

“2025: The Year of the Child”

By Virgil Wind

*Aaniin wagoosh indizinikaas
Biishoo indoodem
Misiziiganing indoojiba
Inundaawaymaaginadook (all my relatives)*

As we come together today, let us remember how connected we all are—as the friends, family, and community that make up the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe as Anishinaabe that walk this beautiful earth, and as people committed to the sovereignty, well-being, and longevity of the Band. Let us always remember the impact that all of our actions—both good and bad—have upon one another. It is within our power to cause someone to have a tremendous day, or a very hurtful one. So let us always choose to be the light that someone may need today.

Blessed. Here we are. What a sight to see: the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Here then. Here now. And here for a thousand years to come, united, always moving forward.

[Applause.]

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. Mr. Speaker, members of the Band Assembly, and Honorable Justices, welcome to the 41st Annual State of the Band Address.

[Applause.]

Miigwech to Joe Nayquonabe Sr. 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 Post for posting the flags, and to the singers that have blessed us here today. Miigwech to the royalty that assisted in bringing in our colors. And miigwech to Brea Sawyer for her beautiful rendition of the national anthem.

[Applause.]

It is such an honor and a privilege to be here today! It’s been 189 days since I raised my hand and swore the oath as Chief Executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. I am very grateful for the opportunity to serve as your Chief. It is not a job that I take lightly. Over the years, hopefully you will come to see that—although I can be a lot at times—my heart is in the right place and I am always working for the best interests of the Band. It still is unbelievable to me to have this honor. I’m thinking back about what the Mille Lacs Band was, and looking today in awe of what it has become.

Over the years, I have learned to count my blessings at least a few times a day, and I am blessed to have had an entire community raise and carry me along throughout the best and worst days of my life. Through addiction, alcoholism, foster care—and some of the poorest choices that anyone could have ever made—I have been blessed with friends, family, and community that have believed in me and seen in me qualities that make a strong leader. When I look around the room, I see lots of those people. And I couldn't be more blessed to have you all in my life! Thank you all for guiding me into the person that I have become.

[Applause.]

Nervous. I have always thought throughout my life that, when your boss is in the room, we should all be a little nervous. Standing here today feels like I'm in front of more than 5,000 bosses—and that's a humbling feeling. A very dear confidant once told me that the human body produces the same endorphins whether a person is nervous or excited. Since that day, I have tricked myself into being excited throughout all of life's struggles. Just that simple change in mindset and approach can have phenomenal impacts on the way that we carry ourselves. I am excited to give you this year's State of the Band address.

During my team's brief time in office, we've invested a lot of time in analyzing the state of our Band. I keep saying that the obstacles which lay before us are not a "me" problem, but rather an "us" problem. Because the truth is—as I said in my inauguration speech—I cannot do much of anything without your support and a united team that will take on any task. Still, it can be helpful to look back at times. In order to know where you're going, you have to know where you've been.

[Pause for dramatic effect.]

The year was 1995.

Those of us who were teenagers at the time knew every word to "Waterfalls" by TLC. Or "This Is How We Do It," by Montell Jordan. Or how about this one? "Gangsta's Paradise" by Coolio.

[Pause for laughter.]

The top movies at the box office were *Batman Forever*, *Apollo 13*, *Toy Story*, and one of my all-time favorites: *Braveheart*.

[Pause for laughter.]

The San Francisco 49ers defeated the San Diego Chargers in Super Bowl 29. And Michael Jordan came back from retirement, only to lose to the Orlando Magic in the playoffs. For the record, I'd still take Jordan over LeBron any day.

[Pause for laughter.]

But something else happened in 1995.

On January 10th of that year, Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson declared 1995 to be the Year of the Child.

In an Executive Order, Chief Anderson found that “safeguarding the future of the children and youth of the Mille Lacs Band is and has always been the most important priority of the Mille Lacs Band.”

She said that she was “personally and officially committed to promoting a ‘Better Tomorrow’ for the children and youth of the Mille Lacs Band.”

She also determined that “promoting a ‘Better Tomorrow’ for the children and youth of the Mille Lacs Band requires that the Band devote resources and energies in 1995 to examining and improving the programs, services, and activities of Band government which serve the interests of Band children[.]”

Finally, Marge found it “desirable that the health, educational, economic, social and cultural needs of the Band’s children ... be formally recognized government wide in 1995 as the primary focus of all Band government and community activities.”

And, with that, Marge declared 1995 to be the Year of the Child.

That was 30 years ago, almost to the day.

[Pause in solemnity.]

Her words are as true and powerful today as they were then.

I believe what she believed: that the children are our future, and that we must invest in them.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mille Lacs Band members, friends, families, distinguished guests, dignitaries, dedicated servants of the Band ...

In addition to providing my State of the Band address, and in honor and memory of Marge Anderson, I declare 2025 to be the Year of the Child.

[Applause.]

As you know, Marge was a fierce, fierce advocate for our tribal sovereignty, self-determination, culture, and children. She served the Band for many years, first as the District 1 Representative, beginning in 1977; then as Secretary-Treasurer from 1987 to 1991; then as Chief Executive from 1991 to 2000, and again from 2008 to 2012. Marge once said, “We must not merely witness the change, we must develop it. We need to help shape the change and be the needle that weaves the web of change.”

With that, I call on each and every one of you—including the Elected Officials in the room, including the Commissioners—to come together and work toward the change that we so deeply need for all of our communities.

[Applause.]

Marge may have walked on, but we still have her daughter: Gina Anderson. Unfortunately, Gina couldn't be with us here today. But a couple of months ago we had an employee appreciation event, and I was shocked to learn that Gina has worked for the Band for more than 40 years. Think about that: 40 years of serving the Band, engaging with Band members, trying to solve their problems. I can't thank Gina enough for her service, and hope she will feel honored watching from home as we look to her distinguished mother for guidance.

[Applause.]

Over the years we have developed programs to attempt to meet the needs of Band members. Upon entering today, you should have received a new “Program and Services Guide” that my team has developed. Please take one with you so that, whenever you are in need of help, you will know exactly what the Band has to offer and who to contact to get those services rolling. We don't ever want to fall short in connecting Band members in need with services meant for them. The truth is that we have been blessed with getting acknowledged time and again for the services that we provide for our people. Although this is a wonderful thing, I believe—like Marge declared so many years ago—that a different approach must be taken. We have done a respectable job being reactive to the woes of our membership, but I believe that taking a more proactive approach might serve us better.

While still the District 1 Representative, I was asked to deliver a speech at Wewinabi to celebrate the Head Start graduation for 22 young graduates. While I stood on the stage, it dawned on me the immense effort that was put into celebrating the graduation of this Head Start class. The children, all adorned in their mini caps and gowns with custom-made medallions, sat patiently as we talked about what was important in their lives and where their lives might take them. The theme for the graduation was “Oh, The Places You'll Go.” At that moment, I remember thinking that we, as a Band, have the resources and the ability to change the lives of these children by simply celebrating them every day. Celebrating their every accomplishment and utilizing our resources to make them feel valued throughout the course of their lives. Imagine where those 22 kids will be in ten or 15 years if we took this approach. Imagine if we created a path for them that encompassed every opportunity from extra-curricular activities to higher education. The sky would be the limit. As leaders of the Band, we have the obligation and the power to make these changes.

[Applause.]

Children hold a special place in my heart. Maybe that's why I had five of them of my own. Not to mention the many *we'ehs* I have been blessed with over the years. Children represent what is best in all of us, before the world takes that innocence away. So many of our children have faced traumas that most people could not even imagine. We have *got* to find a way to reverse that.

Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles: It is our job to come together to protect our kids and build a world in which they can thrive. Together we must make this a priority.

[Applause.]

Confidence is one of the keys to living a successful, happy, and peaceful life. And so much of that is instilled within us when we are young. I was very fortunate in my life to have certain opportunities that laid the groundwork that allowed me to become the person I am today. Throughout all of my youth and even to the present day, I have had people that have believed in me when I haven't even believed in myself, people who have picked me up and dusted me off along the way. Our children need and deserve that same level of support. As leaders, let's make sure we nurture our children's education, their confidence, and provide them the same degree of loving support that we either received—or wish we had received—when *we* were growing up.

As a Band, we have many blessings. We are blessed to have casinos; blessed to have per cap; blessed to have general welfare exclusion payments; and blessed to have a minors' trust fund. We are blessed to have our communities, our government, our sovereignty, our heritage, and we are blessed to have our beautiful culture. But how are we using these blessings to the utmost benefit of our children? I would venture to say that, given the current state of our Band, we are *not* doing enough to set our children up for a positive and brighter future. And that's something we should not accept.

[Applause.]

This struggle is not new. Bruce White, a Mille Lacs Band historian and friend to the tribe, recently wrote a book that I think bears mentioning.

[Hold up a copy of the book.]

The book is called *They Would Not Be Moved: The Enduring Struggle of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to Keep Their Reservation*. Our reservation! The result is our entire history—the fight for our independence and cultural identity—all here in one place. The lives, names, and tales of so many of our ancestors are found within the pages of this book. I'd like to encourage everyone to read this book because I think it's important that we all become students of our own history. And this book allows us to do just that.

On the topic of what's best for our children, I'd like to read one passage from the book.

[Acknowledge Bruce White.]

As Bruce White wrote:

Mille Lacs band members attempted to continue their seasonal patterns of resource use in the face of frequent harassment and competition from settlers. These patterns included participation in logging and harvesting resources such as rice, sugar, berries, and

game, which could be sold for cash. In addition, band members made improvements in their lives of the kind that federal agents frequently encouraged them to do but would not provide for them unless they moved to White Earth. For example, though there was no government school for children of band members, some children began to go to school. It was reported in 1895 that despite objection from some, several Indian children attended the Lake Shakopee school, where they showed ‘the greatest interest in the school and learned very fast.’”

So what’s the lesson here? Even in times of poverty, hardship, and threat of forced removal—even when thrust into an environment in which they were being taught in a foreign language—our children were diligent and successful when given the opportunity. It is incumbent upon us to keep giving them those opportunities. Marge Anderson believed that. It’s why she was such a staunch advocate for our schools, which still stand today as a symbol of our sovereignty and struggle for a better life. Today it is my honor to carry the mantle of that legacy forward, and to honor the vision and leadership of the past by building an even stronger future.

[Applause.]

I’ve now been in office as Chief Executive for just over six months. At my inauguration speech—just last July—I stated that the foundation of the Mille Lacs Band is its people, and I stand by that message. I ask now that we direct our collective efforts toward improving the well-being of all of our membership in 2025.

[Applause.]

The state of our Band is not perfect. We all know this. The health of our communities has plenty of room for improvement. But how do we address the shortcomings? Where do we begin in our struggle to make a brighter future for ourselves and our children?

As the Chief, I am the leader of the Executive Branch of government. And Band law provides me eight Cabinet members to carry out the duties of Band government.

Cabinet members, as I call your names, please stand up for acknowledgment.

They are:

- Commissioner of Administration Darcie Big Bear;
- Assistant Commissioner of Administration Maria Costello;
- Commissioner of Natural Resources Kelly Applegate;
- Commissioner of Education Raina Killspotted;
- Commissioner of Health and Human Services Nicole Anderson;

- Commissioner of Community Development Tracy Burr;
- Solicitor General Caleb Dogeagle; and
- Commissioner of Corporate Affairs, which has recently become vacant.

These are the leaders I will be leaning on during this Year of the Child to provide real-world, tangible results for our Band membership and our children. To all of you standing: I want to be clear and direct that I expect you to work together—and with other stakeholders across the Band—to achieve the goals I am setting out here today. Working together is the only way to accomplish these initiatives.

The daunting task of working together has already started. On multiple occasions I have called upon you as a team to address issues that we face on a daily basis. Your commitment and dedication to the Band does not go unnoticed! I am very grateful for each and every one of the strengths that you all bring to the table. Together is the way. United we can address any problem and positively change the lives of our members.

If there was one focus that you should all work on together, it would be to assess the Band's approach to ensuring that the cultural teachings and Ojibwe language of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band remain at the forefront of every decision that we make. It is our collective responsibility to have our culture woven into every department and action that we take.

[Tell Cabinet members to sit down.]

I'd like to take some time now to address each of you in turn.

Darcie Big Bear, Commissioner of Administration:

Darcie, you were the first Commissioner nominated and confirmed during my term as Chief Executive. In addition to all the reimagining I have asked you to do to the Department of Administration, I also recently asked you to serve as the Interim Commissioner of Corporate Affairs until we can get more clarity on how to improve our corporate governance. That's a lot to put on one person, but you are obligated by statute—and someone I sincerely trust—to carry us through. On top of all your other duties, in 2025 I'd like you to continue reviewing the Band's Personnel Policy and Procedures Manual with an eye toward how we can make it easier for our employees to become foster parents to Band children in need of homes. As Chief of Staff, I look forward to you working with multiple departments to get this done.

The Band has experienced significant growth, inspiring us to reassess our administrative structure. This year, Darcie, I call on you to modernize the Band's administrative framework and technology. Making informed decisions is challenging without having access to accurate data, and our business operations are hindered without updated technology solutions. We continually hear from Band members sharing their concerns about inefficiency, lack of accountability, and communication within our government. Together, we will address these issues and revamp

operations, ensuring our employees have the tools they need to thrive and enhance their work experience.

[Applause.]

Darcie, in 2025 I'd also like you to work with our District Representatives to see what better opportunities we can provide to children through our community centers. The more programs we can provide for our people, the better. And so much of that starts in our community centers. For starters, please look at getting the community centers staffed during the times most convenient for all Band members, including our youth.

[Applause.]

Speaking of community centers, there are two here in District 1—commonly referred to as the “new” and “old” community centers—that I'd like to address. Please allow me to veer off for a moment or two.

I see that our former District 1 Representative, Sandy Blake, is in the audience today. Sandy served as D1 Rep from 2000 until 2004, then again from 2008 until 2020. That's 16 years of total service as an elected official.

A dear friend of mine, Sandy Blake, also known as Miskwaanakwadookwe (Red Sky Woman), is deeply committed to the Mille Lacs Band and to improving the lives of Band members. She was instrumental in the creation of the District I Aquatic and Fitness Community Center, a project that reflected her vision for a more connected community. Her advocacy ensured the facility would meet the needs of Band members.

[Turn toward Sandy.]

Sandy, you did a lot of work in your time to get the District 1 Aquatic and Fitness Center built. It's a beautiful facility. And it's one I'm very fond of. But I've never really liked the name. In fact, you all know that name really chaps my ass!

[Pause for laughter. Pick up Executive Order.]

Here I have an Executive Order renaming the District 1 Aquatic and Fitness Center the *Miskwaanakwadookwe* Community Center, in honor of you, Sandy Blake, the Band's longest-serving District 1 Representative.

[Applause.]

I also asked that the family of the late Myron Garbow attend today. Myron served as District 1 Representative from 1987 to 1992, and then again from 1996 to 1999. Myron's tenure was marked by several notable achievements, including the development and enhancement of community infrastructure, such as the Nay-Ah-Shing school; promoting and preserving Ojibwe culture and traditions; and helping with the development of our casinos. His dedication to the

community and his efforts to improve the quality of life for Band members has left a lasting impact.

[Turn to Myron's family members. Hold up executive order.]

Family members, with your blessing, I have renamed the old District 1 community center the *Baadwewidang* Community Center.

Please join me in giving these two instrumental leaders and their families a round of applause!

[Applause.]

Now... back to the Cabinet members.

Maria Costello, Assistant Commissioner of Administration:

The Swiss Army Knife of Commissioners.

[Pause for laughter.]

Maria has had to fill various roles over the years, acting not only as the Commissioner of Administration at times, but also as Commissioner of Education, Commissioner of Community Development, and Commissioner of Natural Resources. Maria, in 2025, I want you to really take a close look at our Human Resources Department. Our HR team is dedicated to meeting the needs of Band employees, but they have never been prioritized. They continue to work tirelessly with limited resources. This year, I'd like you—along with Darcie—to develop a plan and budget that will nurture a flourishing HR department. Supporting Human Resources is vital, as they are key to our government's success. We will implement a much-needed HR Information System, improve efficiency, manage data, and provide more resources to Band employees.

Additionally, I'd like you to establish a Band member development department within HR that focuses on training and coaching, helping each Band member develop and succeed with their respective career paths.

[Applause.]

Kelly Applegate, Commissioner of Natural Resources:

Our resident Emmy award winner.

[Pause for laughter.]

Seriously, as you may have heard, Kelly recently won a Regional Emmy Award in the category of "Diversity/Equity/Inclusion" for a short film made for the Band's "Water Over Nickel" campaign. The film was developed to educate the public on tribal members' relationship with our sacred *manoomin* and also so that people would understand the threat posed by nickel sulfide mining. For anyone who hasn't seen the video, please visit waterovernickel.com, and you should be able to access the film.

The “Water Over Nickel” campaign has been a tremendous success. Due to Kelly’s efforts and Talon Metal’s increased understanding of the Band’s concerns, Talon Metals has adjusted its approach to the design and operation of its proposed mining facility. Although not a final solution that the Band is satisfied with, the “Water Over Nickel” campaign has succeeded in highlighting the Band’s environmental concerns over the proposed mine in Tamarack and ensuring that tribes are more involved in the state’s mining permitting processes. Thank you, Kelly, for your dedication and continued advocacy on this very important issue.

With regard to enrollments, in 2024 the Mille Lacs Band commissioned a Population Projections Study, produced by the Wilder Foundation. The study found that, if the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe maintains its ¼ MCT blood quantum requirement, in 100 years the Mille Lacs Band will be reduced from approximately 5,000 members it has now to fewer than 1,200. If the Band begins to allow other Anishinaabe blood to be included within this ¼ blood quantum requirement, our membership will be at approximately 1,400 in 100 years. And if we allow any American Indian blood to count toward the ¼ requirement, then our population will stay relatively flat. The population will increase slightly if we move down to 1/8 blood quantum and will nearly double if we move to lineal descendency.

It is—and has been—my position that the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe should not make any changes to enrollment requirements that would affect the Mille Lacs Band’s population without us Band members making that decision for ourselves. For this reason, I have pushed—and will continue to push—for a referendum vote that would allow Mille Lacs Band members to have their voices heard on this matter. To me, that is the fairest and most responsible way to make decisions of such monumental importance. In fact, in that same Wilder study, more than 80 percent of Mille Lacs Band members surveyed believed it should be up to us as members to make that determination. As leaders, it is our job to ensure that Band members are educated in the pros and cons of any and all changes. It is my promise to the membership that, before I agree to any changes, there *will* be a vote of the people!

Commissioner Applegate has been of tremendous help to me when analyzing complex issues such as these. Kelly, in these last six months of working with you, I have found you to be highly organized, thoughtful, and very passionate about pursuing and ultimately protecting the interests of the Band. I look forward to more great things to come from you. But, in 2025, I am asking that you develop new initiatives that engage the Band’s youth, further connecting them to our natural resources and cultural heritage.

[Applause.]

Tracy Burr, Commissioner of Community Development:

Another outside-the-box thinker. Tracy is new to the Band in a Commissioner role, but he has many good ideas. Recently, Tracy has completed a Strategic Housing Plan for Fiscal Year 2025. It is the first of its kind in many, many years. Tracy will soon be submitting his plan to the Housing Board for approval, after which time it will be routed to the Band Assembly for final ratification. A Strategic Housing Plan will help us define the weaknesses in our housing programs to make sure that we’re providing maximum housing opportunities to Band members. I

call on the Band Assembly to work closely with Tracy in 2025 so that the Band can have a housing plan that meets the ever-changing needs of our membership. Coupled with this Strategic Plan, I direct you and your staff to analyze and adjust the current housing policies to better meet the needs of today.

Another objective that I believe will set us up for future success is to develop and maintain a 2025-2035 Capital Improvement Plan. This plan should encompass an outline that will get our Band facilities up to an acceptable standard, as well as provide for a more comprehensive approach to the care of these valuable assets. Tracy, I thank you and your team for the work that you have done to date to help make this a reality. In 2025, I have some very lofty goals for you. These goals are, of course, subject to appropriations.

First, rehabilitation of the ceremonial building. This is a great initiative that is brought on by something that we should all be proud of. More and more Anishinaabeg are participating in our drum ceremonies. This increased participation has caused the need to remodel and revamp our current facilities. There are already plans that are near complete that must be carried out.

Second, Nay-Ah-Shing schools. This initiative ties directly into the Year of the Child by bringing our tribal schools up to date, ensuring the safety and well-being of our students. I direct you and your team to work closely with the Commissioner of Education—Raina Killspotted—to get these assets updated.

Third, the government center upgrade and refresh project. The Biidaabinookwe Government Center—appropriately named after Marge Anderson—stands as the hub for all of the services that the Band offers our members. Its appearance and functionality should reflect a deep commitment to those services. I direct you and your staff to ensure that this building is fully functional and operable for years to come.

Finally, the old District I community center (now known as the *Baadwewedang* Community Center). A few years ago, this project was brought up and into the rotation to upgrade all of our existing community centers. As the District 1 Representative, I patiently waited for the outlying centers to be upgraded. Now is the time to address this need. Please work with the District 1 Representative to establish a plan to get this building up to an acceptable standard.

[Applause.]

Nicole Anderson, Commissioner of Health and Human Services:

One of the greatest fighter for our children. A couple months ago, we advocated for our children before the Wahkon Planning Commission, seeking the city's acquiescence to a new Child Advocacy Center so that our parents struggling with addiction have a safe place to go to exercise parenting time with their children and learn new skills that will help toward family reunification. Because of your efforts, this project is now underway and will be complete this spring.

[Applause.]

During your time as HHS Commissioner, you truly have made a difference, with only more great things to come.

As we look at the continuum of care for our membership, we see a need for a women's and children's halfway house. We currently have an in-patient treatment center, out-patient program, men's halfway house, and peer support services. What we are lacking is something specific to our women and children and those that are struggling for a healthy life and home to live in. Therefore, I am directing you, Nicole, to move forward on the planning and implementation of a women's halfway house and the Commissioner group to move forward on a comprehensive transitional housing plan.

Switching to the dental team for a moment, they do outstanding work. But they are spread very thin. They work long days and adjust to the needs of the patients as much as possible. However, it has become clear to me that there needs to be increased access to dental services, especially in the outer districts. Therefore, Nicole, I direct you to put together a plan to increase access to dental services.

HHS has worked hard to stabilize its Information Technology systems over the past several years. In 2024, the department successfully implemented its new medical record system and started the process of mapping out the Circle of Health program. Technology modernization is vital for enhancing the quality of care, improving operational efficiency, and ensuring that we meet the needs of people we serve. Therefore, I support and encourage the team at HHS to begin the process of updating and modernizing Elder, Emergency, Victim, and Family Services to complete the full modernization of HHS.

Finally, given that the theme of this year's State of the Band address is the well-being of our children, I would be remiss if I did not mention Family Services. The Family Services Department has been a critical area of Band government for years, and it has operated with minimal levels of support. Through self-determination, we as a Band make the decision about our child welfare systems, and we must ensure that family ties remain at the forefront. Evidence shows that children do better when they maintain connection to their family. Having taken many children into my own household over the years, I believe that looking after family members in need is part of being Anishinaabe. It is who we are, and we must always keep those family ties strong!

[Applause.]

Raina Killspotted, Commissioner of Education:

My newest Commissioner. The new "Baby Commissioner," if you will.

[Pause for laughter.]

Having been in office for just a few months, Raina has truly demonstrated her organizational skills, her passion for education, and her deep connection to our culture.

Commissioner Killspotted, beginning with Mille Lacs Early Education, we currently have an enrollment of 139 children, ages six weeks to five years. Though our teachers there are doing everything they can, there simply are not enough of them and they are stretched very thin. By filling and maintaining vacant teaching positions, we could drastically increase our enrollment. We would also be able to return our staff to working five eight-hour days per week, instead of their current schedule of working four nine-hour days Monday through Thursday, then an additional four hours on Friday. Due to the turbulence of this scheduling, Mille Lacs Early Education is closed for half the day on Fridays, and we have even had some children leave as a result. Raina, in 2025, I want you to do whatever you can to hire more Early Education teachers and alleviate these problems. You will have my full and unwavering support.

[Applause.]

There are also issues with Nay-Ah-Shing Schools. Let's call it like we see it: We have low attendance rates. Our students suffer from below grade-level academic achievement levels. Our retention of students as they advance from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school is very poor. A significant number of our students have complex social and emotional needs that are not currently being met. And, finally, even within our own schools, there are simply not enough learning opportunities for cultural knowledge and Ojibwe language. That is something that absolutely must change.

With all of these things in mind, in 2025, I want you to increase learning opportunities for Ojibwe language, cultural knowledge, and native identity through additional staff training and hiring. I also want you to develop a five-year strategic plan with identified priorities and needs, along with specific actions.

[Applause.]

Finally, I'd like you to work with the Office of the Solicitor General's Office to develop a Truancy Code that will ensure our children are not falling behind in their studies, and propose revisions to the Band's Education Code that will ensure our children are being provided a top-notch education throughout the Band.

[Applause.]

Now, I know that's a lot for a Baby Commissioner . . .

[Pause for laughter.]

But education is near and dear to my heart, as I know it is to yours. Your passion for education shows through any time you speak about it. As you know, without a quality education that incorporates both our traditions and culture along with the advancements of a modern world, our children are not set up for success in a society that is always changing and always becoming more complicated. We must—and will—do better.

[Applause.]

Solicitor General Caleb Dogeagle:

One of the best people I know at working a room. Second only to myself.

[Pause for laughter.]

But, seriously, Caleb, you have served the Band well for many years now—ever since 2019. I thank both you and your office for the work you do representing the Band’s interests in tribal court, helping our government function on a day-to-day basis, and for overseeing the Band’s reservation boundary litigation against Mille Lacs County.

As you all know, in 2017, the Band sued Mille Lacs County after the County created a law enforcement crisis on our reservation. The County terminated our law enforcement agreement and asserted that Band officers lacked authority to investigate crimes and make arrests on our reservation. The Band has since prevailed in federal district court. In several landmark rulings, the Court determined that the boundaries of the 1855 Mille Lacs Reservation remain intact and that the Band’s officers have inherent law enforcement authority throughout the Reservation.

The County appealed these rulings to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. The United States, the State of Minnesota, the National Congress of American Indians, and the Boise Forte, Grand Portage, and Leech Lake Bands filed briefs supporting us in the appeal, which has now been fully briefed and argued. Unfortunately, we do not know when the Court will issue its decision, but my office will notify Band members as soon as the Court decides the case.

[Applause.]

It is important to add that, after the County filed its appeal, the Minnesota Legislature amended its tribal law enforcement statutes, so that the tribes no longer need agreements with local counties to exercise law enforcement authority. These amendments prevent Mille Lacs or any other county from ever again attempting to cripple tribal law enforcement authority on a reservation.

[Applause.]

Solicitor General Dogeagle, in 2025 I ask that you continue advocating on the Band’s behalf on this very important issue, along with the Band’s outstanding legal team at Ziontz Chestnut law firm, including Marc Slonim and Beth Baldwin. Let’s see this fight through to the end, so that nobody can ever again question the existence of our reservation or that we belong here. It is our home, and we forever will protect the homelands of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

[Applause.]

And now that the issue of the Mille Lacs reservation is reaching finality, early November I did meet with the drum chiefs from District 2 about the status of the Sandy Lake reservation. Michaa Aubid said something that resonated with me. Allow me to paraphrase: “We fought for the Mille Lacs boundary, why? Because a reservation was there. Well, there is a reservation at Sandy Lake,

and we need to fight to have it recognized to.” So to all of our Band members in District 2, I want you to know that I am committed to determining what the best course of action might be. In partnership with Ziontz Chestnut, we have begun researching hundreds of pages of documents and will finally get to the bottom of this long-standing issue.

[Applause.]

Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures:

When I recited the list of Commissioners earlier, I noted that one was vacant. The position is that of Commissioner of Corporate Affairs. It was formerly held by Joseph Nayquonabe Jr., someone who I’ve known all my life and who served the Band in that role for 12 years. Joe’s term ended just a couple of weeks ago, and I made the difficult decision not to renominate him. But we do have a plan to ensure continuity of leadership at Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, and have been working for several weeks to forge a path forward. Having served in that role for 12 years, Joe has developed a great deal of knowledge that is difficult to replace, especially in the emerging cannabis market. Therefore, I truly believe it is in the Band’s best interests that Joe continue to serve in some capacity.

Former Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Art Gahbow believed that our gaming business was the engine that powered Band government and sovereignty. And it is true that our casinos have served us well for a very long time. But I have always thought they can do better. I have also long believed that our non-gaming businesses could improve. Unfortunately, distributions from our gaming revenues are trending downward, and only a small percentage of our casino employees are Mille Lacs Band members. Therefore, I believe there’s a tremendous amount that we can improve upon.

Former District 2 Representative Marvin Bruneau always asked the question: “What do we do if there’s no casino?” And he never received a satisfactory answer. That is why Marvin came to believe that the Band’s gaming businesses should be separated from its non-gaming businesses—so that Band membership would have a pristine view of how well the casinos are performing on their own in comparison with the performance of all non-gaming businesses. I have written to the Band Assembly that I would like to see the company separated into two companies, just as Marvin had envisioned. I like to call it the “Bruneau Bill”: one company for gaming and one for non-gaming. In 2025, I sincerely hope that leadership can work together to arrive at the best possible solution.

As we move forward with Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, it will be very uncomfortable at times. It has been uncomfortable. But that is how we grow. And along the way, there are still some things that I am very excited about and which I think can be truly beneficial to the Band.

The Ventura Project, for example, is currently being built with an expected completion date of this summer. I want to thank the Band Assembly members for their support on this monumental project. To me, this project represents a stake in the ground that clearly tells our urban membership that, “You matter!” The Ventura Project will be the home to the services that the Band has available to our urban membership. On top of these services, the Ventura Project will

provide 36 units of much-needed housing resources. Urban members, please be on the lookout for advertisements coming very soon for rental opportunities. Over the years, our urban members haven't had a place that was built and could be used solely for them to meet their needs. Urban members, you are an important part of our Band and your needs are still very important to us!

[Applause.]

There is also Lake Leaf Cultivation, which has not only provided jobs to Band members, but could also grow into the stable, non-gaming funding source that is the hallmark of a diverse tribal economy. In the coming years, I cannot wait to see the places we'll go together. A huge step for this was the harvesting of our first batch of cannabis just last week. Band Assembly, we will have to prioritize the next steps for this venture. We have recently had conversations about the creation of the cannabis retail plan and will have to work closely to determine the best investment going forward.

[Applause.]

Next—and before I close my speech—I'd like to recognize some of our young people—and one adult—who have really raised some eyebrows as of late. They didn't perform today, but you may have heard of a little band of Nay Ah Shing students called "Frybread." I tell you: This group of kids has blown the roof off several community events over the last few months, including at one of the Band's employee events. It has been so nice to see our Band member children having fun, putting themselves out there, thriving, and showing us all the talent they have within themselves.

Their names are: Mercedes Anderson, Bryce Cash, Amelya Pacheco-Leecy, Cayleigh Nickaboine, Hayden Nickaboine, and Cass Sam. And they are led by Music Teacher Joseph Covert. Please stand to be recognized.

[Applause.]

[Recognize Riahna, if in attendance, as NCAI student delegate. Also recognize others as needed.]

In closing, I just want to say that we have so many things going for us as a Band. From our government services to our boundary case to our business ventures, we truly are the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. We are here to stay and to live life with all the resilience of our ancestors. But we have got to do more to look after our children and to make sure they have the opportunities that those same ancestors fought for. With that, I hope you will join me in this 2025 Year of the Child to do all that we can for our youth and to ensure the preservation of our way of life for generations to come.

Miigwech. Onward, MLB.

[Closing Applause.]