

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians 40th Annual State of the Band Address Delivered by Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin, January 9, 2024

Boozhoo, Aaniin, Anishinabeg-dook. Mino gizhigd noongoom Mandamin indizinakaz, Melanie Benjamin indigoo. Mr. Speaker, members of the Band Assembly, and Honorable Justices, welcome to the 40th Annual State of the Band Address. Miigwech to Obizaan for speaking on our behalf, so we can begin in a good way; miigwech to the Ceremonial Drum and Waabishkibines for setting the dish; miigwech to the Mille Lacs All Veterans for posting the flags and to the singers today.

Welcome tribal leaders, honored guests, employees, and friends. And most important, welcome to my fellow citizens of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

As in past years, there is an annual report on your table. So much has been accomplished in 2023, that there is not enough time to talk about it all in just one hour. The annual report is a detailed accounting of the programs and services that the Executive Branch provided in 2023. Band members, please take this home. Look through it. There could be services or programs that you don't know about that you might be eligible for.

Mr. Speaker and members of the Assembly, enormous work went into this report. By delivering this report to you, I have carried out my statutory duty to inform you about the State of our Band. It is now your duty, as legislators, to learn what is in this report. Let's schedule a future meeting with the commissioners so you can ask any questions you still have. Miigwech to you for all our work together this past year.

This is a historic day. Today marks the 40th anniversary of the first State of the Band Address, delivered by our great Chief Executive Arthur Gahbow in 1984.

Forty years! This year also marks the 25th Anniversary of our 1837 Treaty Rights victory in the U.S. Supreme Court.

I stand before you today with a profound sense of gratitude, pride, and responsibility as we look back on the amazing journey we have taken together as a sovereign Indian nation. Over the centuries, we faced many challenges — even attempted genocide. But today, we gather here not only as survivors but as architects of our own destiny.

Everywhere we look we can see progress. From our growing economy to our educational achievements; from language preservation to the health and well-being of our people. We must be the architects of a future that not only honors the dreams of our ancestors, but builds upon those dreams, expanding the horizons of possibility for all.

2023 was a huge year for the Band, so I want to dive right into summarizing our biggest achievements on your behalf.

The Aanjibimaadizing program continues to be one of the best in the United States.

496 youth participated in Aanji last year.

704 adult Band members were served by programs such as workforce training and development. They received help with overcoming barriers to employment, finding child care, getting education, and family support.

People are getting jobs and succeeding. Some clients are now making \$54 an hour in construction jobs!

Aanji has also helped expand our language use through several programs. Many years ago, Elder Jim Clark said that he could remember way back when he was young, when there was talk about how important it was for all our people to learn English. He said that now — in just two generations — we had turned 360 degrees. He said that now, we need our people to learn Ojibwe.

Over all of the years I have served as Chief Executive, I have tried to make sure we provide opportunities to learn our language. We have tried many new programs, but the most successful might be our Rosetta Stone partnership. Rosetta Stone has put our language on the map! Tribes and people all over the Great Lakes region — in Canada and even in California — are using our Rosetta Stone program.

This only happened because someone took a bold step. Baabiiyaw Boyd fought hard for this, and took a few punches along the way, but her work was an example of doing something new and bold and following our teachings. And in case you haven't heard, the Disney corporation is now making a Star Wars movie in our Ojibwe language!

In the area of education, across the nation, and right here at home, students are struggling with mental health and wellness. Last year I directed that we work to provide more mental health services to our youth. Through a partnership with Health and Human Services, our middle and high school students can now access therapists and wellness coaches at school. We have made it easier for our youth to get help when they need it.

Oshki-Maajitaadaa, which is our Alternative Learning program, is growing and graduating more students.

Last but not least, we broke ground on a new early childhood center in Hinckley to serve our future warrior Band members.

I am pleased to report that we have a new Commissioner of Administration. Commissioner Samuel Moose. For those of you who do not know Sam, he spent 17 years working for the Mille Lacs Band. Fourteen of those years were in commissioner positions in Health and Human Services and Community Development.

Every now and then, elected leaders make poor decisions. Several years ago, a very poor decision was made by a previous Band Assembly. And Sam became available for hire. From the moment the news hit the Moccasin Telegraph, other employers were beating down Sam's door with competing offers. He could have gone anywhere, but he wanted to be close to home. Our loss was Fond du Lac's gain. Sam spent the past seven years leading their Health department.

But after years of success at Fond du Lac, we were able to convince Sam to return home and work for the Mille Lacs Band again. If I have not embarrassed Sam already, I know I am going to embarrass him now, because Sam is a very humble person. So Sam... just tune out for a few minutes while I brag about you!

Sam Moose knows how to get things done. As a young Commissioner, Sam became a national leader in the Self-Governance movement with the Indian Health Service. Sam was the visionary behind our beautiful new clinic in District I, and providing clinic services in Districts II and III.

Sam is an outstanding advocate for Band members at the state Capitol, and with the U.S. Congress and Administration. Sam is well-known in the United States as a national leader in Indian health and highly respected by state and federal officials.

In fact, the federal government has him serving on three national boards. And he is also trusted by tribes nationwide. He serves on the National Indian Health Board and the American Indian Cancer Foundation. Sam is a thoughtful, mature, highly educated leader. He has brought stability back to the Band and we are so fortunate to have him here.

Some of my pride about Sam is because I am the one who recruited him as a leader almost 20 years ago. I saw talent in Sam while he was working at the DNR, and decided he was somebody to watch. When I learned that Sam had his degree, I recruited him for leadership. I chose Sam as a commissioner.

Band members, we are very fortunate to have Sam Moose as our Commissioner of Administration. Welcome home, Sam.

In Administration this year, operations and services were streamlined, which means we now have more jobs available than ever. Please check the job postings often, because if you are a responsible person who is willing to work, we have a job for you.

In Health and Human Services last year, I spoke about our need for more foster families to come forward. We need so many more. We currently have 77 children in Band custody cases, and 81 children in county cases. But we only have 32 Band licensed foster homes. We need more foster care families, especially relatives.

I want to acknowledge a foster family who I recently talked with. This couple has been a foster family for over 30 years to our Band children, sometimes having up to 20 kids at a time. They have committed their lives to our children. They spoke to me about how being foster parents can be hard at times, but it is also so rewarding. When this couple talked about seeing the kids they fostered grow up into healthy, successful adults, there was pure joy on their faces. If you have room in your home and your heart, please think about becoming a foster home.

In Natural Resources this past year, much of my time and Commissioner Kelly Applegate's time has been focused on a proposed nickel mine. The site is just 1.3 miles away from the Round Lake neighborhood in District II. Protecting our people, land, water, and resources from the possible threats of a nickel mine has been a top priority.

On March 14, 2023, we launched our Water Over Nickel campaign to spread the word about prioritizing clean water over nickel mining. Many Band members were excited about the billboards we have put up, and our yard signs are in high demand. We are also gaining many new allies from the surrounding communities, the state, and the nation.

Commissioner Applegate and I, along with our team, have been in constant talks with the Department of Energy, the Army Corps of Engineers, the United States Geological Survey, and the Department of Interior to make sure the government upholds its trust responsibility to protect our homelands. I have had meetings with the U.S. Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of Interior, and the White House about this issue — and of course Members of Congress.

We have yet to see any science or data to show that nickel mining can be done safely. Yet the mining company continues to expand its exploration activities beyond its original plans and beyond the original area outlined in the application it submitted. Indian country has seen this before: A modest proposal that quickly swells in size and scope, leaving damage in its wake.

When Minnesotans hear that nickel mining is the solution to creating a clean and green economy, I encourage everyone to remain cautious and skeptical. Every day, we see new alternatives to support electric vehicles. Research has showed that Metal recycling could meet between 37% to 91% of the demand for these minerals. Other products like lithium are options, too.

Also, this is not just a Mille Lacs or Minnesota issue. The entire world is watching this project and international companies and organizations are involved with pushing it forward. So, we have made sure that our strategy also includes educating the international community.

The Band was invited in September to talk about environmental justice at a Carbon Capture Conference in Iceland. The mining company was also there, and on the agenda. People from across the globe who knew about the Tamarack project did not know that we existed or had concerns about this project. For some, that information was a game-changer. Later, people wanted to know how they could learn more, or even help.

In late November, I received a call from the former President of the National Congress of American Indians, who is a friend. She knew about our Water Over Nickel campaign. She called to ask if I could help represent NCAI at a meeting of the United Nations: It was the U.N.'s 2023 Climate Change Conference in Dubai.

NCAI sponsored the trip, so I agreed to attend. I joined over 300 Indigenous delegates from around the world for what was called the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change.

Under the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we are stakeholders with international rights. The purpose of this forum was to make sure Indigenous rights are not side-lined during climate change negotiations. I made sure to share our concerns about protecting our water.

There were other Indigenous women leaders from the Pacific Islands who talked about how oceans are rising, and if this world continues as it is, their communities will no longer exist.

Here at home, our Band is also looking at our future existence through the lens of enrollment. Right now, we have just under 5,000 enrolled Mille Lacs Band citizens. The Minnesota Chippewa Tribe has been talking about blood quantum requirements. There will be a referendum vote at some point in the future when you will be asked to decide whether you want to change enrollment criteria.

I think every Band member who is a grandparent has at least one grandchild who cannot get enrolled with the Mille Lacs Band, due to blood quantum requirements.

In 2014, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe had a blood quantum study done that predicted what would happen to each Band's population if no changes were made to the current blood quantum rules.

That study predicted that our Mille Lacs Band enrollment would continue to climb until the year 2038 — another 14 years from now — but would begin to sharply decline after that. Eventually, we could lose 60% of our members, but other Bands were predicted to lose 90% of their membership and one day might not exist.

At one of the many community meetings I held on this topic, a Band member asked about updating that study from 2014. That was a great idea, so we are re-doing that blood quantum study, just for our Band.

As of today, more than 500 Band members have completed a survey. Miigwech to each of you. If you have not filled out your survey yet, you have until midnight tomorrow night to finish it. When the study is done, a final report will be sent to every household later this year.

I asked Wilder about how Band members seem to be answering one particular question on the survey, so far. There is a question on the survey that asks Mille Lacs Band members if you believe that we should be required to follow whatever enrollment criteria that the majority of Minnesota Chippewa Tribe members vote on or whether you Band believe that we, as Mille Lacs Band members, are the only people who should get to decide enrollment criteria for Mille Lacs.

So far, I have been informed that 80% of our Band members have said they do not want the entire MCT membership to make those decisions for us. Most of you believe that we are the only people who should make enrollment decisions for our Band. I will be sharing that information with the Tribal Executive Committee.

In Community Development, we were without a commissioner for a very long time, because the people I nominated for that position were not ratified by this current Band Assembly. Miigwech to the staff for doing the best they could. If you noticed over the past few years, it seems like things really slowed down in housing.

At long last, the Band Assembly finally confirmed my most recent nominee for Commissioner of Community Development (CMD). I am happy to say that Band member Rick Pardun was ratified as the new Commissioner a few weeks ago, and was sworn in yesterday. He has begun digging in to making our Housing program better and stronger.

Congratulations Commissioner Pardun. Miigwech to the Band Assembly, and especially to Representative Davis, for his support in this search and getting a good candidate through the process! Commissioner Pardun, you have your work cut out for you and we look forward to your leadership!

I just held a Cabinet meeting in December that focused on housing. I want to say this. We must overhaul our policies and get our people into homes that they can own.

First, our loan program has not kept pace with inflation. People cannot find decent homes in the price range of our loan amounts. This program is not being used like it could be. We have to increase the maximum loan amount that a person can borrow.

Second, as a government, we need to get out of the business of processing loans and shift that over to financial professionals. We are one of the only tribes in the country that own our own bank and a holding company, but we have employees in CMD who are responsible for mortgage loans.

Think about that. Why should our government be trying to operate like a bank — when we actually own a bank that can do this? A change like this could speed up the process.

Third, CMD currently manages 513 rental units. This is an impossible number to keep up with for our small staff. A few years ago, I directed CMD to create a rent-to-own policy so that more Band members could own their homes, and government can get out of the business of being landlords.

The idea was that the Band member's rental payment would go toward the purchase price of the home. That proposal was not acted on by the Housing Board at that time. Commissioner Pardun, this is the directive I have for you. People who have a stake in their homes take care of their homes. Work with the Housing Board to get that policy passed.

Commissioner Pardun has also talked to me about his idea for home ownership that is a bit like Habitat for Humanity. Band members would be required to help with some of the work on the houses they want to live in. I fully support this idea and look forward to seeing it happen.

In 2019, we filed a lawsuit against opioid manufacturers and distributors. Solicitor General Caleb Dogeagle has been working on this case. There have been some settlements, which will bring us much-needed funds for housing, treatment, and prevention programs. We expect additional settlements in the future.

Commissioner Anderson, I direct you to work closely with Commissioner Pardun to make sure that people who are leaving treatment have a safe place to stay that supports their wellness in a timely manner.

Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures had a good year under Commissioner Joe Nayquonabe's leadership. The business incubator project continued. Forty-two Band members who want to own their own businesses have now graduated from the Enterprise Academy.

The Corporate Commission is currently building Sugar Maple Crossing, which will create 40 workforce housing units in Hinckley. In the Urban Area, the Ventura Project in South Minneapolis is finally underway.

This project was stalled due to talks with the City of Minneapolis. Commissioner Nayquonabe and his team are working hard with the City to make sure we adhere to all of their regulations. The Ventura Project will provide housing to urban members, and a new home for our Urban office and programs.

Despite the economy, our casinos continue to do well. And most exciting for many Band members is that we are expanding the Band's business and economic capacity by constructing a seed-to-sale cannabis facility. This decision to get into the cannabis industry was not made lightly, but it is what the majority of Band members who spoke up said they wanted.

A leader's job is to listen to the people. I have always said that Band members know best how to solve our problems. It is my hope that this new industry is all that we have been promised it will be.

When we make decisions of this magnitude that will impact our future, we must also be guided by the wisdom of those who came before us, relying on the teachings they passed down. It is important to respect their strength, dedication, and foresight.

It will soon be time for our future leaders to step forward. One of my duties is to make sure that I pass along some of the things I've learned to the next generation. But first, I need to share some of the foresight and vision of those who came before me as Chief Executive — the people I learned from.

I first met Chief Executive Arthur Gahbow in an official capacity after he hired me as his Commissioner of Administration in 1989. Chief Executive Gahbow was a trail-blazer. He was a man of great vision. His vision included securing our 1837 hunting, fishing and gathering rights.

He began this work 20 years before our Supreme Court victory. In 1979, Chief Gahbow convinced the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe to establish a hunting and fishing code that was tailor-made for the Mille Lacs Band. Art also understood the power of knowledge. He directed the publishing of our Band history. This history was very important during our lawsuit to reclaim our treaty rights.

He worked hard to convince the Wisconsin Bands to recognize our rights. He also pushed the state of Wisconsin to acknowledge our rights.

He stood firm in the face of resistance, and he never ran away from adversity. In fact, his dedication was so strong that he would seek out trouble — good trouble — which led him to be arrested for spearing fish, out of season. This was his strategy. He wanted to create a case to litigate the Band's treaty rights. And the State of Minnesota's Commissioner of Natural Resources knew it.

Minnesota Commissioner Joe Alexander did not want to litigate our treaty rights case, likely because he knew we would probably win. So State Commissioner Alexander dropped the charges against Art. But the thing is, the State DNR still had possession of the fish that Art had speared.

The way Don Wedll tells the story is that one day Art got a package in the mail. Art opened the box and inside of it was the same fish that Art speared. It had been to a taxidermist, was mounted on a wall plaque, and the spear was still in the fish.

Nobody thought this was funnier than Art. Especially since this trophy fish was not even a walleye — it was just a sucker! Other Band members were also cited for fishing violations. These acts of defiance were a step toward justice, a corner-stone in our struggle to protect what was and is rightfully ours.

Finally, in August of 1990, Chief Executive Gahbow's dream took a big step forward: Our case against the state of Minnesota for interfering with our 1837 Treaty Rights was filed in Federal Court. This was a historic moment, a result of 30 years of struggle, advocacy, and unshakeable determination.

Art also had a vision of hope and opportunity for Band members: a vision born from a life of poverty on our Reservation. He understood that our collective circumstances as a tribe were no fault of our own, but were engineered by 150 years of policies designed to keep us weak.

He envisioned our Band growing into a thriving Indian nation where the flame of opportunity would burn bright, casting its warm light on the hopes and dreams of every Band member.

In a tribe with over 80% unemployment, Art dreamed of a future where prosperity was not a privilege, but a promise to everyone who was willing to work for it. He believed that the key to unlocking economic growth and hope for our Band was our tribal sovereignty. And Art was right. Casino gaming became a reality on our Reservation because we exercised our sovereignty.

Chief Executive Gahbow was also one of the 10 founders of the Tribal Self-Governance project in the United States. Art served the Band as Tribal Chair and Chief Executive for 19 years.

Chief Executive Marge Anderson was the first woman to become Chief Executive in 1991. She led the economic expansion of our Reservation during those first years of Indian gaming. She oversaw the transformation of our Reservation from being a collection of broken-down shacks to a community with modern schools, ceremonial buildings, good homes, and roads.

I also served as Chief Executive Anderson's Commissioner of Administration. With our new gaming revenue, she gave her commissioners the opportunities to be creative, and if our ideas aligned with her values, she supported them.

I will never forget the day that Ben and Elfreda Sam told me about an upsetting thing that happened to them. They were travelling, and one of them needed urgent medical help, so they stopped at a clinic south of us in Mille Lacs County. When they got to the clinic, one of the staff said to them, "Don't you have your own clinic where you can go to?"

That's when we decided that we needed to create a program where all Band members would have health insurance so they could go wherever they wanted and get the medical treatment they needed and deserved. We created Circle of Health. And our Ne-la-Shing Clinic was one of the first brand-new tribal health facilities in the United States built with gaming revenue.

Most important, Chief Executive Anderson led us to our 1837 Treaty Rights victory in the U.S. Supreme Court. Marge served as Chief Executive for a total of 13 years.

There are no perfect leaders — we are only human. But there are perfect lessons to be learned if we pay attention to our history. Many of you know a bit about this next story because I speak about it often. But it is the foundation of who we are as the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band.

This story has everything to do with our current battles today, and it has great power because it's a true story. So to our future leaders: Please listen carefully one more time, and carry this story with you.

In 1855, our ancestors signed a Treaty with the United States. It created the Mille Lacs Reservation. At the same time, Leech Lake and other smaller reservations were also created.

In 1862, the Dakota War took place. There were several Ojibwe Bands from the North who wanted to join the Dakota and fight the United States. The Mille Lacs chiefs refused to join the war and instead sent warning to Fort Ripley, and tried to protect the fort and settlements.

In 1863, after the Dakota War, the United States wanted to remove several tribes that it made Treaties with in 1855, in order to appease the white settlers. However, there were two articles in the Treaty of 1863 that seemed to

contradict each other. Article 1 seemed to say that Mille Lacs and other Bands had to give up their homelands to the United States.

But Article 12 said something different. Because of the Mille Lacs Band's good behavior during the Dakota War, Article 12 said we would never have to move, unless we caused harm to the settlers. Tribal Leaders from Mille Lacs met with President Abraham Lincoln. He told them that our people could stay on our Reservation for 100 years or 1,000 years.

Despite these promises, squatters and others who wanted our valuable pine timber tried to take our Reservation away from us. For 20 years, Band leaders like Shaboshkung and Mozomany fought to preserve the Reservation for Band members. But Federal officials wanted to send our kids to boarding schools and divide up our lands. The pressure to move all the Ojibwe to White Earth was intense.

In 1886, the U.S. sent a commission to negotiate one last time with the Ojibwe of Minnesota. They wanted us to give up our reservations and take allotments at White Earth. Our ancestors refused.

Shaboshkung said to the Commissioners that he would "rather that his bones bleach out on the shores of Mille Lacs Lake than move." He reminded the officials about the 1863 Treaty and President Lincoln's promise of their right to stay on our Reservation.

The commissioners reported back to Congress that Mille Lacs and Fond du Lac would not accept removal to White Earth. Congress responded by passing the Nelson Act, which authorized more negotiation with the Ojibwe to give up our reservations and take allotments. The Nelson Act Commission came to Mille Lacs to negotiate.

Our ancestors told the Commission that they would stay, and take allotments at Mille Lacs. They understood that the allotments would allow them to stay on the Reservation forever if they wanted. So the Nelson Act Commission promised that the Band could receive allotments at Mille Lacs.

However, before the allotments were made, squatters again swarmed the Reservation and claimed nearly all the Reservation lands for themselves. Band members' homes were burned and they were forced from their lands, sometimes at gunpoint.

But our ancestors fought to stay, even when the Federal Government withheld their annuity payments unless they went to White Earth. Eventually, a few allotments were granted on this Reservation. Band members and the Federal government also bought back some land when they could. But most of our land was taken by force. We went from about 61,000 acres down to a few acres.

Our leaders would spend the next 135 years gradually buying back a small part of our lost land, which we are still doing today.

Fast forward to the year 2002. Some Mille Lacs County officials never got over our treaty rights victory in 1999. In 2002, Mille Lacs County sued us to disestablish our Reservation. I was the Chief Executive. This case was thrown out of court by the Judge, because there was no proof that the existence of the Reservation had ever harmed anyone.

Fast forward to 2010, when President Obama signed the Tribal Law and Order Act into law. TLOA, as it is called, made it possible for some of the worst crimes committed on a Reservation to be prosecuted by the United States. If a person was found guilty, they could be sent to federal prison instead of county jail.

So we made the decision to apply for Tribal Law and Order Act status, to give the Federal government criminal jurisdiction on our Reservation, because it might make people think twice before committing terrible crimes.

But the process slowed down after Mille Lacs County objected to our application. The County board told the federal government that there was no Reservation in their county.

In hindsight, the County probably should have kept still. Because of the County's objections, the U.S. Department of Justice had no choice but to ask the Interior Department: Does the Mille Lacs Reservation exist?

So Interior had no choice but to answer the question, which involved intensive research about the County's claim.

After almost two years of waiting, Interior finally issued a 37-page opinion explaining how and why the Mille Lacs Reservation never went away and continues to exist. With that opinion in writing, the U.S. Department of Justice accepted our application and we gained TLOA status.

At that point, the County board could have decided to work with us. But it did not. Instead, it kept fighting and used the only leverage it had over us: our cooperative law enforcement agreement.

In 2016, without warning, the Mille Lacs County Board voted to revoke our law enforcement agreement. Most of us remember that dark period. Mille Lacs County tried to strip our police officers of their state licenses, and threatened our officers with arrest if they did their job, even on our trust lands.

The County issued a threat. They said they would only renew our law enforcement agreement on the condition that we agreed to act as if our Reservation boundary no longer existed. Never — not in a million years — would we ever agree to that.

In March 2022, federal Judge Susan Nelson affirmed that our Reservation did, indeed, exist. Later, she ruled that we had law enforcement jurisdiction over the whole Reservation. We won.

The County spent over \$10 million on this case paying eleven outside attorneys, some with fancy offices at the top of the IDS building. And just so you know, the Band has spent far less on this case, and we keep winning. And now the County is spending even more money appealing this case.

The United States, the State of Minnesota and the Native American Rights Fund — which is representing the National Congress of American Indians, Leech Lake, Bois Forte, and Grand Portage — have all filed legal briefs siding with the Band. Mille Lacs County stands alone.

As the leader of a government, I know if we were spending \$10 million or more on something, our Band members would want something to show for it.

To our non-Native friends and neighbors, I would like you to think about this: Have your lives changed since we won our case in 2022? Has the Band taxed you or zoned your property, or forced you into our Band court system?

No. I know we haven't because we don't want to, and we can't. Mille Lacs County officials have nothing to show for spending all this money, except that all of our property taxes in this county keep going up. The Band is the biggest taxpayer in the county, so Band members are paying for both sides of this case. And we will keep doing this as long as we must, because these are our homelands and we are not going anywhere. We will always be Non-Removable!

There was another major victory this year for Band members, which is related to this story. Back in September of 2018, right after Mille Lacs County agreed to renew its law enforcement agreement with the Band, I met with our government affairs team. I told them that our Band members cannot keep living under the threat that Mille Lacs County could cancel our law enforcement agreement again someday.

I was confident that we would win our lawsuit, but I was also confident that whenever the legal battle was over, the County would try to punish us again. Only a change in State law would ensure that this can never happen again.

I am happy to report that we made history this year, when a new law was passed that finally removes the requirement that tribes have an agreement with a county in order to enforce state law against non-Indians within a reservation.

Never again will Mille Lacs County or any county be able to hold the safety of our people hostage. That period is over forever! This new law recognizes our sovereignty and affirms our right to keep our people safe and increases safety and security for everyone who lives in Mille Lacs County.

Miigwech to the State Legislature, Governor Walz and Lt. Governor Flanagan, the Prairie Island Indian Community, the White Earth Nation, and other tribes who helped this effort, and Miigwech to our tribal police officers and government affairs team.

Also, Miigwech to our friends at U.S. Attorney Andy Luger's office. Under the Tribal Law and Order Act, our Tribal Police Department officers are also cross-deputized by the United States. Our Solicitor General is a Special Assistant U.S. Attorney.

Today, for the first time, I am so proud to introduce the newest full-time Assistant U.S. Attorney — our own Mille Lacs Band member, Syngen Kanassatega! Syngen, we will miss you in our office, but all of Indian country will benefit from your new appointment.

Syngen is here with his new supervisor, U.S. Attorney Andy Luger. Can the two of you please stand to be recognized?

Band members, we won our lawsuit and we achieved this new law because of the work and commitment from so many people. So many of you attended meetings and protests, wrote letters, attended rallies, and tried to keep drugs off our Reservation during that dark period.

Everything that happened also took thousands of hours of meetings and work for me, our staff, and our attorneys — too many trips to Washington D.C. and St. Paul for me to count.

Chief Executive Gahbow and Chief Executive Anderson had their legal cases to see through. This case was my duty to see through. And Band members, we did it! Together!

It has now been 24 years since you first elected me to serve as your Chief Executive. That is as long as some of you have been alive. With your support, I have now accomplished what I set out to do as Chief Executive.

It has been an amazing journey, and as I said earlier, I have learned a few things along the way. Every leader carries a torch that will eventually be passed. I want to take this time to share some of the lessons that I learned.

First, I did not just wake up one day and decide that I wanted to be the Chief. And neither did Chief Executive Gahbow or Chief Executive Anderson. Because you do not choose leadership. Leadership chooses you. I have a story about that.

When I worked for Chief Executive Gahbow, every time we went to Washington D.C. and were visiting our senators, he had a tradition of stopping by the U.S. Senate cafeteria to have a bowl of bean soup. There is a senate resolution that mandates that bean soup be served every day.

During one of our trips to D.C., over a bowl of his favorite bean soup, Art began talking about his role as the Chief Executive. He talked about his vision for the Band, what we had achieved so far, and what he hoped we would achieve in the future.

He told me that the two great fights that he started were coming. One was for our 1837 treaty rights, and one was the battle for the very existence of our Reservation. Then he told me that he had decided not to run for another term as Chief Executive, and that someone else would need to see that vision through to the end.

Art talked about the job of a tribal leader, and how it takes total commitment, time away from family, tough decisions, and years off of a person's life. He said he thought that I could do the job, and asked me to run for Chief Executive. Although I was flattered and honored, I did not know if I was ready.

Sadly, Art passed away before his term was over, which was a devastating loss to our community. Another elected official needed to fill the role of Chief until a special election could be held. Secretary-Treasurer Marge Anderson was that person. She served the Band with courage and strength for that next decade. She was the right person for that moment in our history.

My time as Chief Executive began in the year 2000, but it was not a choice that I made. The only reason I ran for office is because a group of Elders asked me to. Ben Sam invited me to his home. He and several Elders had been talking and they wanted me to step forward. They asked me to. As my Elders, they were my leaders. And once again, you do not choose leadership. Leadership chooses you.

Twenty years later, it has been quite a journey. Together, we have achieved astounding things that would have seemed impossible back in the 1980s, like something out of a fantasy movie.

I have been so proud of our work together — from the time I became Commissioner of Administration and worked for Chief Executives Gahbow and Anderson, to the past two decades of serving as your Chief Executive. I want to acknowledge that progress so our next leaders know what is possible to achieve as an Indian Nation.

In the 1980s, the Band was the poorest of the poor. We were not connected politically, we had no business economy, and the State of Minnesota was not our friend. The Governors, the U.S. Senators, and other politicians barely knew who we were. The State did not recognize our sovereignty or our rights.

Every day was spent fighting against injustice, and fighting for survival. Compared to our budget today, back then, we were operating on pennies. What we have done over 35 years is astonishing. So many times, we were the “first” tribe in the nation to do something bold and successful.

We were the first tribe in the United States to negotiate a Self-Governance compact.

We opened two highly successful casinos.

We were one of the first tribes to heavily invest in building hundreds of homes with gaming revenue [as well as building] schools and community buildings.

We bought a bank!

And we won a U.S. Supreme Court Case!

After I became Chief Executive in 2000, the first thing I did was to hire all Band member commissioners for the open positions. I only nominated people from other communities when I was unable to get Band members through the Band Assembly process. And our success continued.

In 2000, our Circle of Health program took off — we were the first tribal health insurance program in the country to pay Band members’ co-pays and deductibles.

We began the Minor Trust Fund, which today ensures that our youth have resources to secure their future, if they spend wisely.

After pushing hard for a tribal pension plan, so that our Elders could retire with security, we created the monthly Elder supplement.

We opened a state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant, and we overcame a racist campaign to stop us from operating it.

For the first time in Band history, we were finally successful in diversifying our economy beyond Indian gaming.

We were the first tribe in the nation to focus on the non-gaming hotel industry, purchasing five hotels, a resort, and many small businesses

We created Makwa Global, and were one of the first tribes in the nation to receive 8A certification from the Small Business Administration.

We are now in the international cyber-security business and the U.S. Defense Department is a client.

We won a very long battle to stop gaming expansion in Minnesota to non-tribal businesses, preserving our economic security.

We expanded private education opportunities to Districts II and III by sponsoring the first tribal charter schools in Minnesota and we have kept Minisinaakwang going in recent years through donations from the Band Foundation.

We achieved federal legislation that allowed Pine Grove to become a satellite school of Nay Ah Shing, and were the first- ever satellite school in the BIA system.

We completely reformed our tribal police department in 2013, and we hired the first Band member Chief of Police.

We were one of the first tribes to create a Grants Department, which immediately began bringing in millions of dollars of additional funding for our programs, and we are still one of the few tribes that have a Grants Department.

We were the first tribe in Minnesota to create a place of shelter that Band members could use in times of crisis.

We purchased the state’s Four Winds Treatment Center in Brainerd and became the first tribe in Minnesota to own a tribal treatment facility.

We were the first tribe to create a Department of Athletic Regulation, and with hard work from Representative Davis, we were the first tribe to bring professional boxing to the Reservation.

We could not stop the Line 3 pipeline from being built, but with a huge amount of work, we won the battle to get the pipeline re-routed further away from the Reservation.

We got through a global pandemic and made a very swift recovery.

And according to a national contractor who is familiar with hundreds of tribes, Mille Lacs Band members receive more programs and services than any other tribe in the United States that they have ever worked with. And our Band members share in the revenue, thanks to our Net Revenue Allocation Plan.

This is very different from how most tribes operate. Some tribes provide many different services, but do not share the revenue the way we do. Other tribes share revenue with tribal members but they hardly provide any government services. We are one of the only tribes to do both. Band members, we are some of the most fortunate people in all of Indian Country!

Looking back, over the past 52 years, we have only had three Chief Executives. Stable leadership is one reason behind our success, but there always comes a time when the next generation is ready to carry the torch.

In years past, I have talked a lot about growing our own leaders. I've called for new warriors to come forward, for Band members to take advantage of free education opportunities and training programs, and to get involved in our communities. And many of you have done that.

Some of you here today may not have chosen leadership, but leadership has chosen you! You have not stepped forward yet, but you know who you are and you are ready.

In a world often dominated by the loudest voices and the boldest claims, strong leadership is not about how loud someone is, or how often they post on social media. It is about the quiet strength that comes from a deep understanding of the issues at hand, and a genuine commitment to serving the people. Those who are humble can be overshadowed by those with flashy personalities, but humility is a cornerstone of effective leadership.

A great leader is one who listens before speaking, who values the input of others, and who is brave enough to admit they are wrong and change their mind. Strong leaders do not use their power to publicly criticize or cut down hard-working employees in front of an audience — employees who have devoted their lives to our Band.

Leadership is not about the volume of speech or having the most to say. It is about the quality of the message and the sincerity behind it. And Band members, it is so important that our next leader be dedicated to external relations and remain heavily involved with federal and state government processes, just as I have done and which Marge and Art did before me.

The decisions made at these levels directly impact our well-being. We have opportunities today that other tribes do not, but that could change. Our voices must continue to be heard in the halls of power or we risk being overlooked, which can stop our progress and block our ability to protect our rights.

Unfortunately, the influence that a tribal chair has developed does not automatically transfer to the next leader. It can be like starting from scratch, which is why it is so important that our next leader be credible, very smart, and taken seriously.

Our Chief Executive must have the diplomatic skills required to build external relationships and alliances, and they must be able to get through tension-filled meetings with other governments with a calm voice and a smile on their face. Leaders must carry themselves in a way that fosters respect.

Finally, our next leader cannot let up on all the work we have done to preserve our Ojibwe language and culture. It is okay to look at other ways, but the most important thing is to keep our ways because the Manidoog gave that to us.

Today I have a heart full of gratitude and a deep sense of accomplishment. Serving as your elected leader has been the greatest privilege and honor of my life. To the next generation: You are the architects of tomorrow. Your dreams, ideas, and unique perspectives are the building blocks of how our Band will continue to grow and thrive.

As you take hold of the torch, remember that it is not just a symbol; it is a call to action. Embrace the challenges that lie ahead, with courage and determination. For it is through adversity that character is forged.

In your hands, we place the power to innovate, to bridge divides, and to envision a future that transcends the limitations we face today. The torch you carry is not just for you; it is a shared flame that illuminates the path for all.

I am confident that the foundation we have laid together is strong and resilient. It is a foundation upon which a new generation of leaders can build, stepping forward with fresh ideas, renewed energy, and a commitment to the well-being of our Band.

Together, we have overcome challenges, championed causes, and built a path toward a brighter future for our grandchildren.

We have worked non-stop to enhance the quality of life for every member of our Tribe, laying the groundwork for well-being and prosperity.

Our achievements are a testament to the wisdom and strength of those who came before us — of our refusal to never give up or give in — of our wise exercise of sovereignty — and the power of our culture and language.

I extend my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you who have been part of our shared success. Your dedication, hard work, and collective spirit have been the driving force behind our progress.

As we embark on our journey together as a Band into the years ahead, remember the wisdom of those who walked before you. Seek guidance from the lessons of history, and keep our culture close. Let the flame burn brightly in your hands, igniting devotion to our Band and compassion for our people.

As you take the reins, know that you carry the collective hopes and dreams of past generations, and future generations yet to come. Embrace the challenge, lead with integrity, and always remember that you have the power to make a difference.

Band members, Miigwech for the trust you placed in me, for the battles we faced together, and for the victories we can celebrate today as a strong, proud Indian nation.

It has been a wonderful journey, and as a Band member, I look forward to witnessing our continued prosperity and growth under our next leaders who follow.

May our future be even brighter, and may the bonds that unite us as the proud, the unbeatable and Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, remain unbreakable forever.

Miigwech!