



Rebuilding
Communities
Through Indian
Self-Reliance

MEDIA RELEASE

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OKLAHOMA INDIAN GAMING MESSAGE FOCUSES ON INDIAN SOVEREIGNTY

TULSA, OK, August 9, 2009 - NIGA Chairman Ernie Stevens Jr. addressed attendees of the Oklahoma Indian Gaming Conference in downtown Tulsa about the importance of maintaining a presence in Washington, D.C.

Stevens said Oklahoma is undoubtedly Indian Country, as leaders and constituents alike continue to do a great job maintaining a strong presence Washington, D.C. In particular, he pointed to the efforts of David Qualls, Oklahoma Indian Gaming Association Chairman.

“This is Indian Country. Every place you go in Tulsa and around Oklahoma, you see Indian people,” Stevens said. “This is the most Indians I’ve seen in my life.”

The importance of solidarity and finding strength in numbers for the collective good of the whole has not been lost on Stevens, whose father led Indian Country to retain tribal sovereignty a generation earlier. Ernest Stevens Sr. did two combat tours in Korea before returning home to help Indians on the reservation and in Washington, D.C.

“Dad had a way of fighting on behalf of sovereignty, like so many of our elders do,” Stevens said. “Never give up, never rest, never get tired (was the advice).”

“I think that’s where we’re at right now,” he said.

Stevens recounted the early beginnings of Indian gaming and the skepticism Indian Country faced in implementation of a new form of economic development. Today, Indian gaming has become more than a boon for tribes across the country, especially since many states now depend on the gaming revenues to weather the rough economic climate.

“Whether it’s a flourishing economy or a tough economy, we’ve been through this with our lives, our family and our businesses,” Stevens said.

His comments on the American Indian tenacity for survival were not limited to gaming, but also to simple daily existence for many native families that most Americans were not familiar with. While America struggles, I say welcome to our world, he said.

“When rich folks lose a few dollars, they panic. Indian Country doesn’t panic, we just work harder,” Stevens said. “I think people have to understand when Indian Country loses, our communities lose.

“It’s not about being rich, it’s about being a community,” he added.

Part of the self-sufficiency afforded to Indian communities from gaming is the supplemental funding afforded to students for education. With five kids, Stevens said his children know firsthand the importance of college degrees.

“My oldest son is a tribal councilman and just finished with his MBA,” Stevens said. “I have three daughters in college, one in grad school and two undergrads. Ernest III has a media degree.

“If I could promote anything, I say education and training,” he concluded.

Jason Giles, NIGA general counsel and deputy director, followed Stevens with a legislative update on major items facing Indian Country in Washington, D.C. being tackled by NIGA, NCAI and supporters of Indian sovereignty.

The biggest concern is the Employee Free Choice Act in which tribes have been excluded in the language of the legislation.

“We are building support in the Congress for the fair treatment of Tribes under this Nation’s labor laws,” Giles said. “Federal, state and local governments are exempted because of their sovereign status and Tribes deserve the same respect.”

The second issue is the *Carcieri v. Salazar* decision in the Supreme Court, which Giles said can only be repaired legislatively. Fighting this case with Congressional legislation is the major battle Indian Country must undertake immediately, Giles said. Having a role in the legislative process to fix language in any amendments is paramount, he added.

“It’s literally adding two words, or removing a single word to the statute, that’s how we can legislatively address this issue is,” Giles said. “All land to trust decisions, especially within the tribe’s reservation borders, those decisions should be automatic.

“It should be a quick and easy process for a tribe to regain their traditional homelands, especially when that land was improperly taken in violation of our treaties,” he said.

Throughout the conference, the message for attendees and Indian Country was clear: working together and communication are the keys to success in maintaining Indian sovereignty.

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About the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA)

The National Indian Gaming Association is a nonprofit trade association comprised of 184 American Indian Nations and other nonvoting associate member. The mission of NIGA is to advance the lives of Indian people - economically, socially and politically. NIGA operates as a clearinghouse and educational legislative and public policy resources for tribes, policymakers and the public on Indian gaming issues and tribal community development. For more information, visit www.indiangaming.org.