

“Remembering Who We Are”

By Virgil Wind

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

Aaniin. Look at all of the beautiful Band members here today. I’m reminded of when I last stood here — already one year ago — and to me it feels like yesterday. The days have never been shorter, the time has never been more precious. For that reason, I feel so blessed to be here, reporting on the state of our Band: the *Non-Removable* Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Without a doubt, it has been the honor of my life to serve as the Band’s Chief Executive. Miigwech to each and every one of you for granting me that privilege.

Welcome Band members, tribal leaders, honored guests, employees, and friends. Mr. Speaker, members of the Band Assembly, and Honorable Justices, miigwech for having me here to deliver the 42nd Annual State of the Band Address.

Miigwech to *Waahbishkigaabaw* for speaking on our behalf and setting the dish, so we can begin in a good way. Miigwech to the Ceremonial Drum. Miigwech to the singers who have blessed us here today and the royalty who assisted in bringing in our colors. Miigwech to the Mille Lacs All Veterans Post for posting the flags and the visiting veterans from other tribal nations. Your presence today speaks to the importance of collaboration across Indian Country and sharing our knowledge. Finally, we wouldn’t have the blessings that we have today if not for the sacrifices of all our *ogichidaa*.

Over the past few years, we have experienced tremendous losses in our communities, including the passing of many beloved Elders. Some of these Elders were mentors to me and helped to shape who I am today. Before I begin my address, I would like to acknowledge a few Elders who were very important to me and to many within the Mille Lacs Band.

The first Elder is one who, over the course of many years, developed an ironclad reputation for compassion, humility, fairness, and wisdom. This Elder was a man who *lived* our Anishinaabe values. He used to tell me, once elected, you could either serve for the prestige or for the public good. I try to remember those words when times get challenging. He also counseled me in the art of patience, how to be mindful of the way our decisions affect future generations, and how even our best intentions can produce unexpected consequences. This Elder passed away in February of last year, after having served *seven* complete terms as the Band’s District II Representative. This Elder

is none other than Marvin Bruneau (*Ogimaabinaise-ban*), someone who was truly one of a kind. *We remember him, we appreciate him, and we are so grateful for the legacy that he's left behind.*

The next Elder was one of the Band's great spiritual leaders. He was someone you would find at all sorts of community events — not just at Mille Lacs, but throughout Indian Country. This Elder served the Band with humility, wisdom, and strength. He was a passionate advocate for our children, our culture, sober living, and education. He taught me that we all have a past and we don't have to let that define who we are now or who we wish to be in the future. As long as we are striving to be better than who we were, then that is a step in the right direction. This Elder was a proud father, grandfather, *wenh'eh*, mentor, wounded combat veteran, and respected Drumkeeper. He meant a great deal to a lot of people in our community, to whom he dedicated his life. He always greeted you with a smile and a fist-bump, and his favorite saying was, "Nobody does it like Mille Lacs." This Elder is none other than Joseph Nayquonabe Sr. (*Waabishkibinesiban*), or "Big Joe" as we liked to call him.

The next Elder dedicated her life to our children, having spent decades working directly with them at our schools. She was the epitome of kindness and strength. She carried our teachings with grace and shared them through her actions, always lifting others up and putting family and community first. This Elder's legacy lives on in the generations she nurtured, the wisdom she shared, and the love she gave so freely. We are better as a Band because of this Elder and the shining example she set. No matter when you encountered her — no matter what the circumstances — she was the most kind, compassionate genuine person I've ever met. This Elder is Carol Nickaboine (*Asin-iban*).

The final Elder was a man grounded in culture, humility, and quiet strength. He carried our teachings forward through his words, his example, and his commitment to family and community. He helped so many community members and their families through the toughest times of their lives, and he always did so in a kind and loving manner. He reminded us that being Anishinaabe is something we live every day, and his legacy continues in the lives he touched and the values he shared. He always reminded us that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience. This Elder was the irreplaceable Lee Staples (*Obizaan-iban*).

For Marvin, Joe, Carol, and Lee — as well as all the Elders and Band members we've lost in recent years — I now call for a moment of silence. Let us pause to not only honor them, but also reflect on the responsibility that we have to carry on the teachings our Elders shared with us. *Please join me in this moment of silence.*

Coming back to the light, I'd also like to honor another Elder who continues to serve the Band and whose magnificent career is nearly complete. A former colleague of mine, this Elder started his career with the Band all the way back in 1992, when he worked as a Slot Technician at Grand Casino Hinckley. In 1998, he was elected to his first four-year term as District III Representative. He would go on to win four more terms, now having

served a total of 20 years in the Band Assembly. A boxing enthusiast, this Elder was responsible for establishing the Band's Department of Athletic Regulation. He is also the founder of Davis Boxing Club, which continues to operate out of Meshakwad Community Center. He is a proud husband, father, and grandfather. This Elder is none other than District III Representative Harry Davis. Harry, miigwech for your many years of service to the Band, congratulations on your upcoming retirement, and we will all miss you as our District III Representative. *Let's give Harry a round of applause for his 20-plus years of service to the Band.*

As I'm sure Harry knows from his many years in Band government, change is hard. And progress can be slow sometimes. But to move confidently into the future, we must remember our cultural practices and make decisions accordingly. Our traditional values set forth the guideposts that never lead us astray. To say it a little differently, we must always remember who we are: *Anishinaabeg. First, foremost, and always.*

So what are our traditional values? We all know them; we just have to live them. And that includes me. They are:

- *Nibwaakaawin* (Wisdom). Our Elders are honored for the wisdom they have gained through a lifetime of experiences, challenges, and perseverance. They carry knowledge that guides and teaches the generations that follow. When we respect and care for our Elders, we honor not only their lives, but the wisdom they share with all of us. Through *Nibwaakaawin*, we learn to live in a good way.
- *Zaagi'iwewin* (Love). Love is shown through care, compassion, and support for one another's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. It is rooted in sharing and cooperation. As Marge Anderson taught us, sharing is our traditional way of expressing love and care. When we put others before ourselves, we practice *Zaagi'iwewin* — the love that has sustained our people through the generations and brought us to where we are today.
- *Manaajitwaawin* (Respect). We respect our Elders, our culture, our traditions, and one another. We recognize the dignity carried inside by each person. When we have a disagreement with someone, we don't tear that person down or demean them to other people. That does not help anyone and instead creates an environment of animosity. But when we show respect, respect is shown in return. And we can all live comfortably together.
- *Gwayakwaadiziwin* (Honesty). Much trouble and conflict can arise from a lack of honesty. When we are misled or work with wrong information, we risk making poor decisions or walking a difficult path. But when we are honest with one another, the true sources of conflict can come to light, and only then can we resolve our differences. *Gwayakwaadiziwin*.
- *Mino'gikenindizowin* (Humility). I may struggle with this one a bit. But to be humble is to put our egos and our pride in check. To remember that we are individuals, yes, but individuals who are part of a group. A tribe more than 5,000-strong. The *Non-Removable* Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. We are humble when we

serve one another and think beyond what is just best for us individually. It's not always easy to do, but something we must do nonetheless. *Mino'gikenindizowin*.

- *Zoogide'ewin* (Bravery). When the time comes to protect what needs to be protected, we fight. *Our land. Our culture. Our history. Our system of government. The dignity of those we care about.* We stand tall against fear to always do what is right. That is what true bravery is. *Zoogide'ewin*.
- *Debwewin* (Truth). This is the foundation of our tribal court system. Title 24 of Mille Lacs Band Statutes states that "proceedings in the Court of Central Jurisdiction shall not be adversarial but shall be a search for truth and justice." We do not distort reality or bear false witness against one another. We strive to see the world as it is and act with integrity, seeking harmony and justice through truth. *Debwewin*.

My truth for today is that, at times, I struggle with each of these seven values; we all do, as Anishinaabeg. When life or work gets tough, when we are overstimulated, overwhelmed, or feel that nothing is going right, it's easy to fall short of these teachings. We have all done things that might be considered "unwise." We have all expressed anger when we should have shown love. We have all acted disrespectfully, been dishonest, lacked courage, or made situations about ourselves.

But these are not places where we should linger. When we find ourselves in such states, we can always return to the seven Anishinaabe values that have guided our people throughout history.

Last year at this time, I declared 2025 the "**Year of the Child.**" While I want to reflect on many of the Band's accomplishments during that year, I also want to look ahead to 2026. In doing so, our traditional values will continue to serve as our guide.

During the Year of the Child, I asked then-Commissioner of Administration Darcie Big Bear to develop the FY 2026-2027 biennial budget, submit amendments to the Band's Personnel Policy & Procedures Manual, modernize the Department of Administration's organizational structure and technology, and develop community center programs. Regrettably, Darcie's term concluded before she could complete these initiatives. Darcie did get a start on most of these tasks, but her time was cut short. I want to thank Darcie for all the hard work and dedication she has shown to the Band. She continued to serve even when serving wasn't easy — despite all the things I asked of her. Darcie, *miigwech. And please know that I can never thank you enough.*

The Executive Branch has submitted a biennial budget to the Band Assembly, and that document remains under review. Since submitting our original budget requests in late August, the Executive Branch has already trimmed back its requests for Net Revenue by a few million dollars for both Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027. I look forward to further conversations with the Band Assembly to potentially reduce these requests even further.

Just a few weeks ago, the Band Assembly unanimously confirmed Gilda Burr as the Band's next Commissioner of Administration. The importance of this development cannot be understated. Gilda has served the Band faithfully for more than 30 years, working first as a Financial Bookkeeper for the old Mille Lacs Band Housing Authority, then as a Grants Reporting Specialist, and then as the Band's Human Resource Director. After a brief stint working for Grand Casino Mille Lacs, Gilda returned to the government side in 2006 as the Tribal Court Administrator and has been working in this capacity ever since.

During her time as Tribal Court Administrator, Gilda secured funding for — and oversaw the renovation of — the Judicial Branch's office facilities, expanding from one courtroom to two. She also spearheaded the establishment of the Band's Healing-to-Wellness Court, which has now celebrated four graduates — four lives completely transformed for the better.

Although Gilda is leaving behind something very dear to her heart, she has spent the past few weeks tying up loose ends and will always be available to help where she can. I am so pleased to see Gilda elevated to this important position and look forward to the great things she will accomplish for the Band. *Let's all give Gilda a round of applause!*

Gilda, although you're not officially a Commissioner yet, I'll be requesting some major items from you in 2026. After you've been sworn in, I'll first be asking you to modernize the Band's human resource procedures through implementation of the Human Resources Information System (HRIS). I'll also be asking you to carry forward some work that was already started by your predecessor, including a restructure of the Department of Administration and modernization of the Band's IT services. Finally, I'd like you to adopt formal rules of procedure for the smooth running of the Administration Policy Board (APB). These procedures should cover every step of the APB process from beginning to end: the initiation of agenda items, approval of the agenda, rules for discussion, rules for voting, and approval of the minutes. *These are tall tasks, but there's no one I can think of who is more equipped to achieve results than you.*

Also in 2026, the Executive Branch will propose an amendment to the Band's Personnel Policy & Procedures Manual whereby employees will be authorized to spend a total of 60 minutes throughout their workweeks studying the Ojibwe language. We are at a time in history where the Band absolutely needs to make study of the Ojibwe language a top priority. Fortunately, through past hard work and investment, the Band is in a position to offer this training through Rosetta Stone, and we need to take full advantage of it. *Indeed, the preservation of our language depends on it.*

Finally, in order to look after our Elders — and to make sure the appropriate level of dialogue is taking place between our Elders and the leaders in our government — I call on my Cabinet team to organize the Mille Lacs Band's very own Elder conference to take place at one of our casinos. Such an event should be accommodating to our Elders in every reasonable way, including through the provision of important information from our Executive Branch departments. Although the event may require an additional

appropriation from the Band Assembly, I firmly believe this is an initiative we can all get behind. *Let's go and make it happen.*

Upon entering the building today, you may have received a booklet our staff was passing out. This is a combined document that includes both the Band's Annual Report from 2025, as well as the Programs and Services Guide. *Aren't these beautiful books?* I want to say "miigwech" to all directors, supervisors, and employees who helped make this book a reality. I especially want to say "miigwech" to the staff I have working within my own office who put this book together. They have persisted through thick and thin, and I'm so grateful for all the work they've done this past year. *They truly are excellent at what they do.*

The Band also wouldn't be where it is today without the faithful work of its Appointed Officials. (You may know most of them as our Commissioners.) Being an Appointed Official for the Band is a 24/7 commitment requiring heart and dedication, which is shown every day in the hard work that you do. I issued a multitude of directives last year, and we didn't complete all of them. But you made a great amount of progress, and for that I am very thankful.

Last year, for example, I asked a tremendous amount out of Commissioner of Community Development Tracy Burr. First, I asked Tracy to develop a Strategic Housing Plan. I'm happy to announce that Tracy and his staff completed that plan — the first of its kind in approximately 20 years — and that it was approved by both the Housing Board and the Band Assembly. The positive effects are visible for all to see: A substantial appropriation by the Band Assembly led to 53 vacant and boarded-up homes being scheduled for renovation during 2025, 38 of which have been completed and made available to our membership. In addition, nine new home loans have been completed, and our tribal loan portfolio now totals 409 loans worth more than \$28 million.

I also asked Tracy to initiate amendments to the Band's housing policies, develop an FY 2025-2035 Capital Improvements Plan, initiate renovation and rehabilitation of both Nay-Ah-Shing Schools and our ceremonial buildings, and provide upgrades to both our Government Center and the Baadwewedang Community Center. In 2025, the Community Development Department produced a draft Capital Improvements Plan, completed revisions to the Renovation Loan Policy, and continued working on revisions to the Rental Admissions and Occupancy Policies.

Through the diligent efforts of its Project Management Team, the Community Development Department secured approximately \$6 million per year for maintenance and improvements to Band facilities through the federal 105(I) leasing program. This not only helps for the maintenance of the Band's governmental structures, but also helps to mitigate the negative impact of declining gaming revenues which the Band has depended on for so long. With respect to the Government Center, the Project Management Team is putting together a request for bids to architectural and engineering firms to modify the back of the Government Center to accommodate

maintenance and facilities equipment. *Let's give a round of applause to Commissioner Burr, his Project Management Team, and the rest of Community Development for all the initiatives they pushed forward for the Band in 2025.*

Regarding the ceremonial buildings, the expansions and improvements of the buildings in both Districts I and III began in the fall, and the interior for each will be completed in the spring. The exterior and parking lots will be finished during the summer. These expansions were needed to accommodate the increased number of Band members attending these ceremonies. *What a great problem it is to have that we must increase the space we have dedicated for ceremonies because more of our Band members are returning to their culture. Miigwech to the members of the Band Assembly — both in their roles as leaders, but also in their drum roles — for supporting these much-needed modifications.*

Tracy, to keep the momentum going in 2026, I'm directing you to work with the Band's web developers to create an online real estate listing service, whereby Band members who own their own homes on tribal lands can finally advertise their homes for sale. Ideally, the provision of such a service will enhance the tribal housing market so that homeowners — whether they are empty-nesters or simply people who want to change residences — will not be stuck in homes they had previously purchased. If the listing service is executed properly, all Band members will have a “one-stop shop” to know exactly which homes are for sale on tribal lands. *Let's get it done.*

As Chief Executive, one of the most important things I can encourage our Band members to do is complete your education. As Band Elder David Mosey Sam once said: “Go out and get an education. Not only a high school education, but go on past that. Be someone. Come back and help your people.” All I would add to that is, even if you haven't yet completed your high school education, go ahead and earn your diploma or your GED. It doesn't matter where you're at, or what your age is. Start with your high school degree, and, if you end up going past that, more power to you. The Band needs you to set and pursue goals not only for yourself, but for the well-being of all our people. You were born as an indispensable member of our Band, and we want you to live your best life. *So, please, go out and finish your education. And once you've finished, please consider returning home and sharing your gifts with the Band.*

The Commissioner I rely upon to champion education each and every day is none other than Raina Killspotted. Serving as Commissioner of Education since the end of 2024, Raina has been a steadfast supporter of our children's education — always focusing on the details, always looking for ways to improve, and always keeping the best interests of our children at heart. During the 2025 Year of the Child, I asked Raina to hire more teachers at Mille Lacs Early Education, expand Ojibwe language and cultural learning opportunities, develop a five-year strategic plan, and work with the Office of the Solicitor General on both a Truancy Code and proposed revisions to the Band's Education Statute (Title 9). Raina has made substantial progress on all fronts.

One year ago, Mille Lacs Early Education had a combined total of 45 teachers across all three of the Band's districts. Under Raina's leadership, this number has increased to 61 teachers. The result is we are now only a couple of staff members away from being able to offer child care all day on Friday in District I. Raina was also successful in getting the new early education program up and running in District III. This facility consists of three classrooms, allowing for the attendance of up to 24 Band member children. This not only fills a major gap in District III's child care needs, but also opened up employment opportunities for local Band members.

With respect to expanding Ojibwe language and cultural learning opportunities, the Department of Education has:

- implemented language tables in all three districts;
- worked to establish a credentialing process for language instructors as a pathway for a Tier 3 license with the state of Minnesota;
- restarted the Ojibwe Language Bowls;
- established a cultural work group consisting of first-language speakers and second-language acquisition speakers that oversee the Band's Ojibwe language and culture initiatives; and
- updated the Scholarships policy.

The amendments to the Scholarships policy include awards for individuals pursuing Bachelor's degrees in teaching the Ojibwe language and a second laptop award for students pursuing post-graduate studies. There are also now so many Band members attending college that we've had to request a 30 percent increase in funding for the Scholarships program. *What a fantastic return on investment of our tribal dollars. Our leaders must ensure we have sustainable funding to meet the growing demand for education.*

I mentioned the Department of Education's cultural work group. They are also in attendance today. They are: Adrienne Benjamin, John Benjamin (*Waahbishkigaabaw*), Melissa *Baabiitaw* Boyd, Shirley Boyd, Jim Clark III, Vincent Merrill Sr., Brenda Moose, Byron Ninham, Samantha Peet, William Premo, and Betty Sam. This group has also been instrumental in developing the Ojibwe language immersion classroom in District I, which is currently recruiting children ages 3-5. Miigwech for everything you're doing to instill the Ojibwe language and culture within our youth. *This is perhaps the most important work that anyone is doing within the Band. Let's give them a round of applause.*

With respect to a five-year strategic plan, Mille Lacs Early Education has completed a plan for Band member children up to the age of five. Meanwhile, Nay-Ah-Shing Schools are currently developing a long-term plan to be aligned with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) ONE PLAN. The Department of Education has also worked diligently with the Office of the Solicitor General, the Nay-Ah-Shing School Board, and various

administrators to propose revisions to the Band's Education Code, including sections addressing truancy. The next step is to propose the revisions to the Band Assembly and seek out a sponsor.

One of Raina's other major accomplishments is the outreach she has performed with public schools to connect Band member students to Mille Lacs Band resources. She also procured \$19 million in BIE funding for the upgrade and remodeling of both Nay-Ah-Shing's upper and lower schools. This is the first major upgrade of our schools since they were first built in the 1990s. I'm happy to announce that construction contracts have been signed and work began a few weeks ago. This is a credit not only to Raina's perseverance and passion for our children's education, but also to the power of working together.

Raina, I want to say "miigwech" for all that you do, and I look forward to more great things to come from you in 2026. *Let's all give Raina and the entire Education team a round of applause.*

In addition to having a visionary Commissioner of Education, the Mille Lacs Band is also fortunate to have a dedicated Commissioner of Natural Resources. Kelly Applegate has been serving in this role since 2020, and talk about someone who was meant for a position . . . Kelly's passion for natural resources — the very gifts from our Creator — give him the drive, initiative, and resilience to stand up for the Band's environmental interests no matter what. He has proven that time and time again, most notably when pushing back against Talon Metals and the nickel sulfide mine they are planning to install up in Tamarack.

Water Over Nickel is the Mille Lacs Band's commitment to protect our water, land, and people from the risks of nickel mining. Water connects us to our past, our future, and each other. The proposed Tamarack Mine — just over a mile from Round Lake and near sacred sites like Rice Lake and Sandy Lake — poses a risk too great to ignore. *There has never been a clean nickel mine.*

We're taught as Anishinaabe people to protect the earth for the next seven generations. That's exactly what we're doing through Water Over Nickel. But this initiative wouldn't be possible without the people who show up every day — protecting our water and uplifting our voices. As we celebrate Year of the Child successes, I want to recognize the Water Over Nickel Youth Ambassadors — Band youth who are getting involved and protecting our future. These young leaders are helping both Band members *and* Minnesotans understand exactly what's at stake. As I call your names, please stand to be recognized. These leaders are Illyanna Aubid-White, J.J. Aubid-White, Elbert White III, and Jaymon Aubid. *Let's give them all a round of applause for their advocacy and the positive example they're setting.*

I also want to say "miigwech" to Cheyanne Peet for her leadership in guiding this group and ensuring our youth are heard in powerful ways, including last fall's Water Over Nickel Day, when she coordinated a youth dance performance that reminded us that our

strength is rooted in culture and connection to this land. And another special “miigwech” to District II Representative Wendy Merrill, who represents the district most directly impacted by the proposed Tamarack mine. Her support for Water Over Nickel, our youth, and our Band members has helped ensure this issue gets the attention it deserves.

In mid-2026, the Band expects the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to open the first public comment period on the proposed Tamarack Mine. This is a critical moment for Band members and all Minnesotans to raise their voices, share their concerns, and advocate for clean water. This is our chance to make clear that our water is not worth sacrificing, that our cultural lifeways cannot be collateral damage, and that our future deserves better.

During the 2025 Year of the Child, I asked Commissioner Applegate to “develop new initiatives that engage the Band’s youth, further connecting them to our natural resources and cultural heritage.” As expected, both Kelly and the Department of Natural Resources have come through with flying colors. In 2025, DNR organized a number of successful events that reintroduced our children to their cultural way of life, including sugarbush, ice fishing, spearing, setting nets, and learning to clean fish. DNR also worked with HHS and the Commissioner of Education to create gardening programs for youth.

As Kelly has repeatedly stated, this is not just a one-year occurrence, but a new standard going forward. Our children should never be without opportunities to practice our cultural activities. With the dedicated work of both Kelly and the entire DNR team, we’re setting a shining example for future generations to follow. *Let’s give them all a round of applause.*

One recent victory for the Band with respect to natural resources is that of the Willmus Property. The Willmus Property refers to a 3,200-acre parcel of land in Morrison County, contiguous to the Reservation, which the Band purchased in 1992. Given the property’s makeup, the Band’s original intent in making the purchase was wildlife preservation and practice of treaty rights. In 2015, DNR initiated the lengthy, 16-step process for the land to be held by the United States in trust for the Mille Lacs Band. Although Morrison County resisted the transfer, a recent court decision agreed with the Band that the Willmus Property is, in fact, contiguous to the Reservation and therefore eligible for trust status. There are more steps to clear before the property is taken into trust, but as of now the future looks bright.

Although the fee-to-trust process is a lengthy one, Kelly has also done a commendable job preparing the Band’s properties to enter that process. Along with Community Development’s Earthworks Team, he has done that by cleaning up various dilapidated structures throughout the Reservation. Miigwech to the Earthworks Team for getting that important work done, as well as the Band Assembly for their support. Kelly, in 2026, I want you to not only develop a long-term fee-to-trust strategy for the Band, but also take

a hard look at Archives to make sure the Band's most sacred historical documents are being properly catalogued and kept safe. *Let's keep up the great progress in 2026.*

Next, we have Health and Human Services. While the department does not currently have a commissioner, its work continues at the highest level, thanks to the extraordinary leadership team Nicole Anderson helped build. Under Nicole's exemplary leadership, HHS transitioned several departments into a one-stop clinical service for Band members, providing both on-site primary and specialty care. Her business acumen, strategic vision, and ability to turn plans into action improved access to care and streamlined workflow across the organization. Commissioner Anderson worked tirelessly — often beyond the bounds of a typical workday — to ensure safe, high-quality care for all Band members. The systems, processes, and culture she established continue to guide the department every day, ensuring her vision for the Band's health and wellness remains strong.

Miigwech to Nicole for her dedication, leadership, and lasting contributions to the Mille Lacs Band.

In 2025, I tasked HHS with getting the Child Advocacy Center up and running, establishing a women's halfway house in District I, developing a plan to increase access to dental services, and modernizing the information technology platforms for Elder, Emergency, Victim, and Family Services.

Just a few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of attending the Grand Opening of the Child Advocacy Center in Wahkon. This center is designed to be a safe, welcoming place where children and families can go for support when something difficult has happened. Miigwech to Nicole Anderson, Carmen Kalk, Curt Kalk Jr., and everyone else who worked to establish this center. Because of you and your efforts, both our children and our families are stronger. Now, even during the most difficult of times, they will have a place to reunite and seek comfort.

With respect to the Women's Halfway House, HHS has developed an estimated budget along with a tentative design. The department is hoping to solicit construction bids in April of this year and to begin renovation in early summer. HHS is also working on renovations for both its Districts II and III facilities. Once renovations are complete, the old Senior Living facility in East Lake will be converted into HHS's new satellite location for the area — along with such programs as the Food Shelf, Dental, Substance Use, Behavioral Health, and Family Services. The District III dental facility will also be receiving a long-awaited facelift. Finally, HHS is expected to fully convert its data processing from on-site to the cloud within the next eight months.

Having gone more than six months without a Commissioner, I want to say "miigwech" to all HHS staff for persevering no matter what. Specifically, I'd like to say "miigwech" to Executive Director of Health Services Jan Manary and Executive Director of Human Services Carmen Kalk. *Your leadership throughout the past six months has been more than exemplary.*

At last, we have Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures. Although the Commissioner of Corporate Affairs position has been vacant for the past year, I continue to work with Band Assembly on finding the right person to look after the Band's businesses. I'm also working with the Band Assembly on finalizing the details of how the Ventura Project will be rolled out for occupancy. *As I've repeatedly stated, the Ventura Project represents an important site for our Urban membership as a Mille Lacs Band stake in the ground in the heart of Minneapolis.* Once fully rolled out, Ventura will not only house all the Band's programs and services currently being offered to our urban membership, but also provide 36 apartment units.

In 2025, Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures worked diligently and made some excruciatingly difficult decisions. These tough decisions resulted in millions in savings from the company's FY 2025 budget, as well as an increase of Band member employment by 78 people. Band members' share of Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures' total workforce has now increased from 9.8 percent to 13.1 percent.

I want to say "miigwech" to the Corporate Board of Directors — Jen Gahbow, Bradley Harrington, Paul Sam, Julie Ziegler-Dunkley, and now Bernida Humetewa — for all the work and dedication they've set forth while the Band has gone without a Corporate Commissioner. The Corporate Board has been exercising an increased level of responsibility from previous years, and I couldn't be prouder of the way they have risen to the challenge. *The dedication they've shown over this past year to keep the Band's businesses running in an effective manner is truly admirable.*

The year 2025 also saw Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures enter into a new partnership with the Minnesota Wild which, for the first time ever, has allowed Grand Casinos to be seen in the national spotlight and put the name of our casinos in the lexicon of so many more people than before. Only a couple of months ago, the Wild hosted a Native American Heritage Night at Grand Casino Arena that represented a beautiful celebration of Anishinaabe and Mille Lacs Band culture, including Mille Lacs Band singers, dancers, and a tribal flag ceremony. The event also saw the first-ever hockey game broadcast completely in Ojibwe — a truly seminal moment for our people. *Miigwech to all the Anishinaabe speakers on the play-by-play, as well as Band member Melissa Baabiitaw Boyd who came up with the idea.*

Since 1991, gaming has brought our people benefits we had never experienced before. Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, despite its ups and downs, has been instrumental in providing financial support to both our people and our government for more than three decades. But like any industry, gaming is constantly evolving, with new competitors, technologies, and consumer habits emerging all the time. We must stay ahead of these trends, or risk being left behind — or relying on an outdated business model. Instead, we focus on how we can best serve our patrons, and in doing so, ensure we are taking care of our own people.

When it comes to our casinos, I suggest we get back to basics. By that, I mean good food, buffets, a Kids' Zone — and all the little things that make a visit fun for the whole

family. In the 1990s, Indian casinos were new and offered experiences you couldn't get outside Las Vegas or Atlantic City. Those days are behind us, but I feel we've let go of a few important aspects of that business model. It's time to take a second look at those elements and bring them back. Let's make our casinos the place to be again on a Friday or Saturday night — or even a Sunday morning. In other words, let's make our casinos a family-friendly destination once more!

In addition to borrowing from past practices that seemed to have worked, we also have to evolve as our client base and demographics change. I suggest that we redouble our efforts with the State Legislature so that we can help bring responsible sports betting to Minnesota. It doesn't even have to be online. Although a small-margin business, brick-and-mortar sports betting would give consumers a new reason to cross our casino floor, another space for leisure, and some other way they can enjoyably pass the time with their hard-earned money. I believe that sports betting can meet that need, and it's a way to prepare ourselves for the future. *I insist we make that effort.*

Another exciting area for growth — although not part of our gaming enterprises — is wholesale and retail cannabis. Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures engages in these lines of business through its subsidiary, Lake Leaf Cultivation. In 2025, Lake Leaf opened up three retail cannabis dispensaries — one in each district. Despite limited space and starting without a full menu of products, the Mille Lacs and Hinckley dispensaries have been profitable every month since they've opened. On the wholesale side, Lake Leaf products are now available for sale in nine state-licensed dispensaries, with about six more to come online this month.

Moreover, of the 95 people employed at Lake Leaf, 46 of them — nearly 50 percent — are Band members. Miigwech to all of the Lake Leaf employees who've worked so hard to develop this business. I now call on the Band Assembly to appropriate funding for permanent dispensaries in both Hinckley and Mille Lacs. *Let's finish the investment and give these businesses the chance to succeed to their utmost potential.*

Perhaps the most important part of being Chief Executive is looking after the Band's relationships with the federal, the state, and our local governments as well as tribal partners. I'm proud to say that these relationships remain strong, and in many cases, stronger than ever. With Mille Lacs County in particular, we've made steady progress. I'm encouraged to see our partnership continuing to grow and strengthen. The work we've done together is a reminder that collaboration and mutual respect can carry us forward.

Last February, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals — at our request — dismissed the Band's lawsuit with Mille Lacs County as moot (or irrelevant) on the grounds that the law enforcement issue had been resolved by a change to Minnesota state law. Since the conclusion of that litigation, the Band has also entered into a new law enforcement agreement with Mille Lacs County to ensure that our District I and II-A communities receive the type of policing they can rely on. Whether our Reservation exists has *never* been a question for us, and our law enforcement officers have more authority now than

they did before. *Band member or not, the public safety of all Mille Lacs County residents is now more consistent throughout the county.*

Miigwech to Marc Slonim, Beth Baldwin, and their exceptional team of legal experts along with our Mille Lacs Band Solicitor General, Caleb Dogeagle. Their dedication, skill, and tireless effort have carried much of the heavy lifting, ensuring that our work is grounded in excellence and precision. Miigwech also to all of our dedicated tribal police officers and first-responders who work around the clock to make sure our communities remain safe.

At the state level, in September of last year I had the pleasure of signing Minnesota's second-ever cannabis compact with a federally recognized Indian tribe. White Earth was the first tribal nation to do so. Then, after ours was completed, Prairie Island, Fond du Lac, Leech Lake, Red Lake, and now Bois Forte have followed suit. These compacts are sovereign-to-sovereign, high-level agreements that ensure all Band-regulated cannabis activity can access the statewide cannabis market according to a fair and robust regulatory structure that ensures consumer-safe cannabis product. Moreover, the Mille Lacs Band's compact was the final step in making sure that Lake Leaf's business model could be realized. *Miigwech to the Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures employees who worked on this compact, as well as the Governor's Office for giving tribes the opportunity to be key players in this emerging market.*

I want to say "miigwech" to Department of Cannabis Regulation (DCR) Board of Directors and its Executive Director, Becky Houle, for all the work they did in 2025 to get the Band's cannabis regulatory framework up and running. Although the department was created under Band law in 2023, the board itself was not filled until 2024 and the Executive Director was not hired until March of 2025. Since that time, the DCR has established a home office space, purchased necessary equipment, contracted with independent legal consultants and an online licensing system provider, and developed consistent budget, board, and introductory procedures. For cannabis businesses operating within the Band's sovereign jurisdiction, the DCR has already issued six cannabis business licenses, nine vendor licenses, and 95 employee licenses. They have also adopted 18 separate cannabis regulations, with at least five more to come.

The work that the DCR accomplished in 2025 was so substantial that I've invited the board members here today to be recognized. These board members are: Krista Klug, Dann Klapel, Toya Stewart Downey, Jammie Thomas-Rasset, and Steven LaPrairie. All of you that are present, please stand to be recognized. *Let's give them all a round of applause.*

Also at the state level, the Mille Lacs Band — through the Minnesota Indian Gaming Association, or "MIGA" — has lent its support to a bill that would ban sweepstakes gaming across the state. Sweepstakes gaming is online gambling that allows players to use virtual coins to play casino games for cash and prizes. Fortunately, last November, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison issued letters to 14 operators of such illegal games to shut down the activity. This is the type of activity that poses a threat to the

Band's gaming revenues both now and in the long-term. *Therefore, in addition to the sports betting legislation that I mentioned earlier, I call on our Department of Government Affairs to keep a close eye on this legislation for the protection and preservation of Indian gaming long into the future.*

Speaking of Attorney General Ellison, I see that he's in the audience today. Miigwech for coming, Keith. It really means a lot to the Mille Lacs Band that you would attend and be with us here today. And having gotten to know you a little better, I want you to know that I really admire the way you stand up for people from underprivileged communities — not just Indian Country, but other communities as well. You're also the exact same person behind closed doors as you are in front of the cameras. And that's something I really appreciate about you. *Let's give Attorney General Keith Ellison a round of applause.*

At the federal level, as we all know, things have been challenging — to say the least. When I first took office as Chief Executive, the Biden Administration was finishing up a series of regulations and other initiatives. But the world changed quickly — first with the 2024 election, then with the swearing-in of a new President in January 2025. The creation of the Department of Government Efficiency was something that few of us expected, and the cuts they made to the federal government have been felt far and wide — including by tribal nations. We have adapted and we have overcome, but the complications continue to mount. Only a few months ago, the federal government was shut down for a record 40 days. Yet again, the Mille Lacs Band — along with other tribal nations — committed to stand up for its members in response.

In recent weeks, we've all witnessed the impact of increased activity by federal ICE agents in Minneapolis. These events have created fear, uncertainty, and deep concern for our families and our communities. Just last week, an ICE agent shot and killed Renee Good, a 37-year-old mother in Minneapolis. As Anishinaabeg, we understand the importance of safety, dignity, and respect for all human beings. *We must be clear in denouncing violence and harm in all its forms, standing firm in our beliefs of compassion, unity, and collective responsibility.*

We are, after all, a Treaty nation. And our Band's Treaties are the Highest Law of the Land. That's why we defend — like *ogichidaa* in battle — the Rule of Law that secures for us the Treaty rights our ancestors obtained in exchange for valuable resources. The Rule of Law means law enforcement must be lawful. No one is above the law.

I want our membership to know that your leadership is closely monitoring developments and actively working 24/7 to protect the safety and well-being of our people. As a sovereign tribal government, the Mille Lacs Band holds a unique place in America's system of governance. All agencies of the United States government — including ICE — have a trust and treaty obligation to respect our Band's tribal sovereignty and to ensure that the Band and our members are not unduly harassed or harmed by law enforcement activities that have nothing to do with our tribe or tribal law. In this regard, we are redoubling our ongoing efforts to engage on a government-to-government basis in robust consultation with the United States government to insist that any immigration

or other law enforcement activity on our Reservation or Band property be done only after consultation with — and the consent of — the Band.

One silver lining on the federal level is the Department of Treasury's completion of final regulations under the Tribal General Welfare Exclusion Act (GWE). These rules are the result of years of advocacy and consultation by Mille Lacs, other tribal governments, and the Treasury Tribal Advisory Committee (TTAC) — which I had the privilege of testifying before early in my term. The regulations strengthen tribal sovereignty and provide new flexibility. Specifically, the new rules make it easier for the Band to support members' well-being, economic development, and cultural activities — all while respecting tribal sovereignty and reducing tax burdens. So it's now up to us to take a close look at the various programs we have in place and make sure we're providing them in a tax-exempt manner for the utmost benefit to our Band members. *That is something we should all be excited about and represents a huge win for Indian Country.*

When it comes to the Band's government-to-government relationships, I'd like to close with the topic of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe — MCT. As our Mille Lacs Band Constitutional Delegates have pointed out, the three things that connect the Band to MCT are land, elections, and enrollments. And those connections don't always work out well for us.

In July of last year, the MCT Tribal Executive Committee approved Resolution 90-25, adopting Federal Regulations for purposes of calculating the number of eligible voters required to amend the MCT Constitution. Since a Secretarial Election to amend the MCT Constitution is only valid if called by a vote of 30 percent of "those entitled to vote[.]" this 30 percent number will now be calculated based on the total number of *registered* voters — not the total number of MCT tribal members who are of voting age. Now, if — for example — a Secretarial Election were called to amend the MCT Constitution to lower blood-quantum requirements for enrollment, Band members would first have to register for the vote in order to be counted amongst the 30 percent. I don't support that, and that's why I voted against the resolution. As I stated at last year's State of the Band: *Any determination about the Mille Lacs Band's enrollment requirements should be made by the Mille Lacs Band and its members, not anyone else.*

One final thing I'd like to say about the MCT is that, in the event that the Mille Lacs Band ever gets an opportunity to stand on its own, I want us to be ready. We are blessed with a dedicated and hard-working group of delegates who have already started to work on a draft Constitution. I fully support that work and call on all Band members to educate themselves about the process. If there is ever an opportunity for the Mille Lacs Band to govern itself under its own Constitution, we cannot be caught flat-footed. *Let's do the work now so that someday — maybe someday — we will have a Constitution that we can call our own.*

As I close today, I'd like to return to our traditional Anishinaabe values: wisdom, love, respect, honesty, humility, bravery, and truth. As times get tougher and challenges

continue to mount, these are the values that guide us. Think of our Elders and all the things they've seen during their lifetimes. *Think of our blessings and all the sacrifices that were made so we could have them today. We really are so fortunate.*

You may have noticed that I said “miigwech” to a lot of people today. There's a reason for that. I have said “miigwech” to these people because I cannot do this work alone, and these are some of the people who are making substantial contributions day-in and day-out. I call now on all members of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to make their own contributions — *in their own way*. Apply for one of the open Commissioner positions, finish your education, set aside more time for your cultural practices, or learn the Ojibwe language. The Band needs you and values what you have to offer. *And in finding your own way to contribute, never forget who you are. Anishinaabeg.*

Miigwech. Onward, MLB.