



Heritage is a Path to Future Success

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More than 40 years ago, I began a career in public service to my Tribe. My journey started with our great leader, Chief Calvin McGhee, asking me for some assistance. Over four decades, my work for our Tribe has been, at turns, powerfully exciting, grueling, heartbreaking, and filled with happiness. It has always been rewarding.

I believe that one of the most important questions that a leader can ask is, “when is the right time for the next generation take the reins?” I have asked myself this question and the answer is, “now is the time.”

Indian Country is blessed with great leaders who work tirelessly to make our world a better place and take care of people. But, I think that developing future leaders is also an important component of our jobs. It is heartening to me to see that the next generation of our Tribal leaders are not only highly competent, but they are also committed and courageous.

I think most leaders, as they leave their positions, hope that they have made a difference, and they hope that the future will continue to be bright and full of promise. As I leave my position, my hopes rest in the next generation, and I am certain the Poarch Band of Creek Indians is in very good hands.

A Call to Service. For as far back as I can remember, Calvin McGhee, our first official Chief, had always called me “son”. It always felt natural because his son and I were about the same age. But one day, just after I had gotten out of the (military) service, my parents called me and said, “Calvin wants to see you.” Of course I went, and the first thing he said was, “Son, I need your help.” And that was the beginning of my life working for our Tribe.

Fighting for Recognition. We always identified ourselves as Indians. But I don’t think any of us knew how much it would take for us to get federal recognition. No one worked harder or sacrificed more than Calvin McGhee. He led by example. Although, other people were also very important to the process. It was a privilege for me to have been part of that collective effort, and I deeply love the people I worked with to make it possible. I regret that Calvin did not live to see us win that battle, but I know he would be so proud of what we have been able to achieve in the years since.

Keeping the Faith. Winning federal recognition in 1984 gave us the opportunity to grow and improve the lives of our Tribal Members. But I am always mindful that as much as change can be good, it is important to remember what really matters and hold on to our values as a community.

The Episcopal Church has been a constant source of strength for us and a real resource when we needed it most. Dr. and Mrs. Macy, Episcopal missionaries who came to our community in the 30’s, gave us medical care and a chance to have a school right here at home. I remember Chief McGhee saying that we have to educate our people and make sure there is opportunity for our young students to go to college.

Today, I still see how the Macy’s work contributed to our community’s values. As a Tribe, we support education throughout the State and provide scholarships to our Tribal Members. I have spent a lot of my career working on Indian healthcare both at home and nationally and was thrilled to dedicate a new Tribal health center earlier this year. And, I still go to the little Episcopal church that the Macy’s helped start.

Maintaining Community. When we really started to grow, a Tribal Member came up to me one day and said, “Buford, we have to be careful that we don’t grow too big for our pants.” He was so right. One of the biggest and most important jobs a leader has is to manage individual expectations within a community that is expanding and growing like ours.

The strength of our community has always been sharing the good and the bad. As a child, when someone was seriously ill, I remember everybody would pitch in to help... whether it was sitting by a bedside, watching the children, bringing food, or tending to the fields. We still do that here. We have faith in God and each other.

I have always said that we should never get to the point that we see the success of the Tribe and think the Tribe should take care of us. We need to continue to pass on our values and our work ethic and make sure our young people understand who this Tribe is and why we are here. They must realize that for this Tribe to be successful, they have to be part of it.

The Next Chapter. When I look around the table during our Tribal Council meetings, I see a young generation ready to take on the responsibility of leadership. They are educated and committed to our community’s future. And like our generation, they know the work will be difficult, as it has been historically for us, but it will be rewarding.

In the last few weeks, I have woken up in the middle of the night thinking about the future. But I am not worried, I am excited about what is ahead. Our community now extends over six counties in two states. We are a major economic engine in a part of the country that really needs the jobs.