Casino another step forward for the Ponca Tribe

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By Chairman Larry Wright, Jr.

In August, I had the honor and privilege to unveil a new, 11-foot, bronze statue of Chief Standing Bear in Niobrara, Nebraska. Situated on a hill overlooking tribal land, the statue honors our tribe’s past, while having a bird’s-eye view of what lies ahead. In many ways, the statue and its peak position are symbolic of the two worlds the Ponca Tribe lives in -- working to preserve and promote our cultural heritage, while putting in motion a service model that will provide for our people well into the future.

Our tribe is on the precipice of continued growth after a long, hard-fought journey. Our people were forcibly removed from our tribal land by the federal government in the late 1800s, which meant our ancestors had to leave everything they had behind. In the 1960s, the federal government terminated our tribe, meaning that our land, holdings and cultural heritage were dissolved, and our people were removed from tribal rolls. For the second time, everything we had was taken from us.

After working for a quarter-century to regain formal recognition, our tribe was restored by the federal government in 1990. But with this restoration came a catch. Once again, we had to start over. A resilient people, we rolled up our sleeves to begin piecing back together our land, our culture, our heritage, and forming a set of services and programs that our people so desperately needed.

With diligent work, significant progress is being made. Our tribal rolls are expanding, and our citizens are increasingly becoming more engaged, as they learn of more services offered by the tribe.

This progress also brings into focus a critical challenge that any sovereign body must confront. To provide for our people, our programs must be sustainable.

As our tribe’s needs evolved, so, too, did our plans to harness the resources to meet these needs. Soon, our tribe will open the Prairie Flower Casino in Carter Lake on our sovereign land. This facility will help us provide the services needed to make our tribe and people strong yet again.

Gaming will be part of who we are, but will not define who we are.

Because of this facility, critical services such as health care, job training and land preservation will be provided, achieving a central Ponca value of helping our people and our neighbors.
Lifting our own, and our community, absolutely defines who we are.

For example, in February we closed on a property near Ralston, where we will build a modern health care clinic to better serve the community. The 60,000-square-foot space, plus a new building, will offer a suite of health services such as primary, dental and behavior health care, physical therapy, plus a pharmacy. In addition to serving Native Americans, we also hope to serve the general public, as we continue to embrace our community and find solutions to meet our neighbors’ needs.

In Norfolk, Nebraska, our tribe is offering services to help make the right choice the easy choice. We offer clinics on how to craft meals to curb diabetes and obesity. Our staff has provided valuable educational presentations on the importance of immunizations among our youth and offered cultural awareness training.

We’re also continuing to acquire native Ponca land in order to rebuild our cultural and tribal history. This month, we’ll reclaim 1,800 acres of land near Niobrara, which includes Standing Bear’s burial site.

Our commitment to bettering the lives of our people and the communities in which we live, work and raise our families, is as strong as ever.

They say nothing worth fighting for comes easy. That was the case in Chief Standing Bear’s fight to return to his native land to bury his son.

And it’s certainly true with our work to regain federal recognition, reclaim our cultural heritage and establish a sustainable service model for future generations.