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(Neb.)-Brewer Ready For Challenge Of Tribal President

By: Chris Fankhauser Posted at: 11/26/2012 10:08 AM

(Chadron)-Long recognized for his ability to organize and make things happen, Bryan Brewer is about to take on the biggest job of his life. He will become the president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe on Dec. 7 after recently being elected to the position.

While speaking at Chadron State College on Tuesday, Nov. 20, Brewer noted "there's lots of work to be done, but I'm ready for the challenge."

Brewer's list of needed improvements is a long one, covering nearly every aspect of life on the Pine Ridge Reservation, but he's already busy trying to enlist the help from numerous sources.

"I want to work with all people, both those who live on the reservation and those who no longer live on it," he said. "Those who don't live on reservation often feel they are left out."

He added that he's also been in contact with leaders in places such as Rapid City and hopes to form alliances with Chadron State and leaders in towns that border the sprawling reservation.

"There are so many things we can work on together," said Brewer, 65. "I'm not talking about just what you can do for us, but also what we can do for you. We need to build good relationships. We need to collaborate. There's been lots of reconciliation in my lifetime, but we need more."

Brewer already has many accomplishments. He's proud of his two and a half tours of duty as a Navy Seabee during the Vietnam War. He noted that the Lakota people are patriotic and are glad to serve their country in the military. For 13 years, he's organized a pow-wow on the Pine Ridge Reservation to honor the 4,000 veterans who live there.

"We're a warrior society," he stated. "I could have gone to college instead of joining the military, but I served my country first, then went to college." He graduated from Black Hills State in 1976.

Brewer also is the founder of the Lakota Nation Invitational Basketball Tournament that will be in its 36th year this December. He said it grew out of the aftermath of the Wounded Knee II incident.

He was the boys' basketball coach at Pine Ridge High School at the time and had great difficulty in getting teams to schedule the Thorpes. Thus, he collaborated with the late Chuck Cuny, the coach at the nearby Red Cloud School, and they formed a basketball tournament that initially packed the gym in Pine Ridge.

Two years later, when the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center opened, the tournament was shifted there and has become the largest Native American high school basketball tournament in the nation.

Brewer was recently honored by the Rapid City Chamber of Commerce for his leadership in the tourney.

During his talk, Brewer noted that the activities have grown over the years to include a wrestling tournament and a Lakota language contest, and he hopes more educational and cultural functions can be added.

“We want to do all we can to help kids,” he stated

Brewer said the reservation, with 89 percent unemployment and 92 percent of the residents living below the federal poverty level, “can be a hard place.”

The poverty, he said, frequently leads to alcohol and drug abuse and education often suffers.

“If you don’t have a house or a car or know how you’re going to feed your kids, education is not high on your priority list,” said Brewer, who noted the dropout rate on the reservation is nearly 60 percent.

The new tribal president also lamented that there are about 40 suicide attempts on the reservation a month, many of them by youths who are depressed by the conditions they observe.

The unemployment issue will be among the items getting top billing during his term, Brewer said.

“Some of our adults have never had a job and neither did their parents, but they want their kids to have jobs,” he said. “People are concerned. They want things to be better for their kids.”

Brewer said he will hire staff members to write economic development grants and hopes numerous small businesses will open on the reservation. He also wants to bring wind energy to the reservation and is baffled why there are no banks on the reservation.

“There are 70,000 people in Rapid City and they have a bank on every (street) corner,” he said. “We have 50,000 people on the reservation and we have no banks. It is very difficult for our people to get a loan so they can go into business. That’s something we need to change.”

In addition, Brewer said he wants to make it mandatory for contractors who obtain jobs on the reservation to hire Indians.

Another goal, he said, is to improve the working relationship between members of the tribal council.

“Not much gets done when the council members are fighting each other,” he said. “We also need to have better education for our council members. Often if they don’t understand something they push it away and we let opportunities go away.”

Brewer also said he hopes to receive help from Chadron State on several environmental and natural resources issues because the college has a strong reputation in those areas.

Another goal, he said, is to encourage more students to attend Chadron State.

“We need to find a way for our students to feel more comfortable when they go to college,” he said. “It’s the same for our high school and college students. If we can get them past the first year, they will often stay in school.”

On another issue, Brewer said he will try to close down the alcohol outlets in Whiteclay by working with Nebraska officials. He said some \$80 million is spent annually on alcohol by reservation residents.

“I don’t want there to be violence, but it would be a victory for the Indian people if they were closed. It would not stop alcoholism, but they (the outlets) should not be so close to the reservation just so a few people can make lots of money,” he stated.

Brewer also:

--Said he plans to immediately fill the vacancy available to Lakotas in Washington, D.C., for a treaty expert who would work with both government agencies and South Dakota’s congressional delegation on various issues.

--Wants to identify all the fluent Lakota speakers on the reservation so they can help youths learn the language.

--Commended rancher Dave Kadleck, who was in the audience, for preserving and not commercializing the area he owns in Beaver Valley northwest of Hay Springs where Crazy Horse's body is believed to have been taken and placed in a tree after the warrior was bayoneted at Fort Robinson.

—*Con Marshall, CSC Information Service*