

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians
38th Annual State of the Band Address

Boozhoo, Aaniin, Anishinabeg-dook. Mino gizhigad noongoom Mandamin indizinakaz, Melanie Benjamin indigoo. Mr. Speaker, Members of the Band Assembly and the Judiciary, and most important -- fellow Band members of the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

This is a wonderful day. For the first time since the pandemic began, we are able to gather here together for this event, in person. And it feels good!

Miigwech to Obisan for speaking on our behalf, so we can begin in a good way;

- to the Ceremonial Drum and Waabishkibines for setting the dish;
- to the Mille Lacs All Veterans for posting the flags, and to the singers today.

And finally, welcome to our other community members – our Band family members, neighbors, friends, employees, dignitaries and guests – and everyone watching on livestream. You are all warmly welcome today.

By Band Statute, the Chief Executive must provide a report on the State of the Band to the Band Assembly on the second Tuesday of January, each year. This report is meant to inform the Band Assembly of our work from the past year and our goals for the future.

When I attended my first State of the Band Address in 1990, there were only about 100 people in the room. And that was a lot for a government gathering. Across all departments, we had only about 80 employees back then, and our meal was pot-luck. It was possible for Chief Executive Gahbow to provide details about all areas of government in about 30 minutes.

Today we have about 800 government employees, instead of 80. They are hard-working, devoted people so there is a lot to report on about our Band. On your tables, you will find a copy of our Annual Report of the State of the Band. This report is 73 pages long. If I were to tell you about all the information in this report, it would take exactly 511 minutes, or 8 and a half hours.

So, sit back, get comfortable, and maybe we will all be home by seven p.m.!

I'm not going to keep you here all day, but I want to be clear that it is not possible for me to summarize all of our work from 2022. It isn't even possible to just summarize the highlights. Instead, the State of the Band Report includes detailed information about much of the work we've been doing in the Executive Branch.

So, at this time, Mr. Speaker and Honorable Members of the Assembly, I hereby submit to you, for the official record, the 2022 Annual Report of the State of our Band.

I urge the Band Assembly to carefully study this report with a fine-toothed comb because it tells the story of how each dollar you appropriated for the Executive Branch in 2022 was used to benefit Band members. And it lays the foundation for how we will move forward in 2023. The commissioners and I will be happy to discuss this and answer any questions at the next three-branch meeting.

And Band members, I invite and encourage you, too, to please take this report home and read it carefully, so that you have all the information you need to know about the work done on your behalf, and all the opportunities available.

I am scheduling a community meeting for all Band members early this year, which our commissioners will all attend. We will be ready to answer your questions about this report.

Today, I will limit my remarks to information about the State of our Band that you will not find in the written report.

In many respects, the State of our Band depends on the state of our nation. Inflation, COVID, food insecurity, affordable housing, racial equity, voting rights, and the national opioid epidemic -- these are all things our country is facing that directly impacts our Band. The State of our Band also depends on the state of our Band members...and how you all contribute to our Band. I will highlight some of your great work today as well.

Federal and State elections also impact our Band. Minnesotans have once again voted for Tim Walz and Peggy Flanagan as our Governor and Lieutenant Governor, for Keith Ellison as our Attorney General, Julie Blaha as our State Auditor, and Steve Simon our State Auditor. Miigwech, Auditor Blaha, for being with us today!

I have said this many times, but I am going to say it again: Of all the Governors and state leaders I have ever worked with...going back to the late 1980's, I have never known any Administration to be this supportive of tribal rights and true partners with tribes as this State team. Chi Miigwech!

I also want to thank our congressional delegation – Senator Klobuchar, Senator Smith, Congressman Stauber, Congresswoman McCollum and the rest of our delegation for your wonderful support.

There have been changes at the federal level, with the Republicans taking control of the House of Representatives and the Senate taken over by the Democrats. The Chief Executive at Mille Lacs is charged by Band Statute with conducting external relations with all other governments, which is the most time-consuming duty of this position.

While the political parties might have changed, our goal remains the same: which is to work with both political parties and independents to get as much done for our people as we can. When our diplomatic relations with the federal and state governments are strong, Band members benefit from new opportunities, and protection of our rights.

The year ahead will be a time of rapid change, as tribes everywhere deal with new problems, old problems and unmet needs. But we can thrive in a world of change if we remain true to our values and are ready to face any challenge. All challenges must be faced together, squarely and with courage. I pledge to you that we will meet these challenges...with the best that is in us.

ECONOMY

2022 was a year of recovery for our businesses, which have remained competitive. Our economy grows stronger every day. We have a record number of Band members in leadership positions in our businesses, like Wewinabi, where about half the employees are Mille Lacs Band members.

Makwa Global, our government contracting arm, has tripled its revenue and landed their biggest contract yet – which will support future growth. And our latest venture – SLOTCO – has contracted with its first tribal casinos, and several others are in the pipeline.

The Mille Lacs Band does not have a tax-base like other governments, so our government is dependent on revenue from our businesses, federal contracts, state contracts, and grants.

With Senator Tina Smith and Congresswoman Betty McCollum fighting for the MCT Bands, we were relieved to receive a fair allocation of American Rescue plan and Covid relief funding. Chi Miigwech to Senator Smith, who always fight for Mille Lacs Band members and who is here today!

Also, I am so proud of our Grants Department, because in 2022, over half of the grants that we applied for were approved. This rate of success is almost unheard of, for any tribe.

Miigwech to our Grants Director and her hardworking staff. And miigwech to Commissioner of Corporate Affairs Joe Nayquonabe Jr. and his team.

Because of their leadership and the hard work of their teams, the Band members have not experienced a decline in direct services due to the pandemic.

DNR:

Protecting our natural resources from external threats was a major focus of 2022 and will continue. Under the outstanding leadership of Commissioner Kelly Applegate, the Band is more heavily engaged in defending our sovereignty, tribal rights and resources than in recent memory on many issues. Commissioner Applegate never seems to stop working.

There is one project that Band members need to pay close attention to. There is a proposed nickel mine near Tamarack, just 1.3 miles away from our Band lands near Round Lake in District II.

Nickel mining is a major threat to the environment. The practice has a consistent track record of harming water quality in water-rich places — exactly the area where the proposed mine is located. Aitkin county is one of the wettest areas of Minnesota. And to date, the mining company, Talon Metals, has made claims of responsible mining but has not provided data to prove those claims. This mine poses a serious threat to our citizens, water, resources and our medicines.

This is a challenge that we faced head-on in 2022. We mobilized our forces to get the attention of the Department of Energy and the White House, to make sure we have a seat at the table. There were times when we had to remind federal officials that their legal trust responsibility is to us – not the foreign corporations and mining companies. I have met with the U.S. Secretary of Energy twice about this topic. I have talked to the Secretary of Interior, provided testimony to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and had a meeting at the White House.

Underneath the earth near District II, we are told there is one of the largest high-quality sources of nickel in the world. There is national and international pressure to take that nickel out of the earth. They say they need it to support batteries for electric vehicles. They even call this “Green Nickel ” as if nickel mining is friendly for the environment.

But nickel mining is one of the most toxic forms of mining in the world. It produces acid mine drainage that contaminates water. Even the dust that blows off

the nickel into the air while it is being brought up from the ground or transported, can cause toxic poison and harm waters and resources.

Talon Metals' headquarters are in the British Virgin Islands. It has partnered on the Tamarack Mine project with Rio Tinto, an international mining conglomerate, that is headquartered in the United Kingdom and Australia. Rio Tinto has a track record of past practices that have damaged the environment.

We need to caution the world about swapping one source of pollution for another. We believe that we can help create a green economy without relying on practices that threaten our most precious resource that gives us life: our water.

With strong support from the Band Assembly, we are doing whatever we can to make sure that Band members are not collateral damage from mining pollution.

I also want to make it clear that the Mille Lacs Band supports electric vehicles as a way of reducing carbon. We were the first Tribe in Minnesota to receive an Electric Vehicle Charging Station award, through a demonstration project at the University of Minnesota.

We just don't believe that nickel is the only way to create electric batteries. Tesla, which is owned by Elon Musk, already has a contract to purchase nickel from Tamarack. But I don't know many Band members who could ever afford to buy a Tesla. We will continue to support electric vehicles and green energy, but nickel mining is not a green industry.

We are also doing our part to fight climate change with renewable energy. Our latest efforts include a solar energy project that was installed at Grand Casino Hinckley last year. This project will save over \$3.3 million dollars in energy costs and reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

EDUCATION

Our education department went above and beyond this year. We shifted back to in-person education, and Nay Ah Shing Schools received excellent scores from an outside, independent agency review. Our strong commitment to teaching Ojibwe language, culture and history was acknowledged, as well as the many opportunities and services we provide to all learners and their families.

Many Band members achieved learning milestones in 2022. With support from Nay Ah Shing and the PSEO program at Central Lakes College, Chase Sam was able to complete her junior and senior year of high school in just one year. And when she graduated early, she had college credits. Chase is also a very talented artist. Nay Ah Shing educators brought her art to the attention of Rosetta Stone, which was so impressed that they recruited and hired Chase to create digital art for the Rosetta Stone Ojibwe Language app. Congratulations, Chase!

Aanjibimaadizing, which is our 477 Program, also played a big role in education this year. Forty of our youth in Aanji made the honor roll, 16 graduated from high school, and 8 started college.

Through our Education program, 113 students are receiving scholarships from the Band, including 69 Band members and 44 descendants. Many are doing great things.

While studying at the University of Minnesota, Alicia de la cruz heard about a fellowship with the Bell Museum of Natural History, which was seeking artists for their residence program. Known for her beautiful bead work, Alicia found the courage to apply for a fellowship.

She was selected for the Artist in Residence Fellowship at the Bell Museum. Her project combines beaded art with science and nature...to teach others about the need to protect endangered plants — especially those plants important for our culture.

Band Member Brian Dorr just received his PhD from the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. Congratulations to Dr. Dorr! Both Tawnya Stewart and District II Representative Wendy Merrill achieved their

Master's degree in Business Administration -- both of them now have two master's degrees.

And our three Band Member attorneys continue to make valuable contributions to the Band. Aarik Robertson and Syngen Kanassatega are both members of our Legal Services Board of Directors, and Sarah Oquist is the Chair of Woodlands National Bank. Sarah is also in high demand as a motivational speaker and just emceed our girls leadership conference.

Syngen also serves as my Legal and Policy Counsel in the Office of the Chief Executive. He is very humble person, but I just have to give him a shout-out.

I work closely with Syngen every day and depend on his expert advice regarding our Band statutes, legal research and policy. He is a brilliant attorney as well as a Drumkeeper who keeps our culture close. He is a role model to many.

But what I did not know about him until recently, is that he has another status...called "Tic-Toc Famous"!

I don't know much about Tic-Toc so I'm not totally sure what that means, but I was told he has over 33,000 followers! They watch and learn from his serious talks about federal-Indian law and history as well as his very funny videos poking fun at many things.

Miigwech to all our Band Member attorneys for their hard work.

Our Band is fortunate to have so many talented, intelligent people as Band members. The challenge is creating a path for jobs in the fields where we need Band members working the most. Like Education the Medical Profession, and Science and Technology, to name just a few.

Several years ago, I challenged Corporate Commissioner Joe Nayquonabe to create a strategic plan to increase Band Member leadership in our businesses. At that time, only a handful of Band members were in key leadership positions at the Corporate Commission. He put a plan together to grow our own leaders through

professional development supporting their education and creating opportunities for our youth to observe and to learn about running our businesses.

That plan worked, and it's still working. Today, more Band members are in leadership positions than ever before. I commend Commissioner Nayquonabe for making that happen.

For 2023, I hereby direct Commissioner Nicole Anderson and Commissioner Niijo Gonzalez to work together to do the same thing for Band members in the Medical, Human Services, Science and Education fields. We have a Mille Lacs blueprint that worked at Corporate. We just need to customize it for other professions.

And we need to start young. I just attended a Speech event at Pine City High School, and was so impressed and proud to see many Band 7th graders at the front of the room, giving brilliant speeches with confidence!

Public speaking is an important leadership skill. The time to begin preparing our youth for professional careers is right now. But family plays the most critical role. We all need to support and nurture the gifts and dreams of our youth.

And by the way, I invited one of the young ladies from the speech event to attend today, and critique my speech. So, if I seem nervous when I flub up, it's because there could be a very tough 7th grade critic in the audience!

We also need a solid strategic plan that overhauls how we educate, motivate and compensate our hard-working employees. I have my fingers crossed hoping that we might have a new Commissioner of Administration confirmed by the Band Assembly within just a few days.

If confirmed, his job will be to take the best recommendations of our contractor, Bluestone, who we have been working with, customize these for our needs, and put a plan together that launches our Band government forward as one of the best tribal employers in the United States. That will be no small task, but it is very possible.

In fact, that's what Commissioner Anderson did in HHS. She took the contractor's recommendations, made changes, and built a unique plan that is designed for the Band's needs. I direct the other commissioners to follow in that path in the coming year.

YOUTH

No generation was more impacted by COVID-19 than our youth. Their paths were severely interrupted during the time of their lives when the biggest growth, change and learning is supposed to happen. Mental health has become the second biggest public health crisis after COVID.

Throughout Indian Country, a majority of Native youth have struggled with depression and anxiety. In a local study, 58% of Native youth in Mille Lacs County and 67% in Pine County have experienced depression or anxiety.

This is not a comfortable topic to talk about, but we must, because it is a crisis. There are many ways we can help our youth as a government, community, and as families. But sometimes professional mental health support is what is needed to save lives.

After one of our youth approached Commissioner Anderson concerned about some of her friends, we agreed that offering intensive mental health services to our youth in every District has to be a priority. In 2023, HHS is already expanding these services. But we have to speed up growth of youth mental health services in all three districts.

Since COVID began, the demand for mental health in our country has skyrocketed. The average American may need to wait 6 months — or even up to one year — for a first appointment with a psychiatrist. We are committed to doing much better than that for our youth. HHS's goal is to provide psychiatrists or counselors who can offer immediate support whenever a child or young person is in crisis, to get them any medical attention they need.

Education, Human Services, Aanjibimaadizing, and Tribal Courts must all work together closely to help identify kids in crisis who may be suffering in silence.

Recognizing this crisis, we worked very hard in 2022 to increase youth outreach in almost every area.

Last year, I announced that I had been working with a group of youth to plan a youth leadership conference designed by young women for young women. With support from Corporate Ventures, this conference was a huge success. It was called, "Finding your Oshkiniigikwe SuperPower." The purpose was to help girls discover their talents and choose a good path for their life's journey.

Over 160 Band youth participated! We even had a couple of women from St. Croix attend, Eilieen Skinaway and her daughter. And they are looking forward to the second event! The day was packed with events and breakout sessions with inspirational speakers such as Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan. There were breakout sessions about how to write your own music, create your own video game, and sewing a ribbon skirt.

Miigwech to our youth committee members who worked so hard to plan this conference: Shaylynn DeCoteau, Aleah Hill, Mercedes Misquadace, Jazlene White, Roylynn Benjamin, Nindaanis Benjamin, Joscelyn Skinaway, Tammy Gahbow, and Angelique White.

And of course, this could not have happened without our adult mentors who volunteered their time. Besides myself, they were Baabiitaw Boyd, Valerie Harrington, Andrea Bolin, Beth Gruber, Cheyanne Peet, LeAnn Benjamin, Brandi Smith, Chandell Boyd, and Kim Sam.

Miigwech to all. You made a very important impact on 160 youth.

Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures put a new focus on a Youth Ambassador Program. 120 youth worked for our gaming entities, giving them opportunities to explore careers, and build skills for their academic and professional life. It also

gave Corporate staff a chance to listen to and learn from our youth. MLCV also created a youth Intern Program.

In Aanjibimaadizing, nearly 500 youth participated in our Youth Services Program. So many camps, events, sports and activities were offered. Financial incentives were created for youth, recognizing the awards, honor rolls, and letter grade improvement that Aanji youth earned. 110 youth participated in culture and language classes through Aanji, 311 youth took part in traditional activities, and 188 participated in sports provided through Aanji. The Mille Lacs Band now has one of the best youth programs in all of Indian country.

Aanji has been a game-changer for not just our youth, but also the adults who are served. There are 72 other tribes in the United States that operate 477 programs like Aanji. Each year, the federal government chooses one program for a national award for excellence. In 2022, of these 72 tribes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs nominated our Aanji program...which won this national award for outstanding service. Three years ago, our 477 program was in need of attention. Just three years later we are the best in the nation.

Miigwech to Baabiitaw Boyd, Tammi Wickstrom, the Aanji staff, and everyone who has any involvement with Aanji, for your dedication, hard work, and devotion to our kids. I also want to thank our Education, Human Services and other staff who work with our youth. You all work around the clock – sometimes at the expense of your own health and personal lives. We are very grateful for all that you do.

OUR MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

There is another challenge we face involving our children. As of October, 214 Mille Lacs Band children were placed outside the home in 2022 by court order.

Five years ago, we had over 70 licensed Band Member foster care homes. At last count, we had about 40. Only about one half of these homes have children placed, because the remaining homes are only licensed to take in relatives. The

majority of the homes without children are licensed for relative care only, or have already received guardianship of relative children.

Right now, there are very few Band foster homes that can take in a child who is not a relative. This means that our children are being sent to other homes outside the Band or even facilities.

For our oldest generation of Band members living today, there were boarding schools that stripped our children of their culture, identity and caused generational trauma. Today, our youngest generation face a similar loss of culture...when they are sent to foster homes outside the Band.

This is not a problem our Band government can solve. I'm asking every Band Member to look inside of your heart, your home, your family and your time...and to think about whether you might be able to open your home to a Band child in need...who has nowhere else to go except outside of our community.

The whole point of the Indian Child Welfare Act – was to empower tribes to keep Indian children in our communities. That only works if the community has homes willing to take the children in.

This is a major commitment for any family to make, so I also want to take this moment to thank the current Band families who provide foster care today. You are true heroes for our children and our Band. Chi Miigwech.

We are a very generous people, and we are fortunate to have many Band members who live their lives finding ways to help their fellow Band members. When they see a problem, they try to solve it.

One of those people are Asinikwe Sam, who was the founder of the Women's Healing Circle, which celebrated its one-year anniversary of bringing Native women together weekly as a supportive circle. Together, they help each other deal with grief, loss and to break the cycles of trauma. They learn and practice traditions and crafts, promote healing and support each other through life's challenges.

Another person is Dan Wind. We lost many Band elders to the pandemic, including elders who taught the game of Makizin to young men. Makizin is a traditional game that the federal government once banned. Many years ago, some of our elders brought it back. Makizin has been important in the healing journey of many men. Last year, Dan Wind devoted himself to doing his part to keep the game alive. He spent time fund-raising prize money for a Makizin Ataagewin Tournament to honor the memories of Elmer Nayquonabe, Perry Benjamin, Larry Wade, and David 'Amik' Sam, and make sure the game lives on.

Miigwech to Asinkwe Sam, Dan Wind and all the other Band members who quietly step up to help others in need of healing without expecting anything in return.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC SAFETY

In Community Development, our focus has been on addressing our housing shortage. In 2023, we can expect housing and structures that are more accessible for elders, and those with disabilities. With the housing initiative budget and elder and handicap renovation program, homes will be constructed and renovated that address many different needs.

Some very good news is that our neighborhoods are getting safer. Tribal Police have worked hard to remove some of the biggest drug-dealers from our community. Under the Tribal Law and Order Act, the U.S. Department of Justice has taken over prosecution of certain major crimes that are committed on the Mille Lacs Reservation.

With our SAUSA grant, the Solicitor General and U.S. Attorney have been able to target outsiders from big cities intending to bring enormous quantities of poisonous drugs into our communities. Recently, one major dealer was arrested in the cities who had 5 pounds of meth and heroin laced with fentanyl. These drugs were meant to be delivered to the Mille Lacs Reservation. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of drugs that kill people were stopped from coming into our homelands.

Miigwech to our Tribal Police, Solicitor General Dogeagle, and U.S. Attorney Andy Lugar and his staff for making our communities safer.

In 2023, a major public safety priority for the Band must be to continue investing in neighborhood safety by increasing street-lighting in all districts, which I also ask the Band Assembly to support. As our Housing Director Dan Boyd has been saying, we need to light up our communities!

Communities also become safe when our community members and youth have a place to gather. With our beautiful new community center now open in District I, it is high time that we call it something besides “The New Community Center”! Under our Band Statutes, one duty of the Chief Executive is to serve as legal Custodian of all Band Property. I am happy to announce a contest for naming the new community center, open to District I Band members of all ages. You will find details about this contest in the next Band newspaper, and more about the exciting prize.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Many years ago, the late Jim Clark talked about how language and culture were the only solution to the problems in our community. He told me and many others that when people lose their language and culture, they can lose their spirits and go down bad paths.

Language revitalization has been one of my key initiatives since I first took office, not because we are living in the past, not because we are nostalgic, and not because we want to force people to live their lives a certain way. We are focused on language and culture because they are what make us Anishinaabe. Language and culture save lives.

The root cause of addiction, poverty, homelessness and violence is loss of identity. This can be traced back 150 years, when federal policies tried to strip us of our language, traditions, ceremonies and culture.

Today, even the federal government — which was once guilty of trying to destroy our culture and language — is stating that revitalizing our language and

culture are critical for reversing the problems our people face in Indian country. The health and scientific community know this is true. Every Band Member who has ever turned to language and culture to save their lives knows this is true.

Several weeks ago, the White House held a Tribal Nations Summit and nearly every tribe in America was in attendance. There were several panel discussions, and one focused on Language Revitalization.

I was invited, along with the Chairman of the Cherokee Nation, to serve on a panel with Secretary Deb Haaland of the U.S. Department of Interior and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona. The topic was language revitalization.

The White House announced a new initiative, meant to help save native languages. For Band members who are not living healthy lives and have tried everything else, language and culture have proven time and again to be the remedy.

In 2023, we will expand our language and culture efforts to work with the local public schools in each District. Ojibwe language instruction should be offered to our students in all public schools. This is now possible with our Rosetta Stone program. The Rosetta Stone project is not just benefitting Band members – Ojibwe speaking tribes throughout the entire Great Lakes region and Canada are also using our program to revitalize Ojibwe for their communities.

Chi miigwech to all our elders and voice actors who made this project possible, like Shirley Boyd, Joe Nauquonabe Sr., Betty Sam, Carol Nickaboine and every other Band Member who helped with this project.

During 2023 we will also continue our efforts to fully transform Nay Ah Shing into a true immersion school. Our new Commissioner of Education, Niijo Gonzalez, has expertise in Ojibwe immersion schools and is devoted to making this happen.

I also want to thank those in our community who have been inspirational for our youth and young adults to live healthy lives. Sports have always played a big

role how we support health and wellness and in how we come together to celebrate and support our young people.

One Band Member who made a name for himself this year as an athlete is Montana Davis, who is an up-and-coming name in Jiu Jitsu and won a major tournament this year. Montana tried the sport, fell in love with it and with training and commitment he is excelling as an athlete. Congratulations, Montana.

We also have many young Band Member athletes who were recruited or are being recruited right now to play in college sports like basketball and football.

And we have many Band member coaches who use their free time to support our youth. One Band Member who made a name for himself as a boxer when he was young, is District III Representative Harry Davis. District III members know him well, but many of you in Districts I and II may not realize that over 30 years ago, Harry created the first youth boxing club in his front yard, and for the past 30 years, Harry has probably taught at least 100 youth the fundamentals of boxing.

He continues to lead the youth boxing club to this day, quietly coaching and inspiring our kids in District III at the Davis Gym, where they learn about commitment, hard work and pride in themselves. Miigwech, Representative Davis.

I also want to acknowledge Representative Virgil Wind's commitment to our youth and education. In his spare time away from the Band Assembly, he is still a leader of the Onamia School Board. Miigwech, Representative Wind, for your commitment to our youth and education.

ENROLLMENT

In 2022, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe's held a non-binding referendum election on the topic of enrollment. Non-binding means that the election results did not have the force of law.

The ballots contained two questions. The first was whether or not the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe should do away with blood quantum as a way of deciding who is eligible for membership. The second question asked whether each

of the six Bands should be given the authority to make its own sovereign decision about how it will decide who is eligible for enrollment.

A majority of MCT voters answered “yes” to both questions. But again, this was a non-binding referendum election.

On November 23, the MCT received final approval to hold a Secretarial Election about enrollment that WILL have binding results. This is huge news. It is possible this election could happen as early as May of 2023. So we need to prepare. The MCT is using addresses from enrollment offices for sending out ballots. If you did not receive a ballot in the last election, there is an enrollment table outside this room. Please check with enrollments as soon as possible to confirm whether they have your correct mailing address.

I also want to thank our Mille Lacs Band delegates, who have put so much work into this process and conducted hundreds of hours of researching the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and our Band’s relationship with it. They have been calling for the creation of a Sovereignty Commission. There was good effort by the Band Assembly to add a Sovereignty Commission to our Statutes, but for several reasons that bill did not move forward.

To simplify the process, this morning, I signed an Executive Order creating a Sovereignty Commission for Band members to continue this research and provide recommendations to the Band. A public meeting will be held for all Band members on this topic in February.

BIGGEST VICTORY FROM 2023 – RESERVATION BOUNDARY

There are times of emergency, when a nation and its leaders must bring their energies to bear on a single urgent task.

That was the duty our leaders faced in 1837, when they secured our rights to hunt, fish and gather on millions of acres of land ceded to the United States, and

That was the duty of our leaders in 1855, when they secured our reservation on Mille Lacs Lake as our permanent home.

That was the duty our people faced from 1863 to 1925, when, despite massive theft of our timber and our land, and then the burning of our villages by the Mille Lacs County Sheriff, many Band members refused to abandon our reservation. And we became known as the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band.

And that was the duty Art Gahbow faced in the 1970s and 1980s, when he led the Band out of poverty and into opportunity with our first casinos, and that was the duty Marge Anderson faced in the 1990s, when she defended our 1837 Treaty rights all the way to the Supreme Court.

More recently, we as leaders have faced the duty of defending the very existence of our reservation from attacks by Mille Lacs County.

With persistence, diplomacy and committed legal representation, we took down barriers put up in front of us, one by one.

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the United States created our reservation of approximately 61,000 acres in the Treaty of 1855. Under the Constitution, treaties are the supreme law of the land. After years of conflict created by Mille Lacs County, which interfered with our public safety because they believed our reservation no longer existed, we finally had no choice but to file a lawsuit in federal District court in 2017. After decades of challenging whether our reservation exists, the county finally got its answer.

March 4, 2022, will go down in history as the day that the Federal District Court ruled that our Treaty of 1855 is, indeed, the supreme law of the land: The Mille Lacs Reservation boundaries remain exactly as they were promised to us.

If you have not read Judge Susan Richard Nelson's decision, I highly recommend it. So much of our proud history in the pages of that decision.

There is one story that really caught my attention. One of our leaders, Shaboshkung, repeated the story of President Lincoln's promise to us.

Shaboshkung said that President Lincoln told the Mille Lacs leaders to “Sit quiet where you are,”.

What the phrase “sit quiet” meant, was “be peaceful.” Shaboshkung said these words: “Why we were told this was because we had always been quiet and peaceable. They told us we might stay here a thousand years if we wished to. For 10 years, we will sit quiet here. Then for 100 years, and for 1,000 years. And if there be even one Mille Lacs living, then he will stay quietly by Mille Lacs.”

Our ancestors refused to leave. Shawboshkung and other leaders fought for our homelands their entire lives. In the 1970’s, a tribal Elder named George Bedausky gave a copy of Kappler’s Treaties to Chief Executive Arthur Gahbow and DNR Commissioner Don Wedll. George had marked a page with the Mille Lacs Band’s rights under the Treaties of 1837 and 1855. He knew they still existed. Chief Executive Gahbow promised George that he would continue the fight of our ancestors to have our rights recognized.

I worked for Chief Executive Art Gahbow and Chief Executive Marge Anderson. When Mille Lacs County began attacking the existence of our reservation in the 1990s, we all knew that our jobs was to fight to preserve the Reservation promised to us in our treaties, just as our ancestors had done.

Mille Lacs Band members did stay for 10 years, and then for 100 years, and we are now into another 100 years of refusing to leave. And we will remain for another 1,000 years and more. These are our homelands, now and forever.

Judge Nelson ended her ruling with these words:

“Over the course of more than 160 years, Congress has never clearly expressed an intention to disestablish or diminish the Mille Lacs Reservation. The Court therefore affirms what the Band has maintained for the better part of two centuries—the Mille Lacs Reservation’s boundaries remain as they were under Article 2, of the Treaty of 1855.”

It is possible that the County will appeal this decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals. Time will tell. This means we may need to keep fighting for our homelands.

Every generation has a defining point. For our generation, it was the fight to defend our homelands.

CONCLUSION

2022 was a year to remember for many reasons. As a community, we experienced some tragic loss. As a government, we made some important gains.

We are now in a cycle where the sun's path across the sky lasts a little longer each day, bringing more warmth and light.

Our spiritual leaders tell us that there are powerful manidoog in both the sun and moon. Every day when the sun is highest in the sky – that manidoo looks down to check on us and take care of us. The manidoo in the moon has the power of correction, and takes care of each of us when we need help...and something has been forgotten or done in a way that is incorrect.

The sun that lights up our day and the moon that lights up our nights are both taking care of us at all times no matter how disconnected we might feel or how heavy things get.

The light creates energy that flows through, making us function as human beings. I was told that we are all so connected by that energy and our ancestors that we can experience discomfort when others are uncomfortable, without even having that knowledge in our minds. Whether we feel joy or anger toward another person, we are deeply connected to one another. Nothing can ever change that.

It is our duty to try to do good work and be mindful, compassionate, and embrace the gifts given to us.

We were meant to be in the sun – and to receive help from the manidoog. This help is always there for us. That is where we can find hope.

One hundred and fifty years ago, when Shawboshkung and our leaders gave the President an ultimatum they vowed that we would never give up our homelands even if there was only one Mille Lacs Band Member left standing.

Think about the times they were living in, when nearly everything had been stolen from them. There was no help from government, no programs, no services.

It is not Band government programs that have sustained us in our homelands -- across three districts -- for hundreds of years.

It's not money or goods and services – none of that existed when our ancestors stood up to the United States of America. They spoke truth to power...daring anyone to challenge their resolve. That absolutely amazing strength and courage in the face of losing nearly everything else came from somewhere.

It came from the blood of their ancestors before them...and because they knew who they were. Their cultural and spiritual identity as Anishinaabe was nearly all they had left behind and it was more than enough for them to fight for their way of life for generations of grandchildren who would come after them.

We are those generations! Their courage is why every one of us are here today! Like them, we can challenge injustice and fight for our rights. We can be self-determined, taking care of our families and one another. We can do these things if we hold our culture, language and traditions strong.

Shawboshkung knew who he was. Embracing and being proud of who we are is what will sustain generations of grandchildren who come after us, through whatever battles lay ahead.

As we move through 2023, let us continue to work for progress, to seek out healing and hope, and to fight to protect our Band when we must.

Together, I know we will overcome our challenges and never lose hope, because I believe in our Band members and who we are.

You are beautiful, strong and courageous people who have the blood of warriors. You have gifts we were given from the manidoog, who are there for us all the time.

Together, let us walk together into the future with hope in our hearts, with the protection of our culture and the courage of our ancestors. Working together, we will create the better future we all seek for this generation and the next to come.

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