



# Postscript

## Good Neighbors



The event was 128 years in the making when leaders of all 39 Native Nations of Oklahoma were invited to the University of Oklahoma to honor the nations' sovereign status and to recognize the relationship the university shares with each.

Surrounded by the 39 flags, President James L. Gallogly greeted tribal leaders and OU administrators at the September event in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and spoke of the importance of being "a good neighbor."

"Today, we're taking the opportunity to say hello to nations that have been our neighbors for so many years," the OU president said. "This is a historic event. Our goal today is incredibly simple: Turn a page, get a fresh start, be a good neighbor, break bread with some old friends and some new friends and be welcoming."

Following an opening prayer in Cherokee and a flag song, Professor and Chair of OU's Native American Studies Department Amanda Cobb-Greetham welcomed the visitors and said the first-of-its-kind invitation stemmed from the university's efforts "to deepen and grow our relationship with Oklahoma's Native sovereigns. Due to the hard work of many, many people across campus for a long time, we're starting to feel the synergy."

As early as 1915, OU students began appealing to the president for Native curriculum. But it would be another 60 years before professors like Alan Velie, in literature, and Mary Jo Watson, in art and art history, began incorporating Native subject matter into their classes.

"Some suggested that I might feel more comfortable teaching Native American art in the anthropology department," says Watson, who, like Velie, is now a professor emeritus and has watched the seeds she planted grow into a full-fledged degree program with a national reputation.

In 1994, a Native American Studies program was introduced in the College of Arts and Sciences with bachelor's and master's programs in three key areas: tribal governance and policy; indigenous media and arts; and language, history, and cultural knowledge. In 2016, it was elevated to department status.

In 2015, former OU President David L. Boren appointed the university's first tribal liaison to recruit Native students and network between the university and the tribes "And now President Gallogly has asked us to expand our services to HSC and OU-Tulsa. So, these various, siloed departments are becoming parts of networks," says Cobb-Greetham.

The Native Nations have been important partners with each new initiative. In 2015, the Chickasaw Nation contributed more than \$2.5 million to the Chickasaw Nation Scholars Endowment, a pharmacy skills practice lab at the Harold Hamm Diabetes Center and the Native Crossroads Film Festival, held annually at OU. In 2016, the Cherokee Nation partnered with the Gilead Foundation on a mission to eradicate Hepatitis C

among Native Americans. And in 2018, the Chickasaw Nation provided the lead gift for OU's Native Nations Center, which opened this past April.

Part of the Chickasaw gift has already helped renovate and refurbish areas in Copeland Hall for the department, center and meeting spaces. "Having gathering places on campus is so important," says Cobb-Greetham. "Spaces like the Native Nations Center and the Hall of Native Nations flags are manifestations of our students' home base.

"We want Native students to feel at home here. We want to make sure they are aware of opportunities for them, here and nationally. Ultimately, we want to enable students not just to stay in school, but to swing for the fences."

Cobb-Greetham says eight percent of Oklahoma's population is Native American and that Native Nations contribute \$10.8 billion a year to the state's economy.

"Our future depends on good and healthy sovereign relationships between the state and tribes, between tribes and the federal government," she says. "We are all healthier because of that."

There are many different challenges that must be addressed in Indian Country, she adds, but that is where the university in — offering research in health, economic development, preservation of culture and language, and local and international indigenous issues.

Gallogly says it is his goal for OU to have the leading Native American Studies department in the country and that means being the leader in recruitment and retention of Native students, as well.

Cobb-Greetham says administrators at peer universities have started inquiring about OU's Native American Studies department. "Just last week we had people call to ask us if could provide information about what we have done. We have a long way to go, but hard work is the best kind, right?"

"The Seed Sower illustrates my vision for the university, planting seeds that he or she will never see. When you are truly engaged in institution-building you are putting things in place for a long game," she says.

There have been many Seed Sowers leading up to the invitation extended to Oklahoma's sovereign nations. Most of their names are lost and only the deeds remain. In more recent times, sowers have included OU alumna Clara Sue Kidwell, a pioneer in American Indian Studies; Barbara Hobson and Jerry Bread, who helped establish Native American Studies as a program; and the work of professors like Watson and Velie. They all contributed something that will last, even though they will not see all of what is to come.

"There is an excellent saying," says Cobb-Greetham. "They thought they were burying us, but they didn't realize that we were seeds."

— *Lynette Lobban*