

THE WOODLAND VOICE

A publication of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe

Young Mille Lacs Band Members Share the Ojibwe Culture

The Ojibwe culture thrives throughout the Mille Lacs Reservation. Mille Lacs Band members attend powwows, gather wild rice, make birch bark baskets, and participate in drum groups and traditional ceremonies.

The Band's Nay Ah Shing Schools integrate Ojibwe language and culture into the curricula for all early education and K-12 students.

Additionally, the Ojibwe Language and Culture Center holds Ojibwe language classes, ceremonial discussions, and other cultural activities.

Melissa Boyd and Wesley Ballinger are two young Band members who have a strong connection to their culture and speak the Ojibwe language. They are now sharing the culture and language with other young Band members.

Melissa Boyd



After learning Ojibwe at the Fond du Lac Tribal College, Melissa decided that she wanted to share the language with young Band members, so she joined the Band's Master Apprentice Program.

As a part of the program, Melissa works with Elders to refine her conversational Ojibwe, teaches the language to Nay Ah Shing students, and develops Ojibwe curricula for the schools.


Melissa hopes to introduce full Ojibwe immersion classes at the Band's schools, where students would learn the language as well as social skills, problem-solving skills, and discipline from a traditional Ojibwe perspective.

Wesley Ballinger



After Wesley Ballinger reclaimed his cultural identity as a young adult, he started to use art to help revitalize the language.

Wesley created an interactive computer program with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission that teaches the Ojibwe language through the seasonal harvest story. The program features pictures, videos and audio of hunting and gathering activities (winter spearing, sugarbushing, wild ricing, and more). Corresponding Ojibwe sentences describe what is happening in each scene.

He also illustrated a young Ojibwe readers' series called Awesiinyensag, meaning "young animals." The books feature themes that kids often deal with – stories about sharing, bullying, going to school, cooperating with others, and Indian culture. 

Ojibwe phrases

Misizaaga'iganiing

Maanazaadiiwaki

Ogimaawiwini

Biinjwebinigewi-giizhigad

Anishinabe

Gichi-aya'aa

Mii gwech

Anniin

Mille Lacs Reservation

Minnesota

Government

Election Day

American Indian

Elder

Thank you

Hello

20th Anniversary

Grand Casino Mille Lacs

The year was 1988. The Mille Lacs Reservation was a place of overwhelming poverty. After generations of going without what most Americans would consider the basics, hope was hard to hold onto.

Economic development attempts had come and gone. The Band needed something big.

In 1988, Congress passed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. The late Art Gahbow, who was then the Mille Lacs Band Chairman, led the tribal government in negotiating gaming compacts with the State of Minnesota in 1989. This was the big opportunity the Band had waited for.

“Governor Rudy Perpich approved the compacts in order to create jobs and boost the economy in greater Minnesota,” said Jamie Edwards, state government affairs coordinator for the Mille Lacs Band. “He saw the need for economic development on tribal lands and wanted to do the right thing.”

Building the dream

“When the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed, we couldn’t find a bank that would help us build a casino,” Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson recalled. “Finally this firm (later known as Grand Casinos, Inc.) offered to help.”

The partnership with Grand Casinos Inc. not only gave the Band funding to build Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley it also provided gaming expertise until the Band could nurture its own experts. The Band signed a seven-year deal with Grand Casinos Inc., then assumed full ownership and operational oversight over both casinos in 1998.

“Jobs are something we don’t take for granted in this area, because they aren’t easily replaced.”

– Ronda Weizenegger
Grand Casino Mille Lacs
General Manager



Grand Casino Mille Lacs opened in a tin building in 1991.

Opening the doors

Built around the Band’s bingo hall, Grand Casino Mille Lacs opened in a tin building in April 1991. It was a hit from day one, with hundreds of people lined up at the door.

“We had customers coming in who couldn’t find a machine. We decided to expand right then,” Anderson said.

Molly Judkins, who today is Anderson’s executive assistant, was a phone operator at Grand Casino Mille Lacs when it opened.

“When the casino first started, there were no other businesses around. I would have never imagined it as big as it is now,” said Judkins, adding that the casino didn’t even have a paved parking lot in the early days.

Anderson and Judkins have bittersweet memories of the casino’s first month. Despite the joy of the casino’s steady business and first earnings, the death of Art Gahbow about two weeks after opening day overshadowed the happiness.

“He had been our leader for almost 20 years, and he had led the way in getting everything built,” Anderson said. “But Art got to see us take our first steps along a better path.”

The casino closed for 24 hours as the community mourned Art’s death – the only time in history that the casino has been closed. Anderson was named Chief Executive shortly thereafter.

20th Anniversary

s Celebrates Twenty Years

Meaningful progress

“This casino opened up opportunities that never existed here before. Jobs are something we don’t take for granted in this area, because they aren’t easily replaced,” said Grand Casino Mille Lacs General Manager Ronda Weizenegger. Today Grand Casino Mille Lacs employs nearly 1,200 people.

Within months of the casino’s opening, the Band became the first tribe in the nation to issue community improvement bonds backed by casino revenues. These bonds funded reservation construction projects, starting with facilities including a new water treatment plant, Ne-Ia-Shing Clinic, and Nay Ah Shing School.

As casino revenues grew – both from Grand Casino Mille Lacs and from Grand Casino Hinckley, which opened in 1992 – the Band was able to repay its loan and continue to pursue opportunities that would continue to benefit the community.

The casinos themselves grew too. They grew from basic casino facilities into entertainment destinations, complete with hotels, convention spaces, concert facilities, multiple restaurants, and many other amenities surrounding the casinos.

This growth has allowed the Band to continue to chip away at decades of poverty through creating jobs, investing in economic development and community infrastructure, and providing programs and services to Band members. Before the casinos, many Band members were forced to rely on the state and federal governments for programs and services that their families needed.

“I never want to see our situation revert to how it used to be,” Anderson said.

The future of Grand Casinos

Despite the fact that Indian gaming is succeeding in what it was established to do, the possibility of gaming expansion has been almost an annual threat. This legislative session brings the biggest threat yet, as some state leaders want gaming revenues to fill the state’s large budget gap.

“Some legislators aren’t recognizing that expanding gaming will only transfer the benefits of gaming from rural areas in Minnesota to the Twin



Today Grand Casino Mille Lacs includes a hotel, four restaurants, an Events & Convention Center, a coffee shop, candy store, and Grand Ventures for Kids.

Cities metro area,” said Angela Heikes, Commissioner of Corporate Affairs for the Mille Lacs Band. “Grand Casinos would have fewer guests and lower revenues. This would translate into fewer jobs, fewer people with health insurance, and less business with area vendors. These types of losses in rural Minnesota would offset the gaming revenues being projected by some legislators. In fact, this would further burden the state’s already-stretched resources.”

Anderson added, “In the first 20 years, we’ve helped people access jobs, health care, cleaner drinking water, and quality homes. We want to continue the work that we’ve started over the next 20 years.”

Budget cuts could make bad situation worse

While legislators look for new revenue sources, they also need to identify funding cuts. As the situation stands at printing time, the Band faces the potential elimination of more than \$1.03 million in health and human services funding alone.

“Coupled with the potential job and economic losses at our casinos, these funding cuts would drastically reduce the Band’s ability to continue providing services at a meaningful level,” said Don Eubanks, Commissioner of Health and Human Services for the Mille Lacs Band.

The Band is monitoring state budget reductions to ensure that cuts affecting tribal populations are equitable with those of other Minnesotans.

Preserving Natural Resources

Q&A with the DNR Commissioner

Mille Lacs Band member Brad Kalk is the Band's new Commissioner of Natural Resources. A long-time advocate of preserving the Band's hunting, fishing and gathering traditions, Kalk consistently asks himself the same question when making natural resource decisions: "What is the long-term impact on our resources?" Kalk responds to some of the public's common questions here.



What is your most exciting current project?

We are preparing to restore the ecosystem of Ogechie Lake in collaboration with the Minnesota DNR. Returning the lake to its natural water level will be more conducive to wild rice growth – the way it was before Buckmore Dam was built in

the 1950s. More wild rice will provide food and habitat for waterfowl, small mammals, and other aquatic life. It will also re-establish opportunities to harvest wild rice on Ogechie Lake, as our Ojibwe ancestors did.

What is the relationship between the Band DNR and the Minnesota DNR?

People generally associate the Band DNR and Minnesota DNR with Mille Lacs Lake. We work cooperatively to determine safe walleye harvest levels each year. Together we are responsible for making decisions that are in the long-term interests of the lake, so that people will continue to have fishing opportunities for generations to come.

The Band and Minnesota DNRs also work together on other projects. We represent two separate


governments with an ongoing relationship and shared interests.

What is one of the biggest challenges you face?

Invasive species are a major challenge to control and an ongoing threat to our lakes. For instance, zebra mussels attach themselves to hard surfaces like rocks and docks, and they eat large amounts of plankton. The problem is that newly born fish also rely on that plankton, so they struggle to find enough food to survive as the number of zebra mussels increases.

What are some examples of the Band's conservation efforts?

In 2008, the DNR discovered a blue heron nesting area while conducting an environmental assessment for a proposed new road. With the help of our protection efforts, the number of nests in the area has increased from 24 to 130.

Also, the Band is continually planting trees. In District III, we are planting a grove of 450 new sugar maples this year. We also are planting 40 oak trees to help protect red-headed woodpeckers near our Ne-Ia-Shing Clinic. Their population in Minnesota has decreased 80% since the 1960s, but here the woodpeckers stay year-round. 



www.millelacsband.com

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
43408 Oodena Drive
Onamia, MN 56359

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