



NIGA's Leadership Table: Where it All Began

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

The National Indian Gaming Association's Annual Trade Show and Convention is the largest Indian gaming show in the Nation. With over 5,000 attendees in sunny San Diego, this year is bound to be better than ever.

The planning process for our annual tradeshow and convention, Indian Gaming, doesn't just begin at the end of the previous year's event. Every tradeshow we organize is years in the making, and each installment is the culmination of countless partnerships, resolutions and consultations dating all the way back to NIGA's founding, even as our organization is constantly evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of Indian Country.

We expect over 5,000 attendees and over 500 exhibitors at Indian Gaming 2012, which takes place April 1-4, 2012, at the San Diego Convention Center. We are proud to offer over 120 workshop sessions with the goal of improving the state of Indian gaming. Topics include economic development, Internet gaming, marketing, leadership development, guest services, and social media, to name a few.

Every year with our tradeshow, NIGA endeavors to create a space that fosters dialogue and collaboration between and among tribal leaders, Native-owned businesses, gaming industry experts, knowledgeable policymakers and our valued Associate Members. We like to think of our tradeshow as a leadership table. Nowhere else can you be as relaxed and engaged in equal measures than at the intimate, welcoming space at our table of decision makers.

The leadership table has other meaning for NIGA as well. It was around a table, a kitchen table in fact, that the seed of NIGA began to germinate in the early 1990s, when Timothy Wapato, his wife Gay, and their friend Rick Hill, then Chairman of the Oneida Tribe, channeled their frustration into meaningful action. Around that table, NIGA took a giant re-energized step toward visibility in Washington, D.C. and throughout Indian Country.

Tim Wapato was NIGA's first Executive Director and served in that role for six years. He was a visionary who lived by the rule that Indian Country came first and foremost. Tim didn't seek his position to promote himself and never took one day for granted. He was a tireless advocate for tribal sovereignty and Native peoples all over the world. We honor that legacy with the Tim Wapato Sovereignty Spirit Award, given each year at our Indian Gaming event.

Gay Wapato, meanwhile, led NIGA's public relations

effort in those early years, no small task at a time when America was awash in negative portrayals of Indian Country and especially Indian gaming. NIGA provided an important counter to the harmful stereotypes used to threaten tribal sovereignty, such as when the "Repositioning the Argument" campaign won national and regional awards or when the "Schools vs. Yachts" public relations campaign helped kill legislation that would have ended Indian gaming. Our organization stands firm on these historic actions that Tim, Gay, Rick and NIGA's first chairman, Bill Houle and Vice-Chair, Percy Powless have accomplished.

The National Indian Gaming Association today serves as a constant reminder of the paramount importance of tribal sovereignty and tribal rights. We work in Washington, D.C., and across the country to educate members of Congress and their staffs about tribal governments, sovereignty, Native culture and Indian gaming. We continue to dispel ignorance about Native cultures and tribal enterprises, and we work tirelessly to ensure opportunity for tribal nations to chart their own destinies.

We have serious business to take care of, namely Internet gaming, regulation and taxation. At NIGA, we stand strong in support of Indian gaming and we firmly defend Indian sovereignty.

At the same time, we will have fun and excitement – with outstanding golfing at Sycuan and Barona's world-class golf courses. At our Chairman's welcome reception, sponsored by Rocket Gaming, we will feature great native talent aboard the USS Midway Aircraft Carrier in San Diego harbor. When you are aboard, check out the Apache helicopters as we honor our Native veterans. We are also excited to have Dwight Yoakam at our Wendell A. Chino Humanitarian Awards Banquet!

Those of us who attend the Indian Gaming event each year rely greatly on this opportunity to develop longstanding relationships and engage new partners. We at NIGA are humbled to make such an event possible, and this year, we want you to get business done, and have fun at our leadership table in San Diego next month. ♣

Ernest L. Stevens, Jr. is Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA). He can be reached by calling (202) 546-7711 or visit www.indiangaming.org.