



Clubhouse gets demolished
COMMUNITY 4A



Liking 'Literacy Week' at PECS
EDUCATION 1B



Ahhfachkee girls win league title
SPORTS 1C

The Seminole Tribune

Voice of the Unconquered

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February 2026

'Warrior Workshop' addresses human trafficking crisis

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — In alignment of National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, Hard Rock International (HRI) and Seminole Gaming hosted "Warrior Workshop" on Jan. 14 at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.

The preventative educational workshop was coordinated by Durante Blais-Billie, social responsibility specialist and a recipient of the 2023 Freedom Award from PACT (Protect All Children from Trafficking). Blais-Billie invited the Seminole community and team members from Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming to share lived experiences and develop prevention strategies.

Blais-Billie was joined by Paul Pazari, vice president of Global Social Responsibility at HRI, and panelists Theresa Kennedy, Kristi House's chief anti-trafficking prevention officer, and Tsvetelina Thompson, managing director at Twentyfour-Seven Inc.

♦ See **TRAFFICKING** on page 7A

Tribal Fair & Pow Wow attracts thousands to Hard Rock

STAFF REPORT

HOLLYWOOD — What may have been the coldest Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow on record wrapped up Feb. 1 amid uncharacteristic temperatures and windchills in the 30s.

Thankfully, the three-day Tribal Fair & Pow Wow is a free, indoor event, which drew thousands to the comfortable ballrooms at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.

Participants and other guests were welcomed in the late morning/early afternoon on the first day by President Holly Tiger, Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola, Hollywood Board Rep. O'Hara Tommie and powwow coordinator Virginia Osceola; all spoke to the attendees and thanked them for coming to the tribe's largest event of the year, which included dozens of vendors, Native dance competitions, alligators, live music, arts and crafts and clothing contests, and a film festival with celebrity appearances. Additionally, billiards, rodeo, basketball and golf tournaments coincided with the event either beforehand or during.

As usual, tribes from throughout Indian Country and Canada were represented on the floor of the grand ballroom with dancers, drummers and singers. The tribal fair would end Sunday afternoon with a concert by popular singer-songwriter Tia Wood (Cree and Salish), from Canada.

♦ See **TRIBAL FAIR** on page 4B, 5B



Kevin Johnson

The floor of the grand ballroom at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood is full of Native dancers for the grand entry Jan. 30 at the start of the annual Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow.

Tribe honors its INFR World Champion

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

HOLLYWOOD — The first night of the annual Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo was held Jan. 23 on the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Hollywood Reservation. The two-day rodeo is the first rodeo of the 2026 season for the Eastern Indian Rodeo Association (EIRA).

Betty Mae's grandson Josh Jumper was honored for being the first Seminole to win a world championship at Indian National Finals Rodeo, which he did last October in team roping with Clay Gunshows. In the center of the arena, Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola and Brighton Councilman Larry Howard presented Jumper with a saddle engraved "1st Seminole World Champion" on behalf of the Tribal Council.

"Josh does things the right way," Councilman Osceola said to the spectators. "When you're looking for a role model for children, for young cowboys, for somebody to look up to, if you want to look for somebody who works hard day in and day out, stays out of trouble, he's a real man in my book, and I couldn't be more proud of Josh Jumper. I'm proud to know him. I'm proud that he's a Seminole."

"This isn't just for me; this is for all of us," Jumper said. "It can be done from here. I'm proud to be a Seminole Tribe member. I just want everyone to know to keep dreaming because this has been a dream come true for me. I've been dreaming for this since I was a little kid...Keep dreaming and trust in God and put your faith in Him and all things are possible."

Jumper, who is the EIRA president, and his family and horses live on the Big Cypress Reservation, although Councilman Osceola reminded the audience that Jumper was born in Hollywood.

Bringing home the world title was a surprise to just about everyone, including Jumper. He said in an interview at his home last November that he knows there was guidance from above.

"I want to thank the Lord, all glory to God for all this working out," Jumper said. "Without Him, none of this is possible. I just think the Lord had a hand on me and Clay the whole time."

And that includes the ride against what Jumper described as a really strong steer in the previous round. Jumper doesn't usually get nervous, but he did with this one.

"I guess the Lord was getting us ready for the fourth steer," he said.

The fierce steer wasn't the only thing that helped Jumper get ready for the final round. On the Saturday morning before the evening final, he and his wife, Andrea, read the Bible story about David and Goliath.

"David had already gotten ready for that battle before the battle because he already fought a lion and a bear and killed [them] with his bare hands. David was already ready; that's what I got from that, the Lord had us ready before that last steer," Jumper said.

At 46, Jumper had some "David" in him as an underdog, having to face rugged steers and going up against younger cowboys.

When Jumper and Gunshows' time withstood the final two pairs of cowboys, the Seminole Tribe of Florida finally had itself a world champion.

"I grabbed Clay by the shirt and I said 'We just won. We just won,'" Jumper said.

That triumphant moment came close to never occurring.

Just five months earlier, Jumper's younger brother, Moses Happy Jumper III, passed away. They practiced and rode together a lot.

"This year I lost my brother, my little brother," Jumper said. "When I lost him, that was tough. Me and him were tight. When I lost him, I was ready to give up, ready to not rodeo anymore."

Jumper had several rodeos lined up and he didn't want to go.

"Then I talked to my wife and she said you know he would want you to go," Jumper said.



Kevin Johnson

During a break at the Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo on Jan. 23, Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola, left, and Brighton Councilman Larry Howard, right, present Josh Jumper with a saddle that notes Jumper's accomplishment of being the first Seminole INFR World Champion.



Kevin Johnson

Josh Jumper with his horse Jiggy, a 10-year-old quarter horse that was part of the world champion victory at INFR last year. Jiggy is wearing the INFR World Champion saddle and Josh is holding the champion buckle.

He hit the road for a trip from Florida to Oklahoma.

"I did a lot of crying on that trip," Jumper said. "I miss my brother tremendously."

Jumper lives a humble life, and while winning a world championship has always been a goal of his, the title is not his alone. He won it for his family, his reservation, his tribe, all the while knowing faith is the foundation that carried him to victory.

"I give all the glory to God. Without Him, nothing is possible," he said. "I just want to give glory to God. He deserves all the praise and honor for this. I want to thank my wife, my mom, my dad, my whole family, my kids, my brothers. I want to thank them for always supporting me. My wife always telling me that I'm good enough when I

didn't think I was good enough."

Jumper said he's also received a boost throughout the years from his longtime sponsor.

"I want to thank my sponsors, Classic Ropes for standing behind me all these years," he said. "Ever since I was younger, they picked me up. I thank them for sponsoring me all these years. They make the best ropes. They're great people to work with."

Jumper said he hopes to do well in the 2026 rodeo season and have a shot at retaining the world championship title. For now, one is more than enough.

"I always thought the tribe was going to have a world champion," he said, "I just never thought it was going to be me."

Editorial

Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell proved representation matters

• Levi Rickert

Even after retiring from the U.S. Senate in 2005, former Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, who passed away on Dec. 30, 2025, remained a familiar presence in Indian Country. He was easy to spot in the crowd — at White House Tribal Nations Conferences during the Obama administration, at the National Congress of American Indians State of Indian Nations address in Washington, D.C., and at Indian Gaming Association conventions.

By the time I founded Native News Online in February 2011, Campbell had been out of the Senate for six years. Until then, I knew him only through news accounts and books. I first met him at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., during a State of Indian Nations event. Handsome and dignified, he sat quietly as a steady stream of well-wishers stopped to greet him. I approached him with a sense of awe, regarding him as a Native statesman among tribal leaders. After all, he became the first Native American senator in more than six decades — a Northern Cheyenne man who served as one of 44 members of the tribe's Council of Chiefs.

We exchanged business cards, and he told me Indian Country needed more news coverage and to keep going, adding that he appreciated my efforts.

In reality, I was the one who deeply appreciated his efforts during his service in Congress, both in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. His career embodied a simple but powerful truth: Representation matters.

His legislative record spoke for itself. He co-authored the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, one of the most consequential laws for tribal nations, a transformative measure that helped move some tribes from poverty to prosperity. In 1991, he also co-authored legislation renaming Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, believing the original name reflected a one-sided and inaccurate telling of American history.

As the only Native American to chair the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for more than half of his 12 years in the U.S. Senate, Campbell led bipartisan efforts to advance tribal sovereignty and expand access to health care, education and infrastructure in



Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

Native communities.

Campbell was a chief sponsor of the legislation that authorized and funded the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall, ensuring Native cultures and histories were honored in a major national institution.

He helped transform Great Sand Dunes National Monument into Great Sand Dunes National Park in southern Colorado. Campbell also worked on the creation of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, preserving a key site in American and Native history.

Campbell's congressional efforts extended beyond Native American issues. In the 106th Congress, he ranked first among all senators and House members for passing the most standalone pieces of legislation into law, demonstrating his effectiveness in getting bills enacted.

Through his roles on the Appropriations Committee and other panels, he helped pass measures such as the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Act, improving safety for small police departments and tribal law enforcement agencies. Campbell also served on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, contributing to veterans policy.

In retirement, as an elder Native statesman among tribal leaders, he could have easily said, "Been there, done that." Instead, he carried himself with quiet dignity, speaking when approached. For years, he and his wife, Linda, were guests of the Indian Gaming Association at its annual

conventions. The late IGA Chairman Ernie Stevens, Jr. made certain the former senator was honored for his vast contributions to Indian gaming, recognizing that Campbell fought to preserve and strengthen Indian gaming even as it remained under constant attack after the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in 1988.

So, yes, I was in awe of Senator Campbell upon meeting him. I noticed when he talked he had a twinkle in his eye — which I took for him being a wise man. We developed a friendship that involved mutual respect through his latter years that allowed me to call him for opinions and background on issues. We shared common thoughts on the need to preserve tribal sovereignty and ensure progress is being made for Indian Country.

I was honored when he agreed to write the foreword to my book *Visions for a Better Indian Country: One Potawatomi's Opinions*. In his first paragraph, he wrote, "Levi Rickert is a friend of mine. He is a man I respect and trust."

By the second paragraph he made it clear that he and I did not agree on everything.

But, he wrote, "I agree with him 90 percent of the time. This is a good thing! In this day and age of canceling those who do not see things 100 percent our way, it is a very good thing that in Indian Country we can agree on most things and disagree on others, yet give our brothers and sisters the opportunity to speak their mind, and perhaps change our minds in the process."

This nugget of wisdom is needed in this current age of polarization across the political spectrum.

After learning of Campbell's death on [Dec. 30], I reread his words again. With his passing, the words became more meaningful to me than when I first read them.

On [Jan. 3], I spoke with Dave Devendorf, who served as Senator Campbell's chief of staff and remained close to him until his death. We agreed there will never be another Ben Nighthorse Campbell — a Native man who represented Indian Country with wisdom, dignity and that unmistakable twinkle in his eye.

Thayek gde nwendemen - We are all related.

Levi Rickert (Potawatomi) is editor and publisher of Native News Online, which is where this editorial appeared.

Letter to Editor

Dear Seminole Tribune, leaders and members of the Seminole Tribe of Hollywood,

On behalf of Disaster Sources — Lena D. Tiger Foundation, we extend our deepest gratitude, love, and respect to your cherished tribal member Daniell Sharp and another tribal member who wishes to remain anonymous.

Their unwavering support, compassion, and dedication embody the true spirit of the Native community—one rooted in unity, resilience, and responsibility to protect the people. Through their continued commitment, countless seniors, veterans, and low-income families are fed, supported, and safeguarded throughout the year, especially during times of hardship and disaster.

Daniell Sharp and the other tribal member lead with heart and purpose. Their actions reflect ancestral values passed through generations—care for the elders, honor for those who served, and protection for the most vulnerable among us. Because of them, and because of their support and strength, hope reaches homes that might

otherwise be forgotten.

We are humbled to walk alongside these two members of The Seminole Tribe of Florida in service to the people. Their generosity and leadership strengthen our mission and remind us that community is not just where we live, but how we care for one another.

With sincere appreciation and love, we thank them for standing with us, for uplifting the people, and for continuing to lead in the spirit of unity and protection that defines the Seminole Tribe.

With honor and gratitude,
Diane Carroll, president Disaster Sources; Gloria Black, leadership organizer; St. Ruth Baptist Church; Bobbie H. Grace former mayor and commissioner of Dania Beach; James Rolle Ebermezer, SDA Church; Robert Chunn, Children Foundation; Joy Carter, The Pantry of Broward.

Disaster Sources — Lena D. Tiger Foundation, 2145 Davie Blvd., Suite 101, Fort Lauderdale. Phone: 954.850.3267. disastersources.com.

Sovereignty Symposium in OKC to feature 5 Native American U.S. District Court judges

FROM PRESS RELEASE

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. — A historic assembly of five Native American U.S. District Court judges will headline the Sovereignty Symposium, convening in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in June for a groundbreaking examination of ethical leadership and the protection of sovereignty through the federal bench.

The Oklahoma City University School of Law is hosting the 38th annual symposium under the theme "250 Years Later: Sovereignty, Survival, and Self-Determination" on June 15-16, 2026, at the OKANA Resort.

The event will be highlighted by a keynote panel discussion titled "Ethical Leadership: Honoring Sovereignty from the Bench." The session will bring together a distinguished group of Native American federal judges to discuss the intersection of judicial ethics, leadership and tribal sovereignty.

"The Sovereignty Symposium was founded to bridge the gaps between tribal, state and federal legal systems, and this year's keynote embodies that mission perfectly," Emily Eleftherakis, executive director of OCU's Tribal Sovereignty Institute, said in a press release. "By exploring ethical leadership through the lens of these distinguished jurists, we are offering attendees a rare glimpse into how sovereignty is not just debated, but also honored and upheld from the bench."

The panelists will include:

- Honorable Sara E. Hill (Cherokee), U.S. District Court judge for the Northern District of Oklahoma

- Honorable Ada Brown (Choctaw), U.S. District Court judge for the Northern District of Texas

- Honorable Lauren King (Muscogee (Creek)), U.S. District Court judge for the Western District of Washington

- Honorable Diane J. Humetewa (Hopi), U.S. District Court judge for the District of Arizona

- Honorable Sunshine S. Sykes (Navajo), U.S. District Court judge for the Central District of California

Founded in 1988 by the Oklahoma Supreme Court and hosted by OCU Law since 2023, the Sovereignty Symposium serves as a scholarly, non-adversarial setting for the consideration of legal and policy issues facing tribal communities. It acts as a vital platform for the celebration of tribal sovereignty in all its forms — legal, artistic, cultural and economic.

In addition to the keynote panel, the two-day event will feature discussions between tribal leaders, state officials, legal experts and policymakers. Topics will cover the landscape of Indian Country, including economic development, health care, cultural preservation, environmental policy, self-determination and jurisdictional challenges.

For more information visit thesovereignsymposium.com.

Remembering my dad - Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

BY SHANAN CAMPBELL

It is with profound sadness and deep respect that I share that my incredible father, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, has passed. He has gone on to be with his Maker, with our ancestors, and with our family who went before him. For those of you who knew him personally, you already know this to be true. A Great Warrior has left this world.

The past few months with my dad, as he readied himself to be called home by God, were some of the most precious, tender, and sacred time of our lives together. Nothing was left unsaid. The love we shared was mutual and complete, a blessing I will carry forever. On his final day, the tribal elders came to our home at Nighthorse Ranch, and Eddie Box Jr. sang the sacred songs of the Southern Ute Sundance, ancient songs that have carried Native people between worlds for generations. In his vision, Eddie saw my father on his horse, wearing his war bonnet and buckskins, riding into the other world, the warrior heading home.

Moments later, my dad passed peacefully. My mother Linda, my son Luke, his eldest grandson, and I were holding him as he took his last breath. It was exactly as it should have been, the songs of his people, the vision of him riding free, and the love of his family surrounding him. Caring for him in these final days and weeks has been the greatest honor and privilege of my life.

It has been said that we pick our parents. And if that is true, I sure picked a good one. From the time I was a little girl, my dad inspired me, believed in me, and supported everything I dreamed of becoming. Our relationship was special, and we were always proud of each other. He showed me that where you start does not determine where you finish. He transformed hardship into strength and obstacles into opportunity. He taught me that perseverance beats luck, that reinvention is courage, and that you never give up. He was fierce and tender, an artist and a champion. That is exactly who my father was.

My dad was born on April 13, 1933, in Auburn, California. His mother, Mary

Vierra, was a Portuguese immigrant who battled tuberculosis for twenty six years. His father, Albert Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne, struggled with alcoholism and was often absent. By the time my dad was ten, he had spent half his life in St Patrick's Catholic Orphanage in Sacramento. Years later, he would reflect on those early years as deeply traumatic.

Even within those orphanage walls, my dad was learning lessons that would define his life. As a young boy, he flattened silver coins on railroad tracks and worked them into jewelry, not only as art, but to trade for food. Art became his constant, the first sign of a creative genius that would one day earn more than two hundred national and international awards.

His teenage years were turbulent, marked by arrests and trouble with the law. At fifteen, he was arrested for stealing gasoline. At sixteen, for crashing a car. He was headed nowhere good.

Then came his own awakening. He realized he was on the wrong road and chose a different path. He enlisted in the Air Force and volunteered for the Korean War. He was not drafted. He volunteered. Before that, while working as a fruit picker in California's Sacramento Valley, he met Japanese immigrants who introduced him to the martial art of judo. It changed everything. As he would say for the rest of his life, judo kept me off the streets and out of jail. More importantly, it taught him a philosophy he lived by forever, persevere and never give up.

He earned his GED while serving in the Air Force, then used the GI Bill to attend San Jose State University, graduating in 1957 with degrees in physical education and fine arts. He later moved to Tokyo for four years to train at Meiji University, one of the world's most respected judo programs. He became a three time United States National Judo Champion, won gold at the 1963 Pan American Games, and in 1964 captained the United States Olympic judo team in Tokyo, becoming the first Native American on the United States Olympic judo team.

After the Olympics, my dad worked as a deputy sheriff, coached the United States

national judo team, and taught high school. During this time, he met my mother, Linda Price, a Colorado native and public school teacher. They married in 1966 and built a life together that would span nearly sixty years. My dad credited my mom for so much of his success, once saying that without her, he would probably be in some hotel room watching television on an egg crate with a bunch of cool stuff that was not paid for.

My dad's jewelry career flourished. Drawing on techniques learned from Japanese sword makers, he created work that earned more than two hundred national and international honors. His jewelry has been collected by celebrities including Mick Jagger and Robert Redford, as well as several United States presidents.

In 1977, my parents purchased a one hundred twenty acre ranch near Ignacio, Colorado, bordering the Southern Ute Indian Reservation. They raised my brother Colin, whose Indian name is Takes Arrows, and me, Sweet Medicine Woman. We bred and showed champion quarter horses and built a life grounded in land, family, and tradition.

My dad later traveled to the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana, where he found relatives he had never known and was enrolled as a member of the Black Horse family. At his name giving ceremony, he received the name Nighthorse. He would later serve as one of forty four Chiefs of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, a role he cherished deeply.

Politics came almost by accident. In 1982, party officials needed someone willing to run for state representative in what was considered an unwinnable race. Only my dad stepped forward. He won with fifty seven percent of the vote. In 1986, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives. In 1992, he made history as the first Native American to serve in the United States Senate in more than sixty years.

For twenty two years, my dad served in public office. In 1995, he switched political parties over fiscal conservatism while remaining socially progressive.

His legislative accomplishments were extraordinary. He authored the bill

establishing the National Museum of the American Indian and fought to include provisions requiring the return of Native American remains to their tribes. He became the first and only Native American to chair the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, passing more pro Indian legislation than in any comparable period.

He ranked number one in the One Hundred Sixth Congress for passing the most legislation into law. He helped create two national parks and sponsored two national museums in Washington, DC, the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Law Enforcement Museum. Lake Nighthorse in southwestern Colorado bears his name. He co authored the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act and championed changing the name of Custer Battlefield to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

Perhaps his most personal achievement was the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site. My dad was a direct descendant of Red Dress and Yellow Woman, two sisters murdered in the massacre of November 29, 1864. He fought for years to ensure the site was recognized and honored. At its dedication in 2007, he camped there the night before. He later reflected that it was peaceful and beautiful, with children playing by the fire, and he thought about how it must have felt the night before the massacre, when no one knew what was coming.

Throughout his career, my dad remained unapologetically himself. He rode his Harley to the Capitol, led the Colorado POW and MIA Recognition Ride for a decade, and was the only United States Senator with a commercial trucking license. In 2005, he personally drove the National Christmas Tree more than five thousand miles from Meeker, Colorado, to Washington, DC.

His many honors include the Ellis Island Medal of Freedom, the Order of the Rising Sun from Emperor Akihito in 2011, induction into the National Native American Hall of Fame in 2021, and the 2023 Sovereign Warrior Award.

My father is survived by my mother, Linda Campbell; myself, Shanani Campbell; my brother Colin Campbell and his wife Karen Campbell; granddaughters Lauren

and Caroline Campbell; and grandsons Luke and Saylor Longfellow.

Dad, you were a wonderful father, and I was incredibly lucky to be your daughter. You taught me through experience, from taking me to Santa Fe Indian Market as a child and keeping me so close. Everything I have built through Sorrel Sky flows from those times. You taught me that perseverance beats luck, that fierce and tender are not contradictions, and that honoring your ancestors means fighting for the future.

In these last years of his life, one of my dad's greatest joys was seeing a new chapter of his life's work come alive. My mom Linda, my son Luke, and I are proudly carrying on his legacy through Nighthorse jewelry. Watching Luke step into the creative lineage, and seeing the renewed energy and excitement around the work he loved so deeply, brought my dad immense pride. He often said this was one of the most fulfilling times of his life. Nighthorse jewelry was never just his art. It was his story, his spirit, and his values made tangible. He will forever be the heart and soul of Nighthorse jewelry.

My father will be laid to rest at Nighthorse Ranch in a private family service. Information about a public celebration of his life will be shared in the coming days. [Editor's note: A public celebration of Ben's life will take place on April 13, what would have been his 93rd birthday, at the Sky Ute Casino Event Center at 1 p.m. with a reception to follow.]

In lieu of flowers or gifts, donations may be made to the Northern Cheyenne Boys and Girls Club in Lame Deer.

Shanan Campbell is the son of Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell. This tribute appeared as an obituary on the Hood Mortuary website at hoodmortuary.com.

The Seminole Tribune is a member of the Indigenous Journalists Association.

Letters/emails to the editor must be signed and may be edited for publication.

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6365 Taft St.
Suite 3003
Hollywood, FL 33024

Publisher: The Seminole Tribe of Florida
Phone: 954-985-5700

Senior Editor: Kevin Johnson, ext. 10715
KevinJohnson@semtribe.com

Staff Reporter: Beverly Bidney, ext. 16466
BeverlyBidney@semtribe.com

Staff Reporter: Calvin Tiger, ext. 10739
CalvinTiger@semtribe.com

Staff Reporter: Daniella Hakim, ext. 10704
DaniellaHakim@semtribe.com

Advertising: Donna Mason, ext. 10733
DonnaMason@semtribe.com

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Community



Spencer Battiest receives Trailblazer Award

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

Seminole Tribe of Florida singer, songwriter and actor Spencer Battiest doesn't live his life for recognition, but that's what he often gets as a result of his artistic talent and community involvement.

Battiest was presented with the Trailblazer Award on Jan. 17 by the Hollywood LGBTQ+ Council and My Hollywood Pride organization during the Pride 100 brunch at the Doubletree Resort in Hollywood. Youth mentor Lisa Tumminello received the Trailblazer Ally Award.

"They asked if I'd be one of the honorees; I said of course because I'm a Hollywood boy and will do whatever I can do to support and uplift my community," Battiest said. "Any time I am recognized for service to the community, my grandma Judy Baker says that's who I am in a nutshell, down to the core of my heart."

Battiest was the first Native American artist to be signed to Hard Rock Records.



His accolades include an MTV Video Music Award, Native American Music Awards and the Harvey Milk Visibility medal.

Attendees at the Pride 100 ceremony included Big Cypress Councilwoman Mariann Billie, U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Battiest's mother June Baker, sister Coral Battiest and partner Jay Valle.

"I proudly presented Certificate of Congressional Recognition for all the fantastic work Spencer Battiest and Lisa Tumminello do to ensure love always wins in Florida," Wasserman Schultz posted on X. Susan Reinessen, vice president of Community Affairs & Special Events at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood, talked about Battiest's career before the award was presented.

"I've known Spencer since he was a baby trying to make his way in the music world and watched his success and growth over the last 20-something years," Reinessen said. "He has made us at the Hard Rock and the Seminole Tribe so incredibly proud. He is a singer, songwriter, actor, producer and a very proud gay man supporting the community and his tribe. The Hard Rock and Seminole Tribe proudly support him in everything he does."

Battiest received the award "for his tireless advocacy and leadership and creating a more inclusive world for LGBTQ+ individuals his authenticity and visibility and unwavering commitment to uplifting voices, perspectives and presence in our community. The Hollywood LGBTQ+ recognized him for his trailblazing impact and dedications to advancing equity, inclusion and lasting change," said presenter Jeffrey Oliverio, president of Hollywood LGBTQ+ Council and co-chair My Hollywood Pride.

Battiest said it is special when people recognize his work.



Courtesy photo
From left, June Baker, Big Cypress Councilwoman Mariann Billie, Hard Rock VP Community Affairs Susan Reinessen, Spencer Battiest and Coral Battiest pose together Jan. 17 at the Pride 100 brunch in Hollywood where he received the Trailblazer Award.

It also gives him a chance to bring the tribe into the spotlight.

"When I get these opportunities, I bring the tribe with me by wearing my tribal jacket," he said. "I always wear this jacket specifically because it was made for me when I went to the White House pride ceremony in 2024. In the design are man on horse, the pride flag and trans flag colors. It was made by Melissa DeMayo for me and is one of my favorite pieces. Whenever I'm on those big stages, that's the one I reach for first."



Courtesy photo
From left are Lisa Tumminella, recipient of the Trailblazer Ally Award and a congressional recognition, U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, and Spencer Battiest, recipient of the Trailblazer Award.

Brighton Seminole Princess Pageant returns

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

The Brighton Seminole Princess Pageant will be held for the first time since 2015. The pageant will be held Feb. 13 at the Seminole Brighton Bay Hotel & Casino event center. The pageant will be for Jr. Miss Brighton Seminole Princess contestants from ages 8-12, and Miss Brighton Seminole Princess, ages 13-18.

"We feel like this is a very important tradition," said organizer Jaryaca Baker. "Our community needs this because it carries on our traditions. The girls will be able to continue our culture, represent our tribe and bring awareness that we are still here and thriving. It's way past time to bring it back."

The pageant is open to all tribal members from the Brighton Reservation and Glades, Highlands and Okeechobee counties. The deadline for contestants to enter is Jan. 30.

The last pageant was held Sept. 26, 2015, when sisters Krysta and Leilani Burton were crowned Miss



File photo

Krysta Burton and Leilani Burton were the Brighton princess winners in 2015, the last time the event was held.

Brighton and Jr. Miss Brighton during the 35th annual Miss Brighton Princess Pageant.

Baker said she and a few other women, including Brianna Nunez, Theresa Nunez and Wendy Riley, talked about bringing it back. Baker

said Brighton Councilman Larry Howard has been supportive of the pageant's return.

A community dinner will be held in conjunction with the pageant Feb. 12 at the Brighton Elder Services Center at 6 p.m.

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Kevin Johnson

The view of the Seminole Estates clubhouse on Jan. 23 as the demolition of the structure started earlier in the month to make room for a new community center.

Seminole Estates clubhouse demolished to make way for new community center

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

HOLLYWOOD — Demolition of the Seminole Estates clubhouse on the Hollywood Reservation began in January. On Jan. 14, an excavator tore up the concrete patio surrounding the pool. On Jan. 16, part of the south side of the clubhouse

was being torn down by the excavator with piles of rubble to be removed. By Jan. 23, a majority of the building was in ruins. The clubhouse and pool, which for decades have been the scene of countless meetings, birthday parties, retirement celebrations, horseshoe and bowling games, and holiday festivities, will be replaced with a new two-story, 71,000-square foot multi-purpose community center on nearly 10

acres. The Tribal Community Development project will include an arcade room, banquet room, billiards room, bowling alleys, golf simulators, fitness center, kitchen, and teen zone. An adult pool, a kids pool, a lazy river and waterfall feature, horseshoe pits, and a multi-use sports area are also part of the project.



Kevin Johnson

An excavator tears down a wall on the south side of the clubhouse on Jan. 16.



Kevin Johnson

The pool at the clubhouse is surrounded by torn up concrete Jan. 16.



Kevin Johnson

Once home to horseshoe and other activities, the field behind the clubhouse will be replaced as part of the project.



TCD

A rendering shows the front of the new community center.



TCD

Renderings show what the new community center is slated to look like. The property is on the reservation's eastern side of the Florida Turnpike.

Field Day ready to take center stage on Brighton Reservation

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

BRIGHTON — The Brighton Reservation will hold its 87th annual Field Day Festival at the Fred Smith Rodeo Arena and grounds Feb. 19-22.

The event began in 1938 as a day of fun and friendly competition for tribal members, but it has grown significantly since then. Thousands of visitors attend each year to get a glimpse of Seminole and other Native American cultures, watch rodeo competitions and alligator wrestling, enjoy carnival rides, shop for authentic American Indian arts and crafts and enjoy Seminole and other foods.

The headline concert will be country singer/songwriter Tucker Wetmore Feb. 21 at 7 p.m. Other highlights include a PRCA rodeo, Xtreme Bulls, Freestyle Alligator Wrestling, a powwow and hoop dance exhibition, Osceola's Warrior Legacy traditional weapons demonstration and more.

Gates open at 3 p.m. Thursday and at 9 a.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The Grand Entry of tribal officials and other dignitaries begins at 10 a.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday. For more information visit brightonfieldday.com.

Feb. 19

3 p.m. Gates Open - Main Entrance
3:30 p.m. Snake Show - David "The Cobra Kid" Weathers Amphitheater
5 p.m. Horse Dance - Amphitheater
5:30 p.m. White Mountain Apache Dancers - Amphitheater
6 p.m. Powwow & Hoop Dance Exhibition - Amphitheater
7 p.m. PRCA Rodeo - Rodeo Arena

Feb. 20

9 a.m. Gates Open - Main Entrance
10 a.m. Grand Entry & Tribal Officials - Amphitheater
10:30 a.m. Osceola's Warrior Legacy - Traditional Weapon Demo - Amphitheater
11 a.m. PRCA Rodeo - Rodeo Arena
11:30 a.m. Snake Show - David "The Cobra Kid" Weathers - Amphitheater
12:30 p.m. Freestyle Alligator Wrestling - Amphitheater
2 p.m. Billy Walker Alligator Show - Tent City
2:30 p.m.

Osceola's Warrior Legacy - Traditional Weapon Demo - Amphitheater
3 p.m. Horse Dance - Amphitheater
3:30 p.m. White Mountain Apache Dancers - Amphitheater
4:30 p.m. Powwow & Hoop Dance Exhibition - Amphitheater
5 p.m. Clothing Contest - Amphitheater
7 p.m. PRCA Rodeo - Rodeo Arena

Feb. 21

9 a.m. Gates Open - Main Entrance
10 a.m. 87th Field Day Parade - Amphitheater
11 a.m. Grand Entry & Tribal Officials - Amphitheater
11:30 a.m. White Mountain Apache Dancers - Amphitheater
12:15 p.m. Snake Show - David "The Cobra Kid" Weathers - Amphitheater
1 p.m. Freestyle Alligator Wrestling - Amphitheater
3 p.m. Horse Dance - Amphitheater
3 p.m. Osceola's Warrior Legacy Traditional Weapon Demo

- Amphitheater
3 p.m. PRCA Rodeo - Rodeo Arena
3:30 p.m. Billy Walker Alligator Show - Tent City
3:30 p.m. Powwow & Hoop Dance Exhibition - Amphitheater
6 p.m. Opener Dasha - Athletic Field
7 p.m. Concert - Tucker Wetmore - Athletic Field

Feb. 22

9 a.m. Gates Open - Main Entrance
10 a.m. Grand Entry & Tribal Officials - Amphitheater
12 p.m. Freestyle Alligator Wrestling - Amphitheater
1:30 p.m. Snake Show - David "The Cobra Kid" Weathers - Amphitheater
2 p.m. White Mountain Apache Dancers - Amphitheater
2:30 p.m. Osceola's Warrior Legacy - Traditional Weapon Demo - Amphitheater
3 p.m. Xtreme Bulls - Rodeo Arena

Cross cultural collaboration charts No. 1 in Italy

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

“Phantom,” a single by Geolier featuring 50 Cent, has become a blueprint for cross-border and bilingual collaborations in hip-hop. Max Osceola III, the chief executive officer of Mega Sky Group, and Maria Regina Signorile, paved the way for this iconic release.

“We didn’t go into this thinking we were creating something so groundbreaking,” Osceola said. “I’d like to say we had a crystal ball, but we didn’t.”

The rap anthem charted to No. 1 on Billboard Italia within 24 hours after its release date on Dec. 31, 2025.

Geolier, a 25-year-old Neapolitan artist, is signed to Warner Music Italy. Born Emanuele Palmubo, Geolier raps in the native dialect of his hometown Rione Gescal, located on the West Coast of southern Italy.

In an interview with Billboard Italia in 2024, Geolier recalled working in a factory from a very young age and rapping in his free time.

“I would have never bet on myself,” Geolier said. “Only pop songs were on the radio back then. I loved rap because I looked up to America.”

When asked which American artist he could choose to collaborate with, the Italian rapper spoke highly of Curtis Jackson, the 50-year-old rapper known as 50 Cent.

“I admired 50 Cent,” Geolier said. “I felt close to him. I started making music because of him.”

Geolier’s fourth studio album, “Tutto è Possibile,” translates to “Everything Is Possible.” The title reflects the artist’s thematic focus on ambition and creative evolution, featuring multiple collaborations with both Italian and international artists.

Written by Geolier and 50 Cent, “Phantom” was produced by Jacopo Lazzarini, an Italian rapper professionally known as “Lazza,” and Lorenzo Paolo Spinoso, known as “Low Kidd.” The single’s music video was directed by director Marlo Pena, known for working with artists like Bad Bunny, Daddy Yankee, and Natti Natasha.

Shot at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood, the video was produced by Mega Sky Group, the firm that coordinated the collaboration between the Naples-born rapper and the American star.

Max Osceola III, Maria Regina

Signorile, and Fabrizio Scippa are the founders of the independent advisory enterprise. Mega Sky Group operates across the United States and Italy, shaping strategic relationships, international initiatives, and high-value opportunities for artists, brands, productions, and corporate organizations.

“In the late 2000s, we worked with artists



Zykeria Rolle

50 Cent, left, and Geolier light cigars for their single’s music video at the Guitar Hotel in Hollywood. Both were heavily involved in the video’s directorial process, according to Max Osceola III.

like Paulina Rubio and Charly Alberti,” Osceola said. “Regina’s background is very strong within the Italian entertainment industry, so we formed Mega Sky Group.”

“We took a strategic approach with Fabrizio’s connections to Geolier’s team and built a relationship between the artists in two weeks, a dynamic that was a want for nearly three years,” Osceola added.

Filed the first week of November 2025, producers worked with the artists to reinforce the song’s atmosphere in the visual video. The single’s music video features the Oasis Tower and 50 Cent’s luxury spirits label, Sire Spirits.

“Councilman Christopher Osceola was instrumental in helping us shoot on the property,” Osceola said. “We’re very thankful for his support.”

When asked about the single’s influence on the music industry, Max Osceola III stressed the importance of cross-cultural collaborations like “Phantom” and how its success sets an example for young adults, especially Native children.

“Phantom is a blueprint,” Osceola said. “50 Cent is an icon; Geolier is well on his way. I really do believe that Italian music, especially the modernized version of it, isn’t much different to today’s Latin hits.”

“Most importantly, there’s kids in the tribe that have these creative skillsets,” Osceola added. “These future opportunities are going to exist for them, and I want them to see they that can do this too. I find that exciting.”



Zykeria Rolle

At the Guitar Hotel, 50 Cent, center, joins Mega Sky Group founders, including Max Osceola III, second from left.



Zykeria Rolle

Geolier works alongside the production team during filming at the Guitar Hotel to bring his song’s atmosphere to life.



Beverly Bidney

The ribbon is cut at the entrance of the Immokalee sober house Jan. 16.

We Do Recover opens building on Immokalee Reservation

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

IMMOKALEE — The Center for Behavioral Health’s We Do Recover (WDR) program finally has a building on the Immokalee Reservation, where it will hold meetings and other events. The grand opening and ribbon cutting was held Jan. 16.

“We had a vision a few years ago; we have one in Big Cypress and Brighton so why not Immokalee?” said Charlie Tiger, WDR program supervisor. “Everyone worked hard to get this done. The credit goes to everyone, but the number one credit is to God.”

Tiger said they plan to use the building as a sober house for the community to have a place for groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon, and to get together for various events.

The assembled crowd shivered in 50-degree morning temperature as they awaited the grand opening, but it didn’t lessen their enthusiasm for what the WDR Immokalee Shop/Sober House means for the community. Before the ribbon was cut, program participants shared their stories about recovery and how WDR has helped them.

“Recovery is a challenging journey; it’s a daily battle that requires help and support,” said Manuel Garza. “WDR helped me. We support each other and, most importantly, we get to work and help our community. I have a new perspective on life. It wasn’t easy, but it was worth it.”

“I grew up in the shadow of addiction and witnessed it firsthand,” said Josh Garza, Immokalee cultural instructor. “My father (Manuel Garza) is a member of WDR and I’m very proud of him. It was hard growing up with it, but I’m proud of him now.”

Jaime Yzaguirre, Immokalee Council Liaison, and Big Cypress Councilwoman Mariann Billie attended the opening ceremony.

“We need a space like this,” Council Liaison Yzaguirre said. “We are celebrating not only a building but a new chapter for the Immokalee community. I hope this opens the door for people who need help, with no judgement.”

“I’m happy we finally have this in Immokalee,” Councilwoman Billie said. “We can host meetings, find more ways to support each other and just have a place to mingle. Sometimes people just need social interaction. We all deal with trauma, and



Beverly Bidney

Surrounded by members of We Do Recover, Charlie Tiger, with mic, speaks to the group at the opening of the Immokalee sober house on Jan. 16.

this is a safe place for people to have a connection. This is a struggle that faces all of our communities. It’s good to have people around to listen.”

Some attendees in the crowd spoke to share the stories of their journey to sobriety. A few noted that there were still tribal members suffering with addiction. Kenneth Tommie, a WDR participant, has been sober for 12 years.

“I think it’s great to have a building to show there is a place for people seeking recovery,” Tommie said. “I’m excited to help out Immokalee and show you can have joy and peace without using alcohol. This program has changed my life; it makes me push myself more every day.”

“You get stuff you cannot buy working with the team; love and respect,” said James “Micco” Billie II. “This program taught me to set goals and lead by example. It changed my whole perspective on life; it makes me push myself more every day.”

“It’s progress, not perfection,” Daniel Gibson said about the program. “Addiction takes over the mind and body and you have no spirituality. I’m a better man today because I put 110% into the program.”

Tiger’s niece Daisy Tiger had her own issues with addiction and thanked her uncle and her father for pushing her into the

program. “It was the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” she said. “Now I’m learning about my culture, am a productive member of my community and not getting into trouble anymore.”

Kevin Holata talked about hearing the phrase “trust the process” over and over, but said it began to make sense and fill a hole in his heart. Now he appreciates the fellowship of WDR and urges others to “trust the process” and keep coming back.

Other participants said they are part of WDR to help other people, to help their families and to have a place to work.

“This has been the realization of a dream,” said Bernard Colman, WDR administrator. “This building belongs to the community.”

Plans for the building include having women’s meetings, men’s meetings, the 12-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Colman is also open to other suggestions. The building’s hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The Immokalee Shop/Sober House is a substance-free environment designed to provide safety, accountability and peer support for tribal members working toward long-term sobriety, stability and independence.



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Sunny Frank with a wildfire crew in the Big Cypress National Preserve in 2024.

Dedicated to 'serving my tribe and community,' Sunny Frank continues ascension in emergency management

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

Sunny Frank, the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Emergency Management coordinator, is one of the few Native Americans to graduate from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Emergency Management Advanced Academy.

Graduation was held at the National Disaster & Emergency University, in Emmitsburg, Maryland in August 2024.

"To help me get into the Advanced Academy, I got recommendations from the Chairman and others in the tribe," Frank said. "I'm pretty sure he was the icing on the cake and I really appreciated the opportunity to go."

Typically, individuals who have been in the military or working in public safety attend the Advanced Academy. The cohorts in Frank's class were majors, chiefs of police and people who have been in Emergency Management for more than 10 years.

Emergency management is a relatively new field in Indian Country, according to Frank. The tribe began the department sometime around 2010.

Frank's journey into emergency management began when he applied to be a police officer with the Seminole Police Department about three years ago. After taking the tests, then chief of police Will Latchford suggested Frank try emergency management instead since living on the reservation and patrolling it are two very different things.

That suggestion turned out very well for Frank. He graduated the basic and advanced programs and is currently working on earning the Florida Professional Emergency Manager certification. He said the tribe encourages its employees to pursue certifications to better themselves.

"The last three years has opened my eyes to the professionalism and camaraderie of first responders," Frank said. "We are fortunate to have so many professionals working for the tribe. I am working with people who are dedicated to serving our community."

The job of an emergency manager is challenging and can be stressful, especially during hurricane season. Emergency management is comprised of five different fields; prevention, protection, mitigation,



Sunny Frank with FEMA Deputy Administrator Erin Hoffman at his graduation from the National Emergency Management Advanced Academy in 2024.

response and recovery.

"What I've learned is that emergency managers are jacks of all trades," Frank said. "We learn as much as we can about all the fields. It requires a lot of skills. The idea is to be prepared for all hazards. We are involved in just about every aspect of the tribe."

Currently there are only a handful of tribal members involved in public safety. Frank encourages tribal members to pursue a career in the field and said there are places for anyone who is interested.

"I have a dedication to serving my tribe and community," Frank said. "It's a mindset; you have to have the will to serve. I love my community and I love my tribe, I have no plans of working anywhere else."

Frank, 51, started working for the tribe at age 18 at the Classic Casino in Hollywood and has been working for it ever since.

"Every day is a new experience," he said. "I travel to every reservation, which is one of the things I enjoy. Knowing I am able to provide a service for the community puts a smile on my face."

Big Cypress church offers Florida Trail hikers much-appreciated respite

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

BIG CYPRESS — Hikers on the 1,400-mile Florida Trail stopped for a welcome respite at the New Testament Baptist Church on the Big Cypress Reservation throughout the month of January.

In addition to a place to pitch their tents for a night or more, Pastor Arlen Payne welcomes the weary travelers with snacks, drinks and kits with necessary supplies on the trail such as Band-Aids, Tylenol, small washrags, wipes, travel size toothbrushes and more. The church has a modern bathroom and a fully supplied laundry room, originally built in 1979 by Joe Osceola, Steve Osceola and his father. The church sometimes holds a dinner, or as the hikers call it, a "big feed" for the hikers when they arrive.

The church has been hosting hikers since 2022 when some hikers knocked on the church doors asking for a place to camp out since Billie Swamp Safari and the Big Cypress RV Resort no longer allowed tent camping.

"We have four acres and there was no place to stop on the reservation," Pastor Payne said. "Hikers were looking for a place to stay, and I feel like it was kind of like Mary and Joseph look for a place to stay."

Word traveled through the hiking community and the Florida Trail Association asked if the church wanted to be listed on their app as a place to stop. The first year the church had about 85 hikers stay, 125 in 2023, and 135 camped at the church in 2024. Pastor Payne expects about the same amount to come through this year.

During the Florida hiking season, which is from late October through April according to the Florida Trail Association, experienced and novice hikers alike tackle part or all of the Florida Trail. The route starts at the Oasis Visitors Center in the Big Cypress National Preserve on U.S. 41 and the trail ends in the panhandle at the Gulf Islands National Seashore south of Pensacola. Hikers say it takes about 90 days to traverse the entire trail and some have done it more than once.

The Florida Trail Association held its annual kickoff for hikers on the trail, called "the bubble," on Jan. 1 at the Oasis Visitors Center.

"Hikers hike for a lot of different reasons," Pastor Payne said. "For some it's a hobby, for some it's a lifestyle. We have a lot of veterans come through. One had PTSD and he said hiking really helps him."

Pastor Payne said hikers have come every year, mostly in January and February, since it has been listed on the association's app as a place to stay on the Big Cypress Reservation. As of late January, the church had hosted about 70 hikers.

"When hikers come to stay, some of them want something to do," Pastor Payne said. "I give them small projects like painting a picnic table or yard work. This place is cleaner after they've been here than before they got here."

Pastor Payne said the congregation loves having the hikers. The church helps them out and has a ministry with them. Hikers are invited to all of the church services. Some attend and others move on, according to Pastor Payne. The church doesn't charge the hikers to camp out, but some of them leave donations.

Most hikers undertake the Florida Trail in the winter months to avoid the heat and humidity of the rest of the year. But sometimes it gets cold, at which time Pastor Payne allows them to sleep in the church's Fellowship Hall.

Hikers come from all over the world. Last year there were people from the Czech Republic, France and Great Britain. This year they have come from Chicago, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Tennessee.

"I love that we have the opportunity to minister to the hikers, encourage them and give them the gospel," Pastor Payne said. "One of the things I enjoy most is just hearing their stories."

Some hikers are repeat visitors to the church. While on the trail, hikers often use trail names instead of their given names. Dave "Kitty Hawk" Kesler, who started living the nomadic traveling and hiking life in 2023, is on the trail for the third time. He is grateful for people who put water out along the trail.

"Water is a big thing; a lot of the water in drainage ditches is toxic from runoff, so we rely on humans for water," Kesler said.



Pastor Arlen Payne, center in light blue shirt, is surrounded by a group of Florida Trail hikers who stopped for a night or two at the New Testament Baptist Church in Big Cypress.



With his belongings taken out of his backpack, a hiker sets up a tent behind the church. Hikers carry everything they need, including a tent and food, on their backs.

"Water stops can be 10 miles apart."

"This is a much-needed spot on the trail," Gabriel "Tripod" Basquez said. "Without this church, we would have 70 miles between the starting point and Okeechobee. Everyone is looking for someplace to hike in the winter and there is nowhere better than Florida."

Even though this is the dry season, the swamp in the Big Cypress National Preserve is very muddy. Hikers said they sank into the muck, which made the trek much harder than just walking through water.

"It's brutal even though there is no change in elevation," said 'Shira' from Tennessee, who was hiking the trail for the fourth time. "Hikers have to deal with constant sun exposure, lack of water and the mud, but I love thru-hiking. Today I saw two panthers on the reservation, about a mile

west of Billie Swamp Safari. I only see them on this land."

Kyle "Coop" Cooper was hiking the Florida Trail for the first time. He said the first 47 miles were tough, but he was glad to be at the church. It was his first time on any reservation.

"I saw a lot of cattle, which I didn't expect, and was impressed seeing the preschool and the senior center," Cooper said. "It's great that the Seminoles are giving back to the community and educating their kids."

"I did the Appalachian Trail last year, this is my first time on the Florida Trail," said John "Wrong Way" Jacobs, from Mississippi. "The panthers were the most awesome thing I saw; they are absolutely cool."



Hikers rest in the shade of a chickee behind the New Testament Baptist Church.

FLIFF: A toast to four decades of cinema

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

The annual Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival (FLIFF) is celebrating its 40th anniversary, featuring a fusion of world-class films, beachside glamour, and creative energy that continues to draw filmmakers and movie lovers from around the globe.

Spanning 10 days, FLIFF will kick off Feb. 20 at 6 p.m. at Savor Cinema, Fort Lauderdale's historic arthouse theater, and conclude its screenings and events Feb. 28.

Special guests Paul Reiser and comedian Wil Shriner will be in attendance Feb. 22 for FLIFF's screening of "The Problem with People." Actor and comedian Chevy Chase and filmmaker Marina Zenovich will be in attendance Feb. 26 for a screening and Q&A of the documentary "I'm Chevy Chase and You're Not." Chase is the recipient of the 2026 FLIFF Lifetime Achievement Award.

The film festival lineup celebrates bold storytelling, including features, documentaries, shorts, and world premieres. It is produced by the Broward County Film Society, with sponsors such as Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood, the event's diamond sponsor.

Hard Rock is sponsoring FLIFF's screening of "Guy Harvey: The Documentary" on Feb. 28 at the Museum of Discovery and Science's AutoNation IMAX Theater. The 60-minute documentary

follows Harvey's transformation from an inquisitive boy into a prominent advocate for ocean conservation. Attendees can expect a red-carpet reception at 5:30 p.m., followed by a screening and Q&A with Harvey and Director Nick Nanton.

The festival's closing night after-party will be held on the museum's courtyard, featuring live music, food, and an open bar.

For more information about the festival and to purchase tickets, visit fliff.com. Aside from its annual celebration, FLIFF programs the latest international and American Indie films daily at Broward County's only year-round arthouse theaters, Savor Cinema in Fort Lauderdale and Cinema Paradiso in Hollywood.



Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood is sponsoring the showing of "Guy Harvey: The Documentary" and Q&A with Harvey on Feb. 28 at the IMAX theater in downtown Fort Lauderdale.



Hikers set up tents on the church grounds.

♦ **TRAFFICKING**
From page 1A

“These are our homelands,” Billie said. “It is our sovereign duty to ensure we protect everyone that shares this community with us. For the Seminole Tribe, it’s not just about combating the human trafficking crisis as Indigenous people, but it’s also about being responsible citizens of this community. It is important that people know the cultural values of the Seminole Tribe.”

Pazari, alongside attendees, wore blue to mark and commemorate survivors.

Human trafficking is defined by federal law as the crime of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. The invisible crime is second only to drug trafficking as the largest criminal enterprise worldwide.

The United States’ 2016 Trafficking in Persons Report identifies American Indians and Alaska Natives as exceptionally vulnerable, as Native women experience more physical and sexual violence than other racial and ethnic groups.

The National Indian Gaming Commission works with tribes, organizations, and communities to raise awareness and provide resources to prevent this ongoing crime. While this issue cannot be addressed or resolved without the involvement of law enforcement, the tribal gaming industry is uniquely positioned to foster partnerships that tackle human trafficking within Indian Country.

As a globally recognized company spanning more than 300 venues in nearly 80 countries, Hard Rock has empowered nearly 143,510 guest-facing team members at hotels and casinos through comprehensive anti-trafficking training since 2022.

“Our responsibility extends far beyond providing world-class entertainment and hospitality experiences,” said Stephanie Piimauna, senior vice president of People & Inclusion at Hard Rock International and Seminole Gaming. “We recognize our unique position to identify, prevent and combat human trafficking. This year’s initiatives reflect our commitment to community partnership and ensuring our programs serve those most vulnerable to exploitation.”

Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming are partnering with “It’s a Penalty” – an organization that runs global awareness campaigns during major sporting events – to



Durante Blais-Billie speaks at the ‘Warrior Workshop’ Jan. 14 at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.

leverage the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Rolling out in April, the campaign will provide supplemental training for Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming team members, enhancing frontline response capabilities across its properties.

“The most important thing is to get educated,” Thompson said. “Learn about what the laws are when it comes to reporting human trafficking. Human trafficking is a crime, and it should be reported.”

In 2025, Hard Rock donated \$100,000 to PACT through the “Change for Change” initiative.

For the fourth year in row, participating casinos will raise funds for human trafficking prevention through the “Change for Change” program, encouraging guests to donate change from cash tickets to the Hard Rock Heals Foundation to support PACT.

The global enterprise’s Social Identity Quest program has reached 3.2 million students, designed to help children and young adults examine how they interact online and identify the dangers of online predators. Last year, Hard Rock released three new SIQ programs. The growing initiative was recognized by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as a National Best Practice.

“The earlier you can start having conversations with young people, the

better,” Kennedy said. “It can be as simple as teaching children proper boundaries.”

Since the launch of Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming’s Twentyfour-Seven Anti-Trafficking QR Codes, scans of the code have resulted in 109 interventions to support victims. The initiative provides 24/7 support resources for those in need and serves as a deterrent against human traffickers who target individuals at these venues.

“Every day, it seems we wake up to more turmoil in the world,” Pazari said. “But we can contrast those things that are high profile with the realities of human trafficking, because it’s a chronic, ever present, but usually invisible crime. The value of an event like this and the month of January is to remind us of that reality.”

Learn more about Hard Rock and Seminole Gaming’s human trafficking prevention efforts and 2026 CSR Report at hardrock.com/social-responsibility.

To request help or report suspected human trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, or text HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733). Native Americans affected by domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or human trafficking may also call the StrongHearts Native Helpline at 1-800-799-7233.



Durante Blais-Billie, right, leads a group discussion on anti-trafficking with panelists Theresa Kennedy, left, and Tsvetelina Thompson, center, at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Hollywood.



A large screen shows the national championship game between Indiana and Miami on Feb. 19.

Hollywood Reservation turns out in full force to see championship game

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

HOLLYWOOD — Despite what was considered chilly temperatures at the time – but would be balmy compared to the freeze that came two weeks later – about 200 people on the Hollywood Reservation bundled up for an outdoor watch party featuring the University of Miami against Indiana University in the national football college championship game Jan. 19.

The event was co-organized by the offices of President Holly Tiger and Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola.

The setup on the athletic fields behind the Howard Tiger Recreation Center featured a giant screen from SMP that showed the television broadcast, booming speakers, comhole, two food trucks and seven sets of portable bleachers that were mostly filled at kickoff. Some in the audience opted to use lawn chairs; nearly all wore warm clothing with the temperature around 60 degrees (two weeks later the thermometers plunged into the 30s). When Indiana kicked off to Miami to start the game, about 20 people were standing in line at a hot coffee truck.

An alternative to avoid the chilly conditions was found inside the gym where four televisions were set up with the game.

The game took place six miles south of the reservation at Hard Rock Stadium. Not surprisingly, the watch party crowd heavily favored Miami. President Tiger wore a Hurricanes hat. Although there are many tribal members who cheer for Florida State, there is a decent amount, too, who root for UM and others.

“I think we have a lot of varying tastes,” President Tiger said, pointing out support for UM, FSU, University of Florida and even Oklahoma University. “I think if any Florida team made it to the championship, we would be here tonight watching it.”

Steve Osceola was among a handful of spectators who wore a Hurricanes jersey. He said he’s a fan and noted that his late brother – former Councilman Max B. Osceola – graduated from Miami and was a huge Hurricanes supporter.

Unfortunately for Hurricane fans, their team didn’t give them much to cheer about in the first half, which ended with Indiana ahead 10-0. The Hurricanes responded with a much



Steve Osceola, above, and Tyler Baker, below, show their support for the “U” at the watch party.



better second half and kept the game close, but Indiana remained ahead throughout and won its first national championship, 27-21.

As the Hurricanes provided a much-needed injection of excitement this season for local football fans, many continue to hope the NFL team will return to the Super Bowl soon. The day after the college championship game marked the 40th anniversary of the Dolphins’ last appearance in the Super Bowl.

“I root for the Dolphins, then I get sad, and I start over next year,” President Tiger said.



President Holly Tiger and Blake Osceola, Hollywood Council special projects coordinator, get ready for kickoff at the watch party, which was sponsored by both offices.

Commission seizes alleged illegal gambling sites in Lake County

STAFF REPORT

Following the execution of several search warrants Jan. 8, the Florida Gaming Control Commission (FGCC) said it seized 231 illegal gambling machines and over \$157,000 in illegal gambling proceeds in Lake County.

In conjunction with the Lake County Sheriff’s Office’s Special Investigations Unit, the FGCC exercised a coordinated operation at three locations deemed to be running as unlawful gambling houses in Umatilla and Leesburg under the operational name “Calvin Coolidge.”

“These enforcement actions demonstrate our commitment to protecting Florida communities and preserving the integrity of the state’s gaming laws,” FGCC Executive Director Alana Zimmer said in a press release. “Illegal gambling operations undermine

lawful businesses and exploit patrons. FGCC will continue to work proactively with law enforcement partners to shut them down.”

The targeted locations were identified through complaints filed with law enforcement.

FGCC investigators targeted the House of Treasure on State Road 19 in Umatilla. Investigators seized 56 gambling machines, including slot machines and fish tables, along with \$75,619 recovered funds. The Lake County Sheriff’s Office issued three of the establishment’s employees with Notices to Appear (NTA) for possession of slot machines and keeping a gambling house.

Two additional sites in Leesburg, Hot Seats, located on U.S. 27, and The Hub, located on 3805 West Main Street, yielded evidence. FGCC agents seized 77 gambling machines and \$35,621 in suspected gambling proceeds at Hot Seats. At The Hub, agents

seized 98 gambling machines and \$46,597 in currency. Each establishment was issued two NTAs for the same offenses.

Gambling machines are permitted only in legal gaming facilities. Legal slot machines are available in eight licensed pari-mutuel facilities in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, and facilities operated by the Seminole Tribe of Florida. It is against the law to offer slot machine gaming or any unauthorized gambling at any unlicensed facility in Florida.

The mission of the Florida Gaming Control Commission is to preserve and protect the integrity of gaming activities in Florida through fair regulation, licensing, effective criminal investigation, and enforcement. Any concerns about illegal gambling activities or facilities in Florida can be reported online at FLGaming.gov/File-a-Report, by email at Tipline@FLGaming.gov, or by phone at 850-880-3433.



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Through partnership, Seminole belongings come home

BY CONOR ANDRICH
Registrar, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum

BIG CYPRESS — The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is always looking to build relationships with other tribal museums. Collaborative work between such institutions helps us all stay up to date on best practices and current trends in the field of Indigenous cultural heritage and plays a key role in asserting tribal sovereignty in the museum field. This month, we'd like to dedicate this space to highlighting cooperative efforts which resulted in the Museum acquiring four cypress wood carvings, two palmetto fiber dolls, new relationships, and a reinvigorated perspective.

ATTK staff attended the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums Conference (ATALM) on land belonging to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in the Qualla Boundary this past October. There we met, among countless other folks representing countless tribal institutions

across the country, our colleagues at the Museum of the Cherokee People. We learned a lot from the progressive museum practices that they have been installing at the MotCP. They have worked to Indigenize their collections management strategies with an emphasis on increased accessibility and community-driven organizational procedures, such as grouping objects by the family they're associated with instead of using a typology of objects. In addition, rather than quietly shelving previous procedures which approached Indigenous history from an outsider's perspective, they've chosen to confront them head-on via reflexive exhibit text and a commitment to research and education.

For too long, Indigenous belongings were regarded by the outside world as souvenirs, objects for disinterested study, or exotic curiosities rather than things with vital roles in living cultures. This contributed to disruptions in the ability to effectively pass traditions down across generations. Many

tribal institutions nowadays focus heavily on ensuring that culturally significant materials are housed, cared for, and stewarded by those to whom they truly belong. Similarly, many non-tribal institutions and private collectors have begun to recognize that they have objects which should be returned to their rightful place, though they often do not know much about their provenance or where that rightful place might be. This means that tribal museums often end up receiving cultural belongings of other tribes, and it has become common practice, therefore, for them to try to cooperate on the exchange of such objects as a show of respect for one another's identity.

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum collections staff are proud to have worked with the Museum of the Cherokee People on two such exchanges in the past year. Around September, a woman named Kathy Barnett approached the MotCP with a handful of wooden carvings which could be traced to the Silver Springs area, including a small model canoe carved from cypress wood by Charlie Cypress. They put us in contact with her so that we could work out the details directly. We

chose to accept the canoe sight unseen due to its clear provenance and loaned in the other objects — a model totem pole and two model swords — for review, ultimately accessioning all four carvings into our permanent collection (ATTK 2025.30.1-4).

Then, when ATALM came around, MotCP staff informed us that they had two palmetto fiber dolls in their possession which they had received years ago from a private collector. One wears a yellow satin cape and a blue patchwork skirt and is adorned with multicolored beads and a hairboard, and the other is a more antique example featuring simple clothing decorated with bias tape, dark blue beads, and a smaller hairboard. We discussed the possibility of transferring them back to the Seminole Tribe of Florida via the Going Home Project, a directive to help Native communities implement the return of non-NAGPRA



Female palmetto fiber doll formerly at MotCP.



Canoe carved by Charlie Cypress.

items led by ATALM President Susan Fuller. Naturally we jumped at the opportunity, and these two dolls (ATTK 2025.34.1 and 2025.34.2) now reside permanently in our vault, safely at home on Big Cypress.

Seeing the Museum of the Cherokee People and meeting their team during ATALM felt like the consummation of these months-long efforts. We are grateful for their continued partnership and of course urge you to pay them a visit if you ever find yourself in the Qualla Boundary.

New members added to Indigenous tourism association board

STAFF REPORT

As the American Indigenous Tourism Association commences a new era of Indigenous tourism, it announced its newly elected board members who joined its board of directors.

For more than 27 years, the association has served as the only national organization dedicated to advancing American Indigenous tourism that honors traditions and values across the United States and its territories, serving as a united voice for the \$11.6 billion Indigenous hospitality sector.

New members of the board of directors include Sondra Corbitt (United Houma Nation) representing the Southeast Region and Stacey LaCompte (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) representing the Rocky Mountain Region.

The national nonprofit's executive committee will continue to be led this year by President Travis Owens (Cherokee Nation), Secretary Kate Anderson (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), Treasurer Brian Wadsworth (Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe), and the role of vice president will be held by the newly elected Charlene Virgilio (Penobscot Nation).

Returning to the American Indigenous Tourism Association Board of Directors

is the re-elected Maila Sanders (Native Hawaiian) representing the Hawai'i Region.

"The addition of our new board members and their deep expertise in Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) perfectly aligns with our strategic direction as we move to the next level of Indigenous tourism," said Sherry L. Rupert (Paiute/Washoe), CEO of the American Indigenous Tourism Association.

"Following our rebranding to the American Indigenous Tourism Association in October 2025, we have entered a new era of Indigenous tourism characterized by rapid growth and professional transformation. Bringing leaders like Sondra and Stacey onto our board-alongside the proven leadership of Travis and Charlene—ensures that we are not only participating in the national tourism conversation but leading it. Their collective experience will be vital as we continue to scale our impact, strengthen our regions, and showcase the power of Indigenous-led destination management," Rupert added.

Native Nations and communities who are looking to start or expand their cultural tourism footprint can find resources at AmericanIndigenousTourism.org and visitors interested in learning more about Indigenous culture can visit DestinationNativeAmerica.com.

Culture, family fun, rodeo all part of Chalo Nitka

STAFF REPORT

MOORE HAVEN — The Chalo Nitka Festival and parade will be held in Moore Haven on March 7. Since 1948, the festival has celebrated life near Lake Okeechobee and the Seminole culture. Chalo Nitka means "Big Bass" in the Creek language.

The festival holds a variety of activities including a livestock show and sale, fishing contests, and a ranch rodeo during the week leading up to the parade and festival.

The parade begins at 10 a.m. followed by entertainment, food and rides at the festival grounds. The Seminole Tribe will hold a clothing contest and cooking demonstrations in the cooking chickee.

For more information, go to chalonitkafestival.com.

- Feb. 28**
Chalo Nitka Bass Fishing Tournament (Alvin Ward Park / Boat Ramp)
- March 2**
6 p.m. Pee Wee & Dairy Shows
- March 3**
6 p.m. Swine Show
- March 4**
6 p.m. Steer & Heifer Shows
- March 5**
7 p.m. - Pee Wee Parade/Livestock Auction
- March 6**
9 a.m. Small Fry Fishing Contest Registration

- 9:30 a.m. Small Fry Fishing Contest Begins
- 11 a.m. Kids Day (Chalo Nitka Park)
- 5 to 11 p.m. Midway Opens (Chalo Nitka Park)
- 7 p.m. Ranch Rodeo (Bronson Arena)
- 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Chalo Nitka Dance (Doyle Conner Building)
- March 7**
7 a.m. 5K Run Registration (Moore Haven City Park)
- 7:30 a.m. 5K Run Begins (Moore Haven City Park - Tom Perry Park)
- 7:30-9 a.m. Pancake Breakfast (Moore Haven City Park - Tom Perry Park)
- 10 a.m. Parade Begins
- 11 a.m. Gates Open / Midway Opens (Chalo Nitka Park)
- 11:30 a.m. Flag Raising—G.C.S.O. Color Guard / MHHS & West Glades Bands
- 11:35 a.m. Welcome & Introduction of Grand Marshal
- 11:45 a.m. Introductions: Elected Officials; 11:50 a.m. Introductions: Chalo Nitka Royalty
- 12 p.m. Country Rhythm Cloggers
- 12:45 p.m. Live Entertainment By The Seminole Tribe of Florida
- 1:45 p.m. Clewiston Performing Art Center Dance Team
- 4 p.m. Music
- 7 p.m. Ranch Rodeo (Bronson Arena)
- 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Chalo Nitka Dance (Doyle Conner Building)

Alaska Native Mary Peltola announces bid for U.S. Senate

STAFF REPORT

Mary Peltola, an Alaska Native who previously served in the U.S. House of Representatives, announced Jan. 12, 2026, that she will seek a seat in the U.S. Senate.

Peltola, 52, is Yup'ik. She is an enrolled member of the Orutsarmiut Traditional Native Council (ONC), a tribe in western Alaska. She served as an ONC tribal judge from 2020 to 2021. Peltola's mother, the late Elizabeth "LizAnn" Piciqag Williams, was from Kwethluk and was a tribal member of The Organized Village of Kwethluk.

Peltola, a Democrat, received national attention in 2022 when she won a special election to replace the late Don Young, who was the longest serving Republican in House history (49 years) when he died in 2022. Later that year, Peltola won the regular election for the seat. In both races, Peltola defeated former Alaska governor and U.S. vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Peltola lost her bid for reelection in 2024.

Peltola is seeking the U.S. Senate seat from Alaska that is currently held by Republican Dan Sullivan, who previously announced that he will run for a third term in the November election.

ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

February 2026

It is a common misconception that pigs and feral hogs were introduced to Texas in the 1600s, but truly they first came with the arrival of Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon in Florida 100 years prior. He brought over an abundance of domesticated pigs and feral hogs to be used as food for his party and released them into the wild once they reached the coast of Florida. His plan was to build a colony but would early on be pushed out by the Calusa people. The Seminoles took it upon themselves to take advantage of the animals he brought over, which along with pigs included cattle and horses. This would be the start of a new Seminole tradition: cattle ranching and to a lesser extent, pig farming. This artifact was found on a camp in Brighton, possibly a descendent from the hogs brought by De Leon.

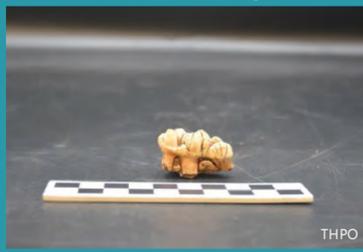


Figure 1: THPO artifact

When the federal government attempted to remove the Seminoles, the pigs, cattle and horses were a helpful part in their being able to resist. The horses helped them evade abduction and the cattle and pigs helped them stay well nourished (Johnston 2025). Since the pigs were already domesticated they were easy to care for, but feral hogs remained as well. What's the difference? Selective breeding practices made pigs more agile, their builds slimmer than their feral counterparts. Hogs have thicker builds, helping them forage and defend themselves against predators.



Figure 2: pig teeth

It is difficult to determine whether this artifact is the teeth of a feral hog or a domesticated pig. Both animals were utilized by the Seminoles for both farming and hunting; the teeth look similar when placed side by side. Based on the larger size of the artifact, it's more likely they are the teeth of a feral hog. Hog teeth are known to be larger and sharper than domesticated pig. Domesticated pigs have duller teeth because of selective breeding as well as being dependent on humans for food. The food of domesticated pigs is typically made up of fish meal, grains, and various fruits and vegetables, while feral hogs are more carnivorous, hunting a range of mammals from rats to small deer (Wildlife Damage Management 2019).



Figure 3: hog teeth

Johnston, Gene (2025). *America's Oldest Cattle Legacy Lives on With the Seminoles. Successful Farming.* <https://www.agriculture.com/america-s-oldest-cattle-legacy-lives-on-with-the-seminoles-11811721>
Wildlife Damage Management (2019). *Food Habits of Feral Hogs.* <https://wildlife-damage-management.extension.org/food-habits-of-feral-hogs/>



SEMINOLE HISTORY STORIES - FEBRUARY 2026

FLORIDA ANCESTORS



Since time immemorial the peninsula that would become Florida was home to many ancestral communities. Some communities thrived along the coasts, others along inland rivers, and all of them held special knowledge of their homelands that was passed down through generations. Traditional knowledge of environments and resources laid the foundations of societies that flourished across the peninsula for thousands of years.

The first Seminole ancestors arrived to Florida over 14,000 years ago, and probably much closer to 15,000 years ago. Archaeological finds show that the ancestors migrated across the continent as they hunted large animals, like now-extinct mammoths, along with deer, rabbits, and other mammals. They fished, collected plants for food and medicine, and built temporary homes from resources available in their local environments. The knowledge they acquired from these activities became the basis for their own scientific understanding of the world around them.

When the first ancestors arrived to Florida, they already had sophisticated ideas about how to flourish in different landscapes. They remained mostly nomadic for a period because the environment at the time - a drier landscape with water-filled sinkholes scattered around the peninsula - favored that method of hunting. They chose to live in smaller groups that made moving from place to place easier. Eventually, smaller groups came together to form larger ones and, over time, as the environment warmed, rainfall increased, and sea levels rose, they began to settle into specific areas of the peninsula. These settled groups would come to form the large, advanced societies encountered by Europeans around A.D. 1500

When European colonizers arrived, they did not just steal resources from Indigenous people of Florida; they stole practical wisdom and science developed over thousands of years. At the same time colonizers suppressed Indigenous traditions and culture, they robbed Indigenous communities of their knowledge for their own survival. As one Indigenous scholar notes, "it wasn't Western science first; it was Indigenous science first."

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

Photo: An engraving of a mammoth found near Vero Beach, Florida. Forensic tests have shown the bone and engraving to be over 12,000 years old. Courtesy of Chip Clark, Smithsonian



Health

Native Americans are dying from pregnancy, and they want a voice to stop the trend

BY JAZMIN OROZCO RODRIGUEZ
KFF News

Just hours after Rhonda Swaney left a prenatal appointment for her first pregnancy, she felt severe pain in her stomach and started vomiting.

Then 25 years old and six months pregnant, she drove herself to the emergency room in Ronan, Montana, on the Flathead Indian Reservation, where an ambulance transferred her to a larger hospital 60 miles away in Missoula. Once she arrived, the staff couldn't detect her baby's heartbeat. Swaney began to bleed heavily. She delivered a stillborn baby and was hospitalized for several days. At one point, doctors told her to call her family. They didn't expect her to survive.

"It certainly changed my life — the experience — but my life has not been a bad life," she told KFF Health News.

Though her experiences were nearly 50 years ago, Swaney, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, said Native Americans continue to receive inadequate maternal care. The data appears to support that belief.

In 2024, the most recent year for which data for the population is available, Native American and Alaska Native people had the highest pregnancy-related mortality ratio among major demographic groups, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In response to this disparity, Native organizations, the CDC, and some states are working to boost tribal participation in state maternal mortality review committees to better track and address pregnancy-related deaths in their communities. Native organizations are also considering ways tribes could create their own committees.

State maternal mortality review committees investigate deaths that occur during pregnancy or within a year after pregnancy, analyze data, and issue policy recommendations to lower death rates.

According to 2021 CDC data, compiled from 46 maternal mortality review committees, 87% of maternal deaths in the U.S. were deemed preventable. Committees reported that most, if not all, deaths among Native American and Alaska Native people were considered preventable.

State committees have received federal money through the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act, which President Donald Trump signed in 2018.

But the money is scheduled to dry up on Jan. 31, when the short-term spending bill that ended the government shutdown expires.

Funding for the committees is included in the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for fiscal year 2026. That bill must be approved by the House, Senate, and president to take effect.

Native American leaders said including members of their communities in maternal mortality review committee activities is an important step in addressing mortality disparities.

In 2023, tribal leaders and federal officials met to discuss four models: a mortality review committee for each tribe, a committee for each of the 12 Indian Health Service administrative regions, a national committee to review all Native American maternal deaths, and the addition of Native American subcommittees to state committees.

Whatever the model, tribal sovereignty, experience, and traditional knowledge are important factors, said Kim Moore-Salas, a co-chair of the Arizona Maternal Mortality Review Committee. She's also the chairperson of the panel's American Indian/Alaska Native mortality review subcommittee and a member of the Navajo Nation.

"Our matriarchs, our moms, are what carries a nation forward," she said.

Mental health conditions and infection were the leading underlying causes of pregnancy-related death among Native American and Alaska Native women as of 2021, according to the CDC report analyzing data from 46 states.

The CDC found an estimated 68% of pregnancy-related deaths among Native American and Alaska Native people happened within a week of delivery to a year postpartum. The majority of those happened between 43 days and a year after birth.

The federal government has a responsibility under signed treaties to provide health care to the 575 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. through the Indian Health Service. Tribal members can receive limited services at no cost, but the

agency is underfunded and understaffed.

A study published in 2024 that analyzed data from 2016 to 2020 found that approximately 75% of Native American and Alaska Native pregnant people didn't have access to care through the Indian Health Service around the time of giving birth, meaning many likely sought care elsewhere. More than 90% of Native American and Alaska Native births occur outside of IHS facilities, according to the agency. For those who did deliver at IHS facilities, a 2020 report from the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General found that 56% of labor and delivery patients received care that did not follow national clinical guidelines.

The 2024 study's authors also found that members of the population were less likely to have stable insurance coverage and more likely to have a lapse in coverage during the period close to birth than non-Hispanic white people.

Cindy Gamble, who is Tlingit and a tribal community health consultant for the American Indian Health Commission in Washington, has been a member of the state's maternal mortality review panel for about eight years. In the time she's been on the state panel, she said, its composition has broadened to include more people of color and community members.

The panel also began to include suicide, overdose, and homicide deaths in its data analysis and added racism and discrimination to the risk factors considered during its case review process.

Solutions need to be tailored to the tribe's identity and needs, Gamble said.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all," Gamble said, "because of all the beliefs and different cultures and languages that different tribes have."

Gamble's tenure on the state committee is distinctive. Few states have tribal representation on maternal mortality review committees, according to the National Indian Health Board, a nonprofit organization that advocates for tribal health.

The National Council of Urban Indian Health is also working to increase the participation of Urban Indian health organizations, which provide care for Native American people who live outside of reservations, in state maternal mortality review processes. As of 2025, the council had connected Urban Indian health organizations to state review committees in California, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.

Native leaders such as Moore-Salas find the current efforts encouraging.

"It shows that state and tribes can work together," she said.

In March 2024, Moore-Salas became the first Native American co-chair of Arizona's Maternal Mortality Review Committee. In 2025 she and other Native American members of the committee developed guidelines for the American Indian/Alaska Native subcommittee and reviewed the group's first cases.

The subcommittee is exploring ways to make the data collection and analysis process more culturally relevant to their population, Moore-Salas said.

But it takes time for policy changes to create widespread change in the health of a population, Gamble said. Despite efforts around the country, other factors may hinder the pace of progress. For example, maternity care deserts are growing nationally, caused by rapid hospital and labor and delivery unit closures. Health experts have raised concerns that upcoming cuts to Medicaid will hasten these closures.

Despite her experience and the ongoing crisis among Native American and Alaska Native people, Swaney hopes for change.

She had a second complicated pregnancy soon after her stillbirth. She went into labor about three months early, and the doctors said her son wouldn't live to the next morning. But he did, and he was transferred about 525 miles away from Missoula to the nearest advanced neonatal unit, in Salt Lake City.

Her son, Kelly Camel, is now 48. He has severe cerebral palsy and profound deafness. He lives alone but has caregivers to help with cooking and other tasks, said Swaney, 73.

He "has a good sense of humor. He's kind to other people. We couldn't ask for a more complete child."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs at KFF—an independent source of health policy research, polling, and journalism.



At the Smallwood Store celebration are clockwise from upper left, Joel Frank in the clothing contest; in the contemporary category, from left, are Kailynn Huggins, Randelle Osceola, Wynter Dawn Billie and Melody Osceola; the store on stilts; and Debbie Osceola (lower left).

Beverly Bidney (5)



Smallwood Store celebrates 100 years on stilts

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

CHOKOLOSKEE — Members of the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes and Independent Native Americans participated in the Centennial Celebration of the historic Smallwood Store in Chokoloskee Jan. 23-24.

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum educator Cypress Billie served as emcee of the event and hosted a clothing contest. A food booth manned by Melody Osceola and others served traditional Seminole food including Indian burgers, fry bread and pumpkin fry bread.

The event celebrated the store's 100 years of being on stilts that have protected the structure from the elements. Ted

Smallwood bought the land on in 1906 for \$600, according to his great-granddaughter Rachel McMillin, and operated a post office and trading post from his nearby home for settlers and the Indigenous population, who were ancestors of today's Seminole and Miccosukee tribal members.

Smallwood was the first white man to trade with Seminoles in the area following the Seminole wars. He welcomed them to camp out on his property. The store was built in 1917, but a hurricane in 1924 wiped it off its foundation. The building was lifted onto stilts made of railroad ties in 1926.

"They lifted the building with railroad jacks with the help of [an Indigenous man named] Abraham Lincoln," said Lynn McMillin, Smallwood's granddaughter.

"They built a railroad track to bring [the railroad ties] to the store. They started to raise the building in 1924; it took over a year to finish it."

Today, the original plumbing pipes can be seen underneath the structure. The Smallwood Store was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Now it is a museum with artifacts going back to the early 20th century.

Photo albums of the store's history are open for examination by visitors. On Jan. 24, Seminole tribal member Wynter Dawn Billie found a photo of herself and her family from 1995, when she was 10 or 11 years old.

"I've been coming here my whole life," said Billie, who lives in Trail.

Journey tribute band to play at Brighton Bay

FROM PRESS RELEASE

BRIGHTON — "Voyage — Celebrating The Music of Journey" is coming to Seminole Brighton Bay Hotel & Casino on June 12 at 8 p.m.

For tickets, go to ticketmaster.com.

Voyage is the world's premier Journey tribute band, celebrated for their ability to recreate the legendary sound, energy, and passion of one of rock's greatest bands.

Voyage performs Journey's greatest hits, including "Faithfully", "Open Arms", "Don't Stop Believin'", and "Separate Ways."

Hard Rock Live lineup for February

FROM PRESS RELEASE

HOLLYWOOD — Here's a look at Hard Rock Live's February schedule at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.

All performances start at 8 p.m. except Rascal Flatts, which starts at 7 p.m.

- Feb. 6: Need To Breathe
 - Feb. 7: Gilberto Santa Rosa
 - Feb. 10: Gipsy Kings
 - Feb. 12: Andrea Bocelli
 - Feb. 14: Rascal Flatts
 - Feb. 19: Boy George & Culture Club
 - Feb. 20: Los Angeles Azules
 - Feb. 22: Tucker Wetmore
 - Feb. 27: Rod Stewart
 - Feb. 28: Rod Stewart
- For ticket information, visit myHRL.com.

Supercar Saturdays to be held Feb. 14

HOLLYWOOD — The next Supercar Saturdays Florida will be held Feb. 14 from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood.

Supercar enthusiasts and spectators are invited on the second Saturday of every

month to interact and view luxury, sports, custom, classic, exotic and specialty cars during the free monthly event. For more information, visit supercarsaturdaysfl.com/events.

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SEMINOLE SCENES



Beverly Bidney

BUSY BASKET MAKER- Sheila Aguilar, Big Cypress and Immokalee treasurer's site coordinator, finds a few free moments in her Immokalee office to work on a basket she planned to enter into the Tribal Fair & Pow Wow's arts and crafts competition.



Beverly Bidney

READY FOR ACTION: Members of the Pemaitev Emahakv Charter School pep squad get ready for the home basketball game against Moore Haven on Jan. 12. From left are Nohea Collins, Evelyn Gore, Macy Williams, Arrow Johns, Aljah Osceola and Mallia Alvarez. Standing behind the girls is coach Katie Bert.



Courtesy photo

ON THE BATTLEFIELD: Seminole artist Elgin Jumper holds up one of the paintings he displayed at the Battle of Loxahatchee reenactment Jan. 24. "Thank you to Elgin for sharing your work with us!" Loxahatchee Battlefield Preservationists posted on social media. Jumper said it was a successful day for his work as he sold paintings and poetry books.



Kevin Johnson

BASKETBALL SUPPORT: Former Brighton Councilman Andrew J. Bowers Jr. exchanges high fives with the Pemaitev Emahakv Charter School girls basketball team during a break between the boys and girls games Jan. 8. PECS faced Ahfahkee for the first time in several years.



Kevin Johnson

PRESCHOOL PROGRESS: Construction continues on the new Brighton Preschool and playground as seen here Jan. 6.



Hard Rock Bristol

BRISTOL DONATIONS: In January, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Bristol team presented donations of \$17,697.46 to YMCA of Hard Rock, and Boys & Girls Club of the Mountain Empire. "Thanks to our generous Team Members for making these contributions possible. We are proud of their commitment to support organizations that make a difference across our community!" Hard Rock Bristol posted on Facebook.



Hard Rock Tampa

PROUD PIRATES: As it does every year, Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Tampa shows its presence in a big, festive way on a float at the Gasparilla Pirate Fest that was held on the last weekend in January.

NATIONAL NATIVE NEWS

Lumbee Tribe buys land off I-95 for possible casino

The Lumbee Tribe has purchased land along Interstate 95 in Robeson County [North Carolina] where it's considering building the state's first casino east of Charlotte.

Around the same time Congress was voting last month to grant federal recognition to the Lumbee Tribe, the American Indian group bought about 240 acres just south of Lumberton, property records show.

The site is undeveloped farmland where Chicken Road crosses I-95 near the tiny towns of McDonald and Raynham. County records show the property was sold for \$6 million. Part of it directly fronts the interstate near the interchange with Interstate 74.

Lumbee Chairman John Lowery, who's also a state legislator, says tribal members will vote on whether to build a resort and casino. "What form of economic development we take early on in this new era, whether gaming is part of our future or not, will be determined by the will of the Lumbee people," he said in a video message last week.

Lowery says a casino plan would go well beyond slot machines and could include "a shopping outlet and additional amenities, such as a golf course, a Top Golf-style facility, a water park or similar attractions." If a referendum on gambling is rejected, the property will become a business and industrial park instead.

"Existing laws and policies create powerful incentives for corporations to invest in our community," Lowery said. "Either of these options can lead to thousands of jobs and be an economic boon, not just for our tribal territory, but for this entire region of the state."

Currently the state's only casinos are in Cherokee, Murphy, and Kings Mountain, all owned by federally recognized American Indian tribes. Until the recent federal recognition, the Lumbee Tribe was only formally recognized by state government. American Indian groups without federal recognition aren't legally able to operate casinos in North Carolina.

Lowery says the newly purchased land — along with other Lumbee properties like the tribe's headquarters and cultural center in Pembroke — will soon be placed into a federal land trust. That prevents the land from being taken through eminent domain and provides "critical protections that safeguard our long-term interests."

"I've seen the economic powerhouse that the Eastern Band (of Cherokee Indians) has become in the western part of the state, and the transformative growth of our brothers and sisters, the Catawba, over the last few years in the Metrolina part of our state," Lowery said.

- WUNC (News North Carolina)

Oxford Casino files lawsuit against Mills' administration over decision to allow online gambling

Oxford Casino has filed suit against the Mills' administration over the governor's recent decision to allow Tribal Nations in Maine to operate online gambling.

The complaint, filed Jan. 23 in U.S. District Court, said by allowing only the four tribes to offer iGaming, the state is creating a race-based monopoly which will adversely affect the state's two casinos.

It alleges that the introduction of online gambling to the state will lead to almost 400 lost jobs at the states casinos and \$60 million in lost value added to the economy.

Tribal leaders across the state supported the legislation and said the new revenue from iGaming will support essential tribal needs.

The law will take effect 90 days after the Legislature adjourns this summer.

- Maine Public Radio

Tribal-ISAC appoints first executive director

PORTAGE, Mich. — The Tribal Information Sharing and Analysis Center (Tribal-ISAC) announced Jan. 27 the appointment of Toni Pepper as its first executive director.

According to Tribal-ISAC, it is the the nation's only information sharing and analysis center dedicated exclusively to the cybersecurity needs of sovereign Native American and Alaska Native tribal governments and their enterprises.

Operating as a 501(c)(3) division of Tribal Share, Inc., Tribal-ISAC supports tribes in preventing, detecting, and responding to cyber threats—while respecting and reinforcing tribal sovereignty.

"The Tribal-ISAC provides a trusted space for tribes to collaborate and share cybersecurity information in support of collective defense," Pepper said in a news release. "I'm honored to support the organization's mission and work alongside members and partners to strengthen cybersecurity resilience across Indian Country."

Pepper has been involved with the Tribal-ISAC since its founding, serving on the Steering Committee and helping shape the organization's mission, governance, and strategic direction.

- From press release

First Nations secure equal stake in one of Saskatchewan's largest solar farms

KINISTIN SAULTEAUX NATION — Last November, heavy, wet snow hit northeast Saskatchewan, snapping power

lines and leaving Felix Thomas's community without power. For a full day, homes stayed cold and dark. Many residents gathered at the local school, where a newly installed backup generator kept the heat on.

"Members were saying, 'How can we be less reliant on outside power? Can we look at solar for our homes?'" said Thomas, chief of Kinistin Saulteaux Nation.

With solar panels already powering community buildings and charging electric vehicles in Kinistin, he said, residents are familiar with how renewable energy could support their community. Their enthusiasm for the clean energy sources in their community led the nation to expand its investment in solar initiatives.

Now, Kinistin Saulteaux Nation is set to become a part-owner of one of Saskatchewan's largest solar farms. They and three other Treaty 4 First Nations have partnered with clean energy developer Neoen Canada to build a 100-megawatt solar project in the RM of Lajord, southwest of Regina. The solar farm's design will take advantage of southern Saskatchewan's long summer days, with capacity allowing it to generate power earlier in the morning and later in the evening than many solar farms.

The nations will collectively hold a 50 per cent ownership stake in the Mino Giizis solar energy facility, which will generate enough electricity to supply 30,000 homes across Saskatchewan.

The partners have signed a 25-year power purchase agreement with SaskPower, the province's Crown-owned utility, to purchase all the electricity generated from the solar farm.

The farm is expected to begin operation in 2028 and produce about 228,000 megawatt-hours of electricity each year, said Ryan Dick, Neoen's director for Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Neoen will handle permitting, construction and operations for the project and earn revenue from power sales over the life of the contract. The four nations, united under the Anishinabek Power Alliance, will own the other half and share equal voting power on the board for all key decisions.

Dick said the company sees that structure as essential to building trust. "Indigenous communities have been burned by business opportunities that didn't work out," he said. "We hope to not just have token Indigenous involvement. We want to work with our partners who own 50 per cent of the project to really optimize their benefits."

Thomas said he hopes 50 per cent ownership becomes the new standard for First Nation energy deals, setting a template that shifts focus from haggling over equity shares to building skills through training, jobs and procurement. "Whether it's a perfect deal, there isn't... but at the same time, it's as good as we can get," Thomas said.

This outcome was years in the making. The idea began with Thomas, who first proposed teaming up for a SaskPower bid. Neoen initially paired with Kinistin and Zagime Anishinabek Nation on a project that offered 30 per cent Indigenous ownership — a proposal that didn't make the final cut.

Later, the nations regrouped and brought the Key and Cote First Nations on board to strengthen their internal agreements.

"All the nations are Anishinabek, so it felt very fitting that we all joined together," said Lynn Acoose, chief of Zagime Anishinabek and chair of Anishinabek Power Alliance holding company.

Acoose said nations spent time reaching agreement within their partnership and making sure Neoen could be trusted before proceeding.

SaskPower ultimately chose Neoen's second proposal from among several bidders. The First Nations Power Authority evaluated proposals, assigning higher scores to those offering greater Indigenous ownership, more participating Nations and stronger hiring commitments.

Both SaskPower and the provincial government now require Indigenous participation in major power projects — a shift from a decade ago, Dick said, when companies tended to treat First Nations as stakeholders to be consulted, offering a handful of jobs, small infrastructure improvements or royalty payments.

Dick said Neoen spent about two years building relationships with the First Nations. Company representatives hosted open houses, met several times with chiefs and councils and spent time in communities. "They want to look you in the eye and gauge your intentions," Dick said.

Neoen has started working with employment agencies that train First Nations and Métis workers. They aim to hire as many local members as possible during both construction and operations. Plans include on-site workshops and monthly sweat lodges open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers.

Acoose pointed out that many provincial policies still underestimate how Indigenous communities collaborate.

Saskatchewan's system often assumes First Nations must partner through formal political bodies such as the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations. But Acoose said cooperation often grows through personal and cultural connections that cross treaty and provincial lines. The province's attempt to show broad Indigenous participation by casting the net wide has sometimes slowed progress rather than advancing it.

Neoen and the Nations are expecting financial support from the Canada Infrastructure Bank, which prioritizes clean energy projects with Indigenous ownership. One or two private lenders, Canadian or international, are expected to provide loans, while the partner nations will contribute additional equity, Dick said. The total cost and power purchase value have not been disclosed.

For the participating nations, the solar project represents more than income. Acoose said renewable energy is tied directly to environmental stewardship and each community's top priorities. In a community-based plan, she said members ranked renewable energy and green technology as top goals alongside food security and food sovereignty.

"This revenue will be not harmful, not harmful to our future generations," she said. "It's revenue that we can be proud of, that we are holding on to our Anishinabe principles and laws that say whatever you do on the earth, you must give back."

- Canada's National Observer

Fraudulent health care scheme stopped in Montana

The [Montana] Commissioner of Securities and Insurance Office helped stop a fraudulent multimillion dollar billing scheme by agents preying on Native Americans on reservations, Commissioner James Brown announced [in January].

In cooperation with health insurers, tribal communities and law enforcement, the investigation secured more than \$23.3 million of fraudulently incurred claims through the Affordable Care Act, Brown said. An additional \$27 million is pending.

"The most reprehensible aspect of this scheme is how the people who were allegedly provided 'care' were vulnerable populations that were, in some cases, exploited, coerced, moved across state lines, and not even so much as given a way to get back home to Montana," Brown said in a statement.

In an interview, Brown said some Montana victims who were taken out of state for treatment that never took place have yet to be found.

Brown said his office met with tribes in Montana throughout 2025 to alert them to the scheme. It also made referrals to federal law enforcement authorities in Montana and the FBI office in Los Angeles where the alleged crimes took place.

In an interview, Brown described the way bad actors used a provision in the Affordable Care Act to victimize Native Americans to try to defraud an insurance company, how the scheme led to as much as \$54.7 million in unjustified claims, and discussed the work that remains in the aftermath.

In January 2025, PacificSource reported suspected fraudulent ACA enrollment to the Commissioner of Securities and Insurance, and the office launched an investigation a couple of weeks later, according to a timeline provided by CSI.

Under the Affordable Care Act, Native Americans are able to enroll in the federal marketplace at any time, Brown said; they don't have to wait for open enrollment.

Fraudsters operating out of Arizona and, for the purposes of the Montana scheme, California, used that provision to entice Native Americans to disenroll from Medicaid and sign up for health insurance through the ACA instead, Brown said.

In particular, he said, the agents would set up information booths on reservations — he believes nearly every reservation in Montana has been a target — and tell people about free drug and alcohol treatment at a beautiful facility in southern California.

The schemers would then transport victims across state lines by buying them a plane ticket to California or driving them in a van; keep them for 90 days while providing "fake services"; and then bill the insurance company \$9,000 a day for 90 days, Brown said.

The billing was for services that didn't take place, were unnecessary, or were provided at "greatly inflated prices," according to the Commissioner of Securities and Insurance.

Brown said the bad actors abused "Obamacare" and trafficked "vulnerable Native Americans." He said at least 183 people were victimized.

"We're still trying to find some of these people, honestly," Brown said.

The Office of Indian Affairs could not be reached Monday about any efforts to find people. The FBI in Montana also could not be reached in time for this story.

Brown said insurance abuse leads to higher premiums for everyone, but the investigation from his office and work with the Trump administration has meant \$23.3 million in payments don't have to be made to date.

Brown said an additional \$27 million is pending a decision by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. He said so far, 80 policy rescissions have been granted, and dozens remain under review.

Brown said PacificSource first suspected a problem when it came across half a million dollars in alcohol and substance abuse being billed out of southern California and the southwest part of the country.

"That is what set their alarm bells off, and they approached us for help," Brown said.

He said his office conducted an investigation that supported the ability of CMS to approve the non-payment of fraudulent claims and rescind the policies. CSI has a team of four investigators, and he said his office spent seven months on the investigation.

The team uncovered falsified records, unlicensed and out-of-state actors, fabricated addresses, and unsupported earnings information used to obtain coverage, according to CSI. It also found "immediate, high-dollar billing patterns designed to extract maximum payouts."

In a statement provided by CSI, PacificSource spokesperson Erik Wood thanked Brown and his team for helping stop suspected fraudulent activity in the marketplace.

"As a nonprofit health plan,

PacificSource exists to keep health care accessible and affordable for our members, and preventing fraud is an important part of that work," Wood said. "We appreciate the state's commitment to protecting Montanans and the integrity of our health insurance system."

PacificSource is a not-for-profit health insurance provider and one of three insurers that offer plans under the Affordable Care Act.

Brown said his office is helping to re-enroll victims into Medicaid so they have coverage. He encouraged Montanans to be wary of any alleged agents advising disenrollment in Medicaid and recommending treatment programs in California through the Affordable Care Act.

Brown said Arizona and Alaska also have dealt with a variation of the scheme. He said any state with a significant Native American population is a target, and he has talked with his counterparts and insurance providers in Washington and Wyoming to alert them to the scheme.

Brown said his office has "zero tolerance for fraud" and it is focused on consumer protection that "works for the people of Montana as opposed to scammers." He said his office is pursuing additional investigations and will ask for an additional investigator in the future.

"We don't tolerate corruption, and we don't apologize for enforcing the law," Brown said in a statement. "If you exploit vulnerable people or try to game our system, we will come after you."

- Daily Montanan

Choctaw Nation to serve as testing site for Trump administration's goal of expanding drone usage

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Choctaw Nation will be home to one of the country's two new testing sites for Unmanned Aircraft Systems, the Federal Aviation Administration announced.

The sites, which were awarded to the Oklahoma tribe and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, are the first two testing grounds for drones and other unmanned aircraft created in nearly a decade, according to the FAA.

In a statement Jan. 9, James Grimsley, the Choctaw Nation's executive director of Advanced Technology Initiatives, said the "designation is a meaningful step" for both the tribe and the future of aviation in Oklahoma.

The test site program is designed to evaluate the safety, operations and navigation systems of public and civil drone technologies prior to their use in national airspace, he said.

The Choctaw Nation said that the designation "comes at a critical time" as the FAA moves to create new rules that allows drones to be flown beyond line of sight, or where operators can't see them, which will expand their commercial and public safety uses.

"Drone technology is already changing how services are delivered and how critical infrastructure is inspected, monitored and protected," Grimsley said. "The next chapter is about proving what works safely at scale, and our role as a test site is to generate the data, operational insights and best practices that help make that possible."

In a separate statement, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said the new test sites will help gather critical data so "we can safely unleash innovation in our skies."

The FAA said Duffy unveiled a proposed Beyond Visual Line of Sight rule to expand drone usage in August.

"From delivering lifesaving medicine to surveying pipelines, drones are already reshaping industries and changing how people and products interact," Duffy said in a statement. "It's our job to make sure the United States safely leads the way with this exciting technology — not China. We've added these new test sites to help us gather critical data and test new systems so we can safely unleash innovation in our skies."

- Oklahoma Voice

Tribes stake their claim on the Colorado River, and help conserve it

Tribes across the West have worked with states to protect the Colorado River and conserve enough water to raise elevations in the river's two largest reservoirs, Lakes Powell and Mead, a move that has helped states during critical droughts.

Now tribes want to make it clear that any future agreements on how to manage the river's water must include their input and an acknowledgment that they intend to develop their water rights.

"It's high time that tribes begin to really begin to flex their sovereignty," said Mike Natchees, a member of the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee.

The Ute Indian Tribe holds significant senior water rights, including 500,000 acre-feet in the Green River basin in Utah, but faces challenges with unused water flowing downstream due to lack of infrastructure and funding.

"It just continues to flow downstream. We are uncompensated for it. It is undeveloped. And again, that is unacceptable for the Ute Indian Tribe," Natchees said.

That sentiment was shared among representatives for dozens of tribes who spoke at the Colorado River Water Users Association conference at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas in December.

Western states that rely on the Colorado River have less than two months to agree on how to manage the troubled river. The seven

Colorado River Basin states — Arizona, California, Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming — have until Feb. 14 to reach a new water sharing agreement before current operating rules expire at the end of 2026 — or the federal government will step in with their own plan.

But the Ute Indian Tribe, whose reservation is located in Northeastern Utah, emphasized that any new agreement will have a significant impact on tribes across the Colorado River basin.

One of the biggest disagreements between the Upper and Lower Basin states is over which faction should have to cut back on their water use during dry years. Historically, Lower Basin states have used nearly all their 7.5 million acre-feet Colorado River allocation under current Colorado River guidelines, compared to the 4.5 million acre-feet used by the Upper Basin states.

Natchees said the impact of water cuts to tribes in the Upper Basin have not been discussed enough during negotiations, adding that he hopes tribes will one day have a seat on the Upper Colorado River Commission, an interstate water administrative agency that represents Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico.

"The bottom line is that the Lower Basin is just simply over allocated. They're overusing and they're doing it with no regard to anyone in the Upper Basin, which feeds their system, and that needs to change," Natchees said.

Tribes have continued to be a part of the solution when it comes to conservation on the river, said President of the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, Jonathan E. Koteen.

In 2025, the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe signed an agreement to conserve 13,000 acre-feet of water to bolster elevations in Lake Mead, and contributed additional water savings through its ongoing seasonal following agreement with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

Those water savings helped California reach its goal of conserving 1.6 million acre-feet in Lake Mead a year ahead of schedule.

"Tribal inclusion must be formal, meaningful and permanent. Tribes are not new participants. We are original stewards of the river, and our voices must be part of shaping the future family," Koteen said.

Conservation efforts by tribes have also been innovative, said Koteen. The Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe secured funding to line the Reservation Main Canal, reducing seepage and improving efficiency for water deliveries to large portions of the Yuma Project Reservation Division.

Another example of an innovative solution was when the Jicarilla Apache Nation entered a landmark 10-year water-sharing agreement with New Mexico and The Nature Conservancy in 2023 to lease up to 20,000 acre-feet of its Colorado River water annually, supporting endangered fish habitat and water security for the state by strategically releasing water into the San Juan River.

"It's increasing water security for the state of New Mexico, allowing the state to meet its obligations under whatever framework that we end up coming up with in post 2026, so it's a great project," said Jenny Dumas, the water attorney for the Jicarilla Apache Nation.

But Dumas emphasized that not every tribe can replicate such an agreement, and every tribe has their own unique needs that must be considered when settling on a new water sharing agreement.

Councilmember for Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Conrad Jacket said the tribe's Bow and Arrow Farm is a major economic driver. While tribes in California, like the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, are able to reduce crops for payment, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe can not.

"This year, we did have to cut back," Jacket said. "And that's not good on our part. That is not good on all this whole region's part."

Instead, the tribe would benefit more from flexible tools that allow the tribe's water to be set aside in good water years, while contributing to additional release in dry years.

Tribes said they were committed to helping states reach a seven-state consensus on how to share the river's water, in order to stabilize the river and secure their rights.

During the conference, the Colorado River Indian Tribes, the Gila River Indian Community and the Central Arizona Water Conservation District, which manages the Central Arizona Project, signed a major proclamation to work together to protect the Colorado River.

The Colorado River Indian Tribes is Arizona's largest and most senior Colorado River water rights holder.

"All of us who live in Arizona, native and non-native alike, are connected by water, for without water, there is no life. And it is that common thread that binds us, which has us here today, pledging to work together for the greater good of all who live in Arizona," said Colorado River Indian Tribes Chairwoman Amelia Flores.

- Nevada Current

Hard Rock Sacramento shows its support for community

FROM PRESS RELEASE

Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Sacramento at Fire Mountain, with the Enterprise Rancheria Tribal ownership, has donated more than \$350,000 in cash and in-kind donations to support local charities and nonprofits in 2025.

In October, it granted its second annual donation in a five-year commitment to gift a total of \$1 million to Sutter Medical Foundation. This year's donation amounted to \$220,000 and was presented at its sold-out annual Pinktober Gala on October 25, 2025. When announced last year, this landmark donation was the largest ever received by Sutter Medical Foundation. These gifts will support the greater Yuba Sutter County cancer patient and family population through programs, services, equipment, and more. This year, the Enterprise Community Fund also granted two gifts to other local cancer treatment organizations, including \$10,000 to the Adventist Cancer Center in Marysville to purchase new infusion chairs.

In August, Hard Rock Live hosted the annual The Event concert series produced by John Cassidy featuring hometown Country Music recording artist Tyler Rich. The charity dinner and concert raised \$33,500 for local nonprofits including \$11,750 each donated to both the Enterprise Community Fund and the Trauma Intervention Program (TIP), and \$5,000 each to the Sutter Animal Service Authority and the Yuba County Animal Care Services.

Additionally, hometown Sacramento performance painter, David Garibaldi, was commissioned by Yuba City Mayor Dave Shaw and his wife, Susan, to do a live painting at the event to honor first responders. The painting was recently installed in the lobby of the Adventist Health and Rideout Hospital in November which will serve as a year-round opportunity for the community to support a rotating list of charities through a QR code.

Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Fire Mountain and the Enterprise Community Fund have donated over \$4.5M to charities in the region since the resort casino opened in October 2019. Throughout the year, various charitable and nonprofit events and donations have supported dozens of organizations in Northern California.

Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood tops \$2.4 Billion in jackpots awarded in 2025

FROM PRESS RELEASE

Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood surpassed \$2.4 billion in jackpots awarded. Awarding \$2,438,741,965 billion jackpots in 2025, which equates to nearly one jackpot every 45 seconds. The average jackpot size is \$3,480, with this year's largest jackpot totaling \$2,251,977.38 awarded in May 2025.

The milestone was officially reached on Dec. 31 at 11:56 p.m., with a \$2,550 jackpot won on a Dragon Link slot machine.

"Surpassing more than \$2.4 billion in jackpots is a historic milestone," Bo Guidry, president of Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood "It's a testament to the excitement our guests create every day and the strong relationships we've built with our players. We're honored to celebrate this milestone and remain committed to delivering a world-class experience for our guests."

Notably, the most recent significant payout was a \$389,229.73 jackpot won on a Dancing Drums slot machine.

Additionally, 80% of all jackpots were won by Unity members, underscoring the loyalty and engagement of Hollywood's core players.

The 150,000 square-foot expansive gaming floor is home to more than 2,700 of the most popular slots, including video poker, electronic roulette and electronic craps, as well as a non-smoking room. To learn more about Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood, visit seminolehardrockhollywood.com.

U.S Dept. of Energy funds home solar installations on Navajo Nation

STAFF REPORT

Navajo Transitional Energy Company (NTEC) announced Jan. 8 the completion of the first 15 home solar installations funded by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations for NTEC's "Navajo Sun Power!" program.

"We'd like to thank the U.S. Department of Energy for its support of NTEC's "Navajo Sun Power!" program," said Vern Lund, chief executive officer for NTEC. "The additional funding provided by DOE allowed us to expand NTEC's program to provide more solar installations and improve the lives of citizens living on the Navajo Nation. This program makes a real difference in the lives of Navajo people who would not otherwise have access to electricity."

According to NTEC, approximately

13,000 homes on the Nation are currently without power.

In 2024, NTEC's "Navajo Sun Power!" was selected and awarded up to \$2.6 million in funding by the DOE to install solar power on Navajo homes without power. The home solar installation program was selected as one of the 19 community-led clean energy projects across 12 states and 13 tribal nations to receive funding to deploy sustainable clean energy solutions and expand access to reliable energy in remote communities across the United States.

The Navajo Nation extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. For families living on homesteads in Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, new solar capabilities make heating, cooling, running water, and refrigeration possible, considering the park's regulations

and locality that prohibit residents from installing transmission lines and running water. Full-time residents of the park in the Olijato Chapter are reaping the benefits of NTEC's first 15 solar installations.

"Usually when we go to the store, we buy some perishable food and have to use it up right away before it goes bad," said Loretta White, resident of Narrow Canyon. "Now we just put it in the fridge and use it later. I think having solar was a very good Christmas present."

Another resident from Monument Valley, Valterra Sayetsitty, added, "It's very convenient with lights now. I don't have to get gas for the generator anymore and the solar system is excellent and convenient."

Established by the Navajo Nation to exercise sovereignty over its abundant natural resources, NTEC has grown

rapidly, ensuring the continued prosperity of the Navajo Nation. Its "Navajo Sun Power!" program began in 2020 and has already installed 50 solar systems, worth approximately \$1,250,000 on homes throughout the Navajo Nation.

Both NTEC and the DOE grant cover the costs of the solar panel system and batteries, system installation including any minor electrical work necessary for the home to meet Navajo Nation electrical safety codes, and education in the operation and maintenance of the system.

There will be a total of 25 home installations within each of the five Navajo Nation Agencies.

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Education



Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School celebrates literacy week

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

BRIGHTON — Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School students learned the importance of reading and writing during the school's annual celebration of literacy week Jan. 26-30.

The annual event is held at schools statewide, but at PECS the week focused on the Seminole Tribe of Florida's history, culture, heritage and literacy. Different historical periods were emphasized each day, guest readers came to the classrooms, a local author visited and the week culminated with a schoolwide timeline that recapped the week's activities.

Parents and community members were invited to peruse the students' writing, artwork, and other projects on display throughout the school on Jan. 30.

On Jan. 28, five members of the Florida Seminole Cattlewomen Association read to students in their classrooms. The books they read were about cattle, horses and the rural lifestyle of ranchers.

"Literacy Week is all about learning about books and reading," said Michele Thomas, PECS administrative assistant and member of the Cattlewomen Association.

Janae Braswell read "Harvey", a book about a newborn calf's first day of life, to a kindergarten class. After the reading, she told the students about her sons who work her family's herd of cattle.

"It's hard work, but it's fun," Braswell said. "You all are old enough to go into 4H and take care of little animals."

Helene Buster read "Buckaroo Beau Goes to the Rodeo" to a second grade class, about a boy who learned to ride a sheep and overcome his fear for his first rodeo.

Buster asked if any of the students had ridden a sheep in the rodeo. A few had. She said if they practice a lot, they won't be scared.

"During Literacy Week you learn to love books and the importance of reading," Buster said. "When you can read a book, you can go anywhere in the world and learn about anything. I like to buy books for my grandchildren."

The students told Buster about their animals and how they take care of them. One



Beverly Bidney

Janae Braswell, of the Seminole Cattlewomen, reads to a kindergarten class on Jan. 28, during PECS literacy week.



Beverly Bidney

PECS kindergarteners have plenty of questions after the book "Harvey" was read to them by Janae Braswell.



Beverly Bidney

Guest reader Helene Buster is joined by students she read to.



Beverly Bidney

Seminole cattawoman and PECS administrative assistant Michele Thomas reads "Little Ree" to a second grade class.

girl described how she tried to ride her pig, but he bucked her off into the mud.

Thomas read "Little Ree" to a second grade class, about a city girl who has to adjust to a new life living on a ranch, where she becomes a country girl.

Thomas told the students she is glad to

be a country girl and asked if they did, too.

Hands went up when she asked who else is glad to live in the country.

BIE names temporary president at Haskell

STAFF REPORT

Describing it as "a significant step forward for Haskell Indian Nations University," the Bureau of Indian Education announced Jan. 26 that Alex Red Corn will serve as temporary president of the university.



Alex Red Corn

"Dr. Red Corn's deep understanding of education and his longstanding commitment to Native students make him an ideal leader for Haskell during this time," Tony Dearman, BIE director, said in a news release.

The move comes via a partnership with the University of Kansas through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, which allows temporary assignment of personnel between the federal government and other entities, including colleges and universities.

"This partnership with the University of Kansas is a model for how we can strengthen institutions through collaboration and shared purpose, allowing us to bring in exceptional talent from within the community to lead Haskell during a pivotal time," Dearman said.

Red Corn, a citizen of the Osage Nation, currently serves as director and associate professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Kansas. He's also associate vice chancellor for sovereign partnerships and Indigenous initiatives.

"I'm motivated by this exciting opportunity to be in community with Haskell students, faculty and staff as we collectively continue the good work of enhancing student success and advancing tribal sovereignty in service to Indian Country," Red Corn said in the release.

According to the BIE, Red Corn will lead the college during a transitional phase as it seeks a permanent president.

Red Corn's resume also includes serving as executive director of the Kansas Association for Native American Education and as chair of the Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education.

He earned a Doctor of Education in educational leadership from Kansas State University. He also has master's and bachelor's degrees in social studies education from the University of Kansas.

PECS team attends FGCU basketball game

BY BEVERLY BIDNEY
Staff Reporter

FORT MYERS — Dressed in their team jerseys, the undefeated Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School girls basketball team, cheerleaders, and coaches attended a Florida Gulf Coast University girls basketball game on Jan. 22 at the university's Alico Arena.

When the team, which finished its season with a 15-0 record, arrived at FGCU arena, coach Jovanny Torres gathered the girls together for a few moments.

"I want them to see that there's a future for them," Torres said. "Basketball and cheerleading are both things they can do in college."

When the students took their seats, a few

girls said they hoped to see some three-point shots made by the college players. Some of them said they are considering playing basketball in high school and college.

When he was a coach at Okeechobee High School, Torres coached McKenzie Neal, who plays for the Austin Peay State University team. After the game, the students met Neal.

"For them to see someone from Okeechobee play college basketball is motivational for them," Torres said.

Although FGCU lost the game, 74-66, the PECS students were excited to be there and watch NCAA Division I women's basketball.



Beverly Bidney

PECS players received an extra treat during their visit to FGCU as they were joined after the game by McKenzie Neal, a forward for Austin Peay State University who played at Okeechobee High School.



Beverly Bidney

The PECS girls basketball team and cheerleaders gather in front of the FGCU Alico Arena before watching the women's basketball game against Austin Peay State University Jan. 22.



Beverly Bidney

PECS students wait for the start of the game.



Beverly Bidney

PECS players form a line to greet FGCU players before the start of the game.

Seminoles in 4-H show their skills at South Florida Fair

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

WEST PALM BEACH — Timothy Urbina's 261-pound hog — named Willie Jack — picked an inopportune time to go for an evening jog.

Willie Jack sprinted — if hogs can indeed sprint — around the ring at the South Florida Fair's youth hog showmanship Jan. 15, the night before the area's largest annual fair opened.

While the other hogs remained close to their owners/handlers in front of the judge, Willie Jack seemed to enjoy his jaunt with Urbina in pursuit.

Urbina admitted that a hog that goes rogue in the ring isn't a good look, but he took everything in stride.

"Once he stepped in the ring, he was doing good, but then all of a sudden he just booked it and he was running all around," Urbina said. "The crowd got a good laugh out of it; I got a good laugh at it, even though it kind of ticked me off a little bit. It's all good, though."

In an attempt to avoid a repeat the following night at the show, Urbina said he would walk Willie Jack "to get that energy out" before entering the ring.

Urbina, a junior at Moore Haven High School, was among about a dozen members from the Seminole Tribe's 4-H program who participated in livestock showings at the fair. For months, all the youth have put in hard work raising their animals in preparation for shows and sales. A few showed in steer and dairy categories, but hogs was the most popular with eight members from the tribe in various age categories.

Jaylissa Brunette, who attends Moore Haven High School, said she enjoyed raising her hog named Kodak, which she said was named after the rapper, not the camera. She started with Kodak when it was 80 pounds and guided it all along the way to a firm 277 pounds by showtime at the fair.

Brunette said she applied what she learned at last year's show — her first at the



Jaylissa Brunette keeps her eyes on the judge while guiding her hog at the South Florida Fair on Jan. 15 in West Palm Beach.



Timothy Urbina patiently follows his hog in the ring during showmanship at the South Florida Fair.

fair — to be more comfortable in the ring with the judge.

"Definitely eye contact when going into showmanship and not going so far away [in the ring]," she said.

Amariah Lavatta, a sixth grader at Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School, said she didn't have any problems raising her hog — Ms. Turbo — from 185 pounds to 270. What's the story behind the unusual title of a pig named "Turbo"?

"Because when I used to run with her, she would take off. She doesn't do that anymore," she said.

The sale of the hogs — and other livestock — took place two days later. The kids know that they raise their animals to be sold; for Timothy Urbina, the sale of his Willie Jack couldn't come soon enough.

"I'm so glad to get rid of this pig," he said. "Once he gets on the truck and goes, I'll be like 'bye-bye, farewell.'"

Seminole Tribe 4-H participants at the South Florida Fair:
Timothy Urbina
Esteban Santibanez Jr.
Amariah Lavatta
Shaelah Isaac
Harmony Urbina
Ofelia Urbina
Sarah Randolph
Claire Randolph
Okalani Collins
Elakaih Collins
Nohea Collins
Jaylissa Brunette
Quitman Johnson



With the judge staring at him and his hog, Elakaih Collins enters the ring during the hog showmanship at the South Florida Fair.



Amariah Lavatta with "Ms Turbo" in the pens before they headed into the ring.



Esteban Santibanez Jr. focuses on eye contact with the judge while showing his hog.

BIE unveils 'Strategic Direction'

STAFF REPORT

In January, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) unveiled its latest "Strategic Direction" for the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), a performance-driven blueprint with goals to improve student results, strengthen Native language and culture, and enhance operational effectiveness across Bureau-funded schools.

BIE supports educational opportunities for more than 400,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students across the United

States through a system of direct services and funding programs spanning early childhood to postsecondary education. There are 183 Bureau-funded elementary and secondary schools located on 64 reservations in 23 states, serving approximately 42,000 Indian students.

Building on reforms initiated in 2016 that the BIE said has resulted in record breaking high-school graduation rates, the Strategic Direction establishes performance indicators to guide progress through 2030.

"The Bureau of Indian Education

is delivering results that matter. Higher graduation rates, stronger academic growth, and expanded access to education options," Billy Kirkland, assistant secretary for Indian Affairs, said in a statement.

The Strategic Direction consists of measurable goals across three priority areas: student success, cultural identity and language, and supportive learning environments. Key targets include increasing the high school graduation rate to 87%, improve yearly student progress by 5% in English and math, reduce chronic

absenteeism by 10%, and expand student participation in transition planning for college, career, and military pathways.

The Strategic Direction was shaped by input from more than 1,500 staff, stakeholders and students. As per the DOI, progress will be continuously evaluated through BIE data systems.

"This Strategic Direction defines clear goals and holds us accountable for meeting them," Tony Dearman, Bureau of Indian Education director, said in a statement.

Show and sale in Brighton

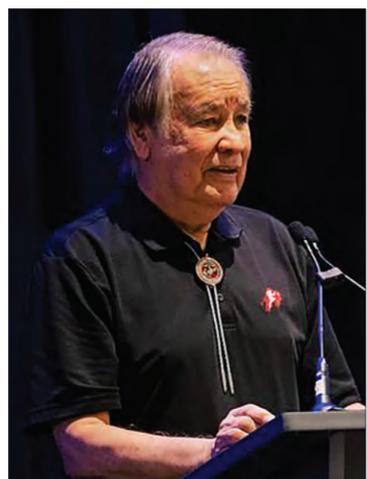
STAFF REPORT

BRIGHTON — The Seminole Tribe of Florida Youth Livestock Show and Sale will be held March 12-14 at the Fred Smith Rodeo Arena on the Brighton Reservation.

More than 600 Native youth attend UNITY conference

FROM UNITY

PHOENIX, Ariz. — More than 600 Native youth from tribal communities



throughout the United States gathered for the UNITY Midyear Conference during the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend at the Sheraton Phoenix Downtown Hotel.

Addressing the most important issues they face today, attendees celebrated Dr. King's legacy by building real-world action plans rooted in service, justice, and community power. The three-day conference combined organized training with community building events, cultural programming, and spaces that strengthened identity, belonging, and leadership across regions.

"Our goal for this conference was to equip young people with tools for change. Our youth-led, adult supported curriculum was designed so that attendees could finish a full 10-step plan to take home and implement in their communities," said Mary Kim Tittle, UNITY executive director. "The top issues were mental health and wellness, social justice, cultural revitalization, and climate action, the importance of which were also

UNITY
Billy Mills (Oglala Lakota), the 1964 Olympics gold medal winner in the 10,000 meter run who also served in the U.S. Marines Corps, speaks at the UNITY conference in January.

addressed by our keynote speakers."

UNITY opened the conference by partnering with the Arizona Science Center for a free screening of the documentary "Remaining Native." After the screening, there was a Q&A with director Paige Bethmann and Nike N7 Ambassador and film subject Ku Stevens. Olympic champion Billy Mills delivered the Saturday keynote, challenging youth to lead with discipline, purpose, and community responsibility. Indigenous leader Judith LaBlanc delivered Sunday's keynote address focused on leadership, advocacy, and civic engagement.

ASU sponsored college and career workshops, and other exhibitors participated in a College & Career Fair throughout the weekend. The speakers and programs were complemented by business meetings, an Earth Ambassador presentation advisor training, UNITY O'odham Cu:dk & Waila (Chicken Scratch) Dance, UNITY Intertribal Round Dance, and opportunities for cultural sharing and community building.

By the end of the conference, attendees finalized their full action plans and presented them for peer affirmation and strengths-based feedback, with one group per track selected to share at the General Assembly.



Hundreds of Native youth participate in the UNITY Midyear Conference in Phoenix.

In the spirit of MLK Day, Native youth left Phoenix ready to turn vision into action. UNITY invites partners, tribes, schools, and community organizations to support implementation of these plans through mentorship, grants, or other forms of collaboration.

UNITY's National Conference will

celebrate 50 years of excellence and will take place July 10-14 at the Oklahoma City Convention Center. Registration is now open, with advanced registration rates available through February 28. Visit www.unityinc.org for more information.

Festive time for Immokalee Reservation

Editor's note: The Immokalee Reservation held its Christmas celebration Dec. 13, 2025. Photos from the event are in this issue because they didn't appear in the January issue.



Kelly Farrell

Amy Yzaguirre, from the Chairman's Office, welcomes families to the Christmas party in Immokalee



Kelly Farrell

Ryan Davis enjoys playing a game of cornhole at the party.



Kelly Farrell

From left to right, Jyotis Alvarado, Namari Alvarado, Juelz Alvarado and Alphonso Alvarado enjoy their time with Santa Claus at the Christmas Party near the rodeo grounds in Immokalee.



Kelly Farrell

Abby Colon enjoys a soda while visiting family and friends at the annual Christmas party.



Kelly Farrell

Sarah Robbins wears a Christmas-themed skirt.

Indian Country agriculture leaders to host live panel discussion

FROM PRESS RELEASE

Native food and agriculture leaders, policy experts, and tribal officials will hold a panel discussion at 3 p.m. (ET) on Feb. 19 exploring tribal departments of agriculture.

- Learn how tribal law and policy serve as the backbone of

effective agriculture governance

- Hear lessons from tribes building departments from the ground up, and those with mature, thriving ag systems
- Understand how the National Congress of American Indians' resolution supports tribal authority in agriculture
- Gain insights applicable

to tribal leaders, policymakers, producers, and partners

The discussion will be live-streamed on the Native American Agricultural Fund's LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube pages. To submit questions for the panelists, sign up at <https://bit.ly/tribaldeptag>.

Bee Gees tribute group to perform in Immokalee

FROM PRESS RELEASE

IMMOKALEE — Seminole Casino Hotel Immokalee welcomes The Australian Bee Gees Show May 15 with doors opening at 7 p.m. and the show beginning at 8 p.m. Tickets are available now from Ticketmaster or at moreinparadise.com. Attendees must be 21. After 24 years and over 6,500

performances in more than 55 countries, The Australian Bee Gees Show is the toast of Las Vegas. The show has been in residence at Excalibur Resort & Casino on the Las Vegas Strip since February 2011 and twice has been voted The Best Tribute Show in Las Vegas. The show features a chronology of the greatest hits from the wonderful music of the

Brothers Gibb, including "More Than A Woman," "Night Fever," "Stayin' Alive" and "How Do You Mend A Broken Heart," just to name a few. The Australian Bee Gees Show has captured the look, the sound and the personality that defines one of the most successful and adored acts in musical history.

Upcoming programs at Native Learning Center

FROM NATIVE LEARNING CENTER

Webinar: Developing a High Reliability Organization

Instructor: Dr. William R. Latchford, DCJ, President, Native Peacekeeper Consulting Group
Date: Feb. 10
Time: 2 – 3:30 p.m.
Course Description:

Today's world is full of the unexpected. System failures, terrorism events, disease outbreaks, and superstorms disrupt businesses every day, sometimes to an unrecoverable point. Despite these challenges, some services (such as power plants, hospitals, and airports) have no choice but to continue operating. This course will explore how these organizations maintain high reliability even in times of serious crisis and stability. We will share their secrets in a way that can be applied to all organizations in order to create high reliability and continued success.

Webinar: Don't Just Write the Grant: Find Your Red Thread and Tell a Story

Instructor: Diane Leonard, GPC, RST, Grant Professionals Association Approved Trainer; President DH Leonard Consulting & Grant Writing Services
Date: Feb. 12
Time: 2 – 3:30 p.m.
Course Description:

In this webinar, you'll learn how to craft a compelling "red thread," inspired by Tamsen Webster's book, that weaves through your entire grant application,

engaging reviewers and motivating them to advocate for your funding. We'll explore how to integrate SMART objectives into your narrative, ensuring that each objective strengthens your overall story. By the end of the session, you'll be equipped to align every part of your application, from objectives to narrative, into a cohesive, persuasive case for support.

Webinar: Creating a Positive Work Environment

Instructor: Dr. William R. Latchford, DCJ, President, Native Peacekeeper Consulting Group
Date: Feb. 17
Time: 2 – 3:30 p.m.
Course Description:

Not all of us have had the opportunity to work in a truly positive work environment. A positive work environment is important for the productivity of a company, but it is also important to us personally. Our emotional and physical health can be improved by working in a positive work environment. We should wake up each morning wanting to go to work - not trying to think of excuses to not go. We want to be proud of where we work and enjoy telling others about where we work. As an employee or a leader within a company, you have a responsibility to create and maintain a positive work environment. This course will give you tools to be able to create the type of company environment that you crave through building and nurturing effective workplace relationships.

Webinar: Using Housing Tax Credits to Cover Most of a Project's Cost

Instructor: Adam Rose, Director of

Partnerships and Growth Travois

Date: Feb. 19
Time: 2 – 3:00 p.m.
Course Description:

Low Income Tax Credits continue to be the largest program for affordable housing development in the country. Because of its ability to help cover 60-80%+ of a large project's cost (and the fact that it doesn't have to be repaid), it's an extremely valuable tool for Tribes to leverage limited NAHASDA and Tribal resources to move housing forward at scale. Attendees will be introduced to how it works, the competition for seeking LIHTC, and compliance expectations.

Webinar: How to Use Agile to Help Your Team Avoid Burnout

Instructor: Diane Leonard, GPC, RST Grant Professionals Association Approved Trainer, President, DH Leonard Consulting & Grant Writing Services
Date: Feb. 24
Time: 2 – 3:30 p.m.
Course Description:

In this interactive session, we will look at how a variety of nonprofit organizations have formed their Agile team(s), in order to help you find ideas based on successful implementations in other groups. We will walk through a facilitation method for building a team working agreement to help create shared understanding in your team(s) about why they will be working together and helping them identify the unique skills each team member brings to the team.

For more information visit nativelearningcenter.com.

U.S. Dept of Education to hold tribal consultation on Indian Education Partnership

FROM PRESS RELEASE

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon sent a letter inviting tribal leaders to a consultation on the Indian Education Partnership Interagency Agreements (IAA) between the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Departments of the Interior (DOI) and Labor (DOL). The consultation will take place at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. on Feb. 10.

As stated in McMahon's invitation, receiving input and guidance from American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities is an important step to ensure that Tribal leadership views guide and

inform the implementation of the IAAs.

On Nov. 18, 2025, the Education Department announced a series of partnerships with DOI and DOL governed by IAAs. The department maintains all statutory and policymaking authorities while acquiring services, technical assistance, and support from DOI and DOL for the integration of Native-serving programs.

Per the IAA, DOI will support the administration of Indian Education programs relating to elementary and secondary education, higher education, career and technical education, and vocational rehabilitation. DOL will ensure applicable fiscal appropriation for set-asides for tribes result in supporting programs that

boost literacy rates, strengthen employable skills, and connect Native youth and adults to meaningful workforce pathways.

This consultation will be conducted by the U.S. Office of Indian Education and will include senior department officials with authority to act on recommendations from tribal leaders.

"Consultation strengthens coordination and helps shape decisions affecting Native education," said Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior Billy Kirkland in a statement. "We are excited to work with tribes to improve program delivery, enforce accountability, and drive measurable outcomes for Native students."



DAVID FRANKEL, ESQ.

Attorney and Counselor at Law
Hollywood, Florida

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Former Lawyer for Leonard Peltier
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Calvin Tiger (2)

At left, Montana Cypress, director and star of "Becoming Buffalo," speaks about his film at the Native Reel Cinema Festival on Jan. 31 at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood. At right, a full house listens to Cypress after watching the film.

Cinema festival showcases Native actors, directors, films

BY CALVIN TIGER
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — The annual Native Reel Cinema Festival took place Jan. 30-31 at the Seminole Tribe's Tribal Fair in a ballroom at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Hollywood. Native actors and directors joined as honored guests for the festival such as Lifefoot, Tazbah Chavez, Doggface, Michael Spears, Keith Osceola and Amber Midthunder. In addition, there were multiple screenings of "Becoming Buffalo", directed by Montana Cypress.

Native-based short films aired during

the festival, giving attendees a chance to see on the big screen for the first time. Some of the short films include "Pow!," "Dene Brother," "Ruru," "Kusi Smiles," "This Means Forever," and "BRAIDS."

"Pow!," directed by Joey Clift, is an animated short film depicting a tribal family attending a powwow and emphasizes the importance of family and retaining tribal culture.

"Dene Brother," directed by Jonathan Antoine, is a short film documentary that highlights a Native family dealing with loss and experiencing different stages of grief from the loss a family member.

"Ruru," directed by Emily Taylor, is a New Zealand short film about a girl who wanders through a forest with her friends and becomes separated which leads her to a ghost-like owl leading her way through the forest to be reunited with her friends.

"Kusi Smiles," directed by Sisa Quispe, is a short film highlighting the culture of the Quechua people. The film is about a Native woman named Kusi who travels back to the Andes for a traditional family gathering. During the family gathering, Kusi is unable to sing due to the loss of her mother. Through the power of family and culture, Kusi confronts her grief and eventually can

sing again with her family during a cultural ceremony.

"This Means Forever," directed by Brandon Martinez, is a short film about a Native family dealing with loss and fallout between a nephew and aunt. The nephew, Lloyd, experiences different stages of grief after losing his father, which becomes a tension point between Lloyd and his aunt and who takes control of the father's estate.

"BRAIDS," directed by Elise M Beers, is a short film about a Native boy named Raven going through the struggles of identity, tradition, and societal pressures. The film takes place during a regular school

day and Raven gets ridiculed for his braids by students and school staff.

Later in the day during the cinema festival, there was multiple screenings of the Native short film "Becoming Buffalo", directed by Montana Cypress. Cypress, from the Miccosukee Tribe, directed and starred as Buffalo Tiger in the film. "Becoming Buffalo" highlights the pursuit of Buffalo Tiger getting the Miccosukee Tribe federally recognized by the federal government after going to Cuba to meet Fidel Castro in 1959, which led to the Miccosukee Tribe to be federally recognized in 1962.

Bronze statue of basketmaker Donna Frank unveiled

BY DANIELLA HAKIM
Staff Reporter

HOLLYWOOD — Seminole basketmaker extraordinaire Donna Frank attended the unveiling of a bronze statue of her creating a basket at the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow Jan. 30.

The statue was revealed as Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum Director Gordon Wareham played a song on his flute titled "Mothers." Wareham played the song in recognition of all mothers, as Frank has served as a mentor, storyteller and motherly figure to him.

At the age of 12, Frank learned sweetgrass cultivating and basket making techniques from her mother, Lena Osceola Frank, who taught her the art. Frank preserves a vital piece of Seminole heritage by passing down the traditional, once-essential artisan skills and serves as a mentor to many tribal

members including Kiana Bell and Hali Garcia.

Garcia is most notable for her contemporary approaches to traditional Seminole artistry and her work has been shown at recently at HistoryMiami's Yakne Seminoli exhibit.

"Most Seminole artists, as far as patchwork, get to show off their favorite cartoons or add their own meaningful twists to a design," said Garcia, a sweetgrass basket weaver and palmetto fiber doll maker. "We don't see that in basket weaving. I thought to myself, well, why not?"

Garcia's woven accessories entice the next generation of Seminoles and her own students, to undertake basket weaving.

"She will continue this journey of sweetgrass weaving," Frank said. "I trust her. She shows up."

Sculptor Bradley Cooley Jr. has worked

on the hot-cast bronze statue for over two years.

"Miss Donna has done so much for the culture, she keeps it alive, and it's good to see that she's carrying that on," Cooley said. "She's taking the young and the old folks that aren't familiar with some of the techniques."

Frank will be passing down the piece to her granddaughter and grandson, Delilah and Cristian Osceola-Pulido. Cristian, her second-oldest grandchild, will be the statue's caretaker.

"I want them to feel that culture and strength," Frank said. "I used to go with my mother into the woods, and I was always complaining, but now I know that she gave me such a gift. This isn't about me. It's about generations before us and generations to come."



Kevin Johnson



Kevin Johnson

Donna Frank, center, is joined by her family at the unveiling of her bronze statue Jan. 30 at the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow in Hollywood. With Donna are, from left to right, Cristian Osceola-Pulido, Damion Frank, Dejong Frank and Delilah Osceola-Pulido.

Big Cypress Councilwoman Mariann Billie joins Donna Frank at the unveiling of Donna's bronze statue.



Kevin Johnson (3)

From left to right, President Holly Tiger with Donna Frank; Gordon Wareham on the flute during the ceremony; and Hollywood Board Rep. O'Hara Tommie with Donna.



Kevin Johnson

Artist Bradley Cooley Jr., who made the bronze statue of Donna Frank, speaks at the ceremony while Donna and Hali Garcia stand on the side.

Scenes from 2026 Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow



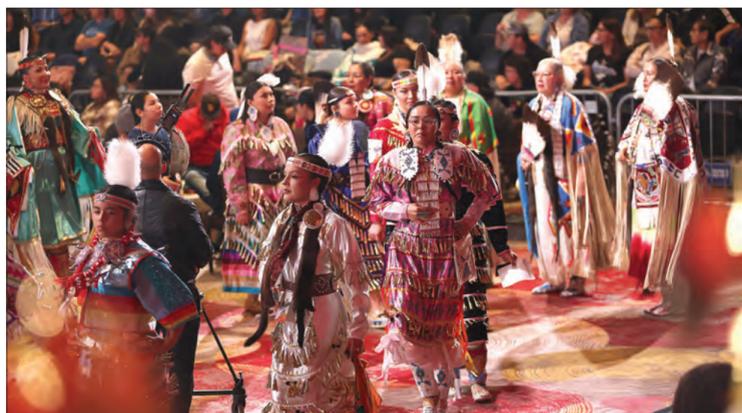
Kevin Johnson

The Seminole Tribe's Color Guard leads the procession onto the floor for the first grand entry Jan. 30. From left to right are Coleman Josh, Curtis Motlow, Gary McInturff and Sallie Josh.



Kevin Johnson

Miss Florida Seminole Bailey Marie Osceola Latchford shakes hands with a princess during the opening day ceremonies Jan. 30. Next to her is Jr. Miss Florida Seminole Chaka Yani Smith and Miss Indian World Dania Wahwasuck. Princesses from several tribes attended the event.



Kevin Johnson

Dancers take the floor as the Pow Wow gets underway Jan. 30.



Kevin Johnson

Paul "Cowbone" Buster smiles as he warms up before playing in one of the ballrooms at the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow.



Kevin Johnson

After participating in the grand entry, Hollywood Councilman Chris Osceola, President Holly Tiger and Hollywood Boad Rep. O'Hara Tommie welcome everyone to the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow.



Calvin Tiger

A boys clothing contest on Jan. 31 with, from left to right, Wildcat Billie, Justin Billie, Devontae Steve, and Reign Hincapie.



Kevin Johnson (2)

Above, the grand entry featuring Seminole leaders and royalty. At right, baskets in the arts and crafts contest.



Kevin Johnson

The drum group known as Pine Lodge Singers performs during the grand entry. Some members of the group are from the Lumbee Tribe, which recently became a federally recognized tribe.



Calvin Tiger

Clothing contests, including this woman's contest, were part of the Tribal Fair. From left to right: Agnes Billie-Motlow, Louise Osceola, Rose Tiger, Diane Snow, Virginia Osceola, Mahala Madrigal and Marilyn Doney.

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Sports



Ahfachkee girls win league championship

STAFF REPORT

The Ahfachkee School girls basketball team turned its first season back on the court in more than six years into a memorable one.

The Warriors won the championship game in the V-Camp Sports Basketball League in convincing fashion Jan. 27, 2026, on the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Big Cypress Reservation. Their 38-17 win against West Broward Academy culminated the Warriors' perfect season in the V-Camp middle school league with a 6-0 record; they finished 6-3 overall.

Coached by Tyree Wilson, Ahfachkee received balanced scoring in the championship victory. The offensive stars were Maddy Garza (13 points), Ollie Balentine (9 points) and Curmya Smith (8 points). Vanessa Osceola contributed three points followed by Tommie Stockton and Reyna Rios with two points each and Sue Bear with one point.

2025-26 Ahfachkee girls basketball team roster

Coach: Tyree Wilson
 Ollie Balentine
 Sue Bear
 Josephine Billie
 Ada Bruised-Head
 Aiyanna Crespo
 Chanel Cypress
 Faithlynn Cypress
 Malilah Cypress
 Maddy Garza
 Vanessa Osceola
 Reyna Rios
 Curmya Smith
 Tommie Stockton



Beverly Bidney

The Ahfachkee girls middle school basketball team celebrates after defeating West Broward Academy Jan. 27 to win the V-Camp Sports Basketball League.



Beverly Bidney

Maddy Garza, the game's leading scorer, dribbles toward the hoop.



Beverly Bidney

Curmya Smith leaps for joy as she was announced as MVP of the championship game during the celebration of the team's win.



Beverly Bidney

Aiyanna Crespo clears a path for Ollie Balentine with the ball.

Coed elementary team wraps up first season

STAFF REPORT

The Ahfachkee coed elementary basketball team concluded its first season Jan. 27 with a loss to West Broward Academy at home. The Warriors finished with a 1-5 record in its league.

The team had excellent turnout this season with plenty of players, which bodes well for next season, including at the middle school level as some players move up.



Beverly Bidney

Allie Billie gets past a West Broward Academy defender.



Beverly Bidney

George Grasshopper controls the ball in Ahfachkee's final game Jan. 27 against West Broward Academy.



Beverly Bidney

With teammate George Grasshopper nearby, Zhane Carter drives toward the basket.

PECS basketball bids farewell to 8th graders

BRIGHTON — On Jan. 12, the Pemaityv Emahaky Charter School girls and boys basketball teams held their eighth grade night, honoring the seven players, who will be headed to high school this fall, and their families. All the players received gift baskets and roses.



PECS eighth graders with boys coach Eli Finney, left, and girls coach Jovanny Torres, right.

Beverly Bidney



Margaria Fudge

Beverly Bidney



Okalani Collins

Beverly Bidney



Jessica Ponce

Beverly Bidney



Noah Olivares

Beverly Bidney



Noah Tubby

Beverly Bidney



Silas Snow

Beverly Bidney



Damahni Bonilla

Beverly Bidney

Friendly rivalry renewed as Ahfachkee, PECS meet

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

BRIGHTON — Ahfachkee School's Curmya Smith and Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School's Margaria Fudge soared into the air for the opening tip Jan. 8 marking the return of athletic contests between the two tribal schools.

Between the girls and boys games, principals Tracy Downing (PECS) and Philip Baer (Ahfachkee), Brighton Councilman Larry Howard, former Brighton Councilman Andrew J. Bowers Jr. and PECS administrator Michele Thomas gathered at midcourt and addressed the teams and spectators.

"For the first time in more than a decade, our school and our sister school are meeting on the basketball court. This isn't just a game — it's a moment of connection, pride and history," Downing said.

"Win or lose, this moment matters," said Michele Thomas, PECS administrative assistant. "It shows growth, opportunity, and what's possible when we invest in our students and believe in one another."

It's been a long time — some said more than a decade — since basketball teams from Ahfachkee and PECS last met. Ahfachkee had been without sports teams for the past six years until its basketball teams returned this winter.

PECS' gym was filled with spectators for two action-packed games (girls and boys) that featured players mostly from the Big Cypress and Brighton reservations. The Ahfachkee teams included some high school students; all PECS players are middle school students.

"It was good to get them back on the schedule. It was good to have Natives playing Natives; seeing that was a good thing to see," said PECS girls head coach and athletics director Jovanny Torres.

Up first, the girls game was close most of the way until undefeated PECS pulled away for a hard-fought 42-27 win. PECS received balanced scoring, including a pivotal boost from Amariah Lavatta, whose six points in the second quarter shifted the game's momentum to PECS' side after Ahfachkee had taken a 14-9 lead after the first quarter. Lavatta finished with 8 points. Fudge led PECS with 12 points followed by Kaliyah Hodge with 11.

Madelyn Garza (14 points) and Vanessa Osceola (7 points) were Ahfachkee's top scorers.

The PECS boys basketball team was in control for the first three quarters against the Ahfachkee. PECS built a 39-16 lead, but Ahfachkee showed plenty of heart by mounting a late charge, which included an 18-3 run to pull within eight points before PECS sealed the 44-36 win.

PECS received a huge performance



Brighton Councilman Larry Howard speaks to the teams and spectators between games Jan. 8 as Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School and Ahfachkee School met for the first time in a sports event in several years. Former Brighton Councilman Andrew J. Bowers Jr., PECS principal Tracy Downing and PECS administrative assistant Michele Thomas also spoke about the importance of the schools meeting in sports.

from Silas Snow. The 8th grader, who plans to attend Moore Haven High School, scored 27 points. Many of his points were on layups, often coming after steals by Damahni Bonilla and others as PECS' defensive pressure proved tough for Ahfachkee to handle.

"Our 2-3 zone was good tonight. Everybody was on the same page," said PECS coach Eli Finney, who took over head coaching duties during the season.

Bonilla finished with 9 points, all on 3-pointers. Curtis Smith led Ahfachkee with 19 points, which included 13 points during the final quarter rally.

"We didn't execute [in the first half], we didn't communicate on defense, but in the second half we came out and played a lot better, we played with intensity. We chopped away at the score. We still ended up short. Hopefully, we can grow from this," said Ahfachkee coach Devante Ray.



The opening tip in the girls game as Ahfachkee's Curmya Smith (9) and PECS' Margaria Fudge vie for the ball Jan. 8 in Brighton.



PECS' Silas Snow tries to dribble past Ahfachkee's Chance Frye in the boys game.



A group photo with all the teams, coaches, principals and Councilman Larry Howard.

Undefeated PECS girls finish with 15-0 record

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

BIG CYPRESS — On its road to an undefeated season, nearly all of Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School girls basketball games were decided long before the final buzzer; its final win was not.

PECS needed two late free throws from a calm Amariah Lavatta to edge Ahfachkee, 21-20, on Jan. 14 in Big Cypress.

The victory and undefeated season continued an astonishing stretch for girls sports at the school. The volleyball and softball teams have not lost a game in four years. During that span, girls basketball has lost only two games — both coming last season.

The win against Ahfachkee was among the toughest of any.

"This was our closest game of the year," said PECS coach and athletics director Jovanny Torres.

The undefeated season was in serious jeopardy in the final seconds. PECS trailed 20-19 when Lavatta was fouled with 15.9 seconds left after grabbing an offensive rebound. Despite all the pressure of the moment, including being in a very loud gym on the road, Lavatta calmly sank both free throws to give PECS a one-point lead.

"So clutch," Torres said. "She plays every sport you can name. She works her butt off. I'm so proud of her."

Ahfachkee didn't get a good look in the waning

seconds and had a turnover as PECS held on for the victory to seal its perfect season.

The game was close throughout. It was tied 6-6 after the first quarter. Ahfachkee led 14-10 at halftime and 18-16 going into the fourth.

Kaliyah Hodge, a seventh grader, scored all six of her team's points in the first quarter and went on to post a game-high 13 points. Lavatta had three points.

PECS played without one of its top players — Moore Haven High-bound 8th grader arMargaria Fudge — who suffered a finger injury earlier in the week. Ameliana Osceola didn't score, but she was one of the players who provided a huge boost in Fudge's absence.

"She never started all year; I threw her in the starting lineup," Torres said. "That girl plays such tenacious defense. She stepped up big time. I'm so proud of her; I'm proud of all the girls."

The team gave Torres plenty of reasons to be optimistic.

"I knew we were going to be decent. A lot of these seventh graders really stepped up and surprised me," he said.

Ahfachkee was led by Maddy Garza (10 points), Ollie Balentine (4 points) and Curmya Smith (4 points). Garza made two key free throws with 1:38 left in the game that gave Ahfachkee a 20-19 lead.



The PECS girls basketball had plenty of reasons to clap this season thanks to its 15-0 record.

Freshmen from tribe making immediate impact with OHS soccer

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

OKEECHOBEE — Two Okeechobee High School freshmen from the Seminole Tribe of Florida made an immediate impression in the Brahman's girls soccer program this winter.

It was just a year ago that Josephine Snow and Amalia Estrada were playing middle school soccer for Pemayetv Emahaky Charter School, but their impact on the high school level was evident in the team's 8-1 win against Port St. Lucie in a district quarterfinal Jan. 20 at OHS.

Snow was the starting and winning goalkeeper and allowed only one goal in the 60 minutes she was between the posts. Meanwhile, Estrada started and looked right at home as a midfielder, and even scored a goal.

Okeechobee coach Kevin Sallette said he's thrilled that both players have three years left with the program. He said both are developing into outstanding athletes.

Snow offers plenty of versatility. In addition to keeper, she also saw action at right back and striker.

"She's a player we can put anywhere on the field and we know we're going to get

something out of her," Sallette said.

As goalie, she appeared in 21 games and allowed just eight goals for a 2.67 goals against average. She also had two shutouts.

Estrada spent most of the season as a starting midfielder on the junior varsity team. She was called up to varsity late in the season.

"Her game has grown a lot. She's gotten a lot better," Sallette said.

Estrada's goal came at a pivotal moment. Port St. Lucie scored on a last-second shot as time expired in the first half to trim Okeechobee's lead to 2-1, but Estrada extinguished any comeback hopes by scoring on a shot from the top of the box eight minutes into the second half to make it 3-1. Okeechobee cruised the rest of the way to victory.

Okeechobee's season ended two days later with a 6-1 loss against Jensen Beach in a district semifinal. The Brahman's finished with a 7-15-1 record, but with plenty of young players — such as Snow and Estrada — the program could turn a corner soon.

"We could have done better. We lost games we should have won. We had 17 freshmen come out, so the program is growing," Sallette said.



Kevin Johnson

Okeechobee High School goalkeeper Josephine Snow makes a save in the team's 8-1 win against Port St. Lucie in a district quarterfinal playoff game Jan. 20. Snow, a freshman, recorded two shutouts this season.



Kevin Johnson

Amalia Estrada, right, battles a Port St. Lucie player for the ball during a district playoff game Jan. 20.



Kevin Johnson

Josephine Snow (9) is in the center of it all in the 2025-26 Okeechobee High School varsity soccer poster.



Kevin Johnson

After scoring a goal, Amalia Estrada, center, is congratulated by a teammate in the Brahman's district quarterfinal win against Port St. Lucie.



Kevin Johnson

Moore Haven High School's Milo Osceola Jr. makes the game-winning basket in the final seconds of a JV game against Okeechobee High School.

Big night for Moore Haven hoops as JV, varsity sweep Okeechobee

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

MOORE HAVEN — Milo Osceola Jr. lifted the Moore Haven High School junior varsity boys basketball team to victory Jan. 7 thanks to a game-winning shot.

With his team trailing Okeechobee High School by one point, Osceola grabbed an offensive rebound in the paint and hit a short jump shot with 10 seconds remaining to give the Terriers a dramatic 33-32 win in front of their home crowd.

Osceola, a forward who is one of the team's top rebounders, finished with six points. He and Timothy Urbina are the only tribal members from the Seminole Tribe of Florida on the JV.

The varsity game featured tribal members Greg James (Moore Haven), Shakur Williams (Moore Haven) and Brody Riley (Okeechobee) and descendant Thaddeus Johns (Moore Haven). Okeechobee, which only had six players, hung with Moore Haven for most of the first half before the Terriers used their depth and quickness to pull away for a 66-36 win.

Moore Haven — in the midst of a strong season with a 10-3 record — used its explosiveness to shift into a higher gear late in the second quarter, turning an 18-10 lead into a 32-11 lead at halftime.

Williams, who shared point guard duties with Johns, scored 11 points. The Terriers' Aaryn Askew led all scorers with 21.

Riley, who played nearly the entire game, scored six points and was one of the Okeechobee's top rebounders.

The Brahman's, who were coming off two consecutive wins, fell to 4-10.



Kevin Johnson

Moore Haven forward Greg James grabs a rebound and eyes two points against Okeechobee.



Kevin Johnson

Okeechobee forward Brody Riley grabs a rebound against Moore Haven.



Kevin Johnson

Moore Haven guard Thaddeus Johns lines up a 3-point shot against Okeechobee.

Kevin Johnson
Moore Haven guard Shakur Williams runs a play against Okeechobee.



EIRA opens 2026 season with Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo

BY KEVIN JOHNSON
Senior Editor

HOLLYWOOD — The Seminole Tribe of Florida had two winners in the Eastern Indian Rodeo Association's first rodeo of the season.

INFR World Champion team roper Josh Jumper picked up where he left off last season as he teamed with Dakota Louis to win the team roping at the annual Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo Jan. 23-24 at the Hollywood Reservation's rodeo arena. Jumper, the grandson of the late Betty Mae, and Louis combined for a winning time of 7.3 seconds.

In bareback, Jacoby Johns, of Brighton, finished second with 65 points. Steven Dewolfe, of South Dakota, took top honors with 72 points.

On the cowgirls side, Boogie Johns, from Brighton, produced the fastest barrels time (15.565), edging second place Quinley Inman (15.720), from Oklahoma. Seminole Shelby Dehass finished in the money in sixth place (16.052).

The tribe nearly had a winner in ladies breakaway. Madisyn Osceola, from Brighton, turned in a solid time of 3.12, which turned out to be the second fastest behind winner Keleigh Lee (2.77), of New Mexico.



Taylor Johns carries the U.S. flag during the opening ceremony for the Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo on Jan. 23 at the Hollywood rodeo arena. The Guitar Hotel is in the background.

Kevin Johnson



Boogie Johns and her horse turn the corner on their way to winning first place.

Kevin Johnson



The bullfighters are in action, including the tribe's Josiah Johns, in the center.

Kevin Johnson



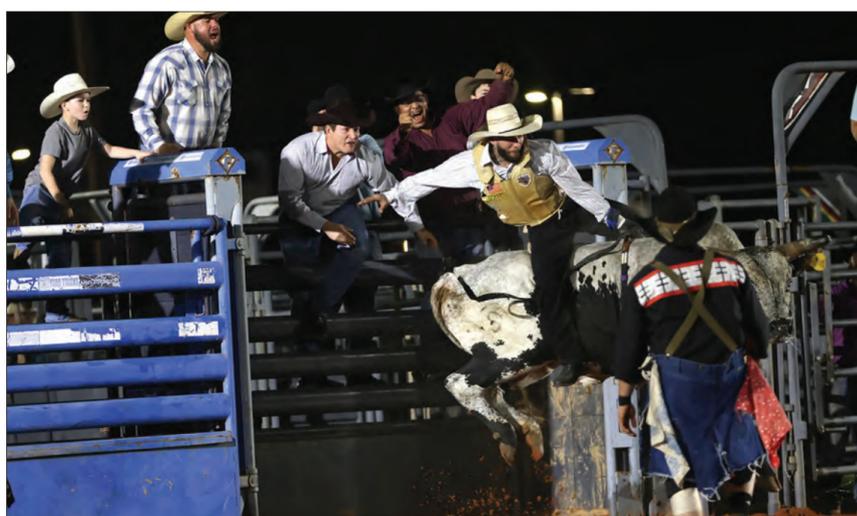
Justin Rodriguez is ready for battle as the gate opens.

Kevin Johnson



Moses Jumper Jr. watches the rodeo named in memory of his mother.

Kevin Johnson



At left, Ethan Gopher, and, at right, MacKenzie Bowers, in action at the Betty Mae Jumper Memorial Rodeo.

Kevin Johnson (2)



Rack 'em up - Tribal Fair pool tournament



Heather Osceola lines up a shot in the Seminole Tribal Fair & Pow Wow Pool Tournament Jan. 23 in a ballroom at Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood. The two-day tournament featured Scotch doubles and 8-ball and 9-ball. It featured men's and women's divisions. Calvin Tiger



Charley Cypress racks up the balls to start another game. Calvin Tiger



Diamond Jumper focuses making a shot. Calvin Tiger



Jayce Smith lines up a shot along the edge of the table. Calvin Tiger



President Holly Tiger, center, is joined by her staff at the tournament. From left to right are Courtney Osceola, Walker Lawrence, Coleman Josh, Tianna Young and Ashley Clark, Calvin Tiger



Stella Ford faces a tough shot in a crowded area of the table. Calvin Tiger



Lance Tommie concentrates on hitting a shot into the corner pocket. Calvin Tiger

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