



## 2021 STATE OF THE BAND ADDRESS

Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin

Mille Lacs Reservation

Tuesday, January 12, 2021

Aaniin, Boozhoo, Good Morning. Mr. Speaker, Members of the Band Assembly, Madame Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary and most important, fellow Members of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe; I am honored to speak to you today on the state of the Band.

One year ago, this room was filled with nearly one thousand Band Members who came to hear about the state of our Band, reunite with old friends, and enjoy a wonderful community meal together. When I was standing at the podium and looking into the audience, I saw a sea of beautiful Anishinaabe faces.

The sounds of coffee cups, of crying babies, of little children who have been trying to sit quietly...those sounds have been the background music to all fourteen State of the Band addresses I have given.

Today, I miss those sounds.

Last year at the State of the Band Address we sat close to each other. It was a day of lots of hugs, of holding new babies, of shared food and especially shared desserts! We laughed and talked to one another close up without worry.

Today I am really missing those things.

Last January we did not know that less than three months later we would be a community in lockdown with the doors to our casinos and businesses closed, school buildings closed and government buildings locked due to a global pandemic.

This year the State of the Band is very different. We are coming to you on-line in order to protect the health and safety of our Band community. Yet some things will never change, including how we begin this day in our traditional way.

- Miigwech to Obisan for speaking on our behalf, so we can begin in a good way;
- Miigwech to the Ceremonial Drum, and Waabishkibines...(Joe Nayquonabe Sr.) for setting the dish;
- Miigwech to Mille Lacs All Veterans for posting the flags;
- And to Arlyn Sam, Little Otter and Torrey Petite for singing for us today.

Like me, I know many of you miss getting together as a community. Yet COVID has not been able to stop us from being a community.

There are more people who worked hard to make sure we could broadcast this to your homes. It took a small army to make this day happen. To each of you, Miigwech for your hard work.

There is no getting around the fact that 2020 was a very rough year. COVID-19 has been vicious with too high of a cost. Band Members lost loved ones to this disease.

Many Band Members faced job loss and financial insecurity, and as America Indians, all of us had to cope with the fear and anxiety of being in the highest risk group for complications or loss of life from COVID-19.

2020 was a year of an ugly national election that nearly ripped our country apart. Just last week, we watched live on TV as the U.S. Capitol was attacked by domestic terrorists trying to overthrow the election and the government.

It was also an MCT Election year, during which we saw some of the ugliness of the national politics spill into our Band elections, which we must never allow to happen again.

And as if that wasn't enough, it was also a year of fear, anger and anxiety sparked by racism with social unrest felt around the world due to the murder of George Floyd -- in the middle of the global pandemic.

Finally, COVID has caused loss of life in other ways. Addictions and mental illness became worse with social isolation. Depression in the United States has tripled since COVID, affecting one in three Americans, and is higher in communities of color.

When people have trouble coping with sadness, isolation and anxiety, they may turn to drugs or alcohol. Research has proven that depression also makes other chronic illnesses like heart disease, diabetes and cancer worse -- and harder to treat.

Sadly, we have seen all of this first-hand. The number of Band Members who have passed away this year is double from the previous year. Hearts are broken from the loss of life and so many funerals.

It is important to acknowledge that there is great sadness in our community right now. If you or a loved one is suffering from depression, we have help available. There are phone numbers listed here during the program. Please call them if you are struggling. Every Band Member's life is a gift. Your families and your Band need you.

During 2020, some of the worst things we could imagine happened, but in many ways, it brought out the best in us we could ever hope for.

Last year I talked about something Joe Nayquonabe Sr. said. He said we should all try "to be good ancestors".

During one of the darkest times in our modern history, many Mille Lacs Band Members did just that. They became a light in the darkness, being the best ancestors they could be.

I've heard 2020 described as a "dumpster fire", but 2020 was also a year when small sparks together lit a great fire of community service, of fighting against injustice and of adapting to a new world.

As Band Members and employees, you stepped forward to serve our Band with courage and compassion, risking your own safety to protect others.

Together, we did not cower in the face of crisis. We faced it head on and we fought it. We took decisive action, and quickly changed the way we do nearly everything so we could keep Band Members safe.

On March 14, 2020, I issued an Executive Order to mobilize our Tribal Emergency Response Committee, which we call the “TERC”. Our TERC included members from all three branches of government. They met around the clock, making sure we could get help and basic government services to our Band Members.

To slow down the virus, many difficult decisions had to be made. All employees who could perform their jobs from home were directed to stay away from government buildings.

We continued to pay all employees as long as we could, but there came a time when we had no choice but to furlough many employees. We tried to time this with the federal government’s expansion of unemployment benefits, so that people would still have a source of income.

But we know this has been a period of great stress for our furloughed workers. I want to acknowledge your sacrifice for our Band as well.

While many of our Band Member services went on-line --like education, tele-health and nearly all our business functions and meetings -- there were still services and help that Band Members needed that could only be provided in person. Those employees were asked to remain working.

With careful planning, the TERC found the safest way for our front-line workers to continue providing those services to Band Members in person.

This included housing staff, who continued going into homes to assist Band Members during the pandemic; our Education staff and teachers also continued working to care for and teach our children when “in-person” education was in place again; our health-care and wellness providers and staff, public health staff and maintenance crews across all districts; our employees who returned to work after the casinos reopened so we could begin our economic recovery; and, our OMB staff, because we still needed to pay the bills and get paychecks out and many others.

All of you sacrificed for our Band, sometimes at great personal cost, especially those who became sick while working.

I also want to acknowledge our Urban Area staff led by Wahbon Spears. After the murder of George Floyd there was civil unrest like we have never seen before.

While a new civil rights movement was born from millions of peaceful protestors, the actions of a few created destruction. The world watched as south Minneapolis seemed to be burning down, very close to our Urban community near Franklin Avenue.

With COVID-19, Wahbon and her staff had to deal with two crises at the same time, and they did it well. They coordinated with the TERC to make sure that Band Members received food and supplies when all the stores were closed and that Band Members could get their medications when there was no public transportation.

Band Members from the reservation like Colin Cash and Randall Sam answered the call to help, driving to Minneapolis to assist with protecting the community, watching over our Woodlands National Bank, tribal offices, businesses and housing. All in the middle of a global pandemic.

To our front-line workers and Band Members who risked your own health and safety to ensure the basic needs of our Band Members were met and to all in our community who sacrificed during the pandemic: You are all heroes for our Band. Miigwech for your bravery, generosity, dedication and service.

I also want to acknowledge and thank our dedicated Members of the Band Assembly for your important legislative work and your strong partnership in getting through this crisis. Our emergency response would not have been possible without your great work.

And chi miigwech to Speaker Sheldon Boyd for his strong, decisive leadership during this crisis. With Speaker Boyd in charge, our Legislative Branch worked harder than I have ever seen.

When our casinos closed and there were no funds for per capita, Speaker Boyd laid the course for providing much needed economic assistance to Band Members. At the same time, he did a brilliant job managing our finances and preserving long-term savings so that future generations will always have resources for another crisis, if needed.

Speaker Boyd leads with integrity, compassion, and he lives our Anishinaabe values. It has been my privilege to work with him.

I also want all Band Members to know that our division-of-powers government was the main reason we were able to respond so quickly. Together as a government, I think we had the best crisis response team in Indian country, and that is not just my opinion.

Throughout COVID we were contacted by other tribes asking for advice, wanting to know how they could replicate what we were doing. Federal and state officials commented that we were better prepared for a crisis than most cities and counties.

For that, I want to acknowledge everyone on our TERC team.

I also want to give a big miigwech to Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan. When the virus hit and the state was about to shut down, tribal leaders were among the first people the Governor contacted. The Governor's office held daily phone calls with tribal leaders to brief us on the crisis and to coordinate with our team.

The Governor and Lieutenant Governor also helped get emergency assistance to the tribes in Minnesota. No other states offered as much help to tribes as Minnesota did. We will always be grateful to our state leaders for standing by us.

Despite the challenges of 2020, we did not let COVID stop us from making progress. Some exciting things happened this year. For example, after taking

inconsistent positions on the status of our reservation in recent years, the State of Minnesota made clear in early February of 2020 that our reservation was never dis-established, and has since reaffirmed that position. Miigwech to Attorney General Keith Ellison and Governor Walz

for joining with the federal government's position that our reservation boundary never ceased to exist.

Mille Lacs County still refuses to acknowledge the existence of our reservation, even though it has never been able to show how the county is harmed by the reservation. The issue will be argued in federal court in March of 2021, and we may get a ruling by the end of the year.

Our historic language revitalization project got off the ground in 2020. With a partnership with from Rosetta Stone, we are making tools and resources that many generations will be able to use.

We are also creating books to build our library of Ojibwe language resources. By raising children who are fluent, we are exercising our sovereignty. We are making sure our future generations can think, act and live like Anishinaabe people with Anishinaabe values. This project will protect our language forever, promising that future generations will always be able to learn Ojibwe.

In 2020 we also opened our new healthcare center, a state-of-the-art facility where Band Members can get health and wellness services. The move was very difficult due to the pandemic, but we did it.

We purchased property in Minneapolis across from All Nations Church, where we will be building new housing in a multi-use building that will include a community gathering space for Band Members. Miigwech to our Urban Area Planning Committee members who are advising us on the design.

We are also just one of two tribes in Minnesota that received a special Eagle permit, which removes the challenges that made it hard to obtain eagle feathers. Band Members now have a much more fair and consistent process when eagle feathers are needed.

We continued our legal battle to protect our lands and waters from a new pipeline through the courts, which is the proper role of government. Individuals worked at the grassroots level.

On the Economic Development front, we have some very big news. The U.S. Small Business Administration has a special program called the 8-A Certification program. This is for businesses owned by women, minority groups and tribes. Businesses that get this 8-A status can receive preferential treatment for federal government contracting.

In March, four of our Makwa Global companies were accepted into the 8-A program. This is a very big deal. In just the past few months, Makwa Global has landed several government contracts around the world that are very exciting.

For example, our Band is now assisting the U.S. State Department with its counterterrorism training needs. Through another contract we are working with the U.S. State Department on a construction project overseas at a secure location that cannot be disclosed.

Who would have ever thought this was possible? It has always been our goal to diversify so that we are not dependent on gaming. For three months last summer when our casinos were closed, we experienced the hardship that loss of gaming could mean. With this new source of

income from government contracting, we are on a path to long-term economic security, even if there is another pandemic. This is history making.

And on another historic front, next week on Wednesday, January 20<sup>th</sup>, President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris will be sworn in as the 46<sup>th</sup> President and Vice President of these United States. This is a profound moment in history, because on that day, we will have the first woman Vice President.

We are witnessing another glass ceiling being shattered forever by Kamala Harris. To anyone who has a young daughter, granddaughter or niece in your homes, there is one thing I ask you to do on that day. Please make certain your TV is on a channel showing the Inauguration. We need all our little girls to watch this historic event so they know their dreams – no matter how big – can come true.

I am confident in the Biden Administration. President-Elect Biden’s “Plan for Tribal Nations” is the strongest I have ever seen by any President. It is based on tribal sovereignty and respect for tribal governments.

President-Elect Biden has made history for us in another way as well. During the campaign, he promised that if he won his election, his Cabinet would look like America and be the most diverse Cabinet in history.

He has already made good on that promise in a big way. By nominating Congresswoman Deb Haaland to the position of Secretary of Interior, we may have the first American Indian to ever serve on the President’s Cabinet in one of the most powerful positions in the country for Indian tribes.

The Department of Interior’s reach goes far beyond the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education. Every day, decisions are made or actions taken across the whole Department that affect us. This includes protecting our trust lands, our economic development, our sovereignty, law enforcement and public safety. It includes our treaty rights, access to clean water, our food security, management of our trust funds, protection of our wildlife, plants, fish and even our religious freedom. The Secretary of Interior is supposed to be our Trustee. Yet throughout most of the past 170 years, the Trustee has overseen the exploitation of our lands and people.

That will not happen with the new Administration. If Congresswoman Haaland is confirmed, a highly qualified American Indian woman will be serving in this position who already knows our needs and who understands tribal sovereignty because she is one of us.

Finally, despite the division that a few people tried to create, our MCT elections proved that our tribal democracy works. On that note I want to thank Band Members for giving me the honor of serving as your Chief Executive for another term of office.

I am very humbled by your support and I intend to see through every commitment I made during the campaign. My goal is that four years from now we will look back on the post-pandemic years as being a time of growth and prosperity for every Band Member. I know we can do this if we keep working together the way we have this past year. Now is a time for unity.

As we begin this new year, many have asked: When will the world return to normal? That depends on what “normal” means. All of us have been impacted by the pandemic. We have

all changed in some way. Things can never go back to the way they were but that does not have to be a bad thing.

Our future can be better than before the pandemic. If we move safely and continue to be smart, we can reemerge as the community we want to be and know we can be. We can get through this pandemic together because we are resilient.

We are already on the path of coming out stronger than before. Out of fear and uncertainty, many Band Members and employees shined. They showed courage and determination, using creative problem-solving to meet our challenges.

It has been a long time since our Band has had to deal with food insecurity. But COVID-19 put up new road blocks that made it harder to get nutritious food, especially for elders and people in high risk groups, families with young children and those who lost their work income.

When our children could no longer get their meals at school, our government and Corporate Commission devised a plan to get meals to the kid at home. After the casinos closed, our food and beverage staff switched from serving guests to serving our Band communities -- almost overnight. Thousands of meals were made every day for Band members and area school children.

Weeks' worth of food for elders was put together and our highest risk people were able to receive basic food supplies so they would not have to risk going to stores. I also want to thank Julie Skinaway and Roberta Martin, of my staff, who helped elders get groceries in District II and District III.

Across the Band, teams of people were organized to distribute food in each district and the urban area. This took hundreds of people but we did it.

We were successful getting a special grant of nearly \$1 million dollars to provide housing assistance. 478 Band families received help through this grant. On that note, miigwech to Britney Wind and our Grants Department staff. The Band received every single COVID grant we applied for.

Individual Band Members also got creative. When the whole country was out of medical masks our ladies went to work sewing masks for Band Members. Some even taught other Band Members how to sew their own masks. Miigwech to Temperance McClain, Carol Hernandez, our ALU residents and the many others who saw a community need and took care of it.

Band Members put our Anishinaabe values into action by taking care of one another, checking on elders, delivering food to those in need and helping neighbors.

Getting through this pandemic is not a sprint. It is a marathon. Resilience is not about avoiding the winds of crisis. It is about facing and walking through the storm with courage and coming out stronger than ever. This is who we are and what we do.

We have that in common with other American Indian people but also with indigenous people all around the world. International researchers who study resilience came up with six things that seem to get Indigenous societies around the world through the hardest times: Our elders, our identity, our language, our ceremony and traditions, our spirituality and our sense of humor.

Of course, we already knew all of that at Mille Lacs, but the past year has proven our need to respect and protect these things. Our ability to survive every crisis the world has ever thrown our way is built into our culture and all that makes us Anishinaabe. These are the traits that will get us through a pandemic, and we will come out stronger than before. As we go through this new year, I hope we will focus on strengthening, sharing and supporting all these things that make us Anishinaabe Resilient.

One of the many lessons I learned this past year is that most people don't like to watch long video messages. So rather than go through each department, I asked the commissioners to provide a short video about their areas in more detail. This way, you can learn more about our achievements and challenges from last year as well as our goals for 2021 directly from the experts who run those areas. I encourage you to watch those videos following this Address.

I have a few directives for commissioners that I want to mention today.

To the Commissioner of Administration, Baabitaw Boyd: With the loss of so many of our fluent speakers, we are facing a cultural state of emergency. When an indigenous community loses their language, it is called "language death". This has happened to countless tribes in the United States.

Our younger people who are second-language speakers are very worried that unless we take big steps now, our Band could experience language death. If this happens, our identity and survival is at risk because it is only through our language that we can conduct our ceremonies and continue our traditions that make us Anishinaabe.

Ojibwe language is a gift we've been given from the Manidoog to communicate with the natural world, the animals, the plants and one another. There is meaning built into our language that guides us about how to treat one another. It is through our language that our ancestors were able to survive.

Our ancestors lived through a time called "The Termination Era", when federal policies tried to terminate our Indian-ness. Federal officials made it a crime for us to conduct our ceremonies. They sent our children to boarding schools and forbid them from speaking our language. But our ancestors didn't allow this. They fought back.

This is our time to fight back. What we have found out is that we need a comprehensive plan to achieve recovery of our language. The good news is that we are on that path. Commissioner Boyd, we need focused leadership working full-time on this project. I hereby direct you to make a leadership plan so this can happen. Chief Executive Art Gahbow had a dream that one day Ojibwe would be spoken throughout the government center. This can happen if we do it right.

Also, our personnel policies must be updated. Currently, they do not reflect the culture of the Band. I further direct you to work with the other commissioners to get this done within three months.

To the Assistant Commissioner of Administration, Peter Nayquonabe: I hereby direct you to continue working to get Band Members into our homes and convert rentals to home ownership. I further direct you to work on a Veteran's Housing project as a 2021 priority. Every veteran who served our country should be guaranteed housing on Band lands.



To the Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Nicole Anderson: You and your staff have done an outstanding job this year protecting our community. You still have your work cut out for you with COVID-19. Continue rolling out the vaccine until every Band Member who wants a vaccine gets one.

To the Commissioner of Natural Resources, Katie Draper: I direct you to focus attention on reorganizing our Enrollments department. For Band member parents, the most important service our Band provides is ensuring that their children who are eligible to be enrolled get enrolled.

We know from history that many mistakes were made in blood quantum, some going as far back as one hundred and fifty years. With new data coming from the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe we have to revamp our entire process. I will also be holding public hearings in 2021 on enrollment to include Band Member input into this process.

To the Commissioner of Education, Joyce Shingobe: Your directive for 2021 is to get a history program developed for every grade that focuses on our Band. By the time our students graduate, they should have deep knowledge about our history, including our division-of-powers government, the meaning of tribal sovereignty and self-governance, and they should understand exactly how our Band government works.

To the Commissioner of Corporate Affairs, Joseph Nayquonabe: I hereby direct you to train as many Band Members as possible to participate in Makwa Global ventures. We are in the beginning stages of a new revenue stream but we need Band Member jobs to come from these ventures as well.

To Solicitor General Caleb Dogeagle, I direct you to work with tribal police and federal, state, and other tribal agencies on a Drug Free Zone plan for all three districts. Also, I direct you to improve communication between OSG, law enforcement and Band Members so our community is well informed.

I also have two directives for all the commissioners. Last year, we brought in our first Solicitor General, Jay Kanassatega, to provide a training to our elected officials and commissioners about the creation of our division-of-powers government. This was a transformative experience for all who went through the training. People who had only heard stories about how our elders planned our current system of government left with a deeper understanding of the cultural reasons for our three-branch system. They gained new knowledge about the connection between our Anishinaabe identity and the way our government was intended to serve Band Members.

In 2021, I direct you all to create a plan that provides this training to any Band Member who wants to learn more about our history. Our history is our birthright, and all Band Members should have access to this important part of our identity.

Second, 2020 has taught us that it is time for all communities and businesses in America to have real conversations about racism, inclusion and respect for other cultures. Our employees especially need to understand how our elders are to be treated. I direct Commissioners to work as a team to develop one comprehensive cultural sensitivity training for all government and casino employees. The training will be guided by our elders and inclusion experts and will strengthen our entire community.

Some days, even in a long and dark winter, there is a very bright sunrise streaming through clouds that lights up the sky, the snow and frozen earth. Today, there are rays of hope in our future.

We have been through one of the worst years in modern history. The whole world has. But we know there are better times coming. Where do we find the strength and hope to move on?

I have hope that the Biden-Harris Administration will reverse the policies that hurt Indian country and restore policies meant to protect our lands and resources, especially slowing down climate change. I have hope that the new Administration will bring justice back to the Justice Department and that the Indian Health Service will finally receive more funding as we recover from the pandemic.

I see hope in our ability to win the legal battle about our reservation boundary. I see hope in an economic recovery. I see hope in science and medicine and the vaccines that have been developed in record time. The world will soon be safer again.

Mille Lacs Band Members are people of great strength. So many times, before in our history, we have stood our ground. In 1855 we were promised a permanent home. We were told we could stay here for one thousand years and longer. In 1863 they tried to move us, and again in the 1880's. At that time, Shaboshkung asked the federal negotiators, "Is the one thousand years up...that the great father sent you here?"

Shaboshkung would not be moved. And still today, we are the Non-Removables.

Almost 100 years ago our ancestors were fighting another global pandemic – the Spanish flu. The first Jingle Dress was created right here at Mille Lacs to help heal the sick during that time. Our ancestors met the disease with our resolve, our medicine and our prayers. Our community survived.

That character that was passed down to us by our ancestors -- that strength, determination, stamina and grit -- that resilience is the greatest gift they passed on to us. Their blood, the blood of warriors, runs through our veins. The will to face down any opponent, stand our ground, and fight is within us.

But especially the ability to get up and fight another day. The ability to rise to any challenge, and then rise again.

Our Anishinaabe values, our compassion for others and our resilience will show the world how to get through a crisis.

History is not something that fate decides. History is made by people of vision and courage. We have plenty of both. When our history is written, future Band Members will define us not by how we suffered through tragedy, but by how we persevered despite tragedy. Even when socially distant we are still united by our blood, by our history, our culture and our values.

In future years we will tell our grandchildren about this time -- about how we met this challenge and how we did not just survive, but came out stronger and more unified.

And so even after the most difficult year many of us have known, the State of the Band is still sound and strong.

The strength comes from all of you.

If there is one thing we have proven, it is that no virus can stop us as a Band or take away our spirit. Despite what we have lost, despite the grief and hardship, we will be stronger and more determined because of this.

We owe that to our ancestors and to future generations. We are Anishinaabe strong, but we are also Anishinaabe Resilient. And we always make a comeback.

I wish all of you the best in 2021. Miigwech!