



## Celebrating Growth and Development in Indian Country

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

Labor Day is a time that traditionally marks the end of summer and start of school. But it is much more than that – it is a celebration of employment and independence. Through the fruits of our labor, we are able to enjoy the amenities of life: happiness, prosperity and continued employment to plant the seeds for tomorrow’s generation. Now more than ever, in these times of economic uncertainty, job creation is of the utmost of importance and we are proud that Indian Country continues to make the resurgence of employment a priority.

As NIGA celebrates the growth and development of Indian Country, we continue to rebuild our communities through job creation and enterprise development. The spirit of empowerment continues to be strong, as we work to turn the table and build our communities on the sound foundation of employment and economic growth.

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Nowhere in this nation is job creation more important than in Indian Country, where tribal communities have suffered unemployment rates far higher than mainstream society for too many generations. Indian gaming is making a difference in the lives of many, sometimes even transforming entire communities with the spirit of self-determination. The \$26 billion a year industry of Indian gaming is also the most regulated industry in America and every dollar is strictly monitored in accordance with federal, state and tribal policies.

Indian gaming is truly the Native American success story. For more than three decades, Indian gaming has proven to be the most successful tool in a century to stimulate tribal economic development and job creation. Many tribes have these revenues to put a new face on their communities. Indian tribes have dedicated them to improve basic health, education, and public safety services on Indian lands. We have used gaming dollars to improve tribal infrastructure, including the construction of roads, hospitals, schools, police buildings, water projects, and many others. Tribes have been able to diversify their economies beyond gaming. Because of capital provided by gaming, tribes have invested in renewable energy projects, retail operations, manufacturing and other entrepreneurial ventures.

For many tribes, Indian gaming is first and foremost about jobs. Indian gaming is a proven job creator, establishing and fostering over 600,000 direct and indirect American jobs in 2010. These American jobs go to both Indian and non-Indian alike. Without question, we are putting people to work. Indian gaming has provided many individual tribal members with their first opportunity to work, or in some cases their first opportunity at a quality job. Just as importantly Indian gaming is bringing entire families back to Indian Country. While reservation communities are building their way to more productive and viable communities, we still have a long way to go.

It is the employees that make Indian gaming so successful and this fact is not lost on the industry. Take the Quapaw Tribe, for instance, which operates the Downstream Casino Resort, located in the northeast corner of Oklahoma in the town of Quapaw. Many employees of the Downstream Casino live in neighboring town Joplin, Missouri, which was devastated by a EF5 tornado on May 22, 2011. The Quapaw Tribe stepped up to the plate and assisted people with financial assistance and even housed employees in the hotel after the tornado destroyed their homes.

The Quapaw Tribe and Casino was innovative in their approach to helping victims, even establishing home-and-ride sharing program for employees trying to recover from the

tornado. The tribe wasn't just reaching out to employees. The casino was also the rally point for donated clothes, food and supplies for victims of the tornado. Humanitarian efforts like this have propelled Indian gaming employment forward with an honest and dependable workforce committed to much more than themselves. Indian Country, as always, continues to think in terms of community and what is best for all people.

I commend the Quapaw Tribe for not only this outstanding dedication to the health, safety and livelihood of their communities, but for their motivation to open this casino in these tough economic times.

Labor Day is more than just a day off from work. It is also a time of reflection on the hard work and effort of those who came before us to set the foundation upon which we now build. Work was not the regulated process it is today, whereby employees enjoy benefits and rights designed for their protection. The first Monday of September did not become a national holiday until Sept. 5, 1882, when Boston celebrated the day off from work after the deaths of workers in the Pullman Strike. Today, we work in the most regulated industry in the United States and employee safety and success is a priority for Indian gaming. It is through the diligence and loyalty of our employees that we are as successful as we are today. NIGA salutes you at the frontlines, the 600,000 direct and indirect employees of the Indian gaming industry.

Of course, there is still much work to be done as we continue to make progress on behalf of Indian Country for our collective future. We will maintain the building effort of our employees, while striving to keep creating new jobs a priority. So this year, if you are blessed with employment and have the fortune to take the day off from work, take a moment to think about how things came to be and what future lies ahead. Enjoy the day of rest and return to work with renewed vigor to improve the lives of you, your family, and your community. Let us celebrate and continue moving forward into the realization of self-determination. ♣

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