



The Seminole Tribune

Voice of the Unconquered

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Hard Rock wins approval for gaming license in NYC

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

After more than three years of community engagement, Metropolitan Park, a partnership with New York Mets owner Steve Cohen and Hard Rock International, was awarded a gaming license by the New York State Gaming Commission.

"Since the day I bought the team, the community and Mets fans have made it clear to me that we can and should do better with the area around the ballpark," Cohen said in a statement. "Now, we are going to be able to deliver the sports and entertainment district that our fans have been asking for."

◆ See HARD ROCK NYC on page 7A



Hard Rock International Chairman and Seminole Gaming CEO Jim Allen talks to attendees during a community meeting in the NYC borough of Queens, where the casino will be located.

After surgery, FSU's Xavier Osceola preps for a comeback

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

SUNRISE — Xavier Osceola made the most of his "homecoming" when the Florida State University freshman guard and his teammates came to Broward County for the annual Orange Bowl Basketball Classic.

While he recovers from hip surgery, there are plenty of things Osceola can't do, namely run and shoot hoops. So when the FSU Seminoles took the floor at AmeriBank Arena in Sunrise for warmups prior to their Dec. 13 game against the University of Massachusetts, the Seminole from the nearby Hollywood Reservation didn't run onto the court, but instead walked. He didn't wear a game uniform, but rather a special long sleeve turquoise shirt — part of the team's recognition of Native American heritage — and garnet sweatpants. He sat on the sidelines for a while talking to a few

teammates and then stood near midcourt as they warmed up, occasionally giving low fives as they passed by. During the game, he cheered for his teammates from the bench, but, of course, saw no playing time.

It certainly wasn't the kind of return to South Florida that Osceola envisioned a few months earlier when he became the first Seminole Tribe of Florida tribal member to sign with FSU basketball.

But any thoughts of playing for the Seminoles this season evaporated in October when Osceola had surgery to repair a torn hip labrum. He suffered the injury when he slipped on a wet spot during a game last year as a senior at NSU University School. He played in pain the remainder of the season, but with the injury "impacting my quality of life" he and FSU decided surgery was the best route.

Being grounded for a lengthy period is all too familiar for Osceola, who previously had to battle back from a serious neck injury



Xavier Osceola, in garnet pants, watches his Florida State University men's basketball teammates warm up prior to their game against the University of Massachusetts in the Orange Bowl Basketball Classic Dec. 13 in Sunrise. Osceola, a freshman from the Hollywood Reservation, is sitting out this season as he recovers from an injury.



that he suffered as a passenger in a car accident during his high school career.

Having successfully bounced back from one serious injury in his career has helped Osceola remain upbeat and confident during his current rehab.

"I try to stay grounded, keep my circle tight, talk to my family as much as I can," he said. "It's been tough. Nothing I haven't been through before. It feels like setback after setback. I feel like it's preparing me to be able to be strong enough mentally."

FSU lost to UMass, 103-95. There was some patchwork close to the FSU bench. The Doney family sat courtside behind one of the hoops; Osceola's grandmother Virginia Osceola and aunt Courtney Osceola sat a couple rows behind the team.

While his teammates practice and play games, Osceola spends a lot of time doing rehabilitation exercises in preparation for returning to action this summer.

The entrepreneurship major is also becoming acclimated to academic life as a college student.

"Classes are going good. I feel like NSU University School did a good job of preparing me for what college would be like," Osceola said.

◆ See OSCEOLA on page 3C

Estate items from legendary coach Bobby Bowden to be auctioned

STAFF REPORT

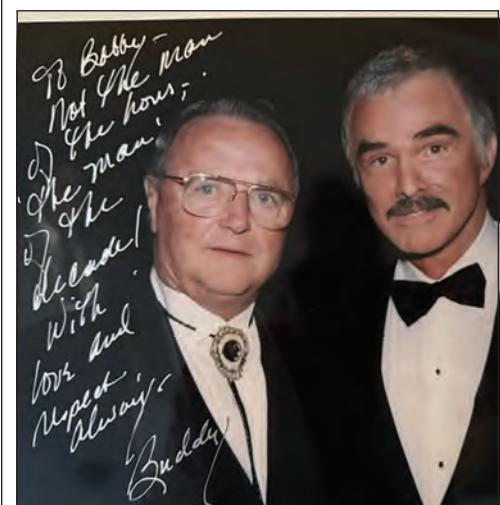
Hundreds of items that belonged to legendary Florida State University football coach Bobby Bowden will be put up for auction, as will his house.

The Bobby Bowden Legacy Auction, an online auction managed by Wiregrass Auction Group, is tentatively set to start in March.

On social media, Wiregrass has been highlighting some of the memorabilia, including a framed display of "The Ballad of Bobby Bowden" signed by the coach, a photo of Bowden and Burt Reynolds that includes a note written on it from the former FSU player and movie star, trophies, golf clubs, handwritten notes from the 1999 National Championship season, and a football signed with a note to Bowden from former Georgia and Miami head coach Mark Richt, who was an offensive coordinator under Bowden.

Bowden carved his name in college coaching lore by leading FSU from 1976 to 2009. His teams won national championships in 1993 and 1999. He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 2006.

◆ See BOWDEN on page 6C



A photo signed and given by Burt Reynolds to Bobby Bowden is part of the estate auction.

Editorial

Tribes do not need a greenlight to build renewable energy

• Catherine Zingg

In May, at a Tribal clean energy conference, I listened as a member of the Upper Sioux Indian Community expressed frustration with their rural electric cooperative. The Tribe had invested in a 2.5-megawatt solar project to offset the energy demand of their casino—yet the panels sat idle, waiting for permission to turn on. Furthermore, when the Tribe moved to turn on the panels without the blessing of Minnesota Valley Cooperative Light & Power, they received notice that power would be shut-off to their casino. And this story has been heard before. Across Indian Country, Tribes have built behind-the-meter solar and other distributed energy resources, only to run into the same barrier: rural electric cooperatives whose outdated policies slow, discourage, and prevent Tribal ownership of renewable energy. Local ownership over energy assets remains stagnant in rural and Tribal communities; this status quo maintained by rural electric cooperatives allows them to ultimately decide who can or cannot build solar.

This dynamic is what was challenged by Upper Sioux Indian Community in their complaint filed at the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission earlier this year. In asserting their right to energize their own behind-the-meter project, the Tribe reminded both the state and their service provider that renewable energy development on Tribal lands is fundamentally an internal matter of Tribal sovereignty. And as the pressure grows for all communities to make future energy decisions, this case makes clear that Public Utilities Commissions (PUCs) and cooperatives must reform their policies so they do not impose control over Tribal decisions but ensure they do not stand in the way.

So let's begin by looking at the role of Public Utility Commissions.

Public Utilities Commissions go by different names across the country, but their role remains largely the same: they oversee the regulatory system that governs electricity. They set electricity rates, approve rate increases, protect customers from the monopolistic shaping of utility companies, and approve the future road maps for a state's electricity plan. The main mandate is to keep energy affordable and reliable. The balancing act that commissioners must play between various stakeholders is not an easy task. Mediating among utility companies, rural electric cooperatives, consumer advocacy groups, and environmental justice groups, commissioners must prioritize low rates, generally consider environmental impacts, and deliver decisions that fit within the financial planning and priorities of the companies that keep the lights on.

But one group consistently remains outside of that balancing act—Tribal Nations. Despite state energy decisions affecting Tribal communities every day, they are rarely included in PUC processes. While Minnesota has a Tribal relations statute meant to encourage engagement with the Tribes in the state, its statutory limits make it unenforceable to the state and its agencies. The lack of teeth in the policy makes it impossible to compel any agency to follow the statute. If this statute is breached, there is no standard of conduct to create a remedy. An expression of values is not enough for Tribes.

A part of this problem is structural. PUCs cling to tradition. They favor making energy decisions based on easily quantifiable financial benefit and feasibility. Commissioners generally struggle to make decisions on environmental impacts and on distributive equity. It is rare to see a PUC with a policy mandate addressing climate change. I have been in PUC hearings where

Tribal members describe long-term harm from utility decisions within their communities, only to be met with a commissioner's question: "How would you calculate the cost?"

There needs to be a fundamental shift towards a PUC with an institutional culture of upholding Tribal sovereignty and enforceable protections.

In the case of Upper Sioux, we glimpsed the possibility of Tribal concerns being upheld by a PUC. The Commissioners unanimously agreed that the rural electric cooperative was acting in a way that was discriminatory towards the Tribe. There was no patent on electricity that the cooperative held. And this can be a leverage point for Tribes in the future to act similarly when in an arena with PUC commissioners.

What was most encouraging was the coalition that formed around Upper Sioux. It was the leadership from organizations such as the Midwest Tribal Energy Resource Association, Tribal Energy Alternatives, CURE, and the Tribal Advocacy Council on Energy that submitted comments in support of the Tribe's position urging the Commission to recognize Tribal sovereignty. These groups continue to push for Tribal renewable energy development in the state and share a vision of government agencies centering Tribal communities.

This case is far from being tied neatly together. After the initial complaint, a new docket was opened to consider transferring the Tribe's casino from the cooperative's service territory into Xcel per the Tribe's request. This jurisdictional maze, subjecting the Tribe yet again to the state's process, is what needs to be addressed. This decision would result in economic loss for the coop, and more importantly, a lesson learned: when utilities create barriers to Tribal energy development, Tribes will seek alternatives.

Another takeaway is that the case-by-case approach is not a sustainable path forward for Tribes. Without meaningful policy reform, Tribes will remain entangled in the state's procedures that grant utilities too much control over distributed energy resources like solar and too little recognition of Tribal sovereignty. Commissioners, policymakers, and Tribal leaders should consider a formal rule establishing Tribal cooperating agency status within the PUC process, where Tribes can insert their own analyses in issues within regulatory proceedings, and it would carry the weight of government-to-government dialogue. This would ensure Tribes have more procedural power and prevent future conflicts like the one with Upper Sioux from happening again.

Change is the only constant we have in the energy industry—and if Minnesota is serious about a renewable energy transition, then Tribes cannot wait for permission from rural electric cooperatives to build clean energy projects that their communities need. The PUC needs to clarify that authority to make those decisions belongs to Tribal Nations only.

Catherine Zingg (Ho-Chunk) is the tribal policy director at Tribal Energy Alternatives, an organization whose stated mission is "to support Tribal Nations in their pursuit of energy sovereignty through solar energy solutions, hands-on training, and community empowerment, ensuring sustainable development and long-term environmental health."



Tribal Energy Alternatives
Catherine Zingg

Largest fireworks show in SWFL comes to Immokalee Jan. 10

FROM PRESS RELEASE

IMMOKALEE — Seminole Casino Hotel Immokalee will light up the sky with "Celebration in the Sky," on Jan. 10 at 9 p.m. The fireworks display will be choreographed to lights and a custom soundtrack. Stereo FM, an Orlando-based band, will perform at 8:30 p.m.

Attendees are strongly encouraged to arrive early. Parking at Seminole Casino Hotel will be limited, with clearly identified overflow parking nearby. All ages are welcome and admission is free. Guests should bring their own chairs to the viewing

area for the show. Food and beverage options will be available for purchase at the event.

"Celebration in the Sky" is the largest land-based fireworks show in Southwest Florida. The show is produced by Zambelli Fireworks, one of the largest fireworks companies in the world. A traditional outdoor Zambelli Fireworks production is a complete sensory experience unlike anything else! Zambelli's productions are some of the largest in the world, and their displays include a variety of shells and high-intensity multi-shot devices that awe and inspire.

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Native singer Blaine Bailey to co-headline IAMF on Big Cypress Reservation

STAFF REPORT

BIG CYPRESS — "Honoring Our Men" is the theme for the fourth annual Indigenous Arts and Music Festival (IAMF) set for Feb. 5-7, 2026, on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation. The event will take place at the Junior Cypress Entertainment Complex.

IAMF will showcase Indigenous performers from across the U.S. and Canada.

Blaine Bailey will co-headline the Friday evening concert. Bailey's Native heritage is at the heart of his identity and artistry and he has already carved a distinctive voice in the music world. Growing up in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, he was surrounded by the blues-infused sounds of his Keetoowah elders. Influenced by legendary guitarists Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan, as well as the red dirt country music his mother played during his childhood, Bailey developed a

unique style that fuses storytelling, soul and grit.

His first album, "Lost City" (2021), paid tribute to his birthplace and upbringing, while his breakout single "Cigarettes and Roses" gained national recognition after being featured in the third season of the hit FX television series "Reservation Dogs."

Bailey recently released his newest album titled "Indian Country Indigenous Day," and was also featured in the television competition series "The Road" that premiered on CBS and Paramount+. He performed his song "T-shirt" about Native American cultural appropriation and was eliminated from the show.

IAMF admission is free. Other offerings include Native food, wildlife demonstrations, art, crafts, and more. For event schedule and details, visit: <https://indigenousamf.com/>.



Facebook

Blaine Bailey

Turnpike expansion in Broward includes Hollywood Reservation

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — Florida, being one of the fastest growing states in the nation, continues to experience rapid population and tourism growth. Florida's Turnpike Enterprise is investing over \$10 billion in state transportation projects over the next five years to ensure Florida's transportation infrastructure can continue to meet the demands of current and future residents and visitors traveling on its Turnpike.

Florida's Department of Transportation (FDOT) has accelerated several widening projects, including Florida's Turnpike and State Road (S.R.) 91 Transportation Systems Management and Operations (TSM&O) Project to add auxiliary lanes from the Turnpike Extension (S.R. 821) to Griffin Road (S.R. 818) in Broward County. The

project is designed to increase roadway capacity, reduce congestion, and improve travel times by adding a lane in each direction of the Turnpike mainline.

Noise wall construction, a 22-foot noise barrier to reduce noise pollution, and drainage installations adjacent to the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Hollywood Reservation, specifically between Sheridan Street and Stirling Road, are expected to be completed by mid-2026.

According to Brielle Gordon, the FDOT's community outreach specialist, public engagement has been an important component to the project's development process. Virtual and in-person public information meetings were held in January 2023 throughout the initiative's design phase, providing opportunities for the community to divulge their questions and/or concerns.

In addition to Turnpike Enterprise's

public engagement efforts, community outreach has been conducted throughout the construction phase, where the Enterprise participated in presentations to tribal representatives and the tribal community, providing an overview of the project scope, construction schedule, noise wall installation, and anticipated activities.

Residents and visitors can expect periodic lane(s), road, and ramp closures due to construction. Though no road closures or detours are currently scheduled, closures will be announced in advance through the FDOT's weekly traffic advisories.

Florida's Turnpike TSM&O initiative began construction in September 2024. It is anticipated to continue through late 2029.

For more information on the project, please visit: Florida's Turnpike TSM&O Project from Turnpike Extension to Griffin Road (floridasturnpike.com).



Construction of noise walls takes place between the northbound Florida Turnpike lanes and a Seminole Tribe Public Works facility on the Hollywood Reservation as seen on Dec. 5. Walls are also being installed along the southbound lanes in the back of tribal headquarters and tribal homes as Turnpike widening takes place in both directions.

Author of 'Inconvenient Indian' discovers he has no Indigenous roots

FROM BBC NEWS

An award-winning Canadian-American author whose career was tied to his apparent Indigenous ancestry has recently learned that he has no Cherokee roots.

Thomas King revealed the findings on Nov. 24 in an opinion piece published in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper.

The announcement follows a mid-November meeting with King and members of the Tribal Alliance Against Frauds, a US-based group dedicated to exposing people who falsely claim American Indian heritage.

The 82-year-old said he accepts the findings of a genealogist with the organization but writes in the essay: "I feel as though I've been ripped in half."

"Not the Indian I had in mind. Not an Indian at all," King wrote.

King won the RBC Taylor prize for non-fiction for his book "The Inconvenient Indian," in 2014, and the Stephen Leacock

memorial medal for humour for his work "Indians on Vacation," in 2020.

He said he never meant to intentionally mislead people, believing that he genuinely had Native American ancestry.

King said he grew up with a family story that his father's biological father - King's apparent paternal grandfather - was a man named Elvin Hunt, who was part Cherokee.

Still, King said he had long been followed by rumours about his ancestry.

"I knew who I was. Knew my family history. At the same time, I recognized that I wasn't a good Indian. I hadn't been raised on a reserve/reservation. I didn't speak Cherokee," he wrote.

The rumours, though mostly ignored, never fully disappeared, and this year he decided to make "a concerted effort to find their origin".

A friend referred him to the Tribal Alliance Against Frauds (Taaf). A genealogist working with the organization

failed to detect Cherokee ancestry anywhere in King's family lineage.

"Taaf suggested that I might want to offer up an apology for my life", King wrote, "but an apology assumes a crime, an offence, a misdeed".

"I don't think that's appropriate", he continued, adding that he was always operating with "the belief that I was mixed-blood Cherokee".

King was born in California but has lived in Canada since 1980. His reputation grew in Alberta as an Indigenous studies professor at the University of Lethbridge.

King has said he intended to return the National Aboriginal Achievement award he received in 2003.

"The rest of my awards are based on my writing, not my ethnicity," he told the *Globe and Mail* in an interview published on Nov. 24.

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Community



A

Jimmy Wayne Holdiness builds huge chickee at Bonita Springs attraction

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

BONITA SPRINGS — Chickee builder Jimmy Wayne Holdiness and his crew built a 40 foot by 20 foot chickee at the Wonder Gardens attraction in Bonita Springs in December, which will give the attraction a place to hold educational and other events.

The chickee, which took Holdiness and his crew a few days to complete, is the same size as one he built about two years ago at the historic McSwain house, also in Bonita Springs.

The Wonder Gardens began in 1936 as The Reptile Gardens, a roadside attraction featuring animal and botanical exhibits meant to capture the nostalgia and history of old Florida. In 2015, the 3-acre Wonder Gardens was purchased by the City of Bonita Springs and is now managed by a non-profit organization.

The chickee is supported by eight thick pressure treated pine pilings, or legs, which were sunk 42 inches deep in the ground and reinforced with a 80 pound bag of concrete in the hole of each piling.

Holdiness learned how to build chickees as a child and has been working with the same core group since 1999.

"My team is a well-oiled machine," Holdiness said. "I love the environment of working on a chickee. Being around people who love what they do makes me happy. We have a happy life. It's tough work, but we love it."

The Wonder Gardens was established during the height of Florida's roadside attractions and will be celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. The 3-acre property, made up of massive banyan trees and other tropical fauna, features exhibits of tropical birds and reptiles including flamingos, alligators, otters, tortoises and a variety of large parrots. The attraction also holds educational programs and an array of other events.

The barn used by the Wonder Gardens for events was destroyed during Hurricane Ian in September 2022. Neil Anderson, Wonder Gardens president and CEO, attended the opening of the McSwain house chickee in 2024 and knew he wanted to replace the barn



Beverly Bidney

Jimmy Wayne Holdiness fills a 42-inch deep hole with dirt after the supporting post was placed but before the concrete was added for support.

with a similar sized chickee.

"The barn was popular but Ian wiped it out," Anderson said. "The chickee will be a gathering place for education related programing and maybe as a rental for family and other group gatherings. It will be a beautiful multipurpose event space that will also have some cover from the elements."

A brick plaza will be installed as the floor of the chickee and the surrounding area. Anderson is looking forward to planning summer educational programs, in conjunction with schools, to be held in the chickee.

Beverly Bidney
Herman Lucas Garcia is ready to add another frond to the chickee's roof.



Beverly Bidney



Courtesy photo

The frame of the chickee was constructed Dec. 19.

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Montana Cypress's 'Becoming Buffalo' to be featured at Native Reel Cinema Festival

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

Buffalo Tiger was a celebrated figure amongst the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians and Montana Cypress's childhood in Ochopee. Cypress's grandfather, and elders of the Miccosukee Tribe, briefly recounted stories of Buffalo Tiger and his delegations with Fidel Castro, the former longtime president of Cuba. In October 2024, Cypress met with the co-producer of "Prey," Jhane Myers, to divulge his newest thriller project: "Becoming Buffalo."

"We've got to do something about that," Myers said.

Cypress grew up on the Miccosukee reservation making films with his brother, Talbert, as a child. At 27, Cypress left his family home in Ochopee to attend the New York Film Academy in Los Angeles, where he graduated with an associate of fine arts degree. The Native Voices theater ensemble at The Autry Museum of the American West supported Cypress and taught him how to hone his writing. "The Red Orchid," a horror folktale, was Cypress's first short film.

"This particular story, 'Becoming Buffalo,' spawned because of a story I'd heard growing up, but didn't know a lot of details about," Cypress said. "These stories were never really told."

William Buffalo Tiger was born in the Everglades in 1920. In the early 1950s, Tiger was appointed as the Miccosukee Tribe's spokesman, serving as an outspoken leader

of the community. The tribe sought federal recognition; without it, the tribe would be unable to receive federal aid or hold their lands in a trust, as per the United States government. Tiger responded by accepting an invitation from Castro, who offered the tribe sanctuary in Cuba. Upon Tiger's return, the United States agreed to federally recognize the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida on Jan. 11, 1962.

Soon after, Tiger became the tribe's first chairman.

"A lot of the knowledge behind this film is composed of newspaper articles," Cypress added. "I went to the Historical Preservation Society on the Miccosukee Reservation. I spoke to elders. It's clear there was overwhelming paranoia and failed negotiations leading up to Cuba."

Ashley Cypress, Montana Cypress's sister, designed the cast's patchwork two months prior to filming.

"My sister is a sprinter for sure," Cypress said. "The historical photographs we had were black and white. We had to trace these back to museums to determine what color palette was most appropriate."

More than half of the film was shot in Mikasuki—the Miccosukee language. The cast includes Miccosukee and Seminole tribal members, and filming took place on both tribal reservations and across South Florida throughout November.

"Looking back, it was the research phase that opened my eyes to how risky everything was and how essential it was for the Tribe to hold onto their cultural values," Cypress



Courtesy photo

In the 1950s, there were countless meetings held between U.S. officials and the Trail Indians that yielded little progress which in time, led to the Cuba trip. This scene features Glenn Emmons, Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, talking with the Miccosukee and Seminole tribal members.

said. "It's important to hold onto these stories and remain connected to something older than ourselves. The best I can do is keep writing, reading, and auditioning as a Miccosukee individual, representing my tribe. That's where creation starts for me."

Cypress's most recent project is a full-length, comedic play for the holidays that debuted in Minneapolis on Dec. 3, titled "A Christmas in Ochopee." Cypress goes back and forth from the Everglades for filmmaking; he's been doing so for the last four years.

"Filmmaking, for me, is to entertain. If no one's entertained, then it loses its ability to affect."

The public can get a first look at "Becoming Buffalo" on Jan. 31 at 7 p.m. during the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow as part of the Native Reel Cinema Festival, followed by a Q&A at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.



Kevin Ondarza

Montana Cypress plays the lead role in "Becoming Buffalo" as Buffalo Tiger. Cypress is joined by Seminole and Miccosukee cast members, Doc Native, Marshall Sanders, Troy Sanders and Daniel Tommie.



Courtesy photo

Behind-the-scenes look at Montana Cypress as Buffalo.

53rd Tribal Fair starts Jan. 30

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — The Seminole Tribe of Florida will host its 53rd annual Tribal Fair and Pow Wow along with the Native Reel Cinema Festival Jan. 30-Feb. 1 at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood. The free, family-friendly event draws an array of Indian Country-wide pow wow dancers and drummers, competing for over \$195,000 in prize money.

Derived from the Narragansett language, the term "powwow" signifies "meeting" in English. These modern-day celebrations originated from the early 19th century Grass Dance Societies and by the 1980s, these gatherings evolved into pow wow competitions across Indian Country. In preserving the rich heritage of American Indians, this festivity incorporates the sharing of songs, dances, clothing, food, and art alongside its contest.

The Pow Wow Grand Entry will take place on both Jan. 30 and Jan. 31 at 12 p.m. in the Seminole Ballroom, followed by a Smoke Dance and Singing Special.

Each participant often wears vibrant regalia dependent on the type of dance; this year's pow wow will feature men's straight, fancy, grass, and northern traditional dancing, alongside women's cloth, fancy shawl, buckskin, and jingle dancing.

A variety of tribal vendors selling patchwork, baskets, clothing, and other hand-crafted items will be open to the public in the Terrace Ballroom. Native youth, adults, and seniors with a knack for old, modern, traditional, and contemporary style clothing will have the opportunity to participate in clothing contests on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1 at 9 a.m.

A taste of Florida wildlife will also be a part of the tribal fair, with alligator photo opportunities and alligator demonstrations all weekend.

In voicing Native stories, the Native Reel Cinema Festival fosters a broader dialogue around cultural diversity and respect. In-person film screenings will be held on Jan. 30 and Jan. 31, starting at 1 p.m.

Workshop focuses on MMIP crisis, available resources

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — Trafficking rarely looks like kidnapping. For most survivors throughout Indian Country, there is an overrepresentation of intimate partner abuse, gender-based violence, and child-abuse. The epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) has existed for years and continues to be of grave concern throughout the United States.

Warrior Workshop, a preventative educational workshop coordinated by Seminole Tribe of Florida tribal member Durante Blais-Billie, was held Dec. 12 at the Seminole Tribe's Native Learning Center in Hollywood.

Blais-Billie, a social responsibility specialist and recipient of the 2023 Freedom Award from the Protect All Children from Trafficking (PACT) organization, discussed key topics for violence prevention. She was joined by panelists Theresa Kennedy, Kristi House's chief anti-trafficking prevention

officer, and tribal member Dr. Tomasina Chupco, a founder of Indigenous Intentions. The panelists addressed dating violence, anti-trafficking, cyberstalking, and online safety.

"It's very important that we address this crisis from an intergenerational perspective," Billie said as she opened the workshop. "It affects our elders, it affects mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and cousins. It affects everybody."

"Indigenous women, as well as Afro-Natives, face the highest rate of dating violence," Chupco said.

Murder is the third leading cause of death among American Indian/Alaska Native women, according to the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI).

UIHI collected data on cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) with an understanding for law enforcement's lack of quality data and found that out of 506 unique cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls across 71 urban cities in the United States, 128 were missing

persons cases, 280 were murder cases, and 98 had an unknown status. Due to UIHI's limited resources, the 506 cases identified are likely an undercount of MMIWG from the past decade.

Billie's work for Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming ensures its anti-trafficking campaigns use trauma-informed language throughout its properties, as many victims tend to brush off violence and abuse. Casinos and their surrounding communities are prime landmarks for trafficking.

"It really is our responsibility to our other tribal members to share what we're learning," said Billie. "Tactics for safety need to be shared across Indian Country."

"One of the privileges we have with Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming is our relationship with PACT," she added.

PACT is a national organization that focuses on preventative education and resources for youth. According to PACT, "Most trafficking doesn't begin with the scary white van, handcuffs, and kidnapping. It starts with a 'friendly' message on an online platform."

Kennedy shared resources, such as the National Human Trafficking Hotline and StrongHearts Native Helpline, as well as Kristi House's drop-in center, home to Project Gold, an organization for girls who have been exposed to sexual exploitation and trafficking.

"Before I became part of the anti-trafficking movement, I didn't have an understanding that it was something that was happening within my own community," Kennedy said. "Here in Florida, we are on a national level. We have the third-highest number of reports of human trafficking."

For additional resources and questions, visit kristihouse.org or reach out to the panelists: Theresa Kennedy at tkennedy@kristihouse.org and Dr. Tomasina Chupco at indigenousintentions@gmail.com.

The StrongHearts Native Helpline is a 24/7 safe, confidential and anonymous domestic and sexual violence helpline for Native Americans and Alaska Natives. Call 1-844-7NATIVE.



From left to right, Theresa Kennedy, Dr. Tomasina Chupco and Durante Blais-Billie lead a workshop Dec. 12 at the Native Learning Center in Hollywood.

Daniella Hakim

Motorcyclists make charity trek from Hard Rock to Weston in memory of Max Osceola Jr.

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

HOLLYWOOD — A lengthy procession of motorcyclists departed from Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood Dec. 7 in the SFPC's Toys in the Sun Run benefit for children and charities.

Seminole Tribe of Florida Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola served as the grand marshal for this year's event, which was held in memory of longtime participants Max Osceola Jr., a former Hollywood councilman and motorcycle enthusiast who played a crucial role in the tribe's acquisition of Hard Rock; Rick Case, founder of Rick Case Automotive Group; and Bob and Dave Amchir, the event's father and son organizers from 1988 through 2018.

Before the start of the ride, Max's family was honored on stage along with Councilman Osceola. Nathan Archibeque, an autistic 6-year-old boy from Spokane, Washington, and huge fan of motorcycles, served as junior grand marshal.

Max Osceola's love of motorcycles began at age 14 and lasted a lifetime with a variety of Harley Davidsons.

"My dad loved motorcycles. He did rides across America. He did this every year and would always bring a big contingent of Seminole riders. I think he would be excited to see everyone out here today," said his daughter, Melissa Osceola Demayo.

For years, Councilman Osceola joined his predecessor for charity rides across the

country.

"I used to do this back when Max used to be the grand marshal," Councilman Osceola said. "He would round up all the guys on the rez that rode motorcycles and he'd get us all out here. We had a nice group. We used to be the Rez Hogs. Some rode Indians, some rode Harleys."

The Toys in the Sun ride was especially close to Max Osceola because of its connections to the Boys & Girls Clubs. In fact, the tribe's Boys & Girls Clubs are named in his honor.

"This was always his favorite. I think his favorite charity in Broward County was the Boys & Girls Club, so this was a big one for him," said Councilman Osceola.

"Riding motorcycles was part of his DNA," said Max's son, Max Osceola III. "Have fun and do charity. He loved that."

Councilman Osceola led the ride out of the parking lot across from the Guitar Hotel in his 1969 Camaro SS. Even in a single-file constant stream, it took close to 30 minutes for all the motorcyclists and some classic cars to depart. With a police escort, the convoy rode to the toy ride's festival which featured live music and food at Bergeron Green Glades Ranch in Weston. Toys were collected at both locations.

The event benefits Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, Boys & Girls Clubs of Broward County, and the Bergeron Everglades Foundation.



Kevin Johnson

Melissa Osceola Demayo, daughter of Max Osceola Jr., holds up a guitar as Max's family is honored prior to the start of the Toys in the Sun Run charity motorcycle ride Dec. 7 at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood. Also on stage is Grand Marshal and Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola and Jr. Grand Marshal Nathan Archibeque, 6.



Participants gather for a ceremony before heading out onto the road in the Toys in the Sun Run motorcycle charity ride.



Kevin Johnson



Miami Dolphins cheerleaders greet motorcyclists as they enter the parking lot across from the Hard Rock Hotel.

◆ TRIBAL FAIR From page 4A

The festival will showcase motion pictures created by Indigenous filmmakers

from around the world. Featuring "Your Name isn't English" by Tazbah Chavez, an up-and-coming director and producer known for her work on "Reservation Dogs"; a first look at "Becoming Buffalo"; "Remaining Native" by Montana Cypress;

Paige Bethmann, an Oscar qualifying film; and anniversary screenings of "The Indian in the Cupboard" and "Trudell." Screenings will be followed by Q&A panels and talent meet and greets will be held in the Grand Ballroom on Jan. 31.

Violinist Genevieve Gros-Louis and Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum Director Gordon Oliver Wareham will be performing a special tribute to Canadian actor, Graham Greene on Feb. 1, who passed on last September. Greene is best known for his Oscar-nominated role

in "Dances with Wolves" and "The Green Mile."

For the full event schedule and more information visit semtribefair.com.

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The hiring of an attorney is an important decision that should not be based solely upon advertisement. Castillo worked as a Public Defender in Broward County from 1990-1996 and has been in private practice since 1996. In 1995, he was voted the Trial Attorney of the year. He graduated from Capital University in 1989 and was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1990, Federal Bar in 1992, and the Federal Trial Bar in 1994.

RICHARD CASTILLO
FLORIDA CRIMINAL DEFENSE ATTORNEY
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The family of Jack Smith gathers with other golfers before the inaugural Jack Smith Memorial Golf Tournament on Dec. 6 in Ave Maria.

Beverly Bidney

Family, friends pay tribute to Jack Smith with inaugural memorial golf tournament

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

AVE MARIA — Jack Smith was a cattleman, a U.S. Army veteran, a former Tribal Councilman and Board Rep from Brighton, but to his family he was a golf lover. To honor him, the first of what will be an annual Jack Smith Memorial Golf Tournament was held December 6 at the Panther Run Golf Club in Ave Maria.

Sixty-four golfers in 16 groups of four competed in the tournament. They came from the Brighton, Hollywood, Immokalee and Tampa/Lakeland reservations. The morning fog was thick before the tournament began at 9, but by the time the golfers played their second holes it had burned off and was replaced with a clear and sunny day.

"We miss him and are glad to have a good turnout," said Jeremy Smith, Jack Smith's son. "A lot of people liked him, he was well-respected. People say he helped them when he was in office."

Jack's daughter Jackie Smith didn't expect this many people to attend the tournament but was glad for the support from all the reservations.

"I want people to be reminded of what he did for the tribe," added Jackie Smith. "He was a Councilman and Board Rep. for seven consecutive terms, six on Council and one on the Board."

During a Father's Day luncheon in June, Brighton Councilman Larry Howard talked to Jeremy Smith and suggested the family hold a memorial for his father.

"He wanted to honor my father, who probably mentored him," Smith said.

Jack Smith was a military veteran who served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, had a herd of cattle and enjoyed traveling and playing golf. He died at age 74 in 2021.

"He used to take us to places and watch us play golf," said Tommie Jackson, Jack Smith's grandson. "He liked a few different sports, but he really liked going out to play golf."

Smith's golfing days ended when a

medical issue sidelined him, but he always enjoyed watching the family play, according to his son.

"We used to travel with him, he took us all over to show us new places and things," Jeremy Smith said.

"I miss the knowledge that he had," Jackie Smith said. "He pushed us to be the best we could be at whatever we did."

The winning teams were:

1st place: Matteo Jimenez, Kevin Osceola, Alex Sibily, Dawn Smith (57 with an Eagle on hole 18)

2nd place: Ricky Doctor, Jessie Mitchell, Eddie Mitchell, Frankly Martinez (57 with a birdie on hole 18)

3rd place: Jimmy Wayne Holdiness, Elliot Young, Trey Boone, Kaden Grimaldo (58)

Longest drive: Trey Boone on No. 18.

Closest to the pin: Matteo Jimenez on No. 15 at 1 foot 9 1/2 inches and on hole 7 at 6 feet 11 inches away.



Beverly Bidney

At right, Jeremy Smith Jr. gets a congratulatory fist bump from his grandfather Jeremy Smith Sr. after sinking a putt.



From left, Ozzy Garza, Ramon Garza and EJ Marrero watch Ray Garza putt during the golf tournament.



Jack Smith tournament golfers from left to right are Jayce Smith, Theresa Frost, Jerry Smith, Jimmy Wayne Holdiness, Ivan Herrera, Jeremy Smith Sr., Jeremy Smith Jr. and Jackie Smith gather before the tournament began.

Beverly Bidney



Ricky Doctor watches his ball after teeing off at the Panther Run golf club.



At left, Alan Hernandez puts as teammates Alan Huff, Robert Dextator and Richard Henry watch.



Ivan Herrera, Jimmy Wayne Holdiness' grandson, tees off at the Jack Smith Memorial Golf Tournament.

Beverly Bidney

◆ HARD ROCK NYC

From page 1A

The \$8 billion development would connect Flushing Meadows Corona Park to the underutilized waterfront of Flushing Bay, and feature a live music venue, a 'Taste of Queens' food hall, and a Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.

"Metropolitan Park will be a global destination for entertainment, food, and culture that reflects the energy and diversity of the World's Borough. The commission's decision confirms the positive impact this project will have on New York City, the state, and the region, and we're excited to build on our long record of delivering world-class entertainment experiences here in Queens," Jim Allen, Chairman of Hard Rock International and CEO of Seminole Gaming, said in a statement.

According to Hard Rock, the project will create 23,000 union jobs — both permanent and construction.

In addition to Cohen and Hard Rock, the Metropolitan Park ownership team includes McKissack & McKissack — the nation's oldest minority- and woman-owned professional design and construction firm — and Siebert Williams Shank & Co., LLC, a minority- and woman-owned investment bank.

The property is next door to the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, home of the U.S. Open.

Hard Rock's presence in New York City was introduced on March 12, 1984, with a star-studded grand opening of a Hard Rock



The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino development in Queens is on the left side of this rendering, across from Citi Field, home of the New York Mets.

Cafe on West 57th Street that included some of entertainment's biggest names, such as Eddie Murphy, John Candy, Dan Aykroyd, Ron Wood, Julian Lennon, Matt Dillon and Robert Downey Jr. That location closed in 2005 as Hard Rock Cafe shifted to a prominent spot in Times Square, which is where, on Dec. 7, 2006, the Seminole Tribe of Florida celebrated its purchase of the Hard Rock brand on the cafe's balcony.

In 2022, Hard Rock opened its first

hotel in the city on West 48th Street in the heart of Midtown Manhattan.

Metropolitan Park is shaping up to be the tribe's next major milestone.

In addition to Metropolitan Park, the commission also approved licenses for Bally's in the Bronx, and Resorts World NYC in Queens.

Metropolitan Park is projected to be finished in June 2030. For more information, visit metropolitanpark.com.



A rendering of the Metropolitan Park's Hard Rock Hotel & Casino on the left across from the New York Mets stadium on the right.

Hard Rock Bristol donates to foster family support organization

STAFF REPORT

BRISTOL, Va. — Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Bristol, in Virginia, finished its season of giving with a \$16,250 donation to SMILE Foster Closet on Dec. 19.

SMILE Foster Closet is a nonprofit in northeast Tennessee that focuses on the needs of foster children, as well as foster families, kinship, and at-risk families. It supports foster families that care for children who might otherwise not be able to get their basic necessities.



Hard Rock Bristol donates to SMILE Foster Closet in December.

Second Rod Stewart show added for Hollywood

FROM PRESS RELEASE

HOLLYWOOD — Due to popular demand, Hard Rock Live at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, Fla. has added a second show for Rod Stewart on Feb. 28 at 8 p.m. Stewart will also perform at the venue Feb. 27 at 8 p.m.

For tickets go to myHRL.com. Stewart, who will turn 81 on Jan. 10,

is one of the best-selling music artists of all time, with more than 250 million albums and singles sold worldwide. His signature voice, style, and songwriting have transcended all genres of popular music—from rock, soul, and R&B to the standards and big band swing—making him one of the few stars to enjoy chart-topping albums in every decade of his more than five decade career.

Upcoming events at Hard Rock Live

FROM PRESS RELEASE

HOLLYWOOD — Here's a look at Seminole Hard Rock Hollywood's January scheduled at Hard Rock Live:

Jan. 2: 8 p.m. Stay Strong Jamaica
Jan. 4: 4 p.m. Fists Of Fury
Jan. 10: 7:30 p.m. Chris Stapleton
Jan. 11: 7:30 p.m. Chris Stapleton
Jan. 16: 8 p.m. Stavros Halkias
Jan. 17: 8 p.m. Miami Comedy Festival
Jan. 22: 8:30 p.m. Morrissey
Jan. 23: 8 p.m. Jerry Seinfeld
Jan. 24: 8 p.m. Jerry Seinfeld
Jan. 30: 8 p.m. Bailey Zimmerman
Jan. 31: 8 p.m. Penn & Teller

Hard Rock Atlantic City earns Newsweek's top honor

STAFF REPORT

The new year has just begun, but Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City has already garnered a top award. It was voted No. 1 best hotel/casino 2026 in a Newsweek reader choice poll that included experts and readers' choices.

"With a lively casino, stellar spa and

constant entertainment, it's a seaside escape that always hits the right note," Newsweek wrote in its poll results that were posted in November 2025.

Hard Rock Atlantic City, along with the others in the top 10 list, was noted by Newsweek for its "exceptional quality and distinctive excellence."

Hard Rock Hollywood to host poker series

FROM PRESS RELEASE

HOLLYWOOD — The Lucky Hearts Poker Open series kicks-off the new year with a run from Jan. 6-21. It features 58 trophy events and over \$6 million in guaranteed cash. The action opens with a \$600 Deep Stack and a \$2 million guarantee. The 2025 Lucky Hearts Poker Open Championship headlines the series with a \$3 million guarantee and includes a \$25,000 high roller tournament.

The tournament culminates with the \$3,500 LHP Open Championship beginning Jan. 16, boasting a \$3 million guarantee. The final table of the championship will take place Jan. 21.

Tampa wine, food celebration to be held in April

FROM PRESS RELEASE

TAMPA — The Tampa Bay Wine & Food Festival will be held April 7-11 along the picturesque waterfront. Celebrity Chef Robert Irvine returns as host for the week, which is filled with food and drink events.

New to the lineup is the April 9 signature

event at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Tampa, featuring Irvine and other celebrity chefs in an immersive night of live cooking and restaurant tastings. The event will benefit the Robert Irvine Foundation.

For more information visit tampabaywff.com.

Hard Rock Bet launches online sportsbook and casino in Michigan

STAFF REPORT

Hard Rock Bet partnered with Island Resort & Casino and the Hannahville Indian Community for the release of its sportsbook and online casino in Michigan on Dec. 2.

"This expansion represents a major milestone for Hard Rock Bet and reinforces our ascent as one of the fastest-growing digital gaming brands in the United States," said Marlon Goldstein, executive managing director-CEO of Hard Rock Digital, in a statement. "Our launch in Michigan builds on our momentum as we bring the legendary Hard Rock experience to more fans across the country, offering a trusted online casino and sportsbook on our top-rated and easy-to-use platform."

Hard Rock International (HRI) launched Hard Rock Digital in 2020, a joint venture with gaming industry veterans, serving as the exclusive HRI and Seminole Gaming vehicle for interactive gaming and sports betting, globally. Hard Rock Bet Sportsbook is live in Florida, Colorado, Illinois, Arizona, Indiana, Michigan.

New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and now, Michigan.

Hard Rock Bet casino features thousands of slot titles, live dealer games, and an in-house progressive jackpot engine, while its sportsbook features hundreds of props, parlays, and game lines. While Hard Rock Bet Casino is limited to casino players located in New Jersey and Michigan, non-local players can indulge in their casino demos.

"This approval reflects our continued focus on maintaining integrity, transparency, and consumer protection in Michigan's online gaming and sports betting space," said Henry Williams Michigan Gaming Control Board's executive director, in a statement prior to Hard Rock Bet's launch in the state. "We look forward to seeing the Hannahville Indian Community and Hard Rock provide a safe, responsible, and enjoyable wagering experience for players across the state—and especially for those served by one of Michigan's long-standing tribal gaming operators in the Upper Peninsula."

Seminole Casino Hotel Immokalee executive appointed to global gaming post

STAFF REPORT

Global Gaming Women (GGW), an industry non-profit dedicated to supporting the development of women in gaming, has appointed Seminole Casino Hotel Immokalee Vice President of Finance Julie Woodruff as its board secretary.

Launched as an independent charitable organization in 2016, Global Gaming Women delivers programs and events to women in the gaming industry. Today, GGW has over 7,000 members and offers educational programs, mentorship opportunities, and networking events globally.

Alongside Woodruff's appointment, GGW announced Siobhan Lane to president and board chair and Adriana Kasunic as second vice president. Lane is CEO of Gaming at Light & Wonder; Kasunic is a vice president at The Venetian Resort Las Vegas.

"Throughout her many years of service to the organization, Siobhan's ardent focus on education has significantly expanded GGW's offerings and reach, which we will see continued in her leadership as president," Lauren Bates, outgoing GGW president, said in a statement.



Courtesy photo

Julie Woodruff

The new leadership appointments will enter effect Jan. 1, 2026, and run through 2028. For more information about Global Gaming Women, visit globalgamingwomen.org.

Guest wins \$1.3M jackpot at Seminole Casino Coconut Creek

FROM PRESS RELEASE

COCONUT CREEK — A lucky guest hit a life-changing mega jackpot worth more than \$1.3 million while playing a Dragon Link slot machine in the High Limit Slots area at Seminole Casino Coconut Creek.

The guest won \$1,335,185.47 after placing a \$25 bet Dec. 17.

Following the win, the Dragon Link progressive jackpot was reset to \$1 million, ready for the next mega winner. A progressive slot machine has a base jackpot amount that increases as guests play that machine.

Exactly one year ago, a \$1 million Dragon Link progressive jackpot was hit at Seminole Casino Coconut Creek.

With this latest payout, Seminole Casino Coconut Creek is approaching \$1 billion in total jackpots paid to guests in 2025, according to the casino.



Seminole Casino Coconut Creek

The winner sports a million dollar reaction at Seminole Casino Coconut Creek.

Newly opened Hard Rock dishes out more than \$10M in jackpots

FROM PRESS RELEASE

METTLER, Calif. — Guests at Hard Rock Tejon Casino won \$10 million in jackpots from Nov. 11 to Nov. 20.

The casino, located 90 miles north of Los Angeles, held a grand opening Nov. 13.

"We are thrilled to see so many of our guests experiencing these incredible wins

so soon after opening," said Chris Kelley, President of Hard Rock Tejon Casino, in a statement. "Hard Rock has always been about creating unforgettable experiences, and seeing \$10 million in jackpots hit in just over ten days shows how much excitement there is on our gaming floor. We're proud to deliver the winning energy our guests expect."

Beach Boys to play in Immokalee

FROM PRESS RELEASE

IMMOKALEE — The Beach Boys — who have become synonymous with the California lifestyle and an American icon to fans around the world — will celebrate 250 years of the USA, saluting 60 years of Pet Sounds, at Seminole Casino Hotel Immokalee on March 27 at 8 p.m.

For tickets go to ticketmaster.com or moreinparadise.com.

The Beach Boys' first hit, "Surfin'" in 1961 was followed by dozens of other

chart toppers "Surfer Girl," "Fun, Fun, Fun," "I Get Around," "California Girls," "Help Me Rhonda," "Barbara Ann," "Good Vibrations," "Wouldn't It Be Nice," "Rock and Roll Music" and "Kokomo."

The Beach Boys have sold over 100 million records worldwide and have received more than 33 RIAA Platinum and Gold record awards. The Rock And Roll Hall of Famers where also honored at the 2001 Grammy Awards with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Half-million dollar winner at Hard Rock Rockford

STAFF REPORT

ROCKFORD, Ill. — Hard Rock Casino Rockford reported in late December

that one lucky guest won \$455,000 on the Blazing 7s Progressive Jackpot. The casino in Illinois said it was the largest payout in its history.

Memories of music festivals

BY MISTY SNYDER
Museum Assistant, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum

BIG CYPRESS — As the year winds down, across most of the country the time for music festivals is also coming to a close. But here in South Florida, our seasons are flipped and the ideal time for outdoor gatherings is just beginning. With many exciting events on the horizon, echoes of music festivals of the past can be found within the Museum's collection.

The first music festival held on Tribal lands was likely the Big Rock Pow Wow, which took place May 23–25, 1969, on

the Dania (now Hollywood) Reservation. In this golden era of music, bands such as the Grateful Dead, Rhinoceros and the Youngbloods performed alongside blues legends Muddy Waters and Johnny Winter. The Grateful Dead later released archival recordings from the concert as part of their "Road Trips" series. A copy of this three-disc box set is part of the Museum's collection, and the cover can be seen in the image here (Image 1).

Other music festivals hosted by the Tribe include the Fire on the Swamp series, the Journey to the Glades New Year's Eve Phish concert, and the Langerado Festival.

The Fire on the Swamp series began



Photographic print of two stages and attendees at the Langerado festival.

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum

South Florida Fair runs Jan. 16–Feb. 1

STAFF REPORT

WEST PALM BEACH — Starting Jan. 16, the South Florida Fair invites guests of all ages to unleash their inner pirate and set sail on an exciting adventure with this year's "Party with the Pirates" theme.

The annual fair in West Palm Beach will run until Feb. 1 and features entertainment, fair food, and attractions. Youngsters from the Seminole Tribe's 4-H program are annual participants in livestock shows and sales. Agricultural and livestock exhibits, such as "Agricadabra," are among the most notable, considering agriculture's significant role in Palm Beach County. Fairgoers can enjoy these events for free.

Popular performers making their return include comedy hypnotist Brad Matchett, guitarist Ron Davis, and the Show-Me Swine Racing Pigs. Parades feature New Orleans style floats and special events like the Mayors' Parade, featuring Palm Beach County's mayors, and Bike Nite, where more than 300 motorcycles ride through the fairgrounds.

This year's special performances include 'Pirates of the Colombian Caribbean', an ice-skating show by Roslyn Ice Shows 'Legends of the Frozen Cove,' 'The Little Mermaid' musical by Panto Company, multi-award-winning artist Jasmine Cain, and more.

The South Florida Fair and Palm Beach County Expositions is a private, non-profit corporation with an initiative to preserve and promote the agricultural and historical heritage of the community. Since 1912, over half a million fairgoers have attended. Beneficial to many Palm Beach County organizations, the fair is an opportunity to raise awareness on local programs, promote small businesses, and highlight student achievements.

The South Florida Fair will hold its opening ceremony on Jan. 16 at 11 a.m. on 9067 Southern Boulevard in West Palm Beach, Florida. The operating hours are Monday to Friday from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m., and Saturday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Parking is on a first-come first-serve basis. For more information visit southfloridafair.com.

Nez Perce Tribe receives \$500,000 contribution for endangered condor program

FROM PRESS RELEASE

The Colossal Foundation, the charitable organization associated with Colossal, the de-extinction company, announced Dec. 11 a \$500,000, 10-year commitment to the Nez Perce Tribe's Wildlife Division to advance the recovery and reintroduction of the critically endangered California condor, known in the Nez Perce language as qu'nes, across the tribe's ancestral lands in Idaho and Oregon.

With a wingspan of nearly 10 feet, the California condor is North America's largest land bird. Historically, this apex scavenger and relic of the Pleistocene soared the skies from British Columbia to Baja California. By 1982, the species had vanished from the Pacific Northwest and its population had fallen to just 22 birds, due to habitat loss, lead poisoning, and other human-caused threats. Intensive conservation averted extinction; today roughly 560 condors exist, about 360 of them in the wild.

Now, for the first time in over a 125 years, qu'nes is poised to return to its northernmost range as soon as 2031. Led by the Nez Perce Tribe (Nimipuu), this historic, multi-year reintroduction aims to restore a species that is both ecologically essential and culturally sacred. The effort would establish the first

inland Northwest population, expand the species' range into habitat identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as among the most promising unoccupied areas, and strengthen genetic and ecological resilience through greater geographic spread.

"Since time immemorial, the Nimipuu (Nez Perce) people and qu'nes (condor) have shared this landscape," said Eric Kash Kash, director of the Nez Perce Tribe Wildlife Division. "Its return represents both ecological restoration and spiritual renewal for our people and the land. Our partnership with the Colossal Foundation honors our sovereignty and our enduring connection to our homeland as we fulfill our sacred responsibility to restore balance by bringing a relative home."

The Nez Perce Tribe is a recognized leader in conservation, with a track record of successfully restoring iconic Pacific Northwest species, including gray wolves, Pacific salmon, and bighorn sheep. Since 2016, the Tribe's Wildlife Division has conducted rigorous assessments confirming that the Hells Canyon ecoregion provides ideal habitat for a reintroduced condor population, with abundant food sources, excellent geography for soaring, and low human density.

Native Finance Summit to be held at Hard Rock Tulsa

FROM PRESS RELEASE

The Native American Financial Services Association (NAFSA) will hold its inaugural Native Finance Summit Jan. 27–29, 2026, at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The event will bring together a lineup of tribal leaders, financial professionals, legal experts, and industry innovators who are shaping the future of tribal economic development and finance to explore actionable solutions that strengthen tribal economic sovereignty.

"The Native Finance Summit is a critical platform to equip Tribal Nations with the tools and knowledge they need to thrive in today's rapidly evolving financial environment," said Gary Davis, Executive Director of NAFSA, in a statement. "We're broadening the conversation beyond Tribal lending to include sovereign digital finance and new economic opportunities that are aligned with the self-determined futures of Indigenous communities."

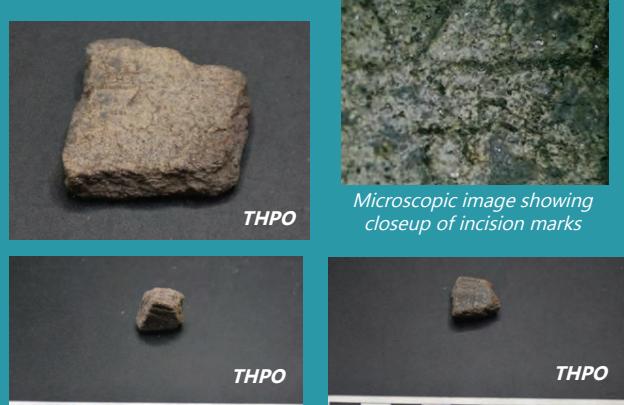
The summit's goal is to provide practical insights and tools for tribal nations navigating today's complex financial landscape—while also looking ahead to future pathways.

For more information visit usetinc.org.

January 2026

ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

There are several features that archaeologists look at when analyzing pottery sherds, such as temper, distribution, and decoration. Decoration can be especially helpful in determining pottery types. Examples include incisions, holes, tick marks, impressions, and images etched onto the surface of pottery, as well as any paint that might have been applied. By looking at the decoration on pottery sherds, archaeologists can figure out which pottery type a style of decoration is associated with.



We applied these pottery analysis techniques when looking at this month's artifact, pictured above. Although it may be difficult to see, these sandy gray pottery sherds have some decoration on them. If you look closely, you might be able to see incisions, or linear markings, cut into the surfaces of the sherds. This style of decoration, along with the sand temper and location where they were found, might suggest that these sherds could be from Surside Incised pottery.

This type of pottery is associated with the Glades IIIa cultural period, which spans from 1200 CE to 1400 CE (FLMNH). It is characterized by one or more incised lines under the rim of the vessel, and it is found throughout south Florida (Peach State Archaeological Society). As the sherds from our collection were found on the Big Cypress Reservation, it is quite possible that they are Surside Incised.



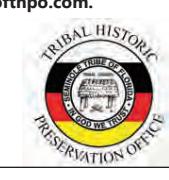
Surside Incised Pottery (Florida Museum of Natural History)

To learn more about all the incredible artifacts within our collection, please visit the THPO website at www.stothpo.com.

Works Cited

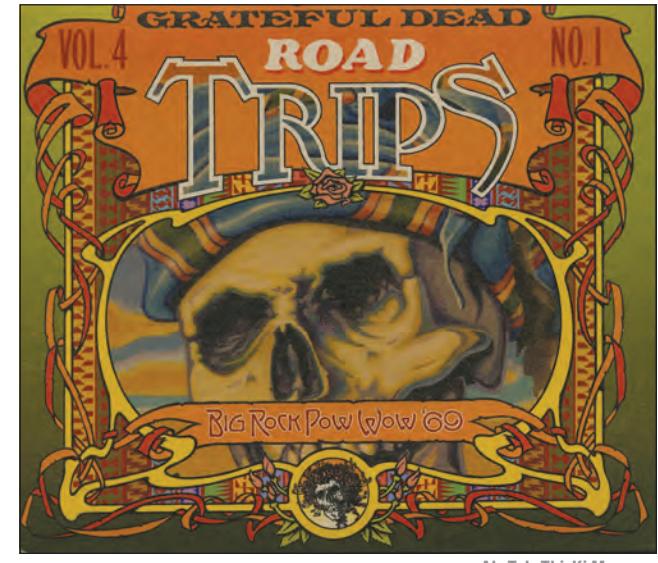
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SEMINOLE TRIBE OF FLORIDA AH-TAH-THI-KI M U S E U M

A PLACE TO LEARN, A PLACE TO REMEMBER.



CD Box Set titled "Road Trips" from the 1969 Big Rock Pow Wow.

of visitors every year. These festivals not only entertain and educate visitors but also reinforce cultural identity and sovereignty through music, dance, art and food—traditions that are passed down and built upon by future generations.

Events such as the American Indigenous Arts Celebration and the Indigenous Arts and Music Festival, held each year on the Big Cypress Reservation, have elevated Seminole and other indigenous cultures to center stage and now attract thousands

in 1993 on the Big Cypress Reservation. Featuring country, folk and bluegrass music, the 1994 edition was headlined by country music legend Charlie Daniels. The festival's fiddle contest drew talent from around the world, including renowned Irish fiddler James Kelly and Bluegrass Hall of Fame inductee Chubby Wise. Country star Travis Tritt also headlined one of the later festivals.

On New Year's Eve 1999, Journey to the Glades—what many consider the greatest Phish concert of all time—took place on the Big Cypress Reservation. It is estimated that over 80,000 people attended. Phish welcomed the new millennium in true jam band style with a seven-and-a-half-hour set that began at midnight and lasted until dawn. As attendees connected with nature on the Big Cypress Reservation and learned about and interacted with the people who know the landscape better than anyone, they reported that this event was more than a concert, it was a transformative, and some say, spiritual experience like no other.

Langerado was an eclectic music festival

that took place in South Florida from 2003 to 2009. It was known for its diverse musical lineups with bands and musicians from across multiple genres including rock, hip-hop, reggae and electronic music. In 2008, Langerado was held on the Big Cypress Reservation with headliners including R.E.M., the Beastie Boys, 311, the Roots and Bob Marley's former band The Wailers. The image included here (Image 3) shows two of the five sound stages at the festival surrounded by some of the over 20,000 people

From music festivals to the Hard Rock, the Seminole Tribe has deep connections to many forms of music. At many of these festivals, Tribal members have performed, sold crafts and shared traditional foods as food vendors—making these festivals not only places to enjoy music but also opportunities to raise awareness about Seminole culture.

Events such as the American Indigenous Arts Celebration and the Indigenous Arts and Music Festival, held each year on the Big Cypress Reservation, have elevated Seminole and other indigenous cultures to center stage and now attract thousands

SEMINOLE HISTORY STORIES - JANUARY 2026

THE CALUSA AND THE FIRST FLORIDA COLONIZER

The Seminole ancestors the Spanish called the Calusa thrived along the coast and the keys in what is today southwest Florida. The ancestors had flourished on the peninsula for nearly 15,000 years when Europeans first intruded into their homelands in the early 1500s. The very first of these were a group led by Juan Ponce de León, who, according to legend, came in search of the Fountain of Youth. It's unlikely that Ponce de León was really looking for a magical fountain, but his own records show he was motivated by mainly by greed and the hope of finding gold.

What Ponce de León was not hoping for was trouble. And yet, in May of 1513 as his fleet sought fresh water along Florida's gulf coast, they encountered Calusa warriors. Desperate for fresh water, the Spanish attempted to trade with the Calusa. The Calusa, however, saw the Indigenous Caribbean people the Spanish held captive and forced into labor, recognized the threat. Soon eight war canoes met Ponce de León's fleet. Eventually, the Spanish realized they were no match for the Calusa warriors and retreated, beginning their journey back to Cuba.

Eight years later, in 1521, Ponce de León returned to the coast of southwest Florida, prepared to set up a colony and "claim" the land of the Calusa and their ancestors for Spain. The Calusa were prepared. Determined to defend their homeland against the intruders, the Calusa fought off the Spanish once more, this time inflicting a mortal wound. Ponce de León was hit in the thigh by a Calusa warrior's arrow, which had been dipped in the deadly sap of the manchineel tree. Defeated, the Spanish fleet limped back to Cuba where Ponce de León died of the wound two weeks later. The Spanish had learned a hard lesson. As one Spaniard put it, the Calusa "were not accustomed... to lay down their liberty so easily".



To see more Seminole History Stories, please visit the THPO website at www.stothpo.com/research

Above: Engraving of Ponce de Leon at the Fountain of Youth, from *Pictorial History of the United States*. Philadelphia: John Winston Company, 1907



Health

Indian River State College awarded \$3.25M federal grant to address Florida's nursing shortage

FROM PRESS RELEASE

FORT PIERCE — Indian River State College announced Nov. 13 that it has been awarded a four-year, \$3.25 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources & Services Administration through a work expansion program. The federal investment will enable the college's School of Nursing to significantly increase enrollment in its Associate Degree nursing program through Project NURSe (Nursing Workforce Expansion), preparing more practice-ready registered nurses to serve the Treasure Coast region's rural and medically underserved communities.

By 2035, Florida is projected to face a shortfall of 37,400 registered nurses, according to the Florida Hospital Association in partnership with the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida.

"The nursing shortage isn't just a number on a page—it affects real people who need care," Timothy E. Moore, president of Indian River State College, said in a press release. "This grant gives us the resources to recruit students from places like Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties, train them here, and help them build careers in their own communities."

With HRSA funding, the college will expand nursing program enrollment to 475 students by fall 2026, with projected

annual completions increasing to over 140 registered nurse graduates entering the healthcare workforce in rural and medically underserved areas. The grant funds dedicated staff to support this expansion, and additional nursing faculty and clinical preceptors will be recruited to maintain The River's accreditation standards and educational excellence.

Project NURSe implements a "grow your own" workforce development model: by recruiting nursing students from the communities that need them most and providing clinical experiences in local healthcare facilities, the program increases the likelihood graduates will remain and practice as registered nurses in their communities long-term.

Project NURSe will provide comprehensive student support, including tutoring, NCLEX-RN exam preparation, and transportation stipends for clinical rotations. The initiative also includes a Dedicated Education Hospital partnership with Raulerson Hospital in Okeechobee County, where nursing students receive one-to-one preceptorship and direct pathways to employment.

With the opening of the college's 50,000-square-foot nursing education center in 2023, the School of Nursing expanded to double the number of nursing program graduates.

For more information visit irsc.edu/program/nursing/.

Mashantucket Pequot, Hartford HealthCare partner to open new facility

FROM WSHU (PUBLIC RADIO, CONNECTICUT)

The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation will partner with Hartford HealthCare to open a wellness center in Eastern Connecticut.

Hartford HealthCare will work with the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe to build a 21,000-square-foot health center. In a statement released by the tribe, it said the location will include a space for Tribal Health Services (THS), which will be for recognized Tribe members, and another space for a Hartford Healthcare clinic that will be open to the public. Tribal Chairman Rodney Butler said the project is about more than bricks and mortar; "it is about reclaiming our health future."

"We are proud to create a space that

combines modern medical care with cultural affirmation, one that serves not only Tribal citizens, but our neighbors throughout Southeastern Connecticut. True wellness comes when the entire community has access to the care and support they need," Butler said.

The tribe said the design will be a collaborative effort, but will seek to honor Tribal traditions, incorporating natural landscaping with native plantings, water elements, and symbolic references such as the Whale's Tail and Turtle Island. The facility will also have spaces for community gatherings.

The new health center is slated to open by spring 2027, and a groundbreaking ceremony is planned for spring 2026.

Native healthcare conference to be held in conjunction with two others

STAFF REPORT

The 16th annual Native American Healthcare Conference will be held June 16-17, 2026, at Pechanga Resort Casino in Temecula, California.

The conference is held in conjunction with the 19th annual Native American Economic Development Conference and the 11th annual Native American Cannabis & Hemp Conference. Registration for one of the conferences provides access to all three conferences.

The healthcare conference will feature

healthcare directors, decision-makers, and tribal leaders who will hear from leading experts on preventative health, wellness, and other critical topics impacting Indian Country. Tribal communities often face significant health disparities and limited resources for ongoing care. This conference offers attendees the opportunity to explore innovative solutions, learn about the latest treatments, technology, and advancements, and discuss the current state and future trends of tribal healthcare.

For more information visit nativenevnevents.org.

Native American Fitness Council to host specialist certification

FROM PRESS RELEASE

The Native American Fitness Council will present exercise and aging specialist certification Feb. 16-19, 2026, at the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe Wellness Center in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Elders and inactive adults can pose special challenges for fitness trainers. This certification gives attendees the skills

to successfully motivate and train these community members. Chair exercises, balance training for fall prevention and modified functional movements are presented that keep elders enjoying active, independent living.

The certification event is sponsored by the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe.

For more information visit nativeamericanfitnesscouncil.com/events.

IHS selects 7 projects for construction program

FROM PRESS RELEASE

In November, the Indian Health Service announced the selection of seven projects for new or expanded health care facilities through the IHS Joint Venture Construction Program.

"For more than 30 years, the Joint Venture Construction Program has shown what true partnership can achieve—building health, hope, and opportunity across Indian Country as we continue the mission to Make America Healthy Again," Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said in a press release.

Under the program, tribes or tribal organizations construct, acquire, or renovate a health care facility using non-IHS funds, and lease it to IHS at no cost for 20 years. In return, IHS requests funding from Congress

to staff, operate and maintain the facility.

The tribes who were among the seven selected projects, all for outpatient facilities, are:

- Ak-Chin Indian Community (Maricopa, Arizona)
- Arctic Slope Native Association (Utqiagvik, Alaska)
- Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (Hugo, Oklahoma)
- Citizen Potawatomi Nation (Asher, Oklahoma)
- Indian Health Council, Inc. (IHC) and Pala Band of Mission Indians (Palma Valley, California)
- Lower Brule Sioux Tribe (Lower Brule, South Dakota)
- Muscogee Creek Nation of Oklahoma (Okmulgee, Oklahoma)

Festive times in Brighton



Calvin Tiger, upper left; others Kevin Johnson (3)

Here's a look at holiday decor on the Brighton Reservation. Clockwise, reservation Christmas tree, lobby in the administration building, Christmas tree at Seminole Brighton Bay Hotel & Casino, and the Florida Seminole Veterans Building.



Nebraska Indian Community College receives \$7M from MacKenzie Scott Foundation

FROM PRESS RELEASE

SOUTH SIOUX CITY, Neb. — Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC) announced Dec. 4 that it has received a one-time gift of \$7 million from the MacKenzie Scott Foundation. According to the college, the contribution will empower NICC to further its mission of providing accessible, culturally relevant education to Native communities and fostering opportunities for all students.

"This is a historic moment for Nebraska Indian Community College and for the Tribal Nations we serve," said President Michael Oltrogge in a press release. "This transformational investment will support our mission for the next seven generations. It will strengthen our academic programs, student services, faculty development, and long-term institutional stability."

NICC is chartered by the Omaha and Santee Sioux Nations, offering higher education rooted in Native traditions and values. The support from the MacKenzie Scott Foundation will enable NICC to:

Enhance student services and academic programs

Invest in technology and infrastructure improvements

Expand scholarships and financial aid opportunities

Support community-based initiatives that promote cultural preservation and economic development

Oltrogge emphasized the importance of the gift for

Tribal Colleges and Universities. "TCUs are powerful institutions, yet chronically underfunded. We preserve culture and language, expand education, and strengthen sovereignty—often with limited resources. This gift recognizes that reality and the potential of our students."

He thanked NICC's faculty, staff, Board of Directors, and the MacKenzie Scott Foundation "for believing in the future of Tribal higher education."

Virtual tourism training offered

FROM PRESS RELEASE

Go International 2026, the American Indigenous Tourism Association's annual two-day training focused on preparing Native Nations and communities for the global tourism marketplace, will be held virtually April 21-22. Designed for Indigenous tourism professionals, entrepreneurs, and partners ready to take their experiences to new markets, Go International offers practical tools and guidance for accessing international visitors through product development, market readiness, and partnerships.



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SEMINOLE SCENES



PRINCESS PORTRAITS: Above and below, Miss Florida Seminole Bailey Marie Latchford, left, and Jr. Miss Florida Seminole Chaka Yani Smith attend Trail's Christmas party Dec. 12 at the Miccosukee Casino & Resort. The princesses visited with guests, enjoyed dinner and had portraits drawn by caricature artist Mariana Perez.



BALLOON BOOSTER: Hard Rock Casino Rockford in Illinois served as a premiere sponsor for the Stroll on State's parade of balloons Nov. 29, an annual community holiday tradition in Rockford that also includes a tree lighting and fireworks.



TOY RUN PARTICIPATION: At left, Seminole Tribe Fire Rescue's Engine Co. No. 2 from Hollywood is among the lead vehicles at the start of the SFPC's Toys in the Sun Run motorcycle ride benefit for children and charities Dec. 7. At right, honor guard members from STFR and Davie Fire Rescue Department present colors at the start of the event's ceremony in the parking lot across from the Guitar Hotel.



POLAR BEAR EXPRESS: This year's holiday display in the lobby at tribal headquarters features a talented singing polar bear band. With the push of a button, the band performs.



TRACKING TRACK: Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School track competitors and supporters watch the day's action at the Okeechobee County track meet for ages 9 to 14 on Dec. 12 at Okeechobee High School.



SENIOR SCENE: Construction of the new senior center on the Hollywood Reservation continues, as seen here on Dec. 23.



Kevin Johnson (2)

NATIONAL NATIVE NEWS

Bad River Band sues Army Corps of Engineers over Enbridge pipeline permit approval

The Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa filed a lawsuit Dec. 16 against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, challenging the corps' decision to grant a permit allowing the oil company Enbridge to reroute its Line 5 pipeline around the tribe's reservation in northern Wisconsin.

The lawsuit, filed in the Washington D.C. federal circuit court, is another step in the long legal history of the Enbridge pipeline and the company's effort to move it from its current route through the tribe's land. The tribe is asking that the permit approval be vacated.

In October, the corps approved Enbridge's permit to reroute the pipeline off the reservation despite significant public opposition.

The new route moves the pipeline south but it still runs across land on three sides of the reservation and crosses the Bad River upstream of the reservation. The permit was approved as the administration of President Donald Trump has moved to more aggressively support oil and natural gas projects. Earlier in the year, the corps approved a fast-tracked permitting process for Enbridge to construct a tunnel across the Straits of Mackinac so Line 5 can cross from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to its Lower Peninsula.

The tribe's lawsuit alleges that the corps violated the National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Water Act and the Administrative Procedure Act by not properly conducting required environmental reviews or following the proper procedures.

"For hundreds of years, and to this day, the Band's ancestors and members have lived, hunted, fished, trapped, gathered, and engaged in traditional activities in the wetlands and waters to be crossed by the Project," the lawsuit states. "The Project would encircle the Reservation on three sides and damage areas the Band highly values for their ecological and cultural significance. The Corps' failure to properly review and address the Project's environmental impacts to wetlands and waterways harms the Band's interest in maintaining its Reservation homeland and resources in the ceded territory."

The lawsuit alleges that the corps violated the NEPA by not giving proper consideration to the "environmental effects of construction, maintenance, and operation of the Project," including how it will harm the health of resources on and near the reservation.

Under the Clean Water Act, the corps cannot approve permits until the state or tribal government responsible for water quality in the project area certifies the project won't harm the local water. While the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources did previously approve the state permits for the Line 5 reroute, those permits are currently being challenged in a separate legal process.

The tribe alleges in the lawsuit that the corps should not have moved forward with its permits until after the state process is complete.

"[The corps] violated the Clean Water Act by issuing the Permit without ensuring that construction and maintenance of the Project would not adversely affect Wisconsin and the Band's water quality," the lawsuit states. "This includes issuing a ... permit while the required ... state water quality certification is not yet final, pending state administrative proceedings; without addressing the inadequacies the Band identified with Wisconsin's Water Quality Certification; or ensuring compliance with the Band's water quality standards."

The lawsuit also states the permit approval does not address how the project construction will affect the tribe's "ability to exercise treaty-protected rights to hunt, fish, trap, and gather in ceded territory," "failed to evaluate the risks and impacts of oil spills along the pipeline route" and "failed to evaluate the risks and impacts of blasting as a construction method."

In a statement, tribe chairwoman Elizabeth Arbuckle said the tribe would do whatever it can to protect the health of the Bad River, Lake Superior and surrounding waters.

"For more than a decade, we have had to endure the unlawful trespass of a dangerous oil pipeline on our lands and waters," Arbuckle said. "The reroute only makes matters worse. Enbridge's history is full of accidents and oil spills. If that happens here, our Tribe and other communities in the Northwoods will suffer unacceptable consequences. From the Bad River to Lake Superior, our waters are the lifeblood of our Reservation. They have fed and nurtured our Tribe for hundreds of years. We will do everything in our power to protect them."

Enbridge spokesperson Juli Kellner said in an email that while the Army Corps made an initial permit decision, it has not been signed by the corps or the company and therefore isn't a final decision that can be challenged in court. She said the company would intervene in the lawsuit to defend the permit approval.

"Enbridge submitted permit applications to state and federal regulators in early 2020 to build a new segment of pipeline around the Bad River Reservation," she said. "Enbridge's permit applications are supported by thorough and extensive environmental analysis and modeling by leading third-party experts confirming project construction impacts will be temporary and isolated, with no adverse effect to water quality or wetlands."

- Wisconsin Examiner

Wounded Knee Massacre site protection bill passes Congress

The U.S. Senate sent President Donald Trump a bill Dec. 11 that would protect a portion of the Wounded Knee Massacre site on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, sponsored the legislation in the House, where it passed in January. Sen. Mike Rounds sponsored the legislation in the Senate, where it passed Thursday, with Majority Leader John Thune as a cosponsor. Both are Republicans from South Dakota.

Johnson released a statement saying "the time is now here to properly memorialize the lost and preserve the land."

"I look forward to seeing the president sign this into law to ensure the land remains sacred for generations to come," Johnson said.

Rounds also issued a statement, saying the Wounded Knee Massacre was "a devastating low point in U.S.-Lakota relations" and "we will continue to tell the story of this dark day in our nation's history."

The legislation would place 40 acres at the massacre site in restricted-use status, which means it could not be sold, taxed, gifted or leased without approval by Congress and the Oglala Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux tribes, which jointly purchased the land three years ago.

The leaders of both tribes praised the bill's passage in comments included in a news release from Johnson.

"Today, we stand to acknowledge the atrocities committed against the Lakota people to continue to heal, to protect, to educate, and most importantly, to ensure that we never forget the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890," said Cheyenne River Tribe Chairman Ryman LeBeau.

Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out called the bill "an important act that will preserve the memory of the Wounded Knee Massacre and the legacy and sacrifice of our ancestors."

"Significantly," Star Comes Out said, "it also promotes tribal self-determination and allows us to protect our Wounded Knee site in perpetuity."

The bill's passage comes a little more than two months after U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced his rejection of calls to rescind medals awarded to soldiers for their participation in the massacre.

Bills to revoke the medals have been introduced this congressional session in the House from Jill Tokuda, D-Hawaii, and in the Senate from Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts. Neither bill has advanced out of its assigned committee, and South Dakota's members of Congress have not signed on as cosponsors.

The massacre occurred on Dec. 29, 1890. A large group of Lakota people traveling to the Pine Ridge Agency in southwestern South Dakota made camp near Wounded Knee Creek, where they were surrounded by hundreds of Army soldiers. A shot rang out during a struggle while the soldiers tried to disarm the camp, and the soldiers opened fire.

Fewer than 40 soldiers were killed (some by friendly fire, according to historians), while estimates of Lakota deaths ran from 200 to 300 or more, depending on the source, including men, women and children. After some of the bodies froze on the ground for several days, a military-led burial party placed them in a mass grave.

One hundred years later in 1990, Congress passed a resolution expressing "deep regret" for the massacre.

- South Dakota Searchlight

New Mexico U.S. Sen. Heinrich reintroduces act to strengthen tribal buffalo herds

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) announced Dec. 16 he is reintroducing legislation to improve federal support for tribal buffalo herds, an effort he said he hopes will return the buffalo within his lifetime "to the prominent place they once occupied as the keystone species on American shortgrass prairies."

Co-sponsored with U.S. Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-Okl.), the Indian Buffalo Management Act directs the federal Interior Department to work with tribes to develop, protect and grow buffalo herds across the country, authorizing up to \$14 million annually. The bill seeks to spur more coordination and consistent investment at the Interior Department, which has provided only "nominal" funds over the last 20 years to tribes that want to start or expand buffalo herds, according to a news release from Heinrich's office.

The InterTribal Buffalo Council, which has been pushing to return buffalo to tribal land for more than 30 years, endorsed the legislation. The council has 89 tribal members in 22 states, including at least 10 New Mexico tribes and pueblos, according to a recent membership list.

"Helping Tribes reestablish herds of buffalo on our reservations is a righteous thing for the Congress to do and will be thoroughly welcomed by Tribes and Indian people across the country," council leaders, including Delbert Chisholm of Taos Pueblo, said in a statement.

At least 60 million buffalo once roamed throughout much of the United States before European settlers and the United States military destroyed all but a few hundred by the end of the 19th century. Indigenous people relied on the buffalo — "culturally and nutritionally" — for thousands of years, according to the council leaders' statement.

Versions of the legislation have passed either the House of Representatives or the Senate, but not both, in recent years. Heinrich

and Mullin (R-Okl.) also cosponsored the bill last year, and it passed the Senate in December but never received a hearing in the House.

"I'm proud to reintroduce this bipartisan legislation to strengthen federal support for Tribal buffalo programs and continue the growth of Tribal buffalo herds," Heinrich said in a statement. "I look forward to continuing to work with Senator Mullin to strengthen this federal partnership and secure future funding for this initiative."

- Source NM (New Mexico)

Tribe regains land near Yosemite National Park

Overlooking Yosemite Valley and both forks of the Wild and Scenic Merced River, Henness Ridge is a place of extraordinary beauty and profound cultural and ecological significance.

Sitting atop a strategic ridgeline that bridges Yosemite National Park and Sierra National Forest, the nearly 900-acre property has now been returned to the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation — restoring a piece of Yosemite's ancestral homeland to its original caretakers.

This transfer, completed in November 2025 with funding from the California Natural Resources Agency Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program, represents a landmark achievement for both cultural restoration and conservation. For the Southern Sierra Miwuk people, who were expelled from Yosemite with the establishment of the park, it establishes a presence in their homeland and provides a base for self-governance, cultural revitalization, and community healing. For PFT, which acquired the property to restore and conserve the extraordinary natural forest, prevent development and protect it forever, it fulfills a vision decades in the making.

"This land will be a sanctuary for our people and a place to reconnect with our ancestors," said Sandra Chapman, Tribal Council Chair and elder of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation.

From the outset, PFT saw Henness Ridge as an irreplaceable landscape at risk. It contains conifer forests with sugar pine, cedar and fir, oak woodlands and meadows, and many springs, including the headwaters of two tributaries of the South Fork Merced. It also holds evidence of long use by the Southern Sierra Miwuk: an ancient trail traverses the property, linking the oak woodlands of the Central Valley to Yosemite Valley.

"When we were first approached to purchase the property, which was actually included in the proposed boundary for Yosemite National Park and is now the boundary limiting the Yosemite West development, we knew its protection was integral to Yosemite's ecology and history. Protecting it was essential," recalls Laurie Wayburn, PFT's President.

PFT initially sought to add Henness Ridge to Yosemite National Park, aligning with John Muir's vision of the integrity of the landscape, and in 2014, PFT transferred a portion of the property to the park. But congressional opposition to expanding public lands blocked efforts to bring the remainder into the park, despite universal, bipartisan support within California. At that turning point, PFT began to consider another future, one that would prove even more fitting.

After learning that the lands were within the ancestral territory of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation's and supporting their effort to become federally recognized, PFT opened discussions with the SSMN to see if they might be interested in owning it. They were — a number of the SSMN had a vision of again being on the land, restoring both the land and their cultural roots. Now, with years of effort, that has come to pass. "Returning Henness Ridge to the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation restores not only ecological integrity but also justice. It gives the tribe back a piece of Yosemite."

For the SSMN, the return of Henness Ridge is both practical and spiritual. "This land will be a sanctuary for our people and a place to reconnect with our ancestors," says Sandra Chapman, Tribal Council Chair and elder of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation. "It allows us to restore cultural practices, bring our community together, and ensure a healthy legacy for our children and grandchildren."

- Pacific Forest Trust

North Carolina's Lumbee Tribe receives full federal recognition

After a 137-year struggle, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina has finally received full federal recognition from the U.S. government.

Members of the Native American tribe shed tears as it reached the historic milestone in Washington, D.C. Tribal Chairman John L. Lowery witnessed President Trump sign the bill that extended acknowledgment to the tribe at the White House on Dec. 18.

"I'm so thankful today for everyone who has helped us along this way — everyone from our ancestors from the late 1880s all the way up to present day. So many people have been a part of this fight," Lowery said in a video posted to the tribe's social media accounts.

Federal lawmakers included the Lumbee Fairness Act in the \$900 billion annual military spending package.

The Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina has 55,000 members. The tribal territory is located in the southeastern part of the state in Robeson, Hoke, Cumberland, and Scotland Counties.

Federal recognition opens the door to an expanse of federal resources for tribes.

Federally recognized tribes are eligible to receive federal funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Benefits include support for housing, education and health care.

"I do believe that the biggest benefit we're going to receive as a tribe is Indian Health Services," Lowery said during a press conference Dec. 19. "For our people who do not have health care insurance, or our people who have high health care insurance, they will be able to work through Indian Health Services to get services provided to them."

In 2022, after the measure was introduced in the House, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the federal government would spend nearly \$250 million in providing health benefits to Lumbee Tribe members over four years through the Indian Health Service.

Federally recognized tribes hold certain rights to self-governance. The designation expands tribal control over economic development by authorizing the BIA to take land into trust for the benefit of the tribe.

The Lumbee first petitioned Congress for federal recognition in 1888. The tribe then only received partial recognition in 1956.

North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein applauded [the Dec. 18] milestone. "The state has long recognized the Lumbee Tribe," he said in a news release. "Full federal recognition will allow members access to the federal health care, education, housing, child care, and disaster relief benefits afforded other federally recognized tribes. These benefits will in turn create economic opportunities for the Tribe and the surrounding community."

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., sponsored the bipartisan Lumbee Fairness Act in the upper chamber. He credited Trump in a statement, calling the designation long overdue for the Lumbee people.

He said "a historic injustice has been corrected, and the Lumbee people can finally access the full federal benefits they have long earned and deserve."

Trump issued a memo in January directing the Interior Department to develop a plan to assist the tribe in obtaining full federal recognition.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians opposed the recognition. Tribal leaders said the Lumbee circumvented proper federal eligibility procedures that require historical evidence of Native heritage. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians had been the only federally recognized Native American tribe in North Carolina. The Lumbee is now the 575th federally recognized tribe in the United States.

"I know with every fiber of my being that our ancestors are smiling down on us today," Lowery said in a statement as the bill was headed to Trump's desk. "After decades of waiting, praying, and fighting, our Tribe has finally crossed a barrier that once seemed impossible to overcome."

More than a dozen tribes from several states are listed online as petitioning the Interior Department for federal acknowledgment. The Office of Federal Acknowledgement website says decisions are based on factors that include anthropological, genealogical, and historical research.

The Department has denied petitions that it deems fail to meet its seven-part criteria that define an Indian tribe under federal law. The requirements include that "the petitioner comprises a distinct community and demonstrates that it existed as a community from 1900 until the present."

Petitioners may wait decades for a resolution.

- NPR

Ottawa offers over \$35.5B for First Nations child welfare reform

Canada Prime Minister Mark Carney's government is presenting a new plan worth more than \$35.5 billion to keep First Nations children connected to their communities, culture and families.

The offer is less than the \$47.8 billion presented by former prime minister Justin Trudeau's government over 10 years, but it covers a shorter period of time and contains a key difference: a \$4.4-billion annual commitment starting in 2033-34 after the initial \$35.5 billion is spent.

Indigenous Services Minister Mandy Gull-Masty shared the details with CBC News before making the announcement in Ottawa on Dec. 22 — the day her government's plan to reform the on-reserve child welfare system is due to be submitted at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.

"Every day that we continue to try to define what an agreement looks like or trying to determine through legal measures how you're going to stop discrimination is another day that a child is in care," Gull-Masty said.

"If we're going to really address that, it has to be in creating a system where a child is in care surrounded by their community, by those that they know, by those that love them, by those that are going to teach them their culture, their identity, their language."

But the government's plan isn't the only one the tribunal is considering.

A group of First Nations chiefs and children's advocates, known as the National Children's Chiefs Commission, is filing a competing proposal with the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society.

"At the centre of our plan is our love for our kids," said Cindy Blackstock, executive director of the Caring Society.

The commission was directed by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to develop a First Nations-led plan after chiefs rejected the \$47.8 billion offer from the Trudeau government last year, over concerns the money was only earmarked for 10 years and would be subject to annual reviews.

The submissions are being made nearly a decade after the tribunal issued a landmark ruling that found Ottawa racially discriminated against First Nations children by underfunding First Nations Child and Family Services, and ordered an end to the discrimination.

The proposals also come almost 20 years following a joint human rights complaint made by the AFN and the Caring Society in 2007.

If the tribunal approves Ottawa's plan, Gull-Masty said the more than \$35.5 billion in funding will be secured in a legal order to ensure it's protected from future changes in government and will be made available right away.

She said the government has not taken away the \$47.8 billion previously on the table because it has been drawing from those funds to pay for services at a cost of approximately \$4.4 billion per year.

- CBC News (Canada)

Citizen Potawatomi Nation blazes new path with foreign trade zone, helping companies navigate tariff changes

About an hour's drive outside Oklahoma City is one of the first active foreign trade zones in Indian Country — an economic tool for tribes and companies seeking stability amid fluctuating tariffs. Meet Citizen Potawatomi Nation's Iron Horse Industrial Park.

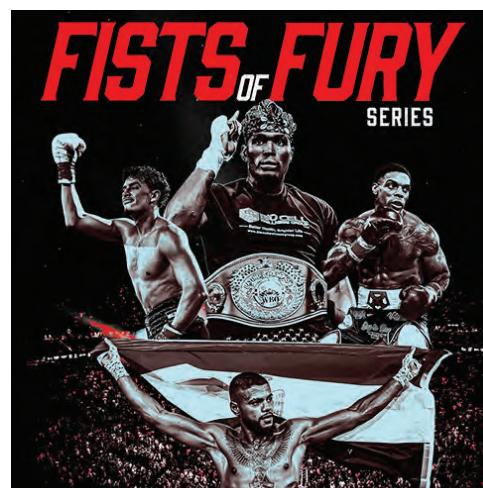
The 700 acres of trust land in Shawnee are home to a pipe manufacturer and a switch engine locomotive named "Linda." But the site's most unique feature sits inside a fenced-in area of a warehouse: a Customs and Border Protection cage.

This is a foreign trade zone, or FTZ, where goods can be legally imported and exported. Unlike the other FTZs across the country, this one is run by the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

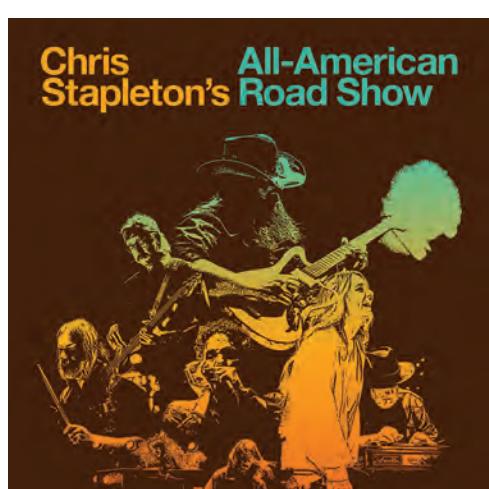
SOUTH FLORIDA'S ULTIMATE ENTERTAINMENT DESTINATION



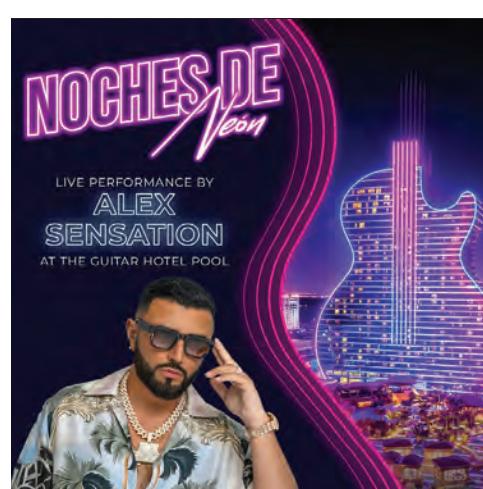
JANUARY 2
STAY STRONG JAMAICA



JANUARY 4
FISTS OF FURY



JANUARY 10 & 11
CHRIS STAPLETON



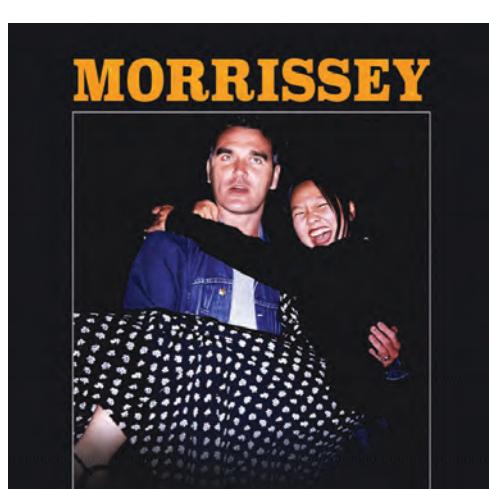
JANUARY 16
NOCHES DE NEÓN



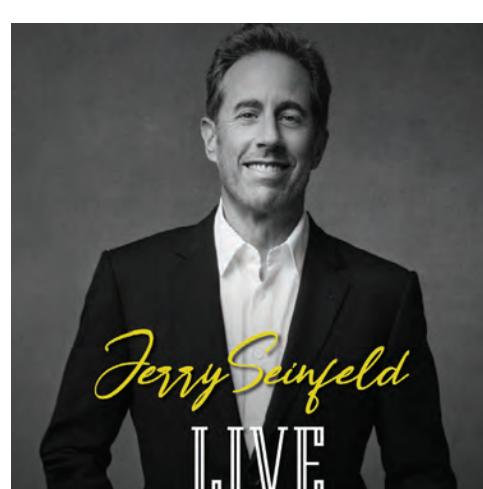
JANUARY 16
STAVROS HALKIAS



JANUARY 17
MIAMI COMEDY FESTIVAL



JANUARY 22
MORRISSEY



JANUARY 23 & 24
JERRY SEINFELD



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Education

B

Gov. DeSantis honors Ahfachkee, PECS students, teachers

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

TALLAHASSEE — Students and teachers from schools on two Seminole Tribe of Florida reservations were guests at a celebration of Native American Heritage Month at the governor's mansion in Tallahassee Dec. 4.

The 22 students and their teachers from Ahfachkee School in Big Cypress and Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School in Brighton toured the home before Gov. Ron DeSantis presented awards for art and essay submissions for Native American Heritage Month. The theme for the art and essay contests was "Celebrating the Achievements of Native American Floridians." The governor also recognized teachers with Excellence in Education awards.

PECS played an important role in the state's recognition of Native American Heritage Month when in 2022, students petitioned the Governor's Office and the Department of Education to spread awareness of Native Americans by holding art and essay contests. They created a resolution for the state to "increase the recognition of Indigenous people as well as the knowledge and acceptance of Indigenous people statewide."

Every year since then, the governor has hosted a gathering at the mansion to recognize the students and distribute the awards.

"Native American Heritage Month is a celebration of identity, resilience, and the continuing contributions of Native people to the arts, education, leadership, and community," wrote PECS principal Tracy Downing in a newsletter to students and families. "It's also an opportunity for all students to learn more about the history and heritage that shape our state and nation."

Winners of the art contest were Aziyah Washington, PECS kindergarten; Jayley Rose Billie-Perez, Ahfachkee first grade; Evianna Nunez, PECS second grade; and Oaklee Hipp, PECS third grade.

PECS essay contest winners were students Reid Trent for "Wild Cat" and Samuel Van Camp for "Louise Gopher."



Governor Ron DeSantis with Native American Heritage Month award winners from left to right, Aziyah Washington (PECS), Jayley Rose Billie-Perez (Ahfachkee), Evianna Nunez (PECS) and Oaklee Hipp (PECS).



Governor Ron DeSantis with teachers who were awarded the Excellence in Education award. From left to right are PECS teachers Quenten Pritchard and Jennifer Ellis, Pasco High School teacher Samson Crazy Horse Clark and Ahfachkee ESE specialist Billie McDonald.



Beverly Bidney
PECS and Ahfachkee students, along with Miss Florida Seminole Bailey Marie Latchford and Jr. Miss Florida Seminole Chaka Yani Smith, attend the awards ceremony at the governor's mansion in Tallahassee Dec. 4.

◆ See GOVERNOR on page 3B

Rosetta Stone partners with Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to preserve its language

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

Language is central to the customs and spirituality of communities worldwide. A drastic decline in Chahta Anumpa, the Choctaw language, in the last several years has affected the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (CNO). In December, Rosetta Stone and CNO announced a long-term partnership to ensure the language—a living expression of the Choctaw people's identity, values, and sovereignty—endures.

Spoken for centuries across the southeastern United States, the Choctaw language is more than just a means of communication. This collaboration with Rosetta Stone will develop an immersive course designed with authentic recordings, cultural input, and imagery provided by tribal members.

"When we speak Chahta, our ancestors speak through us," said CNO Chief Gary Batton in a press release. "Each word spoken is the core that strengthens our families, our culture and secures our identity as the Choctaw people. This partnership to share our language is more than a program. It is an act of love for our people and a promise to keep our culture alive for generations to come."

Anjanette Williston, the tribe's language program director, estimated the loss of 75 elders post COVID-19. The pandemic took a toll on fluent Choctaw language speakers, marking the importance of CNO's collaboration with Rosetta Stone.

Rosetta Stone's Endangered Language Program has partnered with communities across the world for more than two decades to ensure at-risk languages are recorded and taught to younger generations. The program has worked with several other Indigenous languages across North America, including Kanien'kéha (Mohawk), Sitimaxa (Chitimacha), Inupiaq (Coastal) and Inupiaq



Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Chief Gary Batton.

(Kobuk/Selawik), Iñupiaq (North Slope), and Dine' Bizaad (Navajo).

The Choctaw Nation is the third largest federally recognized Indian Nation in the United States, with over 230,000 tribal members. Its reservation spans 10,923 square miles throughout the southeast corner of Oklahoma. As the first tribe to cross the Trail of Tears, its oral traditions date back nearly 13,000 years; that same strength unites their tribe today.

"Language is deeply personal. It connects us to family, history and place," said Paul Mishkin, CEO of IXL Learning, Rosetta Stone's parent company, in the release. "Through our Endangered Languages Program, we're honored to work alongside the Choctaw Nation to protect not just words, but the identities and cultures they carry."

More information will be released prior to the program's scheduled release date in June.

PECS holds annual Survivor Day

STAFF REPORT

BRIGHTON — On Dec. 19, Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School hosted its annual Survivor Day, a tradition that brings students and families together for friendly challenges to foster parental participation and help build relationships between the community and the school.

A plethora of challenges and stations gives players the chance to show off their competitive spirit. Students pair up with a parent, sibling, or family member and compete for the championship title. Competitors who earn the most points in each challenge face off in the final challenge, determining the overall winner.

Survivor Day has been held every year since the school opened in 2007.



Hayden Nunez, left, and Kiara Jackson participate in PECS' Survivor Day on Dec. 19.



PECS
Chance Madrigal, left, and Yopalakiyo Osceola.



PECS
Mae Madrigal, left, and Serenity Bishop.



PECS
Mary Jane Osceola, left, and Katie Bert,

Hill Week takes place Feb. 10-12

FROM PRESS RELEASE

Hill Week, the National Indian Education Association's annual in-person advocacy event focused on Native education, will be held Feb. 10-12 in Washington, D.C. The week brings together tribal nations, Native educators, families, and allies to hear from federal leaders, share what is happening in their communities, and speak

directly with Congress about the needs of Native students.

Grounded in the theme Sovereign Education: Forging Our Way Forward, Hill Week lifts up the message that tribal nations know what our students need and that educational sovereignty must guide federal policy.

For more information go to niea.org.

GOVERNOR

From page 1B

Educators of the year included Jennifer Ellis, PECS instructional coach; Billie McDonald, Ahfachkee Exceptional Student Education specialist; and Quenten Pritchard, PECS 7th and 8th grade civics and history teacher.

Results of the 2025 Native American Heritage Month art and essay contests:

ART

1. Aziyah Washington (Kindergarten-PECS) – “Fry Bread Under the Chickee”
2. Jayley Rose Billie-Perez (1st Grade-Ahfachkee School) – “Betty Mae Tiger Jumper”
3. Evianna Nunez (2nd Grade-PECS) – “Native American Fire Camp”
4. Oaklee Hipp (3rd Grade-PECS) - “Osceola”

ESSAY

1. Mason D'Angelo (Deer Park Elementary, New Port Richey) – “Why Osceola's Story Should be Told”
2. Reid Trent (PECS) – “Wild Cat”
3. Tanja Berry (FLVS, Crestview) – “Florida History Through the Lens of Betty Mae Tiger Jumper”
4. Samuel Van Camp (PECS) – “Louise Gopher”
5. Nathalia Matheus (Zephyrhills High School) – “The Canvas of Continuity: The Art and Legacy of Seminole Artist Noah Billie”
6. Kadance Reeves (Vanguard High School) – “John Hick's Legacy of Leadership”

EDUCATOR

1. Jennifer Ellis (PECS) – PreK-8th Grade Instructional Coach
2. Samson Crazy Horse Clark (Pasco High School, Dade City) – 10th Grade ELA, AICE Global Perspectives
3. Billie McDonald (Ahfachkee) – K-12 ESE
4. Quenten Pritchard (PECS) – 7th & 8th Grade Civics & History



Beverly Bidney

PECS students, from left to right, Silas Snow, Juan Howard, Okaloni Collins, Margaria Fudge and Cassie Pearce, share a laugh on a couch in the governor's mansion sunroom.

Native law students in Minnesota receive scholarships

STAFF REPORT

In December, all nine scholarships awarded by the Minnesota Native American Bar Association (MNABA) were given to students at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law. The MNABA celebrated the upper-year law student's accomplishments at their annual fall feast.

The independent law school offers students a path of study in the Native American Law and Sovereignty (NALS) Institute, a unique legal program for students with an interest in Native American law. With the largest enrollment of Native law students in the nation, Native students

find support through the Native American Law Student Association and Indigenous Women's Law Society and organizations like MNABA.

Recipients included Leo John Bird (Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Tribes), Tashina Emery (Keweenaw Bay Indian Community), Rachel Evangelisto (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe), Case Quinn (Cherokee Nation and Delaware Tribe), Kylian Hill (Red Lake Band of Chippewa), Corrina Kingbird (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe), Ashley LaFraniere (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), Christopher Parisien (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), and Adrianna Rivera (Native Hawaiian).



Courtesy photo
Native American law students receive scholarships from the Minnesota Native American Bar Association.

Harvard honors Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition

FROM PRESS RELEASE

The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition was honored in November by Harvard's Honoring Nations Awards for advancing Indigenous-led stewardship, cultural protection, and tribal-federal collaboration in the management of Bears Ears National Monument.

Founded by the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Zuni Tribe, and the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, the coalition was honored for advancing a model of tribal collaboration, cultural stewardship, and consensus-based decision-making rooted in traditional knowledge.

“This award affirms what our elders and leaders have taught us, that Indigenous governance is powerful, effective, and necessary,” said Anthony Sanchez Jr., Head Councilman of the Zuni Tribe and Co-Chair

of the BEITC, in a statement. “Our work at Bears Ears is about responsibility, healing, and protecting the cultural legacy of our Nations for future generations. For the Zuni people, these lands hold the footprints of our ancestors, and it is our duty to care for them with reverence and humility.”

One major milestone considered by the Harvard Project was the 2025 finalization of the Bears Ears Resource Management Plan, the first management plan to implement tribal-federal collaborative management for a U.S. national monument. The plan, shaped by the Bears Ears Commission and grounded in traditional knowledge, affirms the role of tribal nations as co-stewards of their ancestral homelands. Through initiatives like youth leadership programs, cultural landscape protection, and educational partnerships, BEITC’s model is already inspiring other Indigenous efforts across the country.

University of Arizona and tribal enterprise sign naming rights partnership

FROM PRESS RELEASE

TUCSON, Ariz. — The University of Arizona and Casino Del Sol, an enterprise of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, announced Nov. 17 a 20-year naming rights agreement for Arizona Stadium valued at more than \$60 million, the largest such agreement in Big 12 Conference history. Under the partnership, the venue will be known as Casino Del Sol Stadium.

The naming partnership includes new exterior and interior branding, field logos, and digital platforms, along with expanded integration into national TV broadcasts.

According to a press release, through new programs and co-created initiatives, the partnership between U of A and the tribe will deepen academic, cultural and economic links between the university and the tribe.

The Pascua Yaqui Tribe values partnerships grounded in respect and opportunity,” Julian Hernandez, chairman of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, said in the release. “Our collaboration with the University of Arizona reflects our shared commitment to education, cultural preservation and community strength. This agreement honors the tribe’s deep roots in this region and creates pathways for prosperity that will benefit our people and Southern Arizona for generations.”

Painting ‘en plein’ air (in the open air)

BY ELGIN JUMPER

The basic goal of painting outdoors is to capture a moment in time, with speed and yet, with accuracy - whether a beginner or a bit more along in your painting journey - in spite of the fleeting light, shadows and changing weather conditions. (To be sure, Monet had made this way of painting famous, back in the late-1850s).

Yet, you'll learn to enhance observation skills, making personal connections with Nature, which seems magical, at times, and has a rejuvenating effect, as you experience it directly. Your skills are now on the ascent, you're making rapid decisions, editing, simplifying, thinking on your feet, as they say.

You'll develop through experience, and earnest practice, as well as, experimentation. And, in this way, in due course, you'll begin to create authentic, sincerely-painted studies and works.

I started painting in the open air some 17 years ago, with my late-friend, and fellow-artist, Jimmy Osceola. Indeed our painting expeditions took us from Hollywood to Yeehaw Junction, Brighton, Big Cypress, and Immokalee Reservations, to name but a few of the locations we visited, in our quest for the ultimate Florida landscape paintings.

I recall painting an old chickee in Immokalee once, near the tribal event grounds. It was situated on a patch of yellow-green grass with Spanish moss draped on the oaks and pines. There was a little field of sunlight that had breached the ramparts of

ominous clouds and treetops and cascaded radiantly, triumphantly down, upon the little chickee, creating a kind of painted prayer, if you will, which left me completely in awe. I simply could not pass the blessed scene by. It became one of my earliest oil painting studies.

It was an thrilling experience! And though this was early on in my painting journey, still, I remember hurrying to mix the oil paints just right, to obtain accurate colors and light effects, that I was seeing before me.

It is challenging, without a doubt. Because with outdoor painting, for all intents and purposes, you must work fast, and yet, at the same time, you must paint as accurately as possible.

The desire and passion, I felt back then,

for painting En Plein Air has never left me. I feel the same urgency today to paint outdoors as I had when I first started, if not more so. That much I know. It's endless.

Which reminds me of the endless sawgrass we have in Florida.

There's a vast beauty in the vibrancy of the Everglades, the sparkling rivers, the blue lakes, and panoramic sawgrass, the multi-colored swamps, at dusk, and the early-morning marshes, the scents of wildflowers and tall cypress hammocks, in the glowing mists, palmetto clusters, the last enduring vestiges of Old Florida. And sadly, though, there is an inevitable diminishment, as well.

Which is why there's a crucial need now for artists/painters to venture out into nature, to these one-of-a-kind locations, to document, to record in paint, these extraordinarily-vivid landscapes.



At left, Elgin Jumper paints while sitting in an open area of Loxahatchee River Battlefield Park; at right, Jumper with the painting.



Courtesy photo, left; Kevin Johnson, right

energetic. It's a style of painting with its own charms.

I've been painting now going on twenty years, in the studio and outdoors. The memories of love ones, of painting for long hours, outdoors in rain or shine, of learning and studying art and art history, the days of successful paintings, and the promise of better days to come, are always with me, wherever I may be.

A painting “in one session” is known as, “Ala Prima,” so you've got to work quickly. Nature's always alive and changing! Dynamic light and shadow that doesn't stay still! That means your brushwork will be more looser, than it is in the studio, more

glorious outdoors, where - happily - I render the orange-red streaks of an Everglades sunset sky.

For I am a painter (as well).

Seminole artist, poet and writer Elgin Jumper is a contributor to the Seminole Tribune.

Naples community celebrates Christmas in St. Augustine

STAFF REPORT

ST. AUGUSTINE — Nearly 100 members of the Naples community gathered in St. Augustine a few days before Christmas to celebrate the season together.

The brisk weather was perfect for a nighttime tour of the city's holiday lights in an open-sided trolley Dec. 12. A mass of revelers filled the streets, Christmas carols were heard and even a Santa or two were spotted in the crowd as the trolley traversed the narrow streets of the country's oldest city.

The following day, the group gathered at the fort at the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument for a formal portrait of tribal members in their finest patchwork. The Christmas banquet held later that evening featured Taulia Lave and his band, who traveled from Hawaii for the occasion. The band got people up and dancing to lively country tunes, old and new.



Beverly Bidney



Members of the Naples community pose in front of the fort at the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument on Dec. 13.



Beverly Bidney

At left, Brian Zepeda, and above, from left to right, Mary Osceola, David Osceola and Hilary Osceola enjoy the festivities in St. Augustine.

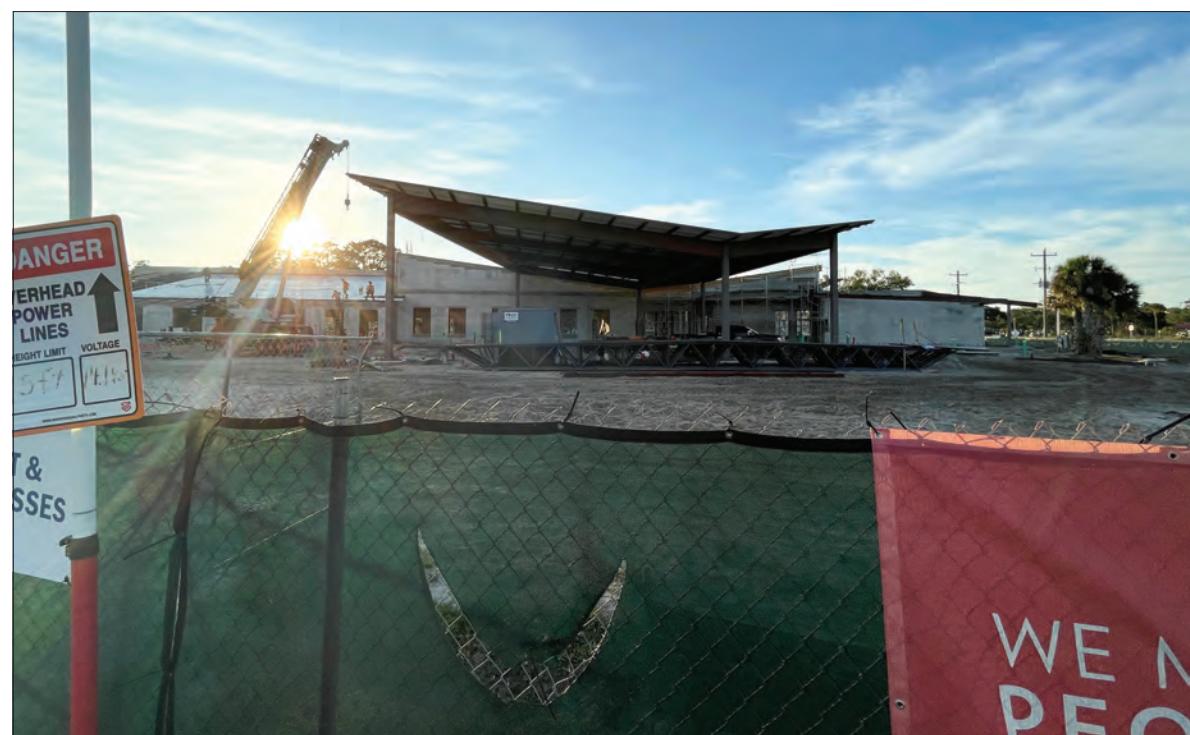
Enjoying St. Augustine's holiday lights from a trolley are, from left to right in the first row, Kyle Zepeda, Joaquin Velasco-Osceola, Colton Zepeda and Pedro Zepeda.



Beverly Bidney

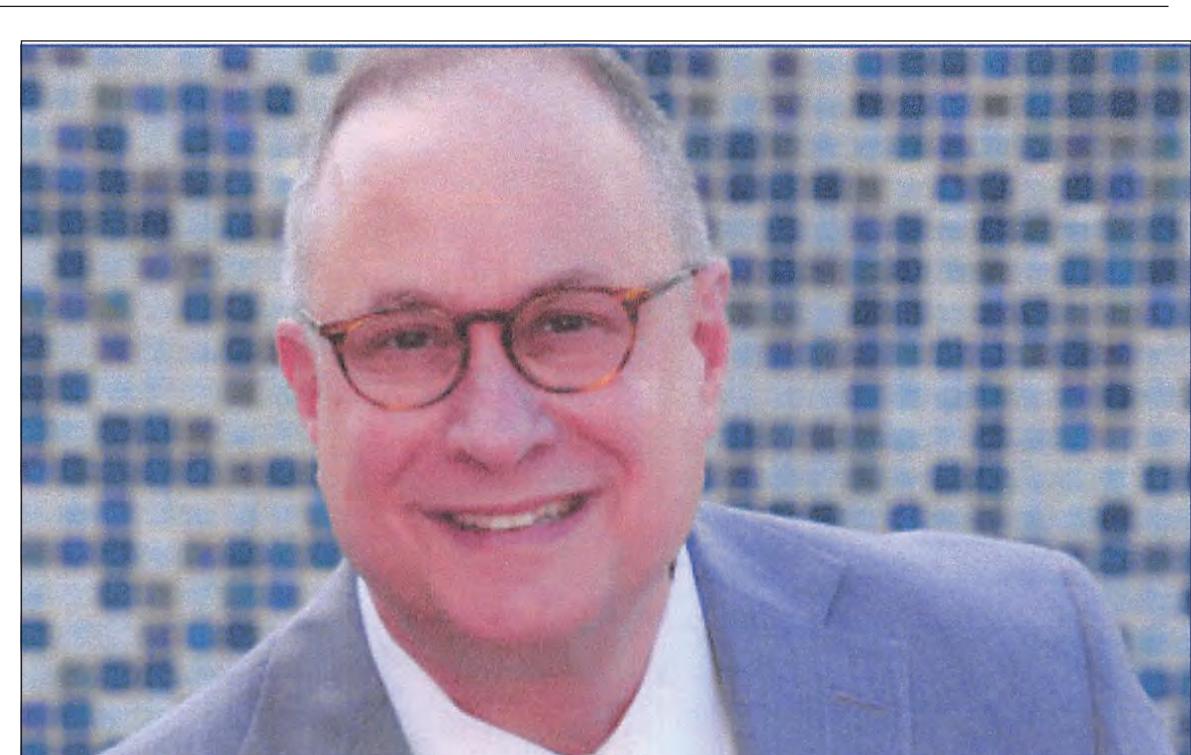
Kids hit the dance floor at the Naples community Christmas party in St. Augustine.

Brighton Preschool construction continues



The late afternoon sun sets in the west Dec. 5 as construction continues on the new Brighton Preschool, which is being built across the street from the current facility. The project also includes a new playground.

Kevin Johnson



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Counsel to the Protestors at Standing Rock

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Reservations celebrate Christmas



Kids enjoy one of the carnival rides at the Brighton Christmas celebration.



Ahfachkee Day School performs for Big Cypress's Christmas celebration: "A Christmas Town Nightmare."



Mitch, Jackie, Steve, and Luke Osceola pose together at Hollywood's Christmas party.



Talia Frank and Ember Frank with Santa at Lakeland's Christmas party.



Brighton Board Rep. Bryan Arledge and Nancy Frank at the Lakeland Christmas Party.



From left to right, Brighton Councilman Larry Howard, Miss Florida Seminole Bailey Marie Latchford, Chairman Marcellus W. Osceola Jr., Jr. Miss Florida Seminole Chaka Yani Smith, President Holly Tiger and Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola at the tribalwide seniors Christmas Party in Brighton.



FSU Basketball player Xavier Osceola is greeted by Hollywood Councilman Christopher Osceola.



Dancers greeting guests at Trail's Christmas celebration.



Spencer Battiest sings Christmas songs at Hollywood's Christmas party.



Jack Skellington and Sally pose with Cohen Tommie at Big Cypress's Christmas party.



Bobby Henry and Annie Henry at Lakeland's Christmas celebration.



Fiona Oscoela, Azalea Stewart, Valentina Stewart and Genesis Stewart at Hollywood's "Cirque du Seminole" Christmas celebration.



Sandra Garcia and Veron Sardegna pose with Santa Claus at Big Cypress's "A Christmas Town Nightmare."



Debbie Henry, President Holly Tiger, Phaydra Clark and Christina Clark at the Lakeland Christmas party with Santa in the back.



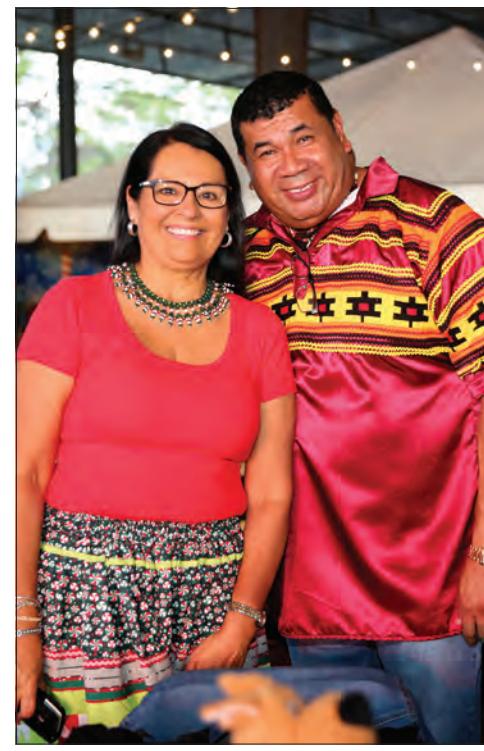
Santa enjoys visiting with Barbara Henry and Larry Sisneroz at the Lakeland Christmas party.



Trista Timothy and Mya Sneed at the Fort Pierce Christmas party.



On the photo podium at Trail's Christmas party clockwise are Jeanie Oscoela, Zahara Ardley, Zill Ardley and Zaviyah Ardley.



Michele Thomas and Brighton Councilman Larry Howard at the Brighton Christmas party.



Birdie Oscoela and McKenna Ramirez enjoy Trail's party.



Sarah and Josh Sneed at the Fort Pierce Christmas dinner in Jensen Beach.



Autumn Jumper and Allison Oscoela at Hollywood's Christmas celebration.



Students from the Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School choir sing their hearts out for the crowd at the Brighton Christmas party.



President Holly Tiger, center, greets S. Choppa, Jennifer Oscoela and Julie Rodriguez at the Brighton Christmas celebration Dec. 18 at the Fred Smith Rodeo Arena.



Brighton Board Rep. Bryan Arledge with Santa and Richard Bowers at the tribalwide seniors Christmas Party at Seminole Brighton Bay Hotel and Casino.



Lawanda and Dawana Tommie at the Fort Pierce Christmas dinner.

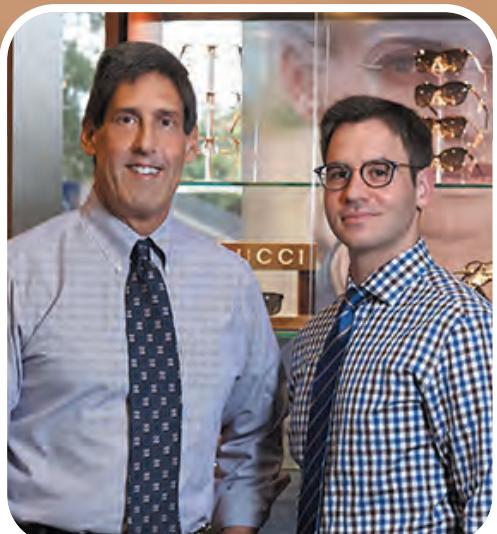
Courtesy photo

YOUR VISION IS OUR FOCUS



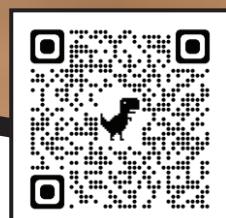
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Sports

C

Basketball returns to cheers at Ahfachkee School

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

BIG CYPRESS — At one point during the Ahfachkee School basketball teams' doubleheader, about 100 people filled the bleachers in the school's gymnasium, providing a spirited athletic environment with students, parents, staff and others from the reservation community cheering for the Warriors.

The student body belted out a "Let's Go Warriors" cheer.

It was a scene that hasn't been seen since 2019. Ahfachkee's six-year drought of being without sports teams ended in early December when Warrior teams played games on the road. The teams' first games in the gym that opened two years ago were held Dec. 11 against A.E.F. The first game featured the elementary coed team followed by a boys game featuring a mixture of middle and high school players.

"It's amazing," Ahfachkee principal Phil Baer said as he watched the games. "It took us a long time to get it. The kids are so excited. The reservation is excited. It gives kids something to do after school. For some kids, this is what is keeping them in school, so that's important."

"It means a lot to the kids. They need more extracurricular activities out here, being out here in a rural location it's hard to keep them motivated to do something if they're not consistent with it," said Big Cypress Councilwoman Mariann Billie, who was among the spectators.

Ahfachkee also has a middle school/high school girls team, which didn't play that day.

Creig Freeman, the school's new athletic director, has led the way in the return of sports to the school. He smiled when informed about the attendance figure.

"That's a good turnout. I'm happy for that," he said.

Although not enough boys or girls signed up to have exclusive high school teams, the future looks bright with a healthy number of players — 19 — on the elementary roster. Baer said the goal is to return in the near future to the Florida High School Athletic Association; for now, the teams are playing in a Broward County-based league.

As for the home openers, Ahfachkee's coed team played a solid game at both ends and won, 21-11.

The starting five in the gym's first-ever game were Braylen Carter, Zhane Carter, Nickolai Billie, Allie Billie and George Grasshopper. Braylen Carter christened the new gym by hitting a 3-pointer for the first points. Zhane Carter was the leading scorer with eight points. Grasshopper had six points.



Curtis Smith grabs a powerful rebound in the middle-high school game.



Blaze Cypress takes a jump in the middle-high school boys game.



The Ahfachkee coed elementary team's bench and crowd give a big cheer during the team's first game in its gym Dec. 11.



Zhane Carter goes behind the back with this dribble in the coed elementary game.

The middle-high school boys team played a close game, but lost 30-28. Blaze Cypress was a standout, which included scoring five points in the final minutes as he helped Ahfachkee battle back from an eight-point deficit to make it a two-point game.

It was the second game of the season for the boys team.

"For the most part, I'm happy because we've been making progress. A lot of these



The Ahfachkee boys middle-high school team warms up prior to its first home game Dec. 11.



George Grasshopper makes a strong move toward the hoop in the coed elementary game.



Ahfachkee defenders stop an A.E.F. player in the lane in the coed elementary game.

PECS soccer celebrates 8th grade parent night

BRIGHTON — The Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School coed soccer team honored its 8th graders prior to their final home game Dec. 17. Many family members attended.



Teo Estrada



Riley Thomas



Juan Howard

Beverly Bidney



Onnie Cypress

Beverly Bidney

Tribal youth receive football tips at Dolphins clinic



Mayli Tommie

Youngsters from the Seminole Tribe spent the evening of Nov. 18 receiving instruction from Miami Dolphins personnel, including cheerleaders and former players. The Jr. Dolphins program was held on the field at Hard Rock Stadium.



Former Miami Dolphins player Lamar Thomas signed autographs and provided instruction to tribal kids on the stadium field.



Mayli Tommie (2)



Goldie Hanks chats with a Dolphins cheerleader during the clinic.

Mayli Tommie

PECS basketball wins twice in Clewiston

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

CLEWISTON — The boys and girls basketball teams from Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School picked up a couple of wins at Clewiston High School on Dec. 16. One win was decided before halftime; the other came down to the final minute.

As has been the scenario for most of their games, the girls overwhelmed their opponent. PECS upped its record to 11-0 with a 34-9 win against Clewiston.

"The team is playing great," said girls coach Jovanny Torres.

A well-balanced attack has propelled PECS with Margauria Fudge (8 points) and Kaliyah Hodge (5 points) leading the way in scoring. Dalyse Baker's playmaking ability and Kanae Jumper's shooting have also boosted production throughout the season.

The boys are also in the midst of an outstanding season with coach Kamani Smith. The team's 28-26 win in Clewiston featured strong defense throughout, including building a 14-7 lead at halftime.

"Defense wins championships," Smith said.

PECS also shined at the line late when Clewiston trailed and began to rack up fouls.

"Free throws is what got us ahead and kept us ahead," Smith said.

Silas Snow led the offense with 14 points followed by Nakoa Smiley (9 points) and Damahni Bonilla (5 points).

The win upped PECS record to 8-3.



PECS' Silas Snow moves past a Clewiston defender on his way to the basket in the team's win Dec. 16 at Clewiston Middle School.

Kevin Johnson



Kevin Johnson

The PECS girls team has had plenty of reasons to smile this year with an 11-0 record.



Kevin Johnson

Dalyse Baker provides tough defense for PECS in its win against Clewiston.

Kevin Johnson
Matthew Peaden (3) leads the PECS smiles in the handshake line.



PECS guard Damahni Bonilla dribbles past a Clewiston defender near midcourt.

Kevin Johnson

Elakaih Collins drives the lane for a layup attempt against Clewiston.

Kevin Johnson

◆ OSCEOLA From page 1A

During FSU's trip to Broward, the team spent time on the Hollywood Reservation, including holding a practice at the Howard Tiger Recreation Center, which is where Osceola spent countless hours as a youth,

honing his skills.

"It was a complete full circle moment, knowing how many hours and how much effort I put being in that gym, being able to see it pay off in a sense," he said.

The team also joined hundreds of tribal members at the reservation's Christmas party at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood following the Orange

Bowl game.

Aside from the injury which has forced him to redshirt this season, everything has gone well for Osceola.

"It's been awesome, everything I could have hoped for and more. I think we have the best [coaching] staff in the country; there's no other staff I would want to play for. Me and my teammates are close," he said.

As of Dec. 29, FSU had a 7-6 record, which included two 3-game winning streaks and one 5-game losing streak.

Osceola lives in the same apartment building as fellow tribal member Zae Thomas from the FSU football team. Later this year, they'll be joined on campus by tribal member OB Osceola III, who recently signed with FSU baseball.

"It's great to see," Osceola said. "We're kind of trailblazers in a sense."

Strong showing by PECS athletes at county track and field meet

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

OKEECHOBEE — Pemayetv Emahav Charter School produced several winners at the annual Okeechobee County track and field meet Dec. 12 at Okeechobee High School.

The meet featured track events, standing long jump and softball throw. Competition took place in three age categories: 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14.

On the boys side, PECS was led by three individual wins from Silas Snow (200M dash, 1600M run and standing long jump) in 13-14. Issac Osceola also had a strong meet. He won the 100M dash and standing long jump in 11-12 and was second in the 200M dash.

Other standouts included Maverick Gabbard (3rd, softball throw, 9-10), Jeremy Smith (3rd, 400M run, 11-12), Cordey Jumper (2nd, 100M dash, 3rd, standing long jump, 13-14), Nakoa Smiley (2nd, softball throw, 13-14), Jaden M. (tied 3rd, 400M relay, 9-10) and the relay team of Damahni

Bonilla, Cypress Ciel, Koah Osceola and Silas Snow (2nd, 4x100, 13-14).

On the girls side, Azaleah Washington and Kanae Jumper had outstanding meets. Washington won three events (200M dash, 400M run, standing long jump) in 9-10 and she ran the final leg for the champion 4x100 relay squad which included Jayda Torres, Kali Jumper and Rowan Van Houten.

Kanae Jumper won the 1600M run and standing long jump in 13-14, finished third in the 100M dash and was part of the winning 4x100 relay team with Dalyse Baker, Kaliyah Hodge and Dylanie Peak.

Other top three finishers included Jayda Torres (2nd, 200M dash, 9-10), Kali Jumper (2nd, standing long jump, 9-10), Kalani Billie (2nd, 400M run, 11-12), Willena Tommie (1st, 200M dash; 2nd, 100M dash, 11-12), relay team of Kalani Billie, Willena Tommie, Kahniyah Billie and Emery Spencer (2nd, 4x100, 11-12), Kaliyah Hodge (2nd, 100M dash; 2nd, softball throw, 13-14), Dalyse Baker (2nd, 200M dash, 13-14), and Jaiden Fludd (3rd, softball throw, 13-14).



Willena Tommie leads the pack on her way to winning the 200M dash at the Okeechobee County track and field meet Dec. 12 at Okeechobee High School. Kevin Johnson



Kalani Billie battles to the finish line in a relay race. Kevin Johnson



Ameliana Osceola competes in the softball throw. Kevin Johnson



Kanae Jumper cruises to a big win in the girls mile for the 13-14 division. Kevin Johnson



Samuel Slocum sprints to the finish line in a relay race. Kevin Johnson



Rowen Van Houten, left, hands the baton to Kali Jumper in a relay race. Kevin Johnson



Nakoa Smiley winds up and delivers a 170-foot softball throw, good enough for second place in 13-14. Kevin Johnson



Azalea Washington completes a winning relay race in the 9-10 girls division. Kevin Johnson



Standing long jump champion Issac Osceola. Kevin Johnson



Hatton Chapman, left, gets set to receive the baton from Mason Buck in a boys relay race. Kevin Johnson



Dalyse Baker, left, receives the baton from Kaliyah Hodge as they teamed up with Kanae Jumper and Dylanie Peak to win the girls 13-14 4x100 relay. Kevin Johnson

Native fitness certification to be held in Vegas

STAFF REPORT

The Native American Fitness Council will present exercise and aging specialist certification Feb. 16-19, 2026, at the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe Wellness Center in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Elders and inactive adults can pose special challenges for fitness trainers. This certification gives attendees the skills to successfully motivate and train these community members. Chair exercises, balance training for fall prevention and modified functional movements are presented that keep elders enjoying active, independent living.

The certification event is sponsored by the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe.

For more information visit nativeamericanfitnesscouncil.com/events.

F1 race at Hard Rock Stadium returns in May

FROM PRESS RELEASE

MIAMI GARDENS — The 2026 F1 Crypto.com Miami Grand Prix will be held May 1 to May 3 at the Miami International Autodrome on the Hard Rock Stadium campus.

The F1 Sprint format will return to Miami Gardens for the third consecutive year, along with Porsche Carrera Cup North America, while McLaren Trophy America will make its Formula 1 debut.

The 2026 edition of the race will once again feature Sprint Qualifying on Friday, the F1 Sprint race on Saturday and the Grand Prix on Sunday at the 3.36-mile Miami International Autodrome.

Miami will be the only American race to host an F1 Sprint next season, following the record-breaking event this past May. The Saturday fixture set a new viewership record for Formula 1 since the format was introduced in 2021 and featured 18-year-old Kimi Antonelli on P1 of the starting grid — the youngest-ever pole sitter of an F1 race.

"We're proud that Miami has become one of the premier race weekends on the Formula 1 calendar and we plan to raise the bar once again in 2026," said Katharina Nowak, president of the Miami Grand Prix, in a statement. "The return of the Sprint race gives fans world-class racing every single day, and we're complementing that with exciting support action in McLaren Trophy America and Porsche Carrera Cup North America. We're committed to providing an experience where fans can feel the energy of Miami while enjoying a full slate of the world's best motorsport action."

To purchase tickets or learn more, fans can visit f1miamigp.com.

NB3 Foundation presents proceeds to Lightning Boy Foundation

FROM PRESS RELEASE

On Dec. 12, the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation presented a \$5,000 check to the Lightning Boy Foundation as part of the proceeds from the 2025 NB3 New Mexico Grande Slam. Lightning Boy Foundation served as the event's nonprofit partner, supporting its work serving Native youth and families.

NB3 Foundation staff Cyanne Lujan and Jon Driskell met with Felicia Rosacker-Rivera, co-founder of the Lightning Boy Foundation, and her husband George Rivera, to recognize the organization's impact and partnership. The organization was established in honor of their son, Valentino "Tzigiwhaeno" Rivera, whose love for dance and resilience following a traumatic injury inspired a mission rooted in healing, culture and movement. Named after the Tewa word for "lightning," the foundation continues Valentino's legacy by uplifting Native youth through dance, wellness and cultural expression.

Each year, NB3 Foundation partners with a different nonprofit through the New Mexico Grande Slam to help extend the reach and impact of the event. NB3 Foundation thanks its New Mexico Grande Slam sponsors and partners for their shared commitment to ensuring all children in New Mexico have the opportunity to live healthy and happy lives.

The NB3 Foundation is a national, award-winning Native-led nonprofit leading the way to improve Native American children's health.

Hard Rock Stadium to host CFP championship

STAFF REPORT

The champion of the 2025 college football season will be crowned Jan. 19 in Miami Gardens. Hard Rock Stadium will host the NCAA College Football Playoff championship game at 7:30 p.m.

Hard Rock Stadium last hosted the championship game in 2021 when Alabama routed Ohio State, 52-24. The Buckeyes are the defending national champions.

Hard Rock Stadium will be the championship game host again in 2030.

Pittsburgh volleyball standout Ryla Jones finds her edge in Native American identity

FROM NCAACOM

In a sport of inches and instincts, Pittsburgh's Ryla Jones draws strength from something bigger. The inaugural Native Student-Athlete Summit illuminated her Cree and First Nations roots, and she's seeing that connection elevate how she competes in volleyball.

"It just lit a path for me," she said.

Jones arrived at the summit curious and left with community. She'd always felt the pull of her mother's roots in Canada. The summit, held at the NCAA national office in June, turned that pull into purpose and people.

"It created a community for me and a circle that I could just run back to when I want to just dive deeper into my Native side and some traditions that I want to get

more into," Jones said. "I have so many more people in my corner now and so many people I can turn to when I feel like I want to just be more involved."

Conversations about tradition sent her back to childhood memories of dressing in regalia and attending powwows. The summit also widened her understanding of the diversity within Native communities and how she fits.

"This was like a great opportunity for me to learn about so many more tribes and so many more things I've been missing out on," she said. "It just made me so happy because I feel like there's so many other parts of me that I was able to discover and so many other people that I was able to meet. I just feel like it just helps me feel more whole."

Jones' Native connection stretches back generations in Manitoba, through the

Fisher River Cree Nation and Peguis First Nation on her mother's side. Trips to see her grandmother in Canada laid a foundation she's now building on.

"I would be always around my family in Canada just trying to learn all about my heritage," Jones said of her childhood.

The more she leans in, the more one theme keeps surfacing.

"I continue to realize how much the community is full of love and how we're just always taught to treat everyone with kindness and respect everyone," she said. "I feel like that's something that we all carry out through life."

Jones, whose father is Black, connects her diverse identity to performance and presence.

◆ See JONES on page 6C



Courtesy photo
University of Pittsburgh volleyball player Ryla Jones.

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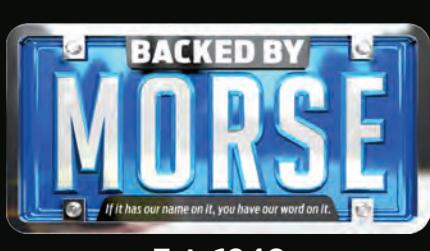
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◆ BOWDEN

From page 1A

"This project represents far more than an auction — it's the careful stewardship of Coach Bobby Bowden's life, legacy, and home, handled with the respect it deserves," Wiregrass posted on Facebook.

The extensive collection from the Bowden home features household furnishings, personal memorabilia, Florida State University and football-related items, awards, plaques, and trophies accumulated throughout Bowden's career. The collection also includes books, papers, photographs, artwork, clothing, personal effects, and legacy pieces.

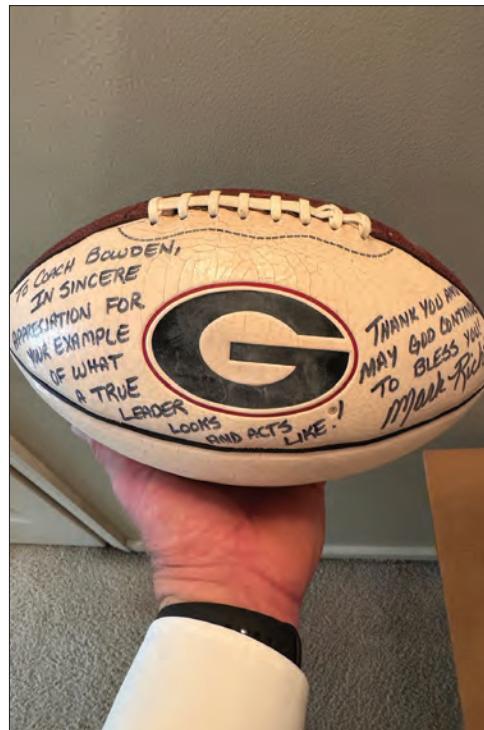
The home of Bowden and his wife, Ann, at 2813 Shamrock Street North in Tallahassee, will also be available for sale as part of the auction.

On-site preview opportunities to view items before bidding will be offered at the Bowden home; dates and times have not been announced.

Participation in the auction requires online registration in advance. A valid credit card is required to register, and a buyer's premium applies to all purchases.

"An auction format was chosen to provide open and transparent bidding, equal access for participants across the country, and a structured process that allows the market to determine value fairly. This approach aligns with the principles Coach Bowden lived by — fairness, accountability, and doing things the right way," Wiregrass wrote in a description about the auction.

Bowden died in 2021 at age 91.



Wiregrass Auction Group photos
Here's a look at some of the items in the
Bobby Bowden Legacy Auction.



◆ JONES

From page 5C

"In a room full of people who don't look like you, it's hard to be confident about who you are and your values," she said.

Jones wants more athletes who stand out and aren't afraid to be who they are, especially Native American and Black girls who might be scanning the room for someone like them. The through line is confidence, she said, and how it frees you to play your best.

"The more confident you are about who you are and your values and where you come from, the better you play," she said.

Native American representation in college sports is rising, which Jones said makes visibility matter even more. In 2024-25, there were 2,364 Native American student-athletes across NCAA divisions, up 35% since 2014-15, with women's volleyball up 28% in that span.

Her advice to that next wave stays simple on purpose.

"Be authentically you. You're created the way you are for a reason," she said. "If you're not being who you are, you kind of get lost ... but just being authentically you is the biggest part because living that way you're finding so many more communities and so many more people who help you be yourself and live a better life."

Jones comes from a family built by college sports.

Her mom played basketball at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba and professionally overseas. Her dad played basketball at Maryland. Her oldest sister, Rainelle, played volleyball at Maryland; her brother, Reis, is a senior basketball player at Charleston Southern; her sister, Ria, rows at Drexel; and her twin sister, Renee, plays volleyball at Arizona.

The siblings' competitiveness, Jones said, sharpened everyone's edges over the

years.

"Obviously, I'm the best (athlete)," Jones said, laughing, "but the family aspect made us all just compete more in our own respective sports and then it made us all want it more for each other and for ourselves."

"My parents were the first in their families to go to college. They paved the way for us, and they made us want it more for each other. We just connected through sports. It was something that we all shared a love for, and our parents just passed that down to us," she said. "The more love that we have for each other also comes from the sports that we play and how much we want to see each other succeed in our sports."

Jones said she chose Pittsburgh because the program feels people-first. Coaches recruit to values, not just verticals, and the locker room functions like a family you can always run back to, she said. Alumni filter through in the summer. Practices spill into youth camp sessions, and relationships matter as much as reps. That's her sweet spot — a community that invests in and off the court.

"Obviously it's a great program," she said. "We train really hard and we're able to find success in what we do, but I feel like the people is what makes it just a beautiful program to be a part of."

"The coaches, they're really specific in who they recruit and the people that they're recruiting because what we value means a lot to us," she said. "We value relationships. We value being a family and just making sure our program is something that you can always run back to."

The staff's belief in Jones has been a safety net for her confidence. When a practice goes sideways or a match stings, coaches are always waiting on the floor for extra reps and follow-up work. Film sessions lead to follow-up phone calls, open doors and specific plans to rebuild her psyche before the next serve.

That steady backing — from head coach Dan Fisher, associate head coach and recruiting coordinator Kellen Petrone and the rest of the staff — has helped her translate potential into production and made it easier to play free.

"I mean Kellen and Fish made it really clear that they believe in me and that they have confidence in me and what I can do," she said. "Even when I had bad games or had a bad practice they were always there after, helping me get extra reps so I can feel confident and so I can prepare the best that I can for the next game."

"Without someone who believes in you, it's kind of hard to perform your best, and they always made sure that I was going to do everything that I can to perform my best."

Pittsburgh's recent volleyball run is historic. The Panthers have reached four straight NCAA semifinals — 2021 through 2024. Jones experienced the most recent one as a freshman, part of a No. 1 seed that advanced to Louisville, Kentucky, before falling in the national semifinals.

The journey was equal parts exhilarating and inspiring for Jones, who started 34 of 35 matches as a freshman, ranked third on the team in blocks and earned Atlantic Coast Conference All-Freshman honors.

"I wasn't really sure what to expect the entire time because there are so many new places that we went, so many more teams that I've never played before, but it just made me even more excited for the future," she said, as Pittsburgh looks equipped for another deep run in the 2025 NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball Championship. "Even though (last year) didn't turn out how we wanted it to and we didn't get the final win that we wanted, I just feel like it made us all want it even more. We learned so much from that season. I'm just really excited to see what we can do this year."



Ryla Jones is a standout for the Pittsburgh volleyball team, which was ranked No. 5 in the country in December.

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