

# *In* Native Hands



*Two OU alumnae are working to bring Native traditions and stories to life at Oklahoma's new American Indian Cultural Center*

Hugh Scott

BY WHITNEY BRYEN

A large, steel shell marks Oklahoma City's long-awaited American Indian Cultural Center and Museum, and inside Shoshana Wasserman and heather ahtone stroll the plywood pathways that connect the unfinished rooms. Carefully watching their steps, the women look past the empty spaces and missing walls, imagining the scenes that will soon tell the story of Oklahoma's Native people, which, like the building, seems incomplete.

"We have 39 tribal communities in Oklahoma that we're trying to provide equity and representation for within our museum," ahtone says. "Each of these tribes has a responsibility to tell their own story, but we can celebrate that there is something critically, globally important about what happened in Oklahoma. And I think telling that story from an indigenous perspective is really, really powerful."

But, like Oklahoma's tribal communities, the project has a long and complicated history. Wasserman and ahtone are bringing their experiences as Native women, University of Oklahoma alumnae and their passion for Oklahoma's indigenous people to help revive the center that has lain dormant for the past six years.

The museum concept was born out of a statewide effort to boost tourism in the '90s when the Oklahoma State Legislature created the Native American Cultural and Educational Authority, the state agency tasked with constructing the center. The city donated a 210-acre oilfield near the southeast corner of I-35 and I-40 that required years of environmental study and clean up. Construction on the 173,000-square-foot facility began in 2006 and stalled in 2012 after federal and state funds went unrealized.

Sales of \$25 million in state bonds are expected to be released to the project this fall, allowing construction to resume. Combined with another \$40 million pledged by private donors, the final push will be a fundraising effort that seeks an additional \$20 million needed to complete the project. The opening is currently scheduled for spring of 2021.

"Despite the delay, the museum's mission has never changed," Wasserman says. "The museum will complement the many tribal museums across the state of Oklahoma, who share tribally specific and rich histories. The center is located in Oklahoma's gateway city and will provide the visitor with a

collective history that we hope will entice people to stay in the state and visit the other tribal museums and all of the many other rich cultural museums and assets in the state."

Wasserman, a member of the Thlopthlocco Tribal Town and Muscogee Creek tribes, has been working on the project longer than most. First as director of marketing and public relations and now as associate director, Wasserman is the museum's liaison between tribes, city and state officials. She has a master of arts degree in business communications from Jones International University and a bachelor of science in elementary education with a minor in multicultural studies from OU. Much of her career has been devoted to the arts, working with the Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center (formerly the City Arts Center) and the Oklahoma Children's Theatre and co-founding The Great American Indian Dance Company. She also serves as the vice chairwoman for Mvskoke Arts Association.

Since joining the museum in 2007, she has worked on marketing initiatives and program development. As a consultant, Wasserman organized a ground blessing ceremony at the site in 2005 that brought a representative from each of the 39 tribes together. They sat in a circle according to where their tribal headquarters is located and fed a ceremonial fire with sticks of hickory. Collaborative and individual blessings and traditions covered the grounds for the unprecedented gathering.

"We were fostering compassion and embracing a notion that Indian tribes are not a singular thing," Wasserman says. "We're distinct nations, but even in that moment there was this poetic beauty of them all coming together. That's what I believe called all these ancestors together to shield this project."

Ahtone wipes away a tear as she hugs and thanks Wasserman for sharing her vision and her faith. The women agree that until the museum walls are in place, a collective of tribal ancestors will protect this now sacred place.

A Choctaw and a Chickasaw citizen, ahtone is one of the museum's newest members, but she is quickly embracing the responsibilities of her role as senior curator bringing with her a wealth of experience and research on tribal culture.

Raised by her grandparents and steeped in tribal traditions, ahtone aims to bring a modern perspective to indigenous history. She has a bachelor's degree in printmaking, a master's degree in art history and a doctoral degree in interdisciplinary studies that incorporates art history, anthropology and Native American studies from the University of Oklahoma. There, she also taught in the School of Visual Arts. As a research associate she helped build a Native science course that uses

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**Touch to Above**, at left, a 13-foot-high stainless-steel sculpture created by Bill Glass Jr. and Demos Glass, greets visitors to the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum. The sculpture, an upraised hand, offers a prayer to the Creator.

indigenous American culture to teach earth systems science. As the curator of Native American art at OU's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, ahtone was one of only three Native curators in the country serving at a non-Native museum.

"There has been a vast under representation of Native perspectives within museums at institutions for far too long," ahtone says. "And so having an all-Native leadership really provides The American Indian Cultural Center and Museum the opportunity to set a footprint to think how we, as indigenous people, can transform museums as global projects into something that can serve much beyond what they've done in the past. And this is something we take to heart every day."

Exhibits curated by ahtone and her team will anchor the building's south wing and tell "stories that have never been properly told before," she says. The largest exhibit will be devoted to a broad, collective history of Oklahoma's tribes with timelines and first-person narratives. On loan from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, objects collected from the tribes during the latter 19th century and more recently will populate the mezzanine gallery. The opening exhibits are expected to be on display for 10 years to allow time for public schools and universities to schedule visits, and for the museum build a reputation that attracts a global audience.

"We obviously have a commitment to our local communities and a commitment to our tribal communities, but we are trying to tell a story for a global audience," ahtone says. "Tribes have an obligation to tell a story from their tribal community. The problem is the story is just so much bigger than that. So it's important that we can have a place to address some of those broader, sweeping moments that affected hundreds of thousands of people."

As the project forges ahead, OU professor Amanda Cobb-Greetham cheers from the



sidelines, optimistic about the opportunities the center will provide for students and Native education across the state.

As chair of the university's Department of Native American Studies and director of the Native Nations Center, Cobb-Greetham sees internship possibilities, educational partnerships and role models for her students in Wasserman and ahtone.

"Because of how histories are written and recorded, they are de facto histories of men written by men," Cobb-Greetham says. "I don't want to diminish critical work and leadership of those individuals, but that notion of history that happens through an individual isn't the way our indigenous communities work. Particular roles of women in that work is key and I think heather and Shoshana are weaving things together, piecing things together, in a way that will help us understand history differently."

With the help of Wasserman and ahtone, Cobb-Greetham envisions a partnership between the university and the center that will encourage academic and intellectual conversations and lead to a deeper understanding of Oklahoma's complex history. Cobb-Greetham points to their passion, profession-



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OU alumnae heather ahtone (left) and Shoshana Wasserman are bringing their experiences as Native women to bear upon the long-awaited American Indian Cultural Center and Museum.





The buildings and mound of Oklahoma City's American Indian Cultural Center and Museum were designed as a series of spirals representing Native ideals of harmony. OU alumnae are helping to complete and lead the center, which is scheduled to open in 2021.

alism and expertise as critical components needed to foster a healthy future for Oklahomans.

The exhibits begin to come to life as Wasserman and ahtone cruise around the unfinished museum on a warm August morning. Nearly every detail of the facility was designed to honor indigenous people, from the Mesquabuck stone, named for a Potawatomi chief, that covers the walls of the east gate, to the site layout that aligns with the cardinal directions. The buildings and mound were designed as a series of spirals that represent Native ideals of harmony. The promontory mound surrounds the west side of the facility, a nod to Oklahoma's mound-building communities that date back to around 500 A.D.

"One of my favorite experiences here is going to be the promontory mound, and the reason I like that is because you can dive deep and dense into the understanding of other people's cultures, but at end of day I want people to walk up that promontory mound and have a reflective moment. By the time they come back down I would like for them to walk away from this place, enriched in some way personally," Wasserman says.

The women have walked these halls countless times, so many that laughter seems to ring from the family-friendly Discovery Center and the smell of Native foods that will be

sold at the cafe almost wafts through the air as they describe the transformation of each nook and cranny. But no matter how many times they've seen it, a sweeping view that combines the urban landscape of downtown Oklahoma City and the site's large, promontory mound causes them to pause. The melding of ancient and modern, of past and present, provides a metaphor for the project's mission.

"I think that lack of equity, of respect for different cultural perspectives, unfortunately still keeps Oklahoma from being the really fantastic place that it has every potential to be," ahtone says. "I hope this center can provide a platform for not only American Indian perspectives, but for other perspectives to be recognized and respected."

As construction resumes and exhibits develop, four principles will continue to guide the center's progress and the women shaping it.

"Respect, reciprocity, responsibility and relationships. These are not core values that are specific to Native people," Wasserman says. "These are core values that human beings need to survive, and if we can help people remember those at some level, I'll feel like this is well done."

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