



Rebuilding  
Communities  
Through Indian  
Self-Reliance

# Media Release

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **CELEBRATING MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY Statement by Ernie Stevens, Jr., Chairman**

**WASHINGTON, D.C. – January 17, 2011** – Throughout America on this day, the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) and the rest of the country celebrate the life and times of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the most iconic leader on the fabric of American history. Indian Country, like the rest of the nation, is indebted to Dr. King's non-violent action in the name of civil rights and equality for all Americans. He stood up against racism and marched preaching the tenets of non-violence learned from Mahatma Ghandi to spread his message of solidarity and unity during some of the darkest times of American history. Nelson Mandela was also influenced to use MLK's insightful and effective non-violent resistance process in his fight against apartheid in South Africa. The history of this period in American is full of dynamic political reactions to the issues of that period. The Civil Rights movement was ushered in by Dr. King and his influence crossed many barriers and communities carrying with it his message of peaceful non-violent resistance to oppression. Armed with the appropriate legal and historic education and determination, speaking truthfully and with purpose to bring about change in a peaceful but determined way was the essence of Dr. King's character.

Indian leaders knew the value of peace but were realistic in its application. The first meetings with Europeans were generally welcome encounters and peaceful exchanges. Indian tribes shared more than food and knowledge. The Indians also traded survival technologies as well as showing different institutions of self-governance. The first colonists had little experience with the freedoms they observed among the Indians they met. By the time of the American Revolution, colonial leadership recognized the sophistication of Native political bodies such as the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy and the effective governing institutions of the Five Civilized Tribes. The democratic institutions of American Indians were to form the basis for the democratic principles by which America relies on to this day. In the years that followed, the principles upon which the U. S. Constitution were interpreted to rationalize such practices as slavery, denial of the rights of women and breach of Treaties by Congress and the Supreme Court. Thus, the balance of good intentions versus self-interests tipped against the most economically and educationally disadvantaged populations. During Dr. King's era, he was able

to reveal the sad history of the U. S., and through enlightenment, to bring about peaceful change. Dr. King's dignified approach was deeply appreciated among Native people. It was truthful, respectful and offered hope to a troubled nation.

Like most African-Americans of his time, Dr. King attended segregated schools in his home state of Georgia and graduated high school at the age of 15. He followed the footsteps of his father and grandfather, attending Morehouse College in 1948 before moving onto Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania for three years of theological study before he received his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1951. Dr. King continued his education and attended Boston University, where he received his doctorate in 1955. His disciplined self-improvement was a subtle value he imparted to his community and to the general American population. His strength was inspirational and respected across cultural divides in a way that has grown over the years since he was assassinated. For his steadfast focus on the rights of all people, Dr. King earned the respect of Indian people, too.

Indian Country faced segregation, too, early on in the history of America but, unlike the African slaves, remained in their tribal communities. As Treaties were broken, tribes were forcibly relocated to remote and often worthless reservations, which reduced them to poverty and dependence on the United States while at the same time subjected to the racism of settlers moved into their lands. Indian children were subjected to being separated from their families and communities during critical years of development. These cruel policies of the U. S. had devastating effects on Indian people yet we carried on. Endurance is a survival characteristic of Indian people and so is adaptability. In time, Indian Country adapted to the ways of America and the lifestyles and values but not from fear or ignorance. Indian people stubbornly held on to the cultural heritage, religions and languages of their ancestors. In this, Indian Country shared with Dr. King the belief that America, despite its history, was a great country in which the deprivations of poor black people, and others, was morally unjustifiable. His speaking out for change was Dr. King's gift to American History at a time when it was badly needed. That message resonated with Indian people on many levels and inspired them to work harder.

Dr. King was a strong advocate for civil rights and in Dec. 1955 he led the first great non-violent demonstration of his time – the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, which lasted for 382 days. The U.S. Supreme Court declared the bus segregation laws of Montgomery unconstitutional on Dec. 21, 1956 and from that day forward, Blacks and whites rode the buses as equals. The civil rights movement was just getting started, however. From 1957 to 1968, Dr. King traveled more than six million miles and spoke over 2,500 times. He was also subjected to the same indignities of those local communities being arrested many times, threatened by local bigots and police. It was later learned that Dr. King had been under the scrutiny of the F. B. I. as were the leaders of other groups, including Indian Activist organizations.

The Indian leaders from history evoke pride for Indian Country to this day, for their heroic resistance to colonialism in their fight for the freedom to live as their ancestors. Sitting Bull, Narbona, Chief Joseph and Geronimo – to name a few were some the Indian leaders who fought valiantly to protect their people. Indian Country owes a debt of gratitude to contemporary outstanding tribal leaders who have passed on as well. Recent Indian leaders like Wilma Mankiller, John Keiffer, Phillip Deer and Tim Wapato continued the work of their ancestors in protecting their lands, rights and heritage. Indian Country remains resilient because we continue to produce tribal leaders with vision devoted to protecting Indian sovereignty today. Leaders like Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Billy Frank, Lynn Valbuena Clinton Pattea, Susan Masten and Stanley Jones are some of the many who guide and lead the way for survival in this generation. Our early tribal leaders were advocates and protectors of Tribal rights, civil rights and equality. Like the rest of America, they wanted what other Americans wanted; education, healthcare and the opportunity to contribute to their societies. They also were devoted to the learning and values of their heritages, languages and customs, which are the basis of identity, their communities and history. This devotion is expressed in respect for ancient ceremonies and the communal identity they feel.

In August 1963, Dr. King marched on Washington, D.C. with 250,000 people and delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, which still resonates to this day with a vision of equality and civil rights for all Americans. School children today read about Dr. King’s famous speech in Washington, D.C. that day and mark it as the pinnacle of his achievements. In 1963, Dr. King was named “Man of the Year” by Time. A year later in 1964, he became the youngest man to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Ever committed to civil rights, Dr. King donated the prize money of \$54,123 to the cause. He acted for the rights of others and never sought the limelight for himself.

Dr. King was a humble man fully devoted to the goal of change and overcoming the effects of governmental oppression and the ignorance that allows it. Humility is deeply revered by Indian people because it shows commitment to the people, even at the sacrifice of self.

Over 500 years after the first Europeans came to North America, Indians are devoted to the education of our young people and activists, preparing them to continue the fight for their communities and Tribal Sovereignty. Indian Country continues to express its activism across the county to protect the historic and unique ways of life of their ancestors. It is not surprising that a man who had endured great hardship with grace and power was, and is, also revered in Indian Country. Martin Luther King was that man.

During his years of advocacy, Dr. King was arrested over 20 times and assaulted at least four times. In recognition of his character and achievements, he was awarded five honorary degrees. He wrote five books extolling the virtues of peace and non-violence. Tragically, On April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee at the age of 39. Indian Country, with the rest of America, mourned this tragic event.

Indian Country is successfully addressing the challenges of over five centuries of European colonialism. We have retained our languages and cultures while becoming educated in a modern world and hold fast to our inalienable rights and responsibilities as America's first people. Our sovereign governments are committed to the cause of advancing our people in the spirit of our great forefathers. Like Dr. King, our many great tribal leaders were and are true statesmen and women, intelligent, refined, educated and experienced, working for the goal of a better tomorrow. Dr. King's legacy lives on as an inspiration on our long journey into the future.

The movement never died and on this day we honor one of our greatest brothers-in-arms, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Freedom isn't free and to this day our brave male and female warriors take their responsibility of defending the ideals of freedom with other citizens with the same passion and determination as that promoted by the legacy of Dr. King.

Indians have never hesitated to support America. Neither did Dr. Martin Luther King.

The Dream is still alive.

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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](http://www.indiangaming.org).