

VOLUME 6 NO.1

# NC

The National Center

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INVESTING IN THE  
NEXT GENERATION

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THE NEW  
MATRIARCHS





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## The National Center

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**Publisher**

Chris James

**Associate Publisher/Senior Editor**

Lewis Lowe

**Sales Director**

Carla Ghafari

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Derrick Watchman

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**Treasurer**

Helvi Sandvik

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Kip Ritchie

**President & CEO**

Chris James

**Chief of Staff**

Erin Abrahamson

Business Headquarters  
953 E Juanita Ave., Mesa AZ 85204  
Suite D  
888-962-2433 (888-9NCAIED)

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# NC MAGAZINE READERS:

Thank you for reading the sixth annual edition of *NC Magazine*. If you're thinking the magazine is out earlier than usual, you're correct. We're trying something new this year by releasing the magazine at the end of the year – about two months earlier than usual and just in time for the holidays. And perhaps most importantly, with plenty of time to get you ready for the Reservation Economic Summit (RES) in March (where you'll also find copies of this magazine).

Though the timing may be a bit different, the quality of the content you have come to expect from *NC Magazine* has not changed.

The people and organizations we profile in the following pages are doing important work. Whether in finance, contracting, agriculture, or energy, tribal and Native-owned businesses are the vanguard of their fields. And oftentimes, these industries and their trade associations are led by visionary women. I encourage you to learn more about them in our feature about women who lead in Indian Country.

*NC Magazine* is not solely focused on those who have already made names for themselves. We also spotlight the up-and-coming and soon-to-be leaders. Make sure to check out the article that details the successes of our 40 Under 40 awardees, and also read the story on the programs that are empowering our Native youth. It's cliché, but the future is bright.

We chose "Rising Together" as the theme for RES 2026. You'll find this theme echoed throughout the pages of *NC Magazine*; many of the subjects profiled are either part of organizations advocating for the interests of their communities or working collaboratively with others on behalf of a common cause. The National Center is proud to work with them to move Indian Country forward, and we will continue to do so in the months and years ahead.

Their efforts and leadership are coming at a pivotal time. The cancellation of federal grants and financial support has hit tribal communities particularly hard, jeopardizing the work that many Native nonprofits and other entities perform. While some of the worst potential outcomes have been avoided thanks in no small part to the steadfast efforts of the leaders featured in this magazine, we are only just now understanding the impacts of federal policies on Indian Country.

Regardless of what the future holds, I am confident we will emerge stronger as a result of the tireless work and effort of the tribal, organizational, and business leaders who will never back down from a worthy fight.

Before I wrap, I want to extend a special thank you to our advertisers. It's a testament to the value and quality of *NC Magazine* that so many of you return to these pages for every edition. And of course, many thanks to our readers for tuning in to every edition. *NC Magazine* would not exist without a great – and engaged – audience.

Happy reading!



Chris James  
President and CEO  
The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development



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# POLICY & LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Report on policy initiatives to advance economic development in Indian Country

WASHINGTON — The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development and partner organizations have been active in their advocacy efforts during a period of unprecedented transition in Washington. The following report, co-authored by National Center policy consultants Kate Boyce, Dr. Ian Record and Ryan Seelau, provides a general overview of their work and status of policy priorities as of November 2025.

For the transition to the 119th Congress and Trump administration, The National Center produced two briefing papers consolidating its policy priorities for the new Administration and Congress with those of 13 other partner organizations to advance the business and economic development interests of Tribal communities, Tribal enterprises, and other Native businesses and entrepreneurs throughout the United States. In addition, The National Center and its partner organizations formed the Coalition for Tribal Sovereignty (CTS) to coordinate their advocacy efforts.

The Coalition for Tribal Sovereignty (CTS) is a collaborative alliance that serves as a powerful unifying voice of regional and national inter-Tribal, policy-oriented and non-profit organizations to engage with federal policymakers on critical issues affecting the sovereign interests, rights, and authorities of Tribal nations, Tribal citizens and community members across the United States.

## 2025 Federal Policy and Funding Challenges

The years of record federal funding for Indian Country to address COVID-19 and economic recovery are in the rearview mirror as the Trump administration ushered in federal hiring and funding freezes, layoffs, grant terminations and funding cuts. Through rapid fire executive orders and Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) directives, the administration deemed these actions necessary to realign federal policies and spending to eliminate “waste, fraud and abuse” and “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI) initiatives. To avert catastrophic cuts to federal funds supporting Tribal nations and economic development in Indian Country, The National Center and leading Tribal organizations quickly coalesced to form the CTS.

The Coalition’s primary mission is to assert federal trust responsibility (grounded in the U.S. Constitution, Supreme Court decisions, and federal statutes); advocate for Tribal nations’ sovereignty; and preserve federal funding obligations negotiated for delivery through the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, as well as annual appropriations.

The CTS has sent a series of letters to the White House, the heads of federal agencies and Congress to (1) reinforce that Tribal nations are sovereign governments (and as such are political entities and not race-based groups), and (2) provide education explaining why federal programs serving Tribal nations and their communities are unique, legally mandated,

and therefore should be protected from collateral harm as the Administration implements its policy priorities.

The CTS also created toolkits for education and advocacy on impacts of FY 2025 federal funding cuts, and an analysis of FY 2026 budget requests, Congressional appropriations and continuing resolution and government shutdown activities. The work of CTS is ongoing and dynamic, responding to a rapidly evolving political and legislative landscape.

## Federal Procurement-Related Developments

**Buy Indian Act Procurements:** Addressing a key priority of The National Center and Native American Contractors Association (NACA), federal agencies made substantial progress in awarding federal procurement dollars to Native contractors during the Biden Administration. After publication of reinvigorated Buy Indian Act procurement regulations, the Departments of the Interior (DOI) and Health and Human Services (HHS) – primarily the Indian Health Service – awarded nearly \$4 billion in contracts to Native-owned businesses in FY 2023. Since then, reporting has diminished on the dollar amount of Buy Indian Act-based contracting, but the Trump Administration continues using these procurement procedures.

**Small/Disadvantaged Business Agency Changes:** In the wake of executive orders and other agency actions to eliminate DEI-deemed programs, numerous federal contracting programs suffered cuts or total elimination. The Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) lost much of its funding and staff, including for MBDA’s Business, Specialty and Export Centers (including the one operated by The National Center). The President’s FY2026 budget request recommended minimal funding for MBDA merely to close out its remaining contracts. The Small Business Administration (SBA) has fared better, although the FY 2026 budget request recommended eliminating some of the business development programs while retaining the Small Business Development Centers, Women Business Centers, and Veterans Business Centers. SBA’s Office of Native American Affairs still operates with just one full-time employee. Though it faces challenges and mounting threats, the 8(a) contracting program continues, as do small-business set asides (more below).

**DOD View of 8(a) Contracting, APEX Accelerators and Indian Incentive Program:** Given the sweeping nature of executive orders against policies deemed DEI-based, the Native American Contractors Association (NACA), with support of The National Center, spearheaded several initiatives to preserve robust use of the 8(a) program that benefits community-based contracting enterprises (owned by American Indian

tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, Native Hawaiian Organizations) and other Native-owned companies. At NACA's request, Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK) and several of his colleagues sent a June 12, 2025 letter asking the Department of Defense (DOD) to confirm its support for continued use of the 8(a) program for Tribal- and other Native-owned contracting companies. In an August 23, 2025 response, the acting DOD Assistant Secretary of Defense for Industrial Base Policy strongly endorsed the DOD's use of the 8(a) program as a vital tool for meeting military needs and highlighted the benefits of the APEX Accelerators' services and the Indian Incentive Program (IIP). The DOD letter was welcome news to NACA and to The National Center, which operates the oldest and largest of the Native APEX Accelerators providing procurement technical assistance to Tribal and other Native contractors and advocacy to foster the IIP's use.

#### **Updates to Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) Part 19:**

NACA has closely monitored the ongoing rewrite of FAR Part 19, which governs federal contracting policy for small business participation. Key changes include requiring contracting officers to attempt to secure competitive 8(a) acquisitions below the competitive threshold before turning to sole source awards. The update also automatically releases follow-on requirements set aside for HUBZone, Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business or Woman Owned Small Business from the 8(a) program without formal SBA release, though this may conflict with SBA regulations.

The FAR Part 19 updates will not affect pending awards and will be implemented agency by agency. Contractors should monitor agency notices about implementation and watch for SBA to issue guidance aligning with the changes. The updates may evolve as the overall FAR revamp continues.

#### **Access to Capital**

The National Center and its partner organizations have long advocated for increased support for Native Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and updates to the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) regulations to increase the services, investments and other support that national, regional, community and Native-owned banks can and should provide to Native communities and borrowers. This advocacy recently took on much greater urgency with (1) the Administration's decision to drop the 2023 CRA Final Rule (which featured critical changes designed to enhance investments in Indian Country) and revert back to the 1995 CRA regulations, and (2) the Administration's October 10th action to terminate all staff of the CDFI Fund as of December 2025 pursuant to its plan to abolish the Fund altogether.

Those actions threatened to dismantle the federal infrastructure that underpins Native access to capital, including the Native American CDFI Assistance (NACA) Program, the New Markets Tax Credit Program, and the federal CDFI certification process — each essential to generating private investment and supporting community and economic development across tribal lands.

Fortunately, Congress intervened. On November 12, President Trump signed into law H.R. 5371, a Continuing Resolution (CR) that ended the government shutdown and reversed the federal reductions in force (RIFs) initiated during the shutdown. The CR explicitly nullifies Treasury's October 10th RIF notice, reinstating all CDFI Fund staff to their positions with full back pay and prohibiting any new RIFs through January 30, 2026. The Treasury was required to notify all affected employees by November 17. Once the Fund's staff return to work, the Native CDFI Network (NCN) will engage with program administrators to confirm timelines for the future NACA Technical Assistance and Financial Assistance awards.

The National Center continues to work closely with the Native CDFI Network and other Indian Country partners to ensure Congress maintains robust FY 2026 funding for the CDFI Fund—specifically at least \$35 million for the NACA Program—and to advance long-overdue CRA modernization efforts that expand Native financial inclusion.

#### **2025 Congressional Progress Report**

**Indian Country Legislation:** During the first session of the 119th Congress, Congress focused most of its attention on major tax and spending legislation and confirmation of nominees to Administration posts. With little time left to consider Indian Country legislation, few if any of the 20 bills reported by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs have seen Senate action. Of the nine pertinent bills reported by the House Committee on Natural Resources, the full House passed and sent two to the Senate and held the rest on the calendar. Most of these bills deal with Tribal land transfers and trusts.

**FY 2025-2026 Appropriations:** Indian Country programs fared relatively well under House Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Cole's (R-OK; citizen of the Chickasaw Nation) stewardship, with at least level funding for FY 2025 and some advanced appropriations for FY 2026. For the upcoming fiscal year, initial House and Senate Appropriations Committee bills recommended at least level funding for federal economic development programs of the Departments of the Interior, Treasury, Energy, and Agriculture as well as SBA. Despite the Administration's budget request to eliminate the Indian Loan Guarantee Program, the Interior Appropriations bills recommended retaining the program (with the House increasing its funding to \$19 million and Senate retaining its funding at almost \$14 million). Similarly, rejecting the Administration budget request's near-total elimination of CDFI funding, the Treasury Appropriations bills recommended a 25% increase in funding in the CDFI Fund's NACA Program. The same bills recommended at least \$5 million for SBA's Native outreach activities. And, despite the Trump Administration's plan to eliminate the MBDA, the Commerce Appropriations bills recommended continued MBDA funding of \$4-5 million for grants to Native entities that support Tribal business and economic development and Native businesses and entrepreneurs. Work on appropriations effectively stalled as a result of the federal government shutdown, making it difficult to predict the appropriations landscape beyond the Jan. 30, 2026 expiration of the continuing resolution.

#### **Policy Briefs and Economic Impact Surveys**

The National Center and its Native partner organizations continue to update policy briefs to galvanize advocacy to sustain the business and economic development progress Indian Country has forged in recent years. In addition, in May, The National Center conducted a survey - which followed a forum held at the 2025 Reservation Economic Summit - providing Tribal political and business leaders an opportunity to share how Trump Administration policies are impacting their communities. A follow-up survey was deployed in November.

*The transition papers, policy briefs, surveys, and other documents can be viewed and downloaded from [The National Center's policy webpage](#).*



# 40 UNDER 40 ALUMNI UPDATES



Hollabaugh



Crane



Walker



Peyton Roberts



DeSpain



Wilson



Blythe-Carroll



Parker



Winder

The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development's Native American 40 Under 40 Award recipients continue making significant contributions to infrastructure development, entrepreneurship, performing arts, law, culinary arts, leadership development and innovation across Indian Country. Here's how a few of these leaders are advancing their careers and strengthening their communities, organized by award year.

## 2025

**Steven Hollabaugh** (Cherokee Nation), founder of Native Strategies, has led the Broken Arrow, Okla.-based firm to remarkable growth since his 40 Under 40 recognition. The company helps tribes strengthen communities through infrastructure design including roads, bridges, drinking water and stormwater systems while supporting long-term economic development.

Native Strategies ranked No. 279 on *Inc.* magazine's list of the 5,000 fastest-growing private companies in America, posting 1,346% revenue growth over three years and earning the top spot among Oklahoma businesses. Hollabaugh helped launch Grey Snow Native Strategies, a joint venture with the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, expanding Native-led collaboration.



## ALUMNI

**Jacob Crane** (Tsuut'ina Nation), innovation program officer for The Fireweed Institute, transitioned to his new role in 2025 after serving as cultural liaison with the Utah Division of Indian Affairs from 2023 to 2025. Crane focuses on advancing Indigenous innovation, entrepreneurship and community-driven economic development through program design and partnerships. He previously managed the Flint Hub Program at the University of Waterloo, a business incubator for Indigenous startups, and was part of the Renewing Indigenous Economies Cohort at Stanford University's Hoover Institute.

**Madeline Mae Walker** (Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation), a professional performer, served as lead vocalist in the 106th Philadelphia 6ABC Dunkin' Thanksgiving Day Parade, the oldest Thanksgiving Day parade in the United States. Walker prepared for the 2025 holidays as principal female vocalist in "Holidays in Hollywood" at Walt Disney World's Hollywood Studios, performing alongside Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Princess Tiana and Princess Belle. Walker earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in musical theatre with a dance minor from the University of Central Florida.

**Jessica Peyton Roberts** (Cherokee Nation), corporate associate at Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, organized and launched a federal Indian and tribal law cross-practice group at her firm in 2025 to support Native-led initiatives, businesses and entrepreneurs. Roberts serves as president of the Northwest Indian Bar Association, which has awarded more than \$10,000 in scholarships to Native law students in the Pacific Northwest. Her practice includes mergers and acquisitions, franchise law and federal Indian law.

## 2024

**Pyet DeSpain** (Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation), culinary entrepreneur, released her debut cookbook *Rooted in Fire* in November 2025, shortly after the October premiere of *Spirit Plate*, a cooking and travel show on PBS Food. Three years in the making, *Spirit Plate* follows DeSpain as she travels across tribal nations to honor Indigenous people, stories and foods. The premiere episode documents her homecoming to the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, where she reconnects with family, feeds sacred bison and prepares bison stew for the tribe's annual powwow feast.

**Jeremy Wilson** (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) has expanded his career since his 40 Under 40 recognition. He founded Four Directions Creative Consulting, which helps tribes develop business strategies and create sustainable business models for various markets. Wilson serves as COO for Eltueg Federal, an 8(a) government contracting company, and CEO for Eltueg Services, which handles acquisitions. Both companies are Section 17 subsidiaries of Eltueg Corporation for the Mi'kmaq Tribe of Maine.

**Willow Blythe-Carroll** (Muscogee Creek Nation), founder of Weaving Wisdom, delivered her TEDx talk "How to Reclaim Your Voice and Rewrite Your Story" at TEDxAddison Women in July 2025, sharing an Indigenous perspective on resilience, authenticity and empowerment through storytelling. Through Weaving Wisdom, founded in 2022, she provides transformative speaking engagements, leadership development and strategic communications consulting that helps organizations craft compelling messaging and storytelling strategies aligned with their values.

## 2020

**Mary Parker** (Cherokee Nation), director of communications for the National Congress of American Indians, earned her doctorate in instructional systems design and technology from Sam Houston State University in May 2025, focusing her research on digital equity and Native American education. Parker joined NCAI in March 2025 during a critical period for the organization. She previously served as public affairs manager for the National Indian Gaming Commission from 2021 to 2025, following roles as management and program analyst and instructional system specialist at the agency.

## 2014

**Tanaya Winder** (Southern Ute, Duckwater Shoshone, Pyramid Lake Paiute), director of operations for NDN Collective, released her debut music album *Call Back Your Heart* in 2025 and premiered her first music video for the song "Maybe" on YouTube. After her 2014 40 Under 40 recognition, Winder was appointed an at-large commissioner for the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs and is set to publish her first children's book, *I Tell You That I Love You*, in December 2025. She founded Dream Warriors Management in 2015, an Indigenous artist management company. ■

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# RISING TOGETHER

## *The New Era of Native Enterprise*

Long before borders or banking, Native nations built economies that spanned a continent. In the pre-colonization era, vast trade routes linked tribes from the Pacific to the Great Lakes. Shells from Baja California have been found in Midwestern burial mounds, reminders — as legal scholar Robert J. Miller notes — of “a complex web of Indigenous economies that moved goods, ideas and cultures across thousands of miles.”

Commerce wasn't competition; it was relationship.

Colonization shattered those Indigenous economies, replacing trade alliances with borders, and self-sufficiency with dependency. Yet the spirit of exchange never disappeared — it adapted, persisted and waited.

By the early 2000s, intertribal ventures were still rare. The Four Fires partnership — four tribes joining to build a hotel near the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian — was celebrated as an anomaly in 2002. Today, collaboration has become an organizing principle of Native enterprise. Tribes and Native businesses are combining capital, expertise and vision in ways that would have seemed improbable a generation ago.

In 2020, when the Gun Lake and Nottawaseppi Huron tribes co-purchased the McKay Tower in Grand Rapids, Mich., they weren't just buying real estate — they were reclaiming ancestral

space and modeling “patient capital.” In Southern California, the Viejas Band partnered with Indian Energy and two Chippewa tribes to finance a \$150 million microgrid, the first project backed by the Department of Energy's Tribal Energy Financing Program. Across the Pacific Northwest, eight Native CDFIs pooled \$9 million to finance a flour mill on the Umatilla Reservation, proving the power of collective lending.

Even in the competitive world of federal contracting, collaboration is reshaping the landscape. Grey Snow Native Strategies — a joint venture between a tribally owned 8(a) firm and a Native-owned engineering company — shows how cooperation can accelerate projects for both tribal and federal clients while building long-term capacity.

This is a moment of momentum — but not a beginning. Native nations have built, traded, governed and innovated on these lands since time immemorial. What's happening now is a continuation, a renewal of that long arc of enterprise adapted to a modern economy. From clean energy to finance, food and infrastructure, Native nations are proving that the most powerful force in today's tribal economy isn't gaming or grants. It's partnership grounded in shared prosperity — and the enduring truth that rising together lifts everyone.



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Photo: Andrew Snyder for Cairnspring Mills

# WEAVING CAPITAL

Across Indian Country, Native banks, CDFIs, tribal governments and Indigenous-focused impact investors are teaming up on bigger, more complex projects than ever before — pooling capital, sharing risk and building financial capacity that will shape the next generation of Native enterprise.

In mid-August, on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation east of Pendleton, Oregon, a group of Native financial executives stood together beside a wheat field across the road from an active construction site at Coyote Business Park. Excavation equipment was already cutting into the ground where the Blue Mountain Mill is being built, a regional flour facility led by Cairnspring Mills that will produce identity-preserved flour sourced from winter wheat grown across the Pacific Northwest. The new site replaces a nearby mill destroyed by fire three years earlier.

The gathering was small and mostly unceremonial. Representatives from the tribe and eight Native community development financial institutions — along with leaders from impact investor Mission Driven Finance and Cairnspring Mills — met at the edge of the work zone not to unveil a formal announcement, but to acknowledge what they had already done. The group had collaborated on a \$9 million subordinated debt package to support the mill — a rare multi-lender transaction for Indian Country, and a model Native finance leaders say could be replicated.



Left: Ted Piccolo of Mission Driven Finance at the tribally owned Coyote Business Park on the Umatilla Indian reservation. Right: Piccolo and representatives from Native CDFIs, Cairnspring Mills and the CTUIR gather at the Blue Mountain Mill construction site. (Photos: Brian Edwards for *Tribal Business News*)

**“This financing shows what happens when Native lending institutions are empowered to lead.”**

— Ted Piccolo, Mission Driven Finance

Although the mill is privately led, Cairnspring CEO Kevin Morse says the Native-backed financing came together only after years of trying to raise capital in more traditional markets. In the Seattle investment community, he said, even supportive funders were willing to offer “\$25,000 checks” while simultaneously committing millions to AI startups and software ventures. That mismatch — between stated enthusiasm for rebuilding regional food systems and the small-dollar capital actually available — left Morse fundraising for years just to stay on track.

The partnership with CTUIR, along with Native American Bank and eight Native CDFIs, offered something different: investors whose priorities matched the company’s focus on stewardship, regenerative agriculture and local ownership. “I just wanted good partners and a good landlord,” he recalled telling tribal leaders when he first toured Coyote Business Park. Their eventual commitments, including a 50-year land lease and a \$5 million equity investment represented not only financial support but “a level of trust” he described as both humbling and unexpected.

This Native-led collaboration sits inside a larger financing structure. The project, reported to cost \$65 million, relies on a capital stack that combines secured debt, New Markets Tax Credits, equity, mission-aligned capital

and grant funding. The Native CDFI collaboration is the project’s subordinated layer — using a structure that Mission Driven Finance designed so Native-led lenders with smaller balance sheets could enter the deal collectively and fill a critical funding gap.

Ted Piccolo, senior director of Indigenous Futures at Mission Driven Finance, called the financing “a capital weave,” referencing an Indigenous tradition of trade and exchange that pre-dated the modern finance system. “This financing shows what happens when Native lending institutions are empowered to lead,” Piccolo said in an interview. “It’s strengthening local economies while reconnecting us to the spirit of trade and exchange that has always been central to Native communities.”

For the Native CDFIs present that day, the deal also represented a step change in complexity. Many had not participated in a multi-party syndicated lending structure of this scale before. According to Mission Driven Finance co-founder Lauren Grattan, that is part of the point. She calls it “experiential capacity” — the practical knowledge gained by structuring, negotiating, underwriting and closing capital transactions that require new skill sets beyond conventional small business lending that Native CDFIs typically engage in.

Dave Tovey, an enrolled citizen of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and executive director of Nixyáawii Community Financial Services, said the collaborative approach made the deal possible. “This would not have been possible without the bold and creative approach of Mission Driven Finance, making it easy for us and other Native CDFIs to come together and invest in a project with such a transformative impact on Indian Country,” he said.



Cairnspring Mills CEO Kevin Morse in a Pacific Northwest wheat field. Morse said Native-led lenders and the CTUIR offered the values-aligned capital needed to advance the Blue Mountain Mill project. (Photo: Amy Kumler for Cairnspring Mills)

While the group spoke near the wheat field, trucks and equipment continued moving in and out of the construction zone. Some took photos together. Others walked the property perimeter, looking at the utility trenching and site work that would eventually connect the mill's operations into the region's infrastructure. This was not a staged media moment. It was an early look at a manufacturing facility, on a reservation, that will support more than 20 jobs and help return regional milling capacity to a market now dominated by a handful of national producers.

For Native CDFIs, the project is evidence of a next phase. Native lenders have long provided small business credit, home loans and community financing across Indian Country. But projects like the Blue Mountain Mill illustrate a shift toward larger, more complex capital structures — including subordinated debt, tax credit financing, equity from tribal governments and senior lending from Native-controlled institutions.

Pete Upton, executive director of Nebraska's Native360 loan fund and CEO of the Native CDFI Network, said the flour mill deal is the type of collaboration required to bring more capital into Indian Country. "That's what the Native CDFI industry needs — collaborative opportunities like this to build capacity and bring more deals and more capital to Native communities," he said. "We need to mimic this transaction in the future."

The flour mill gathering signaled that the next era of Native finance may not be defined by individual institutions working independently, but by Native financial entities coordinating resources, creating shared structures, and learning together. The \$9 million project-level collaboration at Pendleton showed that when Native lenders move in alignment — scale becomes possible.

### Not an Anomaly

The collaborative financing at Coyote Business Park is not an anomaly. It is part of a broader shift in which Native financial institutions are building the technical capacity and inter-institutional trust required to manage complex, multimillion-dollar transactions. The pattern extends from Oregon to Alaska and across the Great Plains, as Native lenders, banks and investors structure deals that once seemed out of reach.

Nowhere is that trend clearer than at Native American Bank, the Denver-based institution jointly owned by more than two dozen tribes and Alaska Native corporations.

NAB is the senior lender on the Blue Mountain Mill project, providing a \$25 million construction loan with Steward Lending participating in the financing, according to a bank spokesperson. The mill deal is one of several recent large-scale collaborations the bank has taken on as Native institutions pursue more complex capital structures.

In July 2025, the bank announced it had deployed \$50 million in New Markets Tax Credits to five community projects across Indian Country — funding new healthcare and childcare facilities, wastewater systems and other essential infrastructure. For the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, that meant \$15 million toward a \$35.4 million health-care complex in Omak, Wash. The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority used \$7.5 million to upgrade wastewater treatment in Kayenta. Child-care centers in Santo Domingo Pueblo and Winnebago, Neb., and an urban Native clinic in Minneapolis rounded out the allocations.

Each transaction required careful layering of federal tax credits, tribal equity and conventional debt — structures once handled almost exclusive-



Courtesy Photos

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**“A bank can’t do everything, and a CDFI can’t do everything. But when we combine underwriting capacity, technical assistance and local relationships, we create an assembly line that moves projects from concept to completion.”**

— Jeff Bowman, President, Bay Bank

ly by non-Native community-development entities. For Tom Ogaard, the bank’s president and CEO, the work reflects a growing maturity within Indian Country’s financial system. “We’re seeing more projects that begin and end with Native institutions,” he said. “Our role is to connect the pieces — tribes, CDFIs, and outside partners — so that capital stays aligned with community goals.”

Jeff Bowman, president and CEO of Green Bay-based Bay Bank, describes the process in similar terms. His institution, wholly owned by the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, partners frequently with Native CDFIs on housing and small-business lending in Wisconsin and Michigan.

“A bank can’t do everything, and a CDFI can’t do everything,” Bowman said. “But when we combine underwriting capacity, technical assistance and local relationships, we create an assembly line that moves projects from concept to completion.”

That collaboration, he added, has produced measurable results: more mortgages on trust land, stronger credit histories for Native borrowers and a clearer pipeline of investment-ready projects for regional banks.

The same collaborative logic guided another 2025 Native-led deal — this one in Metlakatla, Alaska, where inflation and tariff spikes had opened a financing gap for a tribal infrastructure project. The Metlakatla Intertie, a submarine cable system linking the Metlakatla Indian Community on Annette Island to the mainland, needed \$5.2 million in bridge financing to finish construction. Native American Bank organized the loan, joined by four Native CDFIs: Oweesta Corporation, Spruce Root, Nimiipuu Fund and Nixyáawii Community Financial Services. The stopgap allowed the community to complete its connection to regional power and broadband systems — an investment expected to save residents nearly \$150,000 a year on electricity and provide reliable internet access.

In each case, the mechanics differ but the principle is constant: Native institutions are solving capital gaps collectively. These projects also demonstrate a kind of institutional learning cycle. Every time a Native CDFI participates in a layered structure — whether a subordinated debt tranche in Oregon or a tax-credit bridge in Alaska — it gains experience that reduces friction in the next transaction. That accumulation of “experiential capacity,” as Mission Driven Finance’s Grattan calls it, is transforming Indian Country’s financial landscape.

The learning extends beyond lenders. Tribes themselves are becoming more active investors, using their balance sheets to co-invest alongside financial partners. CTUIR’s \$5 million equity stake in Cairnspring Mills is a striking example: a tribal government taking a minority position in a private enterprise to anchor regional food manufacturing. Similar strategies are emerging in renewable energy, housing and digital infrastructure.

Policy momentum is beginning to align with these developments. In Congress, the Tribal Tax and Investment Reform Act of 2025 proposes a \$175 million annual set-aside of New Markets Tax Credits specifically for

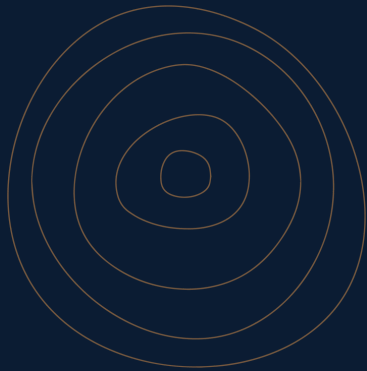


Top Left: Native American Bank CEO Tom Ogaard (Courtesy); Bay Bank President Jeff Bowman (Photo: Shado Lacount). Bottom: Executives from Native CDFIs, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and Cairnspring Mills gather near the construction site in August. (Photo: Brian Edwards, *Tribal Business News*)

tribal projects — an acknowledgment that conventional allocations have bypassed many Native communities. Research by the Center for Indian Country Development at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows that for every \$100 in NMTC investments nationwide, only about \$1 has historically reached tribal entities. Advocates such as The National Center and the Native CDFI Network argue that a tribal set-aside, combined with direct allocations to Native-controlled community-development entities, would accelerate the kind of deals now emerging across the country.

Upton, who leads both Native360 Loan Fund and the national Native CDFI Network, said the progress of the past two years shows what coordinated capital can achieve. “We’re finally reaching a point where tribes, banks and Native CDFIs are speaking the same financial language,” he said. “The more we collaborate, the more capacity we build and the more we can control our own economic outcomes in Native communities.”

Together, these examples point to a quiet but significant transformation: Indian Country is no longer waiting for outside intermediaries to deliver financing. Through deliberate partnerships — among Native banks,



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## “With every project like this, we’re reclaiming the ability to define our own economic future.”

— Bill Tovey, CTUIR Department of Economic & Community Development

CDFIs and tribal investors — it is designing and executing its own capital architecture, project by project, deal by deal.

### After the Ribbon Cutting

The pattern emerging across Indian Country suggests something larger than a set of isolated transactions. Native financial institutions are designing a parallel system of capital that operates within, yet apart from, conventional markets — one rooted in sovereignty and shared values rather than scale for its own sake. As more tribes and Native lenders gain experience with complex financing, the pipeline of investable projects is widening across sectors once considered unreachable.

The next frontiers are already visible. In housing, Native CDFIs are partnering with tribally owned banks and private builders to construct modular homes on trust land, reducing per-unit costs and cutting through longstanding bottlenecks. In clean energy, tribes are exploring shared-ownership models that combine tax-credit financing, federal guarantees and tribal equity to build solar and micro-grid projects on tribal lands. And in digital infrastructure, deals like the Metlakatla Intertie show how Native institutions can jointly deliver broadband and power to remote communities when national carriers cannot.

For lenders such as Native American Bank and Bay Bank, the collaboration is less about competition than specialization. Banks bring balance-sheet strength, regulatory expertise and underwriting systems; Native CDFIs bring deep community relationships and technical assistance that de-risk borrowers before they ever reach a loan committee. “The more we align our work, the faster capital moves,” said Bay Bank’s Bowman. “That’s how you build scale without losing the mission.”

What is forming, in effect, is an ecosystem. Each transaction — whether the Blue Mountain Mill’s eight-figure capital stack or a \$5,000 small-business loan to a Native artist — creates knowledge that can be reused across the network. As Native-centered institutions share that knowledge, efficiency increases and external investors begin to view tribal projects through a different lens: as disciplined, replicable and creditworthy.

Tribal governments are also re-evaluating their roles. Rather than limiting themselves to grant funding or guarantees, many are deploying cash reserves and enterprise earnings as stakes in projects that meet both financial and cultural objectives. These investments, tribal leaders say, are a logical extension of sovereignty: the right to decide how capital serves the community.

“With every project like this, we’re reclaiming the ability to define our own economic future,” said Bill Tovey, who directs economic and community development for the Umatilla Tribes. “When we invest together, we keep value circulating in our communities.”

Analysts describe the evolution as the emergence of a Native capital market — still small by national standards but growing in sophistication. Loan participations, subordinated debt, tax-credit allocations and sovereign equity are becoming familiar tools within tribal finance offices. As these mechanisms repeat, they will likely produce what economists call “institutional memory”: standardized templates, legal precedents, and track records that lower transaction costs for future deals.

## WHAT’S A “CAPITAL WEAVE”?

**Term origin:** The phrase comes from Ted Piccolo (Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation), senior director of Indigenous Futures at Mission Driven Finance. Piccolo uses it to describe how Native lenders blend different types of capital the way their ancestors once exchanged goods along Indigenous trade routes.

**Definition:** A capital weave is a blended-finance structure that layers multiple forms of funding — tribal equity, bank debt, New Markets Tax Credits, philanthropic investment, private impact capital and CDFI participation loans — into one coordinated deal. Unlike traditional syndicated lending, the goal is to balance financial performance with community priorities so the full capital stack serves Native-defined outcomes.

### How it works:

- A lead arranger — often a Native bank or impact investor — assembles senior and subordinate lenders.
- Native CDFIs subscribe to smaller participations that fit their risk tolerance.
- Tribes may contribute equity or provide long-term land leases.
- Private investors with Indigenous-aligned priorities can participate through direct equity, impact funds or subordinated debt.
- Tax credit and guarantee programs help fill remaining gaps.

### Why it matters:

- Scale through collaboration: Allows smaller CDFIs to enter large projects collectively.
- Skill building: Each deal adds “experiential capacity,” creating a smarter, faster-moving Native finance network.
- Sovereign control: Keeps project ownership and benefits within Indian Country, even when outside capital participates.

**Example:** The Blue Mountain Mill financing brought together eight Native CDFIs, Native American Bank, New Markets Tax Credits, tribal equity from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and mission-driven private capital — a textbook capital weave.

The implications for federal and private partners are significant. Agencies from the Treasury Department to the Department of Energy are revising program rules to accommodate tribal structures. Philanthropic and impact investors are following suit, directing mission-aligned capital through Native-led intermediaries rather than outside brokers. The result is a growing confidence that Indian Country can not only absorb but also deploy large amounts of capital effectively.

Back in Pendleton, construction at Blue Mountain Mill continues to rise out of the fields — a tangible symbol of that new confidence. When the first bags of flour roll off the line next year, they will represent more than a regional supply-chain project. They will embody a broader shift in economic design: one where Native lenders, bankers and tribal governments are not recipients of capital but its architects.

That, Upton says, is the true meaning of rising together. “Collaboration isn’t just about getting one deal done,” he said. “It’s about creating a system that keeps working long after the ribbon cuttings are over.” ■



# WIRING SOVEREIGNTY

(Photo: Karsten Wurth via Unsplash)

As federal support recedes, tribal nations are advancing sustainable energy and climate resilience on their own terms — building workforce, pooling capital and hardwiring sovereignty into the grid.

**F**or a generation, tribes have talked about controlling their energy destinies. Now they're doing it — one rooftop, one microgrid, one financing stack at a time.

At Pine Ridge, Indigenous trainees install solar panels on tribal homes, working eight-hour days in the snow under the direction of Red Cloud Renewable. On the Wabanaki Nations' lands in Maine, new technicians are learning to perform energy audits and service heat pumps so tribal members no longer have to pay outside contractors. In southern California, the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians is building what will be the state's largest long-duration battery microgrid, financed through a complex mix of federal guarantees, tax credits and tribal equity.

Taken together, these projects signal something larger than new technology. Native nations are building the people, capital and infrastructure to sustain clean energy on their own terms — even as Washington pulls back.

That work begins long before a single panel is mounted or battery is switched on — it begins with people.

## People Power

The sustainable-energy transition in Indian Country begins with people. With billions in federal funding paused or canceled, tribes have turned to

workforce programs that prepare Native citizens to install, maintain and operate renewable systems.

In early 2025, six tribes in the Upper Midwest completed solar workforce training through the now-defunct Solar for All program. Led by Indigenized Energy and Red Cloud Renewable, the two-week course trained 30 Indigenous participants from six tribal nations, including the Chippewa Cree and Oglala Sioux. Graduates left with technical certifications and, in several cases, full-time solar jobs.

“It's important to develop capacity,” Indigenized Energy CEO Cody Two-Bears told *Tribal Business News* in a February 2025 story. “Workforce development plays a key role in what's being put in these communities.”

On South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, Red Cloud's Bridging Renewable Industry Divides In Gender Equality (BRIDGE) program trains Native women for renewable-energy careers. The all-female 2025 cohort worked through rooftop installations, safety certifications and electrical coursework with female instructors from Remote Energy, breaking into a field where women make up only 11% of workers.

Programs like BRIDGE tackle the dual barriers of gender and geography by offering stipends, housing and childcare. About 80% of graduates from the first cohort in 2024 found jobs within four months. Instructor



Partners in the Viejas Band's energy project — including Indian Energy executives, tribal partners and federal officials — gather at RES 2023 for the announcement of \$72.8 million in financing through the Department of Energy's Tribal Energy Financing Program. (Photo: The National Center)

Laura Walters said in an interview this summer that the impact extends far beyond employment.

"If you want to see change in something like this, you have to design a program that meets those populations," she said.

Farther east, the Wabanaki Sustainable Energy Team — representing the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Houlton Band of Maliseet and Mi'kmaq Nation — is training tribal members as energy auditors and heat-pump installers. The approach replaces costly outside contractors with tribally trained workers, keeping dollars circulating locally.

"We don't want to go outside the nations to get these services," said program coordinator Kelsey Flores. "The overall goal is to feed into our resilience and our self-sufficiency."

Each of these efforts reflects a growing conviction: true energy sovereignty starts with Native hands on the wires.

### Rising Together

Long before power lines or pipelines, Native nations built networks that carried goods, ideas and mutual responsibility across the continent. That same spirit of exchange is resurfacing in the clean-energy transition as tribes collaborate to generate, store and share their own power.

In northern California, four tribes — the Hoopa Valley, Yurok, Karuk, and Blue Lake Rancheria — joined forces on the \$177 million Tribal Energy Resilience and Sovereignty project, or TERAS, linking microgrids across a region prone to wildfires and outages. Together, they built a tribally controlled network capable of islanding during emergencies and re-connecting once the grid stabilizes.

In southern California, the Viejas Band's partnership with Native-owned Indian Energy and two Chippewa tribes has become a model for large-scale collaboration. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians joined as co-owners in the project company — a structure designed to ensure Native ownership from development through long-term returns.

Together, the tribes and Indian Energy are developing the Enterprise Microgrid, a 15-megawatt system paired with 70 megawatt-hours of vanadium and zinc long-duration storage, the largest of its kind in the state. The \$150 million project combines a \$43 million California Energy Commission grant, a \$72.8 million Department of Energy loan guarantee — the first ever issued through DOE's Tribal Energy Financing Program — and tax equity bridge funding from U.S. Bancorp and Starbucks, along with in-



Top and middle: Women in the BRIDGE program train for solar careers with Red Cloud Renewable. Bottom: GRID Alternatives crews install rooftop solar on tribal homes across Indian Country. (Courtesy Photos)



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Austin Lowes, chairman of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, said the tribe viewed the partnership as both strategic and generational. “The tribe invested in Indian Energy to diversify revenue streams, support tribal member-owned businesses and facilitate energy development within Indian Country, including our own tribal lands,” he said in a statement.

These joint efforts echo an older Indigenous economic principle: commerce as relationship, not rivalry. Training programs are now shared across tribes. Small-scale funders, philanthropic partners and technical nonprofit partners are helping tribes advance early-stage projects.

In each case, cooperation isn’t a slogan — it’s a strategy. By rising together, tribes and Native-serving organizations are creating an energy ecosystem grounded in sovereignty and shared prosperity, rebuilding networks of exchange suited for a new energy era.

### Closing the Capital Gap

The most daunting energy challenge for tribes these days isn’t technology — it’s finance.

Until recently, the Environmental Protection Agency’s Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund promised nearly \$2 billion for Indian Country through three programs: Solar for All, Clean Communities Investment Accelerator (CCIA), and National Clean Investment Fund (NCIF). That pipeline has been shut off. Solar for All was canceled outright, while CCIA and NCIF are tied up in federal court. The result: hundreds of tribal projects stalled mid-construction.

Rather than wait for resolution, Native innovators are building their own financial bridges.

In Parker, Ariz., Native entrepreneur David Harper launched Huurav Energy — named for the Mohave word for the power behind thunder and lightning — to connect impact investors and philanthropic lenders with tribes whose projects were frozen. The startup firm plans to provide short-term bridge loans and technical support to keep developments on schedule.

“Most tribes don’t need a billion dollars,” Harper said at a tribal economic development conference this fall. “They just need \$2 million to bridge the gap, to keep the project moving.”

The nonprofit Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy is trying to bridge that gap at scale through the Indigenous Power & Light Fund, a collaborative pool backed by the MacArthur, Hewlett, and Lemelson foundations and other philanthropic partners.

Launched in 2024, the fund was originally designed to help tribes cover pre-development costs that federal programs do not: matching funds, feasibility studies, environmental reviews and technical planning. With many federal programs rescinded or frozen, the fund shifted to a rapid response role — providing emergency grants and loans to keep stalled projects on track and support tribes facing rising energy costs or unreliable service. Former Office of Indian Economic Development Director Onna LeBeau was hired to lead the fund.

The need has grown sharply as federal support contracts. The fund now focuses on community-scale projects that replace diesel systems, electrify homes that have never had service, and stabilize essential facilities such as health clinics, community centers and emergency shelters. More than \$35 million has been committed to date, with a goal of building a \$100 million permanent, revolving resource dedicated to tribal energy sovereignty.

Other Native-serving nonprofits are filling gaps at the community level. In November 2025, Tribal Energy Alternatives awarded \$3.6 million in micro-grants to 26 tribes through its Tribal Solar Accelerator Fund. The Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin used its grant to install a 70-kilowatt solar array at its Community Kitchen, cutting costs and powering food production.

“These grants reflect our ongoing commitment to helping Tribal Nations define their own clean-energy futures,” program officer Darrell Hill said in a statement. Since its inception, Tribal Energy Alternatives — once part of GRID Alternatives — has distributed more than \$19 million for tribal projects and workforce training.

Even smaller allies are staying in the game. The Massachusetts-based All Points North Foundation issues grants of \$100,000 or less for solar installations and training workshops.

“We view this as stepping stones,” Interim Executive Director Laura Staich said in a recent news story. “One person, one project, one community at a time — that all begins to add up.”

Her colleague Joe Ogrinc said small grants often reach tribes excluded from large federal competitions. “The big swings — the multimillion-dollar grants — take a lot of effort,” he said. “Smaller projects really play a huge role in developing initial partnerships.”

What unites all these efforts—whether a single rooftop panel or a utility-scale grid upgrade—is the same principle that once connected trade routes across the continent: collaboration. Tribes are rising together, turning relationships into resilience and proving that the path to energy independence runs through community.

The Native energy transition is no longer a vision deferred to the next administration. It’s happening now, built by the people who will live with its results.

In a policy climate that is prone to reversals, that persistence may be Indian Country’s most renewable resource of all. ■

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The U.S. Air Force's T-7A Red Hawk trainer aircraft takes off during testing. Pinnacle Solutions, a subsidiary of Alaska Native-owned Akima, secured a \$369 million contract in 2025 to develop the aircraft's new maintenance training system. (Photo: U.S. Air Force / CJ Raterman)

# RESHAPING FEDERAL CONTRACTING

Tribes are reshaping the federal contracting landscape through disciplined expansion, strategic acquisitions and long-term investment. Their success is building capacity, credibility and economic power across Indian Country.

Federal contracting has become one of Indian Country's most powerful economic engines. Tribes that once viewed government contracts as supplemental income now treat them as strategic assets — vehicles for job creation, technical capability, and long-term nation-building. What began as a small foothold in the U.S. Small Business Administration's 8(a) Business Development Program has evolved into a \$26 billion sector reshaping tribal economies across the country.

That growth is visible in the accelerating scale of awards, acquisitions, and partnerships. Native enterprises are competing at the highest levels of the federal marketplace while expanding into commercial and international work. They are also creating enduring value by reinvesting profits in their communities, funding education, housing, and infrastructure that extend the benefits of contracting well beyond agency walls.

Waséyabek Federal Services, a subsidiary of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi's business arm, is one example of how far tribal companies have come. The Grand Rapids, Mich.-based firm is part of a federal contracting platform the tribe began building in 2018 with its first 8(a) certification, a line of business that has steadily expanded in recent years.

In July, the SBA-certified firm secured a five-year, \$205 million contract with the U.S. Department of Energy to provide site operations and research support for the National Energy Technology Laboratory. Under the agreement, the company will manage daily operations and environmental services at NETL sites in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Oregon, alongside subcontractors Amentum and E2 Consulting Engineers.

President and CEO Deidra Mitchell has described the win as part of a long-term growth strategy led by Waséyabek Development Company, the tribe's broader enterprise. WDC now manages more than 32 entities with more than 650 employees nationwide and has pursued a buy-and-hold approach, acquiring electronics manufacturer Safari Circuits in 2022 and defense software firm VES in 2023. Mitchell has said the parent company aims to build a diversified portfolio that can reach \$1 billion in revenue by 2040.

Other tribes are following a similar path. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians has built one of the most active acquisition programs in Indian Country through its contracting arm, PCI Federal. The Alabama-based enterprise acquired Superlative Technologies Inc., a Virginia cybersecurity and IT services provider, in April 2025. Two months later it purchased Street Legal Industries Inc., an Oak Ridge, Tennessee, firm specializing in infrastructure and environmental support for the Department of Energy and Department of Defense.

Together, the companies bring decades of experience, hundreds of cleared employees and more than \$150 million in recent contract awards, according to market-intelligence firm HigherGov. Tribal Chair and CEO Stephanie Bryan said the acquisitions expand PCI Federal's technical capabilities and its reach across defense and civilian agencies. They also reflect a broader shift toward owning firms with established performance and specialized certifications rather than relying solely on newly created 8(a) ventures.

Another federal contractor with an Alabama presence has shown strong growth in the sector. In November 2025, Pinnacle Solutions, a subsidiary of Alaska Native-owned Akima, secured a \$369 million contract to develop the Air Force's new maintenance training system for the T-7A Red Hawk. The award builds on Akima's growing presence in Huntsville, Ala., where it opened a new 35,000-square-foot office in 2024 and manages a \$563 million facility-support contract at Redstone Arsenal.

Owned by NANA, an Alaska Native Corporation representing more than 15,000 Inupiat shareholders, Akima now employs 10,000 people globally and ranks among the country's largest government contractors.

Cherokee Nation Businesses, through its contracting arm Cherokee Federal, has taken diversification a step further by creating its own investment vehicle. In 2024, CNB launched Sovereign Capital, a growth capital firm designed to leverage Cherokee Federal's experience in the federal sector by investing in founder-led companies poised for expansion. The firm's





(Photo: Shutterstock)

first acquisition, Virginia-based Advanced Technology Applications, provides data-intensive solutions to Homeland Security, Defense, and Intelligence clients. A year later, Sovereign Capital added Management Science and Innovation, a Reston, Va.-area consultancy specializing in process optimization, automation and artificial intelligence.

“The new investment fund gives us a way to pair capital with the operational knowledge we’ve gained through decades of federal contracting,” Cherokee Federal President Steven Bilby said in a statement when announcing the first deal. Together, the investments extend Cherokee Federal’s reach into high-growth technology segments while creating long-term value for the Cherokee Nation.

Some tribes are entering the market through private equity rather than direct contracting. The Southern Ute Indian Tribe launched Kava Equity Partners in 2023 to identify acquisition targets aligned with its values and its Growth Fund’s long-term strategy. Kava’s first purchase, environmental remediation contractor Arrowhead Contracting, brought three decades of federal and commercial project experience and an Indigenous founder whose mission complemented the tribe’s own.

Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation (UIC) expanded its federal footprint with its largest acquisition in late 2024, taking a 70% stake in Colorado Springs-based Delta Solutions & Strategies. The defense contractor serves the U.S. Air Force, Space Force and Space Command, bringing 400 employees and 180 subcontractors under UIC’s Bowhead Family of Companies.

Chenega Corporation, another major Alaska Native player in federal contracting, expanded its portfolio with the 2024 acquisition of SecuriGence LLC. The deal added a cybersecurity and engineering firm with long-standing work for Defense and Intelligence agencies to Chenega’s Military, Intelligence and Operations Support division.

Those deals illustrate a broader trend quantified by recent research. A 2024 analysis by HigherGov and Tribal Business News found that from 2000 to 2023, Native entities — including Alaska Native corporations, tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations — acquired companies that together generated nearly \$10 billion in federal contracting revenue before purchase. M&A transactions involving Native entities grew at an annualized rate of nearly 13% over that period, with 2023 marking the highest single year on record. Most targets operated in professional services, construction, and manufacturing, sectors that mirror tribes’ existing strengths.

While mergers and acquisitions expand capability, collaboration remains central to growth. Tribal enterprises are forming joint ventures at an

unprecedented pace to build past performance, share expertise, and enter new lines of work.

The Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma provides a recent example. Its subsidiary Eastern Shawnee Professional Services has created eight joint ventures beginning in late 2023 — an unusually fast start for a newly certified 8(a) company. CEO Matt Metcalf, a Navy veteran, has said the JVs with partners such as Veracity Consulting and Bay West allow the company to pair 8(a) eligibility with technical experience in IT modernization and environmental remediation. “One of the hardest things to get into the market right off the bat is to establish the past performance or qualifications and bench depth,” Metcalf said in an interview. “This gives us a way to compete early and credibly.”

Farther north, the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska recently joined with Native Strategies, a Cherokee-owned engineering and construction firm, to form Grey Snow Native Strategies LLC. Structured as a tribally controlled 8(a) joint venture, the company will pursue infrastructure projects for tribal and federal clients, starting with water and civil-engineering work. Iowa Tribe Chairman Timothy Rhodd said the partnership “is more than a business arrangement — it’s a way to deepen our capacity to serve Indian Country.”

Such ventures require precision and accountability. They offer opportunities to scale quickly but demand strong management and compliance systems to maintain eligibility and reputation. That expectation has become more visible as federal agencies scrutinize pass-through arrangements and high-dollar awards across preference-based programs. Recent enforcement actions, including the suspension of a tribally owned contractor and Treasury’s review of \$9 billion in contracts, have underscored the importance of strong internal controls. The vast majority of Native firms operate with those standards firmly in place, industry participants and advocates say.

“The Native 8(a) program is a proven model that creates jobs, drives economic opportunity, and strengthens Native-owned small businesses,” Quinton Carroll, executive director of the Native American Contractors Association says. “Our members deliver high-quality work to the U.S. government and bring economic development home to our communities.”

Carroll added that NACA supports the SBA’s efforts to ensure full compliance across the program and continues to train members to prevent misconduct.

That focus on integrity comes as federal regulators review portions of the 8(a) program and update acquisition rules. In June 2025, the Federal Acquisition Regulation Council proposed raising the sole-source ceiling for tribal 8(a) firms from \$100 million to \$150 million for defense-related agencies and from \$25 million to \$30 million for civilian agencies.

Together, these developments reflect a sector that is both maturing and expanding. Contracting success has created capital pools that tribes are now redeploying through acquisitions, joint ventures and private-equity investments. The most sophisticated enterprises are building multi-company platforms that can compete without set-asides, integrate advanced technologies and sustain tribal economies for generations.

For tribal leaders, the implications are significant. Federal contracting continues to provide one of the most stable revenue streams available to Indian Country. But the next phase of growth will depend on strategy — selective acquisitions, strong governance, and collaboration that shares risk and reward among Native partners.

Each contract, acquisition and joint venture adds to a broader story: a network of Native enterprises learning, partnering and building capacity together. The methods may vary — 8(a) certifications, mentor-protégé agreements, or M&A — but the motivation remains consistent. Federal contracting is not just commerce; it is sovereignty expressed through enterprise. ■



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# FEEDING THE FUTURE

(Photos: Courtesy of Native American Agriculture Fund)

*Native farmers, ranchers and tribal partners are rebuilding market power — developing modern food infrastructure, financing growth on their own terms and advancing food sovereignty from the ground up.*

**J**anie Simms Hipp spent years pushing against the assumption that Native producers, lenders and food businesses had to operate on separate islands. The former USDA official and founder of multiple Native agriculture organizations believed that Indian Country could compete in modern agriculture only if tribal nations built stronger capital systems — together.

The shift is now underway.

Native agribusiness is scaling in step with Native CDFIs, philanthropic capital and new partnerships that move beyond traditional silos. Tribes and Native lenders are aligning around shared investment, modern processing capacity and regional food infrastructure — creating the conditions for Native producers to grow operations, add value and keep more dollars circulating in their own communities.

There is real scale behind that shift. According to USDA data, more than 78,000 farmers and ranchers identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, producing roughly \$6.4 billion in agricultural value each year across 63.3 million acres of farm and grazing land. Tribal and Native producers raise beef cattle, bison, specialty crops, grains and value-added products sold in both tribal and commercial markets. It's a diverse economic engine hidden beneath national averages.

**“Farmers and ranchers have to have reliable access to capital if they want to stay in business. Period. Full stop.”**

— Janie Simms Hipp, NAFS

Yet much of that acreage is held in trust by the federal government. Unlike other U.S. farmers, Native producers typically cannot leverage land as collateral to secure traditional loans or lines of credit. The result has been decades of underinvestment and stalled growth, even when tribal producers had the demand, the land base and the operational sophistication to expand. Closing that capital gap — on Native terms — has become central to building food sovereignty and strengthening Native economies from inside Indian Country.

“Farmers and ranchers have to have reliable access to capital if they want to stay in business,” Hipp said. “Period. Full stop.”

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### In the Trenches

For Skya Ducheneaux, an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, that gap wasn't abstract. It shaped her relationship with agriculture itself.

Growing up, she wanted more. She wanted to be done haying, chasing cows and helping her dad full-time on the family's South Dakota cattle ranch. When she turned 18 years old, she decided she would no longer return to the agrarian way of life, trading her biceps and muck boots for brains and a business degree.

After leaving, Ducheneaux found she couldn't stay away for long.

A few years later, the land called her back. She got engaged to a cattle rancher, settled on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation and, as she says now, began raising two little "cowgirls."

Her return now intersects with a different version of the Native ag economy — one supported by Native-led lending. Ducheneaux serves her community as the executive director of Akiptan, a Native CDFI based in Eagle Butte, S.D., that finances Native farmers and ranchers through operating and ownership loans for equipment, livestock, land and other needs. Akiptan also works alongside its borrowers with technical support and financial training so they can grow sustainably.

"Their success is our success," she says. "We're going to do everything we can so they can succeed."

Akiptan has completed 567 loans and committed \$40 million to 29 tribal nations in six years. The projects range from processing facilities focused on livestock to value-added specialty crop operations, serving tribal communities with limited access to transportation hubs and broadband.

**"Their success is our success. We're going to do everything we can so they can succeed."**

— Skya Ducheneaux, Akiptan

These loans enable producers who might otherwise be locked out of conventional credit to expand their herds, buy farm equipment and build long-term operations.

"The cool thing about CDFIs is that we very rarely say no; it's usually, 'Not yet,'" Ducheneaux says.

For Ducheneaux, that flexibility is the point — Native lenders are building systems meant to last, not just to chase volume.

"We're not just working with numbers or customers who generate us interest or income," she says. "We're in the trenches, for lack of a better word, with our community members, and our producers come to us proactively versus reactively."

### Scaling Native Agribusiness

Over the last decade, Native lenders and tribal finance partners have helped local economies and communities enter new markets — from ethanol feed markets to value-added food production and Native-owned retail.

According to a Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia analysis, 46.4% of residents in census tracts with majority American Indian and Alaska Native populations live in "banking deserts" — more than 12 times the



**“We have such diverse projects, and they are meeting the needs of their community or region.”**

— Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, NAAF

national average. So Native-controlled capital has stepped in where main-stream finance has not.

For years, Hipp rejected the idea that agricultural producers in Indian Country and financial institutions had to operate in totally disconnected worlds.

“That’s literally BS,” she says. “I know producers around the country who have interacted with their local farm credit office or the one who serves their region, but it’s all been a one-off. My goal ... within farm credit was that we must do this better.”

Hipp has spent her career building the modern Native agricultural landscape. An enrolled member of the Chickasaw Nation, she founded USDA’s Office of Tribal Relations, launched the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative at the University of Arkansas and later became the founding executive director of the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), established in 2018 after a multi-million dollar legal settlement with the federal government over discrimination against Native farmers and ranchers.

Today, she leads Native Agriculture Financial Services, or NAFS, as its CEO, continuing to push for capital systems that work for Native producers.

Hipp always believed the farm credit system could do better — that “loans” and “debt” didn’t have to be scary words. Her work helped normalize lending as a tool of sovereignty, not a risk to be feared.

As capital access and technical assistance have expanded, Native agribusiness owners are scaling, and Indigenous entrepreneurs are building their business acumen and standing up new food companies.

A glimpse at Akiptan shows how that shift plays out on the ground. Early this year, Ty Thompson of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe used an Akiptan loan to become a feed dealer — a move that allowed him to stay price-competitive in a tight market. Akiptan has seen similar demand across Indian Country. Since Jan. 1, 2025, the Native CDFI has closed 103 additional agriculture loans for cattle ranchers, crop farmers, value-added producers, specialty growers and truckers, with another 86 applications moving through its pipeline this summer.

“I wouldn’t be able to sell feed if it wasn’t for Akiptan,” Thompson said in materials provided by Akiptan. “If I had to go through a higher interest rate institution, my feed would be higher and I would have less people buying my feed because it would in turn need to be higher in price as well.”

Financing with Akiptan helped him be competitive. “If I were at a 10-12% interest rate, the feed I sell wouldn’t be as competitive for feed sales,” he said.

Success stories like this help change the narrative, according to current NAAF CEO Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, a citizen of the Colville Confederated Tribes. “We have such diverse projects, and they are meeting the needs of their community or region,” she says.

Across all of those projects, the cost of growth is rising. In modern agriculture, where equipment costs routinely hit seven figures, capital is the difference between scaling and stalling.

“For today’s operation to be competitive, where you’re buying million-dollar pieces of equipment, it’s important to have that relationship with farm credit in Indian Country,” Stanger-McLaughlin says.

**Returning to the Land**

Even as Native producers build lending relationships and become more competitive, they’re still operating inside a land system constrained by federal trust status — and that limitation continues to shape how Native producers access capital today.

Much of this agricultural land is held in trust by the U.S. government. Natives do not own the land, Stanger-McLaughlin explains. As a result, many do not have the ability to leverage land and operations for capital like other U.S. farmers and ranchers.

“We need to be able to work with our federal partners and private partners to create opportunities for lending that find creative ways for tribal governments to leverage that land,” Stanger-McLaughlin says.

This has become even more critical amid government shutdowns, trade disputes and repeated farm bill extensions, according to Carly Griffith Hotvedt, a citizen of Cherokee Nation and the current executive director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI). Native producers already operate as biologists, logistics managers, marketers and risk managers — and now, she says, navigating federal programs has become an essential skillset to help secure food sovereignty.

That’s why IFAI rolled out a governance guide this fall and posted weekly reports on federal policy affecting tribal food and agriculture. Hotvedt says her message to tribal leaders is that that Native agriculture has to be treated with the same priority as schools and health care — because neither can function without a stable food foundation.

## **“We cannot be truly sovereign unless we can feed our own people. Tribal sovereignty requires food sovereignty.”**

— Carly Hotvedt, IFAI

“I think it’s about helping folks understand the critical value of agriculture in that we cannot be truly sovereign unless we can feed our own people,” Hotvedt says. “Tribal sovereignty requires food sovereignty.”

### **Funding the Future**

One of the major forces driving capital expansion in Native agriculture over the last decade has been the Native American Agriculture Fund — and it is operating on a finite timeline.

NAAF started in 2018 as a charitable trust serving Native farmers and ranchers after the *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* litigation settlement. According to its five-year impact report (2019-23), the trust distributed \$83 million to tribal projects and communities nationwide via its grant making. Funding for the trust runs out in 2038.

“We are on a ticking clock with regard to the existence of the fund,” Hipp says.

For Hipp, that expiration date is a real economic constraint: producers need steady capital year after year to buy equipment, invest in irrigation, cover production costs and secure land — the basic inputs of modern agriculture.

And when that capital source winds down, Indian Country will need the next generation of native ag professionals ready to build what comes next.

### **Preparing the Next Generation**

It’s late September and NAAF’s Stanger-McLaughlin is in Lawrence, Kan., visiting the Haskell Indian Nations University. She wants to see the development of NAAF’s partnership with a higher education institution. She wants to see how NAAF’s grants are helping build future capacity.

In 2024, NAAF and the Bureau of Indian Education invested in a new agriculture business degree program at Haskell that would cover lending, risk management, regulatory compliance and customer service — skills that would strengthen Native producers’ relationships with financial institutions.

During her visit, Stanger-McLaughlin witnessed a bison harvest on campus, where students were preparing meat for a community feast.

NAAF’s work has also supported Native entrepreneurship pathways beyond the classroom. In 2025, the fund awarded a grant to the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque to help food entrepreneurs build business plans, improve financial literacy and become investment ready.

Half of Indian Country’s market receipts in agriculture are already tied to livestock, Hipp notes — making this a pivotal moment to connect Native producers with Native buyers. She points to casino retail and food operations as an immediate, scalable opportunity.

If tribes unlock those channels, Native producers — and even non-Native producers around them — could be stabilized because so much food volume moves through casino and resort properties.

“Think about how many retail food operations there are inside those structures,” she muses. “We wouldn’t even need to market our food anywhere else, right?” ■



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# THE NEW MATRIARCHS

INDIGENOUS WOMEN RESHAPING LEADERSHIP IN AMERICA

In Native governance and business, power looks different than it once did. Indigenous women are redefining what leadership means — building financial systems rooted in reciprocity, managing multimillion-dollar portfolios, running national advocacy organizations and steering regional economies with confidence born of tradition, technical mastery and hustle.

Nicole Borrromeo, president of the ANCSA Regional Association, captures the ethos succinctly: “I know with 100% legal certainty that I’m not always going to be the smartest person in the room,” she says. “But I also know with 100% certainty that no one in the room is going to outwork me.”

That relentless drive — tempered by cultural accountability — defines a new generation of Indigenous women leaders. They aren’t asking for seats at the table. They’re building the tables, writing the bylaws, and deciding who gets to sit.

Fifty years ago, perhaps a handful of Alaska Native women held leadership posts. Today, depending on the region, women lead 50% to 75% of major organizations, Borrromeo says. And this shift isn’t unique to Alaska — it’s reshaping leadership across Indian Country.

**“I know with 100% legal certainty that I’m not always going to be the smartest person in the room. But I also know with 100% certainty that no one in the room is going to outwork me.”**

— Nicole Borrromeo, ANCSA Regional Association

From California to Oklahoma, Native women are running multimillion-dollar investment firms and tribal enterprises. In the nonprofit world, they’re directing century-old advocacy organizations with expanding mandates. In finance, they’re designing new capital structures that move money to Indigenous communities on Indigenous terms.

The breadth is striking — law, finance, cultural preservation, economic development, policy advocacy — but so is the depth. These aren’t symbolic ap-



pointments. These are women controlling budgets, shaping policy and making decisions that affect thousands of lives.

This moment carries historical echoes. Wilma Mankiller's election as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1985 shattered assumptions about Indigenous women's capacity to lead major tribal governments. Ada Deer's establishment of federal recognition for the Menominee Tribe — and later her service as Assistant Secretary of the Interior — demonstrated Native women could navigate both tribal and federal systems with equal skill. Suzan Harjo's decades of advocacy resulted in the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, returning thousands of ancestors and sacred objects to their communities.

But what's happening now feels different in scale and velocity. The first wave of contemporary Native women in leadership were notable partly because it was so scattered and rare to see Native women in leadership. Today's Native women leaders are rising collectively, creating networks of mutual support and deliberately building infrastructure for the next generation.

"We've done an excellent job at encouraging women in the Native community to pursue higher education," Borromeo notes, describing how cultural shifts and the introduction of Western education systems — despite their assimilationist origins — have thrust Native women into leadership positions they've always been capable of holding.

This isn't just about individual achievement. It's about a critical mass of Indigenous women reaching positions where they can redirect resources, transform institutions, and redefine what leadership looks like in the 21st century.

### How They Lead

Leadership style reveals as much as the positions themselves — how these women wield power speaks volumes about what they're building.

As president of ANCSA Regional Association, Borromeo represents 12 Alaska Native regional corporations on issues including land rights, subsistence harvests and resource development at local, state and federal levels. A Doyon shareholder who is Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan, she approaches advocacy from the intersection of technical excellence and cultural accountability.

Her leadership philosophy is deceptively simple: lead by example, and never be outworked. And beneath that work ethic lies a deep commitment to sovereignty.

Shannon O'Loughlin brings a different vision to her work as CEO and attorney for the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA), the nation's longest-serving Native nonprofit, established in 1922. The organization's scope is staggering — cultural sovereignty and repatriation, youth and family advocacy including the Indian Child Welfare Act, Native youth justice, sacred site protection, federal acknowledgement and public education.

O'Loughlin, an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, leads with a principle that challenges the extractive nature of Western institutions: "We're not going to kowtow to any particular political party. Ever." Notably, the association chooses not to pursue any federal funding.

"We want to work at a grassroots level. We're not going to speak for others," O'Loughlin says. "What we try to do a good job at is make sure that everybody understands the issues, so that we're educating with facts and evidence."

Education alone isn't the goal. AAIA filters every decision through what O'Loughlin calls "a lens of passing down intergenerational healing" rather than intergenerational trauma. It's a framework that recognizes centuries of harm while refusing to replicate oppressive dynamics in their own work.

In finance, Lauren Grattan demonstrates how Indigenous values can reshape capital flows. As co-founder and chief community officer of Mission Driven Finance, an impact asset management firm she launched a de-



Nicole Borromeo (center), joined by Byron Nicholai and Shauna Hegna, at ANCSA Regional Association's annual "Walking in Mukluks" DC Reception. (Courtesy photo)

cade ago, Grattan structures investments that prioritize reciprocity over extraction. Her firm manages the Indigenous Futures Fund, launched in February 2024 to accelerate capital flows to Indigenous entrepreneurs and tribal enterprises.

Growing up mixed race in Hawai'i with Native Hawaiian, Irish and Chinese heritage, she saw how communities had different access to resources and advancement based on class.

"I used to do a workshop called 'alternative term sheets,'" Grattan says, "and people would show up thinking I'm going to lay out structural elements, and instead I'm going to talk to you about power dynamics and how term sheets are a representation of being in right relationship."

That framework — "being in right relationship" — unites these leaders across sectors. Borromeo filters policy decisions through impacts on tribal self-determination. O'Loughlin structures partnerships and programs to pass down healing rather than trauma. Grattan embeds reciprocity into investment agreements. They're not simply succeeding within existing systems — they're building new ones.

### Balancing Tradition & Innovation

The creative tension between honoring tradition and embracing innovation isn't something these leaders resolve — it's something they navigate daily, weaving Indigenous values into modern institutional frameworks.

Grattan applies this to her investment work. Mission Driven Finance doesn't just deploy capital differently; the firm structures legal agreements to reflect Indigenous principles. "How can you embed reciprocity into your legal agreements for how capital is moving?" she asks. "We start with how we want our relationships to be, and then that flows out into how we structure the investments."



Shannon O'Loughlin (top) and Lauren Grattan (bottom) at recent speaking engagements. (Courtesy photos)

**“We don't want to continue to oppress our own people. The places we go and the work that we do are always filtered through a lens of passing down intergenerational healing.”**

— Shannon O'Loughlin, Association on American Indian Affairs

A recent transaction united several Native lenders in a complex financing effort — a first for many of the participants. Through regular educational calls, Grattan and her team worked to build what she calls “experiential capital” — the knowledge and confidence that come from learning by doing. “We're giving you the cheat codes,” she tells her partners, “so that you have that capacity to be able to lead in the future.”

For Borrromeo, the balance shows in how she structures her life around both professional excellence and cultural practice. Despite living in Anchorage and maintaining a demanding advocacy schedule, she unplugs completely for major cultural events like the annual Alaska Federation of Natives convention. She takes time off to fish, pick berries and harvest traditional foods with her family.

“Making sure that we pass down those traditions to our children is really important to my husband and me,” she explains. It's not compartmental-

ization — her cultural grounding makes her a more effective advocate, and her professional success creates space for her family to maintain traditional practices.

O'Loughlin's organization operates this balance institutionally. The non-profit hosts an annual repatriation conference and creates training programs for returning cultural heritage from both private collections and international institutions — deeply traditional work conducted through contemporary nonprofit and legal structures. Its monthly Tribal Partners Working Group brings together Native nation representatives working in repatriation and sacred site protection, creating a closed space where communities identify priorities that the association then amplifies through media engagement and federal advocacy.

This is the sophisticated work of leaders who understand that Indigenous futures require both honoring ancestral knowledge and mastering the tools of contemporary power.

### Mentorship & Kinship

Leadership in Indian Country has never been about individual ascension — it's always been about collective continuity. These women understand that implicitly.

O'Loughlin's strength as a leader flows directly from her grandmother, who raised her after her mother couldn't provide care. “She's the one who would tell me story after story of the struggles she had in her life just to exist,” she says. “She went through all of those struggles so that I could be here and make a difference. I know that every breath I take has the opportunity to change this world. That's the gift my grandmother gave me, and that's a gift I want to pass on.”

That gift takes practical form in how O'Loughlin structures her organization. She empowers staff to “really dream about what is possible in Native country for change,” recognizing that most of their work yields results over decades, not quarterly. She's careful about how AAIA enters relationships, ensuring they're “being mindful of the possibility for harm or healing” in every partnership. It's mentorship embedded into institutional culture.

Borrromeo takes an intentional approach to building the next generation of Native leaders, especially Native women. “I fall back on leading by example and making sure that I am opening doors to those who are coming behind me,” she says.

She's also candid about a weakness in Native communities: “We do an exceptional job of telling the next generation, ‘Go out, get your degree, come back, there will be a job for you.’ And then when the next generation comes back with their shining degree, we're not always welcoming.”

She's working deliberately to change that pattern — showing up in spaces, building partnerships where none existed before and performing relationships that the next generation can inherit and expand.

Grattan mentors in the Rematriating Economies Apprenticeship, which trains Indigenous women for leadership roles in finance and investment. Beyond teaching sessions, she works with participants one-on-one and offers what she calls “gut-checking” — reaching out to someone who's walked a similar path when life gets intense. For women stuck in the impossible loop of needing experience to get a job but needing a job to get experience, Grattan creates project-based shadowing and short-term engagements that build technical credibility and confidence.

### Barriers and Breakthroughs

There's an old adage about art: Don't sit too close to the ballet — you'll see the work. The same applies to leadership. From a distance, grace looks effortless; up close it's sweat, sacrifice and strain.

“You're not seeing the all-nighters,” Borrromeo says bluntly. “You're not

**“It’s easier to learn finance when you care about the right things than it is to be trained in finance and learn how to care.”**

— Lauren Grattan, Mission Driven Finance

seeing me get on a plane when my kids are sick. You’re not seeing me fall short as a wife or a daughter or a sister.”

She and her husband of 20 years are raising four children with help from her mother. Accepting that help without trying to control it, Borromeo admits, is a lesson she’s still learning. “Just because I would do things one way with the kids doesn’t mean that when someone is helping with carpooling they’re going to do it the same way,” she said. “As long as the kids get home, the kids get home.”

Grattan describes a subtle barrier: being consistently underestimated.

“I’ve been mistaken for a secretary or executive assistant more times than I could count,” she says. Her response is strategic: “I’ll let you underestimate me, and then I will run circles around you.”

She’s also clear about the privilege that has made her path possible — growing up with rising class privilege, earning a degree and gaining access to spaces that were unimaginable to her grandmother. “I make sure to (acknowledge) that I’ve had this access so that people don’t think that this is a path that’s just open and easy,” she said.

For the women she mentors, the barriers are more fundamental: discrimination, lack of networks and, as Grattan puts it, “different money traumas.” The challenge, she says, is creating opportunities for experience.

O’Loughlin faces barriers of another kind. The federal government’s treatment of tribal sovereignty and sacred site protection has “always been problematic, in every administration.” While the current political moment has heightened urgency as protections are systematically dismantled, she’s clear-eyed about history: “Those protections have always been minimal and utilize consultation as a check mark instead of a substantive, consensus-based process.”

How do these women persist? By refusing to replicate the harm.

“We don’t want to continue to oppress our own people,” O’Loughlin says. “The places we go and the work that we do is always going to be filtered through a lens of passing down intergenerational healing.”

Borromeo keeps showing up, building partnerships, opening doors. Grattan teaches technical skills while affirming that Indigenous values are what make Native women exceptional: “It is easier to learn finance when you care about the right things than it is to be trained in conventional finance and learn how to care.”

In that one line, Grattan captures the essence of Indigenous leadership — mastery rooted in purpose. Borromeo, O’Loughlin and Grattan all lead from the same place; conviction first, credentials second.

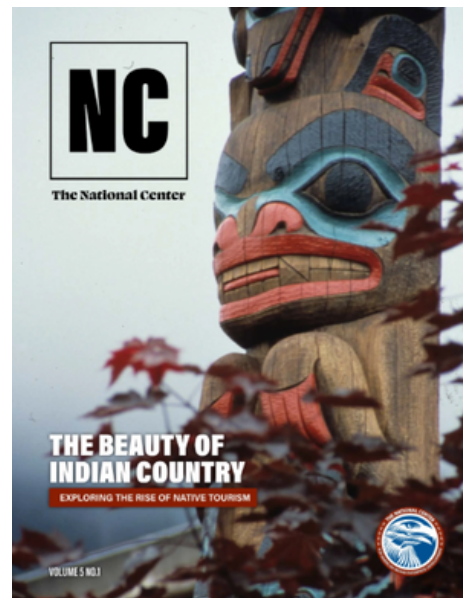
Every breath, as O’Loughlin learned from her grandmother, is an opportunity to change the world — and these women are making that truth their collective practice.

This wave of Native women’s leadership isn’t new. It’s ancient — a resurgence of matriarchal wisdom that predates colonial disruption. What’s unprecedented is the institutional power these women now wield and their resolve to use it to transform, rather than assimilate into, existing systems. They’re not climbing ladders; they’re building entirely new structures, leaving them in place for the next generation and ensuring that Indigenous communities flourish on their own terms. ■

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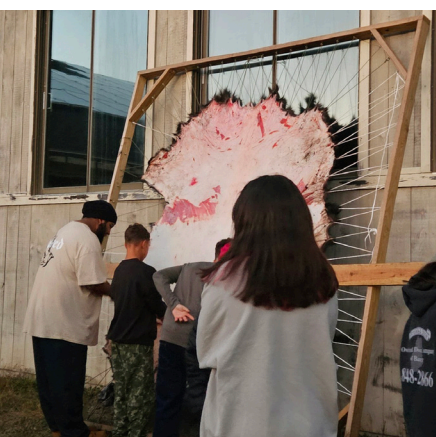
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Sky Harper was a junior in high school when he catalyzed carbonated water into simple sugars with a pair of glass jars, two needles and electricity. The experiment earned him a spot among the finalists at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair — and a full scholarship from Drexel University.

Harper (Diné) graduated from Drexel in 2024 with a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry. In 2025, he enrolled at the Medical University of South Carolina to pursue a doctoral program in molecular pharmacology and experimental therapeutics. After earning his PhD, Harper plans to attend medical school, then return to the Navajo Reservation to open a research institute focused on improving the lives of his people with targeted therapies.

“I feel like the Indigenous philosophy is if you see something that you feel is wrong, you’re going to do what you can to address it,” Harper said. “What drives what I’m doing, especially as a scientist is, yes, I do want to do this basic science, but at the same time knowing that science can extend beyond the bench. That is very powerful.”

Throughout his academic career, Harper accumulated prestigious scholarships and fellowships, co-authored peer-reviewed papers, conducted research at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Mayo Clinic. He also created Drexel’s first Native student group and launched We Are All Scientists, an organization teaching research fundamentals to Indigenous youth.

His path reflects a broader movement: Native youths are tackling challenges facing Indian Country as scientists, engineers, technologists, activists and community leaders. While their projects may be disparate, their efforts coalesce to shape public policy, advance scientific discovery, create healthier communities and advocate for meaningful change in Native communities. As they age, future generations will look to them for guidance and counsel, just as older generations guide them now.

And, like Harper, many of these leaders began their paths through programs dedicated to providing leadership and learning opportunities to Native youth.

### An Extended Family

Native youth organizations span disciplines, from those focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields, to advocacy, experiential learning and cultural reclamation. These organizations play a pivotal role in ensuring Native youth, who may lack educational opportunities and access, are engaged from an early age through adulthood.

Many programs offer mentorship, connecting young people with established Indigenous professionals leading change in their fields. The relationships forged through these programs have lasting effects on participants’ lives, providing connection, cultural grounding and a haven as they face loneliness, isolation, skepticism, and racism.

“There will always be those students who will rise to the top and will be the ones that are going to make it and go to college,” said American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) President Sarah EchoHawk, a citizen of Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma. “How do we reach those students that maybe wouldn’t have those opportunities,” she asks.

Founded in 1977, Albuquerque-based AISES focuses on advancing Native professionals in STEM-related occupations. The organization serves both K-12 and college-bound students by exposing them to STEM fields while creating networks of Indigenous peers and mentors to support students as they progress through their education and careers.

“A lot of these folks, they’re the only Native American in that science class,” said David Cournoyer (Rosebud Sioux), AISES’ vice president of communications. “They’re the only Native American majoring in mechanical engineering. They’re the only Native in their department at work.”



Sky Harper (Diné), chemistry graduate and doctoral student, aims to bring cutting-edge research back to the Navajo Nation. (Courtesy of AISES.)

**“I feel like the Indigenous philosophy is if you see something that you feel is wrong, you're going to do what you can to address it. That is very powerful.”**

— Sky Harper

Native people hold less than 1% of STEM jobs in the U.S., according to the 2023 Diversity and STEM report released by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. Sparking an interest in science and math early with hands-on learning is crucial in determining whether students will pursue a career in the STEM fields, EchoHawk said. If students aren’t engaged in STEM before middle school, they’re unlikely to engage in the years following — particularly when traditional schools fail to provide adequate STEM education.

“A lot of these kids think they don’t like science and math because it hasn’t been taught well,” Cournoyer said.

For K-12 students, AISES focuses on activities that help young people engage in STEM fields. These range from organizing affiliated clubs and providing hands-on learning, to working with educators at tribal schools.



At Summer Earth Camp, Wabanaki Youth in Science (WaYS) participants practice plant identification during a guided forest lesson (left). Keyana Pardilla (right), a WaYS alumna who now works in land wellness and sits on the program's board, credits WaYS with shaping her leadership path and grounding her in Indigenous knowledge. (Courtesy of WaYS.)

AISES' preeminent event is its annual National American Indian Science and Engineering Fair, which welcomes Native youth from across the country to compete in person or virtually. Finalists represent the organization at international science competitions.

Harper's participation in the science fair led him to the international stage and caught the attention of Drexel administrators.

Harper discovered AISES as a high school freshman at Navajo Preparatory School. He competed annually and continued engaging with the organization throughout college, leaning on it for support and camaraderie.

At Drexel, Harper struggled to find other Native students. The university offered communities for other ethnic groups, but not Indigenous students. Drawing on guidance from his AISES mentors, Harper organized Drexel's first Native student group. The group hosted celebratory events and successfully lobbied for Drexel to purchase a land acknowledgment plaque.

In the years since, Harper has come back to AISES for support, networking and mentorship. He was recently named a national student representative for the organization. While he notes he felt alone and isolated at points during his studies, he knew he could always turn to AISES for community.

"It is kind of like that extended family where everybody knows each other," he said.

## Decolonizing the Mind

Native youth leadership programs go beyond career preparation and advancement. For many, attending these programs helps shape cultural identity, underpinning their view of tribal sovereignty and setting them on a path to further decolonization.

Since childhood, Keyana Pardilla (Penobscot and Passamaquoddy) loved the ocean. It's an aspect of herself she credits to frequent visits to her grandmother in the Passamaquoddy Pleasant Point community in Maine, as well as a passion cultivated during her time attending camps hosted by Wabanaki Youth in Science (WaYS).

WaYS teaches traditional ecological knowledge and western science and offers mentor-paired internship opportunities for Native youth from the four federally recognized tribes in Maine. Pardilla was 15 when she began attending WaYS camps and said she enjoyed hiking, fishing and meeting other Native youth. Pardilla graduated from the University of Maine with a bachelor's degree in marine science and went on to work as a

researcher at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute analyzing the migratory patterns and diets of bluefin tuna, sharks and swordfish.

Pardilla eventually shifted focus from marine science and currently works as a land wellness division director for Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness, where she educates community members on nutrition, traditional foods, obesity prevention, and other topics.

"I don't think my career would be where it is today without WaYS, going to their camps and working with their internships," Pardilla, who sits on WaYS board of directors, said. "I'm a young director and it definitely taught me a lot of leadership skills that I didn't necessarily know I was learning."

Beyond her own education, Pardilla credits WaYS with filling a crucial gap in Native youth education in Maine. Current law requires schools on reservations in Maine to abide by the state's curriculum, often leaving precious little room for incorporating Indigenous history, culture and knowledge.

"It's not intuitive to decolonize your mind," Pardilla said.

Participating in WaYS programs fills in those gaps by providing opportunities for Native youth to explore and learn Indigenous teachings, like how caretaking tribal land is a major component of sovereignty, Pardilla said.

In addition to its camps, WaYS also sponsors an annual cohort of Native interns who work on STEM-related projects impacting their communities. The organization managed 22 paid internships last year, the largest cohort in WaYS history, said executive director Jennifer Galipeau.

Interns, who are paired with mentors, range from 15 to 26 years old and work 20 hours a week. One intern monitored striped bass in the Penobscot River. Another intern helped tribal community members improve their health and wellness.

"Respect is a part of our programming," Galipeau, a Penobscot citizen, said. "We make sure at our camps, we offer that respect to all living beings. I think that's a foundation that will help the future."

Teaching Native youth the importance of tribal sovereignty and their role in maintaining and improving that sovereignty is a common thread among youth programs.

For the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, teaching young people the federal government's trust responsibility to Native people and the importance of sovereignty underpins the organization's many programs, said the program's executive director, Tracy Goodluck (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Mvskoke Creek).

"Indigenous people have always been here," Goodluck said. "They've



## INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

always had their sovereignty and are able to determine their path and future for their communities. It's really important that our youth understand that. It's not easy."

Founded in 2011, the Center for Native American Youth offers fellowship programs covering issues and areas like advocacy, the foster care system, murdered and missing Indigenous women, climate justice and civic engagement.

"Access to educational opportunities is always going to be a challenge, unfortunately," Goodluck said. "All the challenges our communities are facing right now are barriers for our youth. It's our job to help lift those youth up and show them that there are opportunities out there that will help them grow, that will help them understand their place and that they can be contributing members and leaders in their communities."

### "Two-Eyed Seeing"

Native youth leadership programs encourage participants to find their place in the wider world and give them tools to teach the Western world about Native experiences and values.

Galipeau of WaYS calls combining traditional Indigenous and Western knowledge as "two-eyed seeing" and it is a foundational approach she and her staff instill in their students.

She believes Indigenous knowledge brings a more measured, holistic approach than Western practices. Instead of viewing the natural world as resources to use and extract, WaYS teaches young people how to view resources as relations, requiring respect and care. It's a deeper, more recip-

rocal approach and one Galipeau believes the world would benefit from.

"Western science is what the world runs on," Galipeau said. "More validity is given to Western science and not to the thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge people have continued to use. I would like (Indigenous knowledge) acknowledged equally and see them complement each other."

Pardilla believes science itself is grounded in centuries of Indigenous observation, testing and recordkeeping through stories and information passed from one generation to the next.

"In the way that science is based on observations and questioning and that constant nature of inquiry, that is also what Indigenous values are rooted in," she said. "It's why we have that knowledge here today and why it's survived through colonization."

While more organizations recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge, challenges remain.

Integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems risks tokenization of Native beliefs; meanwhile, the appetite to incorporate both knowledge systems fluctuates. Many federal programs incorporating Indigenous knowledge into government, science and culture were recently canceled. That's where organizations like WaYS and otehrs step in.

When one PhD scientist involved in AISES struggled to secure support for her dissertation on bridging Western and Indigenous sciences, the organization stepped in.

"We're here to support them in that and say, 'This has value,'" Echo-Hawk said. ■



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# NATIVE CREATIVE

Art is business in Indian Country — and a force for redefining Native identity. Native Creative tracks the creative economy in all its forms, from books and genre-bending music to Indigenous art exhibits, Native tourism ventures and award-winning film and television. It's where innovation, culture, and commerce meet — and where Native creators are rewriting the narrative of modern Indigenous enterprise.

## NATIVE NARRATIVES

### 10 NEW MUST-READ BOOKS

Indigenous authors are publishing some of the year's most compelling work. From Ojibwe memoirs to Cherokee speculative fiction and Lakota food sovereignty, these books — recommended by Nadine Teisberg, store manager at Birchbark Books & Native Arts in Minneapolis, and the *NC Magazine* book team — showcase the breadth and power of contemporary Native storytelling.

#### *Sugar Bush Babies: Stories of My Ojibwe Grandmother*

By Janis A. Fairbanks | University of Minnesota Press, Oct. 7, 2025

Janis A. Fairbanks, a member of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, revisits her childhood by weaving together memories from reservation life and urban relocation in this tender memoir. She also celebrates her grandmother's strength and the Ojibwe language.

#### *All the Stars in the Sky*

By Art Coulson | Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, Sept. 16, 2025

Art Coulson, of Cherokee, English and Dutch descent, reconnects ancestral starlore with contemporary longing in this beautiful lyrical picture book. Illustrated by renowned artist Winona Nelson (Ojibwe of Minnesota).

NATIVE CREATIVE



***Sisters in the Wind***

By Angeline Bouley | Henry Holt Books for Young Readers, Sept. 2, 2025

From the *New York Times* best-selling author Angeline Bouley (Ojibwe), who penned *Firekeeper's Daughter* and *Warrior Girl Unearthed*, comes *Sisters in the Wind* — a daring new mystery about a foster teen claiming her heritage on her own terms. It's a richly drawn young adult tale of sisterhood, identity and the call of the land.

***If the Dead Belong Here***

By Carson Faust | Viking, Oct. 7, 2025

Carson Faust, an enrolled member of the Edisto-Natchez-Kusso Tribe, offers a haunting story that probes the lines between memory, land and belonging. The story takes off when a 6-year-old vanishes without a trace, leaving her family shattered and struggling to navigate the darkness of grief.

***Hole in the Sky***

By Daniel H. Wilson | Doubleday, Oct. 7, 2025

Daniel H. Wilson (Cherokee Nation) explores speculative horizons in *Hole in the Sky*, a narrative that blends technology, spirit and identity. A struggling single father tries to reconnect with his teenage daughter while a NASA astrophysicist detects something massive and unknown hurtling toward Earth.

***Turtle Island: Foods and Traditions of the Indigenous Peoples of North America***

By Sean Sherman | Clarkson Potter, Nov. 11, 2025

Sean Sherman, Oglala Lakota chef and activist known as “The Sioux Chef,” extends his vision with a work that contemplates land, food sovereignty and Indigenous futurity. Sherman uncovers the stories behind the recipes that have linked the natural environments, traditions and histories of Indigenous peoples.

***We Survived the Night***

By Julian Brave NoiseCat | Knopf, Oct. 14, 2025

Julian Brave NoiseCat (Secwepemc and St’át’imc Nations) steps into fiction with this propulsive narrative that interweaves oral history with hard-hitting journalism into a profoundly personal father-son journey, offering a searing portrait of Indigenous survival, love and resurgence.

***A Steady Brightness of Being: Truths, Wisdom, and Love from Celebrated Indigenous Voices***

Edited by Sara Sinclair & Stephanie Sinclair | Penguin Canada, Aug. 26, 2025

An anthology gathering Indigenous voices across genres, *A Steady Brightness of Being* centers reflective essays and storytelling. The

editors, who are of Cree-Ojibwe and German-Jewish settler descent, bring together voices from across Turtle Island with a collection of letters from Indigenous writers, activists and thinkers — written to their ancestors, future generations and themselves.

***Legendary Frybread Drive-In: Intertribal Stories***

Edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith | Heartdrum/HarperCollins, Aug. 26, 2025

From Muscogee author Cynthia Leitich Smith comes a lively anthology of intertribal stories unfolding in a communal drive-in hub. Featuring the voices of both new and acclaimed Indigenous writers, this collection of interconnected stories serves up laughter, Native pride and the world’s best frybread.

***Bad Indians Book Club***

By Patty Krawec | Broadleaf Books, Sept. 16, 2025

Patty Krawec (Anishinaabe, Lac Seul First Nation) delivers a literary journey that mixes memoir and critique to engage with Indigenous history and decolonization. It examines works about history, science, gender and fiction — all written from the perspective of marginalized writers whose refusal to comply with dominant narratives opens up new worlds.

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# NATIVE TOURISM SPOTLIGHT

## The Last Dance: Gathering of Nations Powwow to Close After 43 Years

The Gathering of Nations, billed as North America's largest powwow, will hold its final event April 24-25, 2026, at Expo New Mexico in Albuquerque, ending a 43-year run that has drawn tens of thousands of participants and spectators from tribes across the United States and Canada.

The announcement came in August with limited explanation from Gathering of Nations Ltd., which stated only "there comes a time." The annual event, themed "The Last Dance," marks the end of a major economic platform for Native vendors, artists, and competitors.

The closure follows years of criticism from some Native Americans who said organizers capitalized on Indigenous culture, though organizers said revenue covered event expenses. The powwow moved from the University of New Mexico's Pit arena to Expo New Mexico in 2017, where uncertainty about the fairgrounds' future has complicated long-term planning as the state considers redevelopment.

The event features competitive dancing and drumming with prize money, the Miss Indian World pageant, and an Indian Trader's Market. Some tribal leaders have worked to distinguish traditional cultural practices from commercial powwows.

[gatheringofnations.com](http://gatheringofnations.com)

## AIANTA rebrands as AITA to expand Indigenous tourism market

The American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association is now the American Indigenous Tourism Association, a rebrand announced on Indigenous Peoples' Day that expands the orga-

nization's advocacy across the multi-billion dollar Indigenous hospitality sector.

The name change expands the organization's reach beyond American Indian and Alaska Native communities to include all Indigenous peoples across U.S. territories, strengthening its advocacy for an industry that generates billions in annual economic activity.

"This change allows us to unify all Indigenous cultures across the United States and its territories under a single, powerful banner, strengthening our collective voice," said CEO Sherry L. Rupert (Paiute/Washoe).

The 27-year-old organization provides technical assistance, training and capacity building to Native Nations developing tourism enterprises. Indigenous-owned hospitality businesses contribute \$11.6 billion in annual sales to the U.S. tourism sector, according to association data produced with SMS Research.

[americanindigenoustourism.org](http://americanindigenoustourism.org)

## Blackfeet Entrepreneur Brings Indigenous Voice to Glacier's Gateway

When visitors traverse the spectacular trails bordering Glacier National Park, few realize they're crossing the ancestral homelands of the Blackfeet Nation — a disconnect Christen Meeko Falcon is determined to bridge.

Her company, Backpacker's Ferry, won the Pow Wow Pitch Tourism Semi-Finals in September, earning \$1,000 and advancing to compete for the \$25,000 grand prize against Indigenous entrepreneurs from across Turtle Island. Though she didn't claim the top prize at October's finale, Falcon's vision resonated powerfully: shuttle services that don't just transport tourists, but transform them into witnesses of Blackfeet culture and stewardship.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**117,582**

estimated number of jobs created by Native tourism

**80%**

international visitors to the U.S. who say they're interested in authentic cultural experiences

**\$67B**

Indigenous tourism's expected contribution to the global economy by 2034

Sources: AITA, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, George Washington University

"The Blackfeet presence is low within Glacier National Park," Falcon explained, noting how her ecotourism venture funnels revenue directly into tribal economies while creating jobs that allow community members to share their perspectives.

In a region where Indigenous voices often echo unheard despite millennium-deep roots, Backpacker's Ferry charts a different route — one where transportation becomes translation, and every journey honors the people who've called these mountains home since time immemorial.

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# NATIVE ART & ENTERPRISE

## Alaska Native Artists Find Digital Home in Statewide Directory

A new online platform is mapping Alaska's Indigenous creative landscape like never before.

The Alaska Native Arts Directory debuted in October 2025 during the Alaska Federation of Natives convention in Anchorage, featuring approximately 200 artists working across multiple disciplines. The Anchorage-based Alaska Native Arts Foundation operates the free service and hopes to grow its roster beyond 1,000 artists within a year, according to Alaska Public Media.

What sets this directory apart: its breadth. While Alaska has regional artist databases and Indigenous-focused marketplaces like Collective49, this statewide resource covers everyone from carvers and painters to poets and performers, embracing both ancestral practices and modern forms.

"We're celebrating every dimension of Alaska Native creativity," foundation chair Gail Schubert told APM — visual arts, literature, performance, design and traditional crafts included.

The project signals renewal for the foundation itself. After launching in 2002 and running a gallery and online store, the organization collapsed in 2016 when state money vanished. The reboot draws support from the Rasmuson Foundation, federal small business programs, Sen. Lisa Murkowski's office and Anchorage's municipal government. Next up: a 2026 economic summit focused on Indigenous arts.

[alaskanativeartsdirectory.org](http://alaskanativeartsdirectory.org)

## Former NEH Chair Shelly Lowe Takes Helm at IAIA

Dr. Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo) took over as president of the



Institute of American Indian Arts in August, bringing federal leadership experience to Santa Fe's Indigenous arts university. Lowe, the first Native American to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities, left that post in March at President Trump's direction after managing



Fever Visions I by Cressandra Thibodeaux (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa), a surreal landscape study featured in the Detroit Institute of Arts' "Contemporary Anishinaabe Art: A Continuation." (Courtesy photo)

a \$207 million budget. She also joined the advisory council for the MacArthur Foundation's Native self-determination program over the summer. She succeeded Dr. Robert Martin (Cherokee Nation), who retired in July. Lowe holds a PhD from the University of Arizona and brings two decades of senior administrative experience from Harvard, Yale and elsewhere.

## Exhibits & Markets

**The Detroit Institute of Arts** mounted its first major Native American exhibition in three decades this fall with "Contemporary Anishinaabe Art: A Continuation", featuring over 90 works by 60-plus Anishinaabe artists through April 5, 2026. Curated by Dr. Denene De Quintal, the show spans punk rock photography, runway fashion, traditional basketry and film — all with gallery labels in Anishinaabemowin. Visitors with tribal-issued identification receive free admission, courtesy of Native-owned Rush Group of Companies. The exhibition challenges assumptions about what Indigenous art can be.

[dia.org](http://dia.org)

An Indigenous Present spans a century of contemporary Indigenous art at **Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art** through March 8, 2026.

Co-organized by artist Jeffrey Gibson and curator Jenelle Porter, the exhibition features 15 artists using abstraction to convey personal narratives and cultural traditions. New site-specific commissions by Raven Chacon, Caroline Monnet and Anna Tsouhlarakis anchor the show, which emerged from Gibson and Porter's 2023 publication. Programming includes Robert Peters' installation in the Art Lab and Sky Hopinka's film series. The exhibition travels to Nashville's Frist Art Museum and Seattle's Frye Art Museum in 2026.

[icaboston.org](http://icaboston.org)

The **Reservation Economic Summit (RES)**, hosted by The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, merges its Native Art Market with Fashion Row for the first time when it returns to Las Vegas March 23-26, 2026. Indigenous designers and fashion creatives will showcase alongside traditional artists at Indian Country's largest economic summit, expanding market reach on an international stage. The combined marketplace runs daily on the Promenade level and outside the Octavius Ballroom, with hours extending from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. throughout the four-day summit. The integration elevates cultural innovation while providing Native American artists unprecedented visibility.

[res.ncaied.org](http://res.ncaied.org)

# NATIVE FILM & TV



Members of Cherokee Film celebrate with newly won Heartland Regional Emmys, part of OsियोTV's continued success as the Cherokee Nation-produced series climbs to 33 awards since its 2015 debut. (Courtesy photo)

## 33 Emmys and counting: OsियोTV dominates again

Cherokee Nation's *Osियो, Voices of the Cherokee People* claimed four more Heartland Regional Emmy Awards in 2025, bringing the docuseries' total to 33 wins since its 2015 launch.

The victories underscore a simple truth: Cherokees tell Cherokee stories best. "Cherokee People have important stories to tell," said Jen Loren, executive producer and host. "This recognition provides further evidence that no one can tell our stories as well as we can."

OsियोTV earned 11 nominations this year across categories including history, culture and diversity. Awards honored stories from the show's ninth and 10th seasons and its "Let's Talk Cherokee" language segment.

Loren, a Cherokee Nation citizen and Emmy-winning journalist, directs and hosts the series, which has featured hundreds of Cherokee citizens. The show airs globally, showcasing traditional culture alongside contemporary Cherokee life.

Cherokee Film Productions operates as part of Cherokee Film, which includes studios, a film commission and institute. All four branches work toward the same goals: narrative sovereignty and economic development on Cherokee Nation land. The operation is owned by Cherokee Nation Businesses, with 100% of profits supporting tribal citizens.

## Vision Maker Media expands Native youth filmmaking program

After losing its primary federal funder with the closure of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Vision Maker Media is doubling down on Native storytelling by expanding its Native Youth Media Project.

The initiative, launched in 2020, trains Native youth in filmmaking while connecting them with experienced Indigenous media professionals. Designed to be self-sustaining, the program puts storytelling tools directly in Native hands, allowing tribal communities to establish and run their own filmmaking programs.

The approach is already working. Kanesia McGlashan-Price, an Unangax tribal member with no film experience, joined in 2021 and created *Letter to Ilguning*. She later produced *Tides of Tradition*, examining how climate change threatens traditional Unangax food sources. The film aired nationally on GBH's streaming platform.

"This teaches filmmaking craft to Native storytellers and ... allows career media professionals to pass on their expertise," says Vision Maker Media President and CEO Francene Blythe-Lewis. "The ultimate goal is for tribal communities to establish and sustain their own training programs."

Tribal leaders and community members interested in establishing local programs can visit [visionmakermedia.org](http://visionmakermedia.org).

## Indigenous On Screen

Native creators are commanding attention with stories for the big and small screen that center Indigenous voices, histories and futures. From Tulsa noir to Navajo crime drama, this year's standout productions prove Native creatives are reshaping on their own terms.



### ***The Lowdown — Season 1***

**Creator/Director/Writer:** Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Muscogee Nation)  
**Studio:** FX/Hulu  
**Release:** Sept. 23, 2025

Sterlin Harjo, co-creator of *Reservation Dogs*, shifts from comedy to noir in this Tulsa-set crime drama. Ethan Hawke stars as a bookstore owner pulled into corruption in a city where Native and Black histories collide. The cast includes Kaniehtiio Horn, the late Graham Greene and Cody Lightning.

### ***Dark Winds — Season 4***

**Creator/Director:** Graham Roland (Chickasaw Nation)  
**Studio:** AMC  
**Release:** 2026

The acclaimed series returns for a fourth season following Navajo tribal police officers Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. Zahn McClarnon (Hunkpapa Lakota) anchors the show, which balances suspense with cultural nuance.

### ***The American Southwest***

**Director:** Ben Masters  
**Producer:** Len Necefer (Diné), Natives Outdoors  
**Release:** Sept. 5, 2025

This environmental documentary examines Four Corners ecosystems through Indigenous eyes. Producer Len Necefer spotlights Diné knowledge and Native stewardship of water, wildlife and sacred lands.



# ALT-NATIVE MUSIC



Stella Standingbear (left) and Keith Secola (right) are reshaping the landscape of contemporary music by Natives. (Courtesy photos)

## “NDN Kars” Returns in *Dark Winds* Era

Bois Forte Band musician Keith Secola is seeing a surge of attention around his landmark rock song “NDN Kars” more than 30 years after he first wrote it. A seven-time Native American Music Award winner, Secola recently joined Ishkōdé Records — the label’s first signing outside Canada — as “NDN Kars” re-entered the culture through AMC’s *Dark Winds*. He also released a new “NDN Kars (Dark Winds Version)” on April 25, 2025, adding flute tones and a colder, atmospheric feel while keeping the original’s spiritual chassis intact. Secola oversaw the new production with Rick Clarke, mixer Adam Krinsky and mastering engineer Jim Fox.

The original’s lurching beat and screeching, almost bag-pipe-bright guitar intro remain unmistakable. “NDN Kars” isn’t nostalgia — it’s Indigenous continuity in fourth gear.

[secola.com](http://secola.com)

## Stella Standingbear steps into national spotlight with new EP

Oglala Lakota rapper Stella Standingbear is pushing into a wider national lane with the release of her new EP *Rap Star* this November — fresh off winning Best Rap Recording at the Native American Music Awards in July for her track “Blessings.” Standingbear has now won two Native American Music Awards, and she became the first Lakota artist to win two historic awards at the 2023 Indigenous Hip-Hop Awards — cementing her status as a leading new voice.

In mid-November, she performed at halftime for the Phoenix Suns’ ORIGINATIV Night — a rare NBA showcase slot for a rising Indigenous musician. The EP’s first single, “Mmhmm,” also drew national attention from AllHipHop.com, which framed it as a declaration track from an Indigenous woman claiming space on her own terms.

Standingbear grew up in Salt Lake City before returning home to Pine Ridge, where she now records and mentors at the Oglala Lakota Artspace.

## Four Native Records Defining 2025

Native musicians across the U.S. and Canada are releasing some of the most adventurous new music this year — indie folk, country-adjacent storytelling, rock realists and punk provocateurs. These records aren’t trying to meet industry expectations about what Native music is supposed to sound like. Native artists are expanding the genres themselves — defining new sounds entirely.



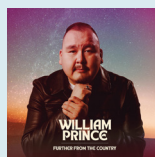
### Gumshoe, Samantha Crain (Kill Rock Stars)

Choctaw singer-songwriter Samantha Crain widens her sonic vocabulary on *Gumshoe*, blending folk instincts with indie rock edges and — in a rare gear shift for her — horns. Crain still works in micro-emotional precision, but songs like “B-attitudes” show how sharp that interior scrutiny can get. This is not a reinvention so much as a deepening: a veteran songwriter allowing herself new colors without abandoning her core quiet power.



### Cruel Joke, Ken Pomeroy (Rounder Records)

Cherokee singer-songwriter Ken Pomeroy’s *Cruel Joke* is a stark, quietly stunning record. Her unreleased songs “Pareidolia” and “Cicadas” lit up *Reservation Dogs* in 2023, accelerating her rise. Now signed to Rounder Records, Pomeroy doubles down on subtle, slow-unfolding writing. The songs from *Rez Dogs* appear on *Cruel Joke*, and “Coyotes,” with Tulsa folk-rocker John Moreland, is a standout.



### Further From the Country, William Prince (Six Shooter Records)

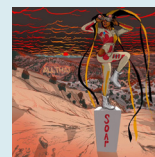
Peguis First Nation songwriter William Prince — a two-time Juno winner and direct descendant of Chief Peguis — released his fifth album in late October 2025. *Further From the Country* leans into melancholy with uncommon emotional clarity. Prince writes like a man sorting the distance between past and future in real time — using a steady baritone, not volume, for impact.



### PoSt American, Dead Pioneers (Hassle Records)

Led by artist and vocalist Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute), Dead Pioneers’ second album hits capitalism, colonialism and white supremacy with punk force, but balances its indictment with sharp humor and meticulous craft. This isn’t just catharsis; it’s informed resistance — rewiring the narrative, not just shaking fists.

One more note: Not an LP — but another Native artist belongs in this moment, too:



### TwoLips (Singles)

Kianah “TwoLips” LongChase — enrolled Native Village of Eklutna, raised in northern New Mexico, now L.A.-based — isn’t dropping LPs in 2025. She’s flooding the zone with singles. Eight this year alone, including the irrepressible “All That” and the twitchy, zeitgeist-tuned “Chaos.” Her electro-funk / R&B / punk hybrid delivers hooks and confrontation at the same time — music built for dancing, and for calling things out when they’re wrong.

# Q&A

## Jason Giles on the Legacy of Ernie Stevens Jr. and the Road Ahead for Tribal Gaming

At the National Congress of American Indians' annual conference in November, the absence of Ernest L. "Ernie" Stevens Jr. was unmistakable. Stevens, who led the Indian Gaming Association (IGA) for more than 20 years and was also a longtime board member of The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, became one of the most influential advocates for tribal sovereignty and economic self-determination.

Jason Giles, the executive director of IGA and a 17-year veteran of the organization, spoke with *NC Magazine* about Stevens' impact, the state of the tribal gaming industry and the challenges and opportunities ahead. Giles has served as both deputy director and general counsel for IGA and works closely with tribal leaders, policymakers and federal agencies on gaming and economic policy. *This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

**Without Chairman Stevens at NCAI this year, what has the atmosphere been like?**

**Giles:** He was always a major presence at this conference. In more than 30 years as a tribal representative and organizational leader, he almost never missed an NCAI annual meeting. People felt his absence, and the honoring ceremony this morning was emotional for many.

**What do you see as his most important contribution to Indian gaming?**

**Giles:** He kept Indian Country united. When he took office, tribes faced pushback from commercial casinos, states and sometimes from each other. His message was that tribal sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency depend on unity. Even a small rural casino with 50 slot machines is an exercise of sovereign authority and a source of jobs. That message guided him for 25 years and helped tribes overcome significant opposition.

**He often emphasized education — teaching the country about tribal history and sovereignty. How central was that to his work?**

**Giles:** It was essential. Most Americans never learn about tribal nations, treaty rights or how tribes came to be where they are. Ernie believed education, not anger, changed minds. Every new member of Congress needed to understand who tribal citizens are and why treaties remain the law of the land. He loved telling the story of the Oneida Nation helping George Washington during the Revolutionary War and then being removed from their homelands. He thought a strong country should acknowledge that history and honor its commitments.

**He held the chairman's role for nearly a quarter century. What gave him that kind of staying power?**

**Giles:** His energy. If a tribe needed help, he was on a plane the next day. People saw him at conferences, but they also saw him at hospital openings, fire station dedications and basketball tournaments. He met people where they lived, even when he expected hard conversations. He showed up, listened and stayed engaged.

**His death came during major federal workforce cuts. What does this transition period look like for the industry?**

**Giles:** Tribal gaming itself won't miss a beat. It's a nearly \$50 billion sector with established infrastructure and national reach. But the broader policy environment has changed. Federal workforce reductions eliminated positions across Interior, Justice and other agencies that tribes rely on. Many longtime Native employees lost their jobs. Tribes are unified in pushing back and reminding federal officials that treaty and trust obligations remain intact. Chairman Dave Bean now has to navigate that environment.



**What strengths does Chairman Bean bring to the role?**

**Giles:** He's from the Puyallup Tribe, part of a long tradition of Washington State leaders who defended treaty rights in court and in Congress. Those fights required significant personal and financial sacrifice. Chairman Bean knows those histories firsthand, and he's not afraid to stand up to state or federal authorities when sovereignty is at stake.

**What is your outlook for tribal gaming in 2026?**

**Giles:** The outlook is uncertain. We're seeing a downturn in consumer spending as 2025 closes. When big-box retailers report weaker numbers and people cut back on entertainment, that affects casinos. Construction has slowed because of higher interest rates, higher material costs and labor shortages. This doesn't necessarily mean losses for tribes, but it complicates long-term planning.

**Any final thoughts on Chairman Stevens' legacy?**

**Giles:** His legacy is unity. He kept tribes working together through major political and economic changes. If anyone can carry that forward, Chairman Bean will. The core message remains unchanged: treaties are sacred, they define tribal nations' place in this country and they will guide future generations. ■



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