

## Up Close with Ernie Stevens, Jr., Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association



*In an interview from the ICE Totally Gaming tradeshow floor in London, Ernie Stevens, Jr., Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA), spoke with Indian Gaming about the importance of working with the new Trump Administration and the need to expand economic development efforts internationally.*

### **What advice do you have for tribal leaders across Indian Country who might be feeling a level of uncertainty with the new Trump Administration?**

The boxer's advice; dig in, get your feet on the ground and stand firm. Get ready to do what you need to do. I have the word of Representative Markwayne Mullin (R-OK 2nd District), who headed up the Native American advisory team, who has said they are doing everything they can to help the new Administration understand Indian Country. As an enrolled member of Cherokee Nation – he understands the stakes.

During the election, I went to both of the national conventions. In Cleveland at the Republican National Convention (RNC), somebody asked me, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'I've been coming to the RNC for many years.' Some of the biggest champions for Indian Country have come from the Republican side of the aisle. I have to work both sides – that is a critical purpose of the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA). It's not just people like Representative Mullin, or Representative Tom Cole (R-OK 4th District) – there are many more champions for Indian Country – on all sides.

### **What should the Administration know about Indian gaming, particularly relating to the many jobs it creates?**

We have been trying to respectfully indicate that we've been making America great for a long time. We help keep people working with 600,000 direct and indirect jobs in

Indian gaming, and everyone – Indian and non-Indian alike – pays taxes. A large portion of legislators in Washington know this, but there are many new ones who do not, so we have to educate them quickly. We are coming off of two terms of unprecedented communication with the White House during the Obama Administration. We built a strong foundation, not just with President Obama, but Senators, Congressmen, Cabinet Secretaries and beyond. We have to continue to build on that foundation. It's up to us to educate and work with the new Administration and the 115th Congress in a respectful, but active way. We've got to go to work and stay positive about what can be done with this Administration.

### **How best can tribal leaders work to affect change?**

When dealing with our legislators, speak assertively and respectfully. By doing so, our voices will be heard. It is not about partisanship – it's about Indian Country. I'm from the 'Indian party' and I'm going to do what's best for our people. I'm counting on the folks that are advising President Trump to understand who we are and where we come from. I'm going to continue to keep my chest out and chin up, and if I take a hit on the chin, that's fine. I'm a fighter. In boxing, I didn't get knocked down too many times – but when I did, I got up and fought again. We'll keep fighting in a respectful, assertive manner, as good sports on behalf of Indian Country.

My wife and I went to school with nothing. We paid student loans into our forties. I have five kids who primarily

*"Our tribes had economic development and worked with each other in government-to-government relationships before there was a United States of America."*

utilized tribal education – and today, they all have college degrees through the use of tribal scholarships and family support. Gaming is helping facilitate the education of many. All five of my kids went to school in tribal school settings with state-of-the-art technology, teachers who could teach traditional culture, math and science at the highest level. Some people say, 'Well, tribal school?' My youngest, who had an entirely tribal K-12 education, received her undergraduate degree from Haskell Indian Nations University, completed her Masters degree at the University of Kansas, and is now in her second semester studying for her PhD in graduate school. Indian Country – that's where she comes from.

#### What is your outlook for working with this Administration?

I'm objective and upbeat and I'm going to stay that way, even if we slip or get pushed back – we'll just go in the side door if need be. We'll knock, phone, email, or text – whatever



**YOUR CASINO'S  
CASH ACCESS SOLUTION  
MADE EASY**

**NIGA booth #1739**

**VOTED #1 IN  
TECHNOLOGY &  
CUSTOMER SUPPORT**

**FABICASH**  
your cash access company  
A DIVISION OF FIRST AMERICAN BANKCARD, INC.

**www.fabichash.com**  
**504.837.2626**

FABICash is the #1 cash access company in the gaming industry. With our senior level in house software engineers, FABICash has become the leader in technology. FABICash offers the total cash access package, including ATM's, credit and debit card cash advance, check cashing, kiosks, and the most user friendly Title 31 software program. Ask our customers... We guarantee more money back on your casino's gaming floor. Call us today and let FABICash make your casino great again!

it takes – and then go back around to the front door again. Indian Country is depending on us to go to Washington and do a good job and defend tribal sovereignty and continue to build a future for the next seven generation of Native people. Donald Trump can only be the President for 4-8 years. We're going to be around a lot longer than that. In the meantime, we are going to count on his Administration to understand, appreciate and work with us.

#### What does being in London at ICE Totally Gaming represent for you and other tribal leaders in Indian Country?

It is an enormous opportunity to let the world know about Indian gaming. We want the leaders and business people here to come to the United States, visit our communities, see our culture and traditions, visit our museums, parks and our gaming facilities. We need to tell the world about our economic opportunities and facilitate any potential business with and beyond gaming. My priority is to expand that dialogue.

The Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne hosted a delegation of tribal leaders for a day of activity at UK Parliament. We had a reception and extraordinary lunch, and then witnessed a session of Parliament in the House of Lords. In the evening there was a dinner with the Baroness and the Yaaw Tei Yi Dancers from Juneau Alaska danced at the end of the night. The entire day and evening was a tremendous success.

#### What would you like gaming professionals overseas to know about about Indian Country, and more specifically, Indian gaming?

The international political and business representatives we are meeting need to know the contemporary story of Indian people and what we do as tribal governments engaged in gaming. We need to be able to create international opportunities for Indian Country and we are making strides. It is important for us to tell the world who we are, what we do and where we come from. The myth is that 'we struggled in our lives, so we were given a casino.' We gamed from time immemorial, before we ever met anybody from the outside world. Our tribes had economic development and worked with each other in government-to-government relationships before there was a United States of America. We are a very proud, traditional, powerful group of people who live together, bond together and interact together. ♣

*For more information about the National Indian Gaming Association, visit [www.indiangaming.org](http://www.indiangaming.org).*