jobs to District 2, and invest to provide infrastructure and job creation.

In the Department of Natural Resources, planning for the impact of climate change has been a focus. Warming temperatures are changing everything. Birds are returning sooner, and deer are breeding sooner – sometimes before they have enough to eat. One hundred years ago, 90% of trees around Mille Lacs were maple. Today, only 30% are maple, because they are moving north.

Climate change is causing flooding, which harms crops, and food prices will increase. Of great concern is our Manoomin, which is very sensitive to any change in water levels.

Something called “climate migration” is already happening in America, with more Americans choosing to relocate to higher, cooler lands with more water resources. It’s different for us. As Anishinabe, we have no place to migrate to. Our lives are here, on our homelands in each District. Our burial sites cannot be moved. Our Treaty Rights to hunt, fish and gather are not portable. We need to prepare for the future. The good news is, we have already begun.

The old “Sod-Busters” property has been converted into a tribal farm, named “Lenny’s Orchard” in honor of the late Leonard Sam. It began producing fresh fruits and vegetables last summer, and is being expanded. Best of all, our youth from the Widoo program who helped out became completely hooked on gardening. They are learning how to grow and harvest food, like our ancestors did. We have also acquired a fully functioning ranch in Morrison county, where Band Members will learn about cultural growing techniques.

Unfortunately, we also face a soil crisis. Experts predict that there may be only 60 years left of good soil for growing food. To prepare for this, the Band started an Aquaponics program. Aquaponics combines raising fish with growing plants in water. We can grow food year-round...without wasting even one drop of water. This has already begun.

The Manidoog gave us an entire pharmacy, right outside on our homelands, and we are re-learning about our plants. At a facility in Wahkon, Band Members can now get traditional plant medicines for things like arthritis or anxiety.

Our fisheries program is thriving. This year, our little hatchery produced over 1 million walleye fry, which were stocked into our ponds. 21,000 fingerlings were stocked into 4 area lakes. One of these lakes will be a fishing pond which only elders and youth will be allowed to use for outdoor fun together.

Our Food Sovereignty program will create exciting new jobs for Band Members. I am directing the Commissioner of Natural Resources to continue growing this program.

But it will not be Bradley Harrington performing that role. Governor Walz now requires every state agency to have a Tribal Liaison position. The State DNR just created that position to advise the DNR on tribal policy.

In a major development for Minnesota tribes, and especially for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, it is my honor to announce to you, that Bradley Harrington Junior has just accepted the offer to serve as the new Tribal Liaison for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. He will soon begin advising the State DNR. His new Supervisor, Commissioner Sarah Strommen, is here today as well. Welcome, Commissioner Strommen.

It will be a privilege for the State to have Brad working with you! Please make sure he’s treated well, or I will be coming down there to bring him back!

Administration, led by Commissioner Melissa Boyd and our new Assistant Commissioner Pete Nayquonabe, leads Human Resources and the Aanjibimaadizing Program, which means "changing lives" in our language. This program helps Band Members with education, training, work experience, and support services to improve their lives. The goal is to help participants to end dependency on government assistance through getting jobs and improving job readiness.

Just 100 years ago, 70% of Mille Lacs Band Members spoke only Ojibwe, and only 30% spoke any English. Today, 100% of us speak English, and only a handful are fluent in Ojibwe. Many people of my generation do not speak Ojibwe because the boarding school system punished our parents and grandparents if they used the language. In other cases, the BIA relocated many of our parents to big cities, which separated us from other Ojibwe speakers. So we grew up speaking English.

Wiping out our language was a strategy of the colonizers to assimilate us into American culture. But we now have a plan to preserve and teach our language forever. The Band has achieved federal approval through Aanjibimaadizing Program to create an exciting Ojibwe language teaching system, which is creating jobs for Band Members.

When people would talk about how we are losing our language, Jim Clark used to say, “you can’t lose something that you are giving up.” Through this program, we are going to get it back ... and give it to our Band Members again. Chief Executive Art Gahbow’s goal was to one day have Ojibwe spoken throughout the government center and in meetings. With this new project, we might reach that goal some day. Future Band Members will be able to learn our language, and our ceremonies can continue forever.

This is how we will be good ancestors.

There are two issues in the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe that Band Members need to be informed about. The first deals with a resolution passed by the TEC last winter. Some of our Band trust lands include not just the name of the Mille Lacs Band on the title...but also the name of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

Last winter, the TEC voted to pursue legislation that will correct the title on these lands by removing the MCT from the title. This is very important to Mille Lacs and other Bands. There are discussions happening at the TEC...which Band Members will receive a letter about, in the near future.

Second, in 2017, the TEC voted to hold a Constitutional Convention to consider changes to the constitution. Our Band Member delegates have been working very hard, attending many meetings with delegates from the other Bands, and meeting on their own.

Many of our delegates are concerned about this process. They have stated they believe that the entire Band should be part of any decisions going forward, rather than just their small group. They have proposed an all-day conference just for Mille Lacs Band Members on this topic in the near future. It is very important that Band Members be part of this conversation. Delegates have a table outside, and I encourage you to visit them and find out more.

At this time, would each of our delegates please stand if you are able? These Band Members are looking out for our Band. They are new warriors. Let’s give them a round of applause. Miigwech!

I also want to acknowledge our other new Warriors who always contribute to our community: This Christmas, our local chapter of Women Empowering Women for Indians Nations cooked up food, collected gifts, and went to Mino Bimaadiziwin. Families had a nice meal and the children received gifts. Miigwech to our WEWIN members, and to Valerie Harrington for organizing this event.

Our third grade students at Nay-Ah-Shing showed that even kids can be warriors for our community. They did a food drive right before Christmas, then they packed up the food, loaded the bus and delivered it to our Food Shelf.

Don Eubanks is a warrior for Social Justice, by doing important work to educate people in Minnesota and the Nation about issues of racism and identity ...through his radio show, "Counter Stories" on National AND Minnesota Public Radio. This is wonderful service that will benefit American Indian people!

We have many other new Warriors who work every day for our community, some who just work hard to brighten the day of an elder. Many elders bring up Robert Mitchell, who drives them to their medical appointments, and talk about how kind he is...how he always offers to help them with little chores and always manages to lift their spirits. I know there are hundreds of other Band members who are always there to help. Miigwech to all of you for what you do for the Band.

At the State of the Band Address in 2015, I was happy to announce that for the first time in decades, crime had decreased on the Mille Lacs Reservation. Then suddenly, in July of 2016, Mille Lacs County revoked our law enforcement agreement, and claimed tribal police had almost no authority. It seemed our neighborhoods changed almost overnight. We began a period of the highest rate of violence, drug related crime and death we have ever known in our modern history.

Our Reservation became known as a police-free zone by criminals from all over, who had no fear of tribal police, and moved into some of our homes. Elders were threatened, and many children will forever carry the scars of violence and death. That year, Mille Lacs County had the highest crime rate of all 87 counties in Minnesota.

We begged previous state officials for help. Promises were made, and broken, and except for offering mediation, no help came. We finally accepted that we were on our own. We did the only thing left we could do. In 2018, we filed suit against Mille Lacs County in federal court.

Whenever I tell this story to those who are not from here, they ask why. Why did the county end our law enforcement agreement? We found that out right away, when the county refused to reinstate the agreement unless we agreed to act as if our reservation created by the Treaty of 1855 no longer existed.

The second question they ask, is...with such high crime...why would they replace 2 dozen highly skilled tribal police officers who know our families and culture...with just 6 county deputies who are strangers to us? The answer is, to protect their legal argument about our reservation no longer existing. They said our police had almost no authority in Minnesota without their permission.

The third question is always the hardest to answer. Why would former state officials do nothing to help Minnesota citizens who were victimized by crime and violence? That answer is as dark as the racism that has always existed in government institutions. Certain politicians and their advisors were afraid of losing votes. In a meeting with one of our government affairs staff, a former state elected official not only admitted this was true - he was proud of it.

Our people were threatened and harassed and children were traumatized, because of a political calculation. While the state refused to help us, the federal government stepped in. The Secretary of Interior made an emergency trip to our reservation, and approved federal law enforcement were sent help us. Our police were also deputized by the federal government.

With prayer and ceremony, and help from our Trustee, we managed to get through that period until the agreement was reinstated in 2018, and our tribal police were back in full force. In May, the U.S. Attorney announced a major federal indictment. Eight people were arrested and charged with ten counts of conspiracy to distribute heroin on the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation. They are facing federal prison. Last week, another person was indicted and is going to federal prison.

Those particular drug dealers are now gone from our reservation. And we will not stop until we get rid of every drug dealer, no matter who they are. Miigwech to the U.S. Attorney Erica MacDonald and Assistant U.S. Attorney Deidre Aanstad for their cooperation and outstanding work.

At every table in this room today, there is someone who lost a loved one due to drugs or drug-related violence. We are a community that has experienced the worst kind of racism. And the worst kind of silence from those who were supposed to be our allies...all because one group of county commissioners say our reservation no longer exists.

At the federal level, there is no question. Democrats and Republicans agree that our reservation boundary exists. The Bush Administration supported us in 2000. The Obama Administration wrote a legal opinion saying our reservation has always existed. Even the Trump Administration has said our reservation exists. The only parties that disagree are Mille Lacs County and the former Attorney General, who took that position in hopes of getting votes.

During the civil rights era, a great man once said, "It is time to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forth-rightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." That man was Hubert H. Humphrey. Minnesota was once a leader on civil rights. But on Indian policy, Minnesota has been an outlier. There are 573 Indian tribes spread across America. It is not normal...in this day and age...for any state to be in the business of trying to terminate an Indian tribe's reservation. It does not have to be this way in Minnesota, and it should not.

But I have hope for the future, because I have hope and confidence in Governor Walz, Lt. Governor Flanagan, and Attorney General Ellison. We will continue fighting for our basic right to our homelands, and invite them to our struggle.

Our federal lawsuit will take years to resolve. While the Band has behaved with honor, the county has engaged in a public relations attack on us, by spreading false information in the newspaper, trying to build fear and mistrust among our non-Indian neighbors.

To our friends and neighbors, I have this to say. There are 11 Indian reservations in the State of Minnesota, and thousands of non-Indian people who live within those reservation boundaries who have never experienced what Mille Lacs County wants you to believe will happen. Federal law is very clear. If you live within our reservation and are not a Mille Lacs Band Member, we cannot tax you. We cannot zone you. We cannot force you into our courts. If you are arrested, the case goes to the state or federal government. If you live within our boundary, you do not lose any rights you have as a county or state citizen.

The fact is, our reservation HAS existed since 1855, and we have never once attempted any of these things. The County is not telling you the truth. They are just trying to justify raising your taxes to pay the legal bill for their obsession with getting rid of our reservation.

The Mille Lacs Band wants nothing more than to live in peace, and be good neighbors. We have been good neighbors and we will continue to do so, no matter what.

Many elders talk about how they feel about our homelands. When the health of our mom, Baashking, began to fail, my sisters and brothers and I took care of her in shifts so she could stay in her home. For awhile, she had to spend many weeks in the nursing home in Onamia. I would visit her almost every day. Nearly every time she saw me, she would say, "Okay, Mel, let's go. It's time to bust me out of here."

My mom was the only Anishinabe elder staying at the memory care unit at that time. But one day she looked at me with clear eyes and told me why she wanted to go home. She said, "You and I are different from everyone else here. We are the kind of people who need to feel the ground underneath our feet."

I heard a Pawnee woman said it another way. She said, "I take my shoes off, stand in the water, eyes on the lake, feel the water move with my feet and my soul. This place grounds me. This land knows my name."

That is how many Anishinabe feel about our home. The Manidoog in the lakes, in the trees, in the plants and earth all around us know who we are. They know our names. Each of us were meant to be born...and to be where we are. Across all three districts, the land knows our name. We are moved by a sense of joy when the maple sap runs, when the trees bud out, when the birds return.

Nelson Mandela said it another way. When talking about the racism and conflict that terrorized his homeland of South Africa, and the after-math and scars his people still bore, he talked about the link between ancestral lands and the identity of his people. He said, "that spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland explains the depth of the pain we all carried in our hearts..." when his country was torn apart by violence. Mille Lacs Band Members can relate to that.

The United States once tried to rob us of our language, our religion, and our children and families. They robbed us of our land, and the state tried to stop us from hunting and fishing and feeding our families, and stole our medicines. They federal government gave us constitutions with enrollment laws that were intended to reduce our size, and eventually enroll us out of existence. All of these things were done to achieve one thing: To rob us of our ability to imagine a future.

They failed. Band Members young and old are emerging as warriors, ready to fight for our traditional ways, our language, our safety and our homelands. We are a community of artists, musicians, and business people. We are educators, writers, scientists, counselors and health providers. We are wildlife experts and chefs and dancers. We are carpenters, mechanics, and welders. We are the youth, we are the workers, and we are the retired. We are the warriors who will stand and fight for future generations.

Band Members, together, we will finish the job our ancestors started. We will fulfill the promise to future generations we have yet to meet --- that these lands will forever be our home. We are the non-Removables and together, we will face our battles and we will win.

And when future generations look back on what we achieve together, they will say...that we were good ancestors!

Bizindawiyeg. Chi Miigwech!