



Bay Mills Indian Community

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich,
Storyville Social, as part of the
Michigan Main Street Story
Series

Bay Mills Indian Community is a federally recognized tribe located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. We have been around since time immemorial and are part of the original six bands of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians that reside on the Bay Mills Indian Community reservation. Bay Mills is actually our English name, and our traditional name is Gnoozhekaaning, which actually means ‘Place of the Pike.’

The Sault Tribe is the other tribe in the area, and their traditional name is Bahweting, which means ‘Place of the Rapids.’ One of the things I love about the Anishinaabe language is that a lot of people don’t realize how interwoven our language is into the state of Michigan. For example, even the name ‘Michigan’ comes

from the Ojibwe word ‘michigami,’ which means ‘Place of many in Great Lakes.’ Even the word ‘Chippewa’ is actually a mispronunciation of ‘Ojibwe’ that came from a French mispronunciation that slowly developed over time.

First and foremost, the goal of the Bay Mills Indian Community is always to be able to provide services, care and promote the health and welfare of our tribal citizens. That care ranges from providing basic governmental services like water and sewer infrastructure all the way to creating and developing economic opportunities for our tribal citizens. We are there to serve and provide for our community.

From an economic perspective, Bay Mills Indian Community

has more than 700 employees and we contribute more than \$25 million in annual income, which then drives money into the local economy. The impact comes from folks purchasing goods and services, taking care of their bills and providing for their families. We also have an established community college with Bay Mills Community College, so we're providing education for many tribal and non-tribal students across the eastern Upper Peninsula and across the country.

Bay Mills Indian Community is not closed off because we work to build relationships with the broader community. There are families that get married, and there are sports teams that come together. Bay Mills has always been very close-knit and we're here to take care of one another, so if you've been part of our life, even in a small but meaningful way, we're going to take care of you like family.

Being one of the original six bands of the Sault Ste. Marie area has really provided a cultural centerpiece for much of the history that exists here. Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan is very well known for the French fur trade, but many people don't realize the French fur trade wouldn't exist without the Ojibwe being part of that trade. When folks go into a restaurant and eat whitefish, they're not imagining that that fish was caught by tribal fishermen exercising their treaty right.

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From the aspect of our language, culture and dance, we've always been able to share and express our culture in a way that grounds us in what Sault Ste. Marie is meant to be. I like to share with people that our identity is really interwoven in the natural landscape, in the earth and the water. We are part of the creation story. So much of our history is scattered throughout the eastern Upper Peninsula and at moments in time, like the significant battle at Point Iroquois Lighthouse or at Brady Park, where some of our ancestors are buried. We

exist and we have touched Michigan at many different points throughout history. Sometimes you just have to peel back a layer and you start to see our culture, history and language right there in front of you.

One of the really wonderful things about Anishinaabe culture is that we're very focused on living in harmony with creation. We're removing that dominance of and distraction from nature. That actually comes from one of our core teachings and the idea that in the line of creation, we don't see men and women being created last because they were the most important: we see them being created last because they are the least important. We rely on all that has come before us to be able to survive and need to respect them for what they give to us in order to be able to live out our lives.

I never thought that I would become president of the Bay Mills Indian Community at the age of 31. I completed my undergrad at Michigan State University where I got an interdisciplinary degree, which means I just studied general education and they had to give me a degree.

After that, I was really contemplating on how I wanted to be able to give back to my people and how I wanted to serve them. I knew that I wanted to help Native people and tribes, but I didn't know in what way. It was at that point that I started exploring law school, and specifically federal Indian law, how that applied to tribes, and how tribes could advocate in Congress and be able to effectuate change with policy and procedure.

I graduated and ended up working for one year with the Department of Justice in Washington D.C. They have what is called an Indian Resource Section and that's basically the section that handles all of the cases involving tribal nations.

However, I felt really disconnected from my family out in D.C. It's an entirely different atmosphere out there and I didn't want to be away from my people. I wanted to be working with Native people, working for tribes and helping them on the ground. So I moved back home, but I didn't know what I was going to do at the time. It was actually my grandmother, who kind of hit me over the head and said, 'Well, why did you get this law degree if you're not going to do anything with it?' She encouraged me to run for Chief Judge of Bay Mills Tribal Court.

I ran, I won, and I served as Chief Judge for one year. Then our president at the time, Bryan Newland, reached out and asked me to serve as in-house counsel for the community. I left my position as judge and started working as the tribe's attorney and was assisting the former president on many of the things that community deals with. Then in January 2021, our former president informed me that he would be resigning to take a

position as the Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs for the Department of Interior and that he would be leaving us, and that's where he serves today. I was devastated because I love Bryan and really loved working for him. The question was presented to our tribal nation of who would be the next leader. At that time, I had several individuals who reached out and asked me to run. That was a really big decision for me, not only because of my age, but because I want to always be able to serve my people in the best capacity. I want the best person for the job to be in that role. I want us to be able to impact change, do good and improve people's lives, and that's a big question for someone who was only 28 at the time.

I prayed really hard and I talked with my family. I talked with the Creator and I decided to throw my hat in the ring.

Then I won the election.

Initially, I was worried because of the amount of responsibility, but then it became a really overwhelming sense of joy and happiness. It was a reaffirmation that my people in our community trusted me. It solidified for me that I was ready, and I was willing to work as hard as possible as I could for them. I always want to do my best and to always keep them in mind because they put me into this position, and I just want to do right by them.

I love my tribe and I love my community. I love being a part of Bay Mills. It goes even a step further to be like I love being Native. I love being indigenous.

No matter what happens in our community, I have been able to rely on more than just my immediate family. I've been able to rely on aunts, uncles, and community members who are always there to catch me if I fall. They lift me up and brush me off and support me in what I'm doing. I've seen that in every step of my life. From when I was a young girl having bake sales or selling lemonade on the side of the road, our community has supported me. They have supported me through law school, then in me taking this step to become president and I just love them so much.

They make me proud to be who I am because of what they've done and what they continue to do.

For that, I just want to make them proud, too.

- Whitney Gravelle, President of Bay Mills Indian Community

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