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Pueblo of Acoma Governor, New Mexico
First appointed 2019



WHAT ARE YOUR MOST SIGNIFICANT OR IMPORTANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS AN ELECTED LEADER?

The accomplishments of tribal governments are rooted in a collective effort on the part of tribal officials, tribal councils and the tribal community. In 2019, it was important to complete projects and initiatives of my predecessors while also establishing the groundwork for new ideas and initiatives of my administration. One of the most important issues was to ensure the return of the Acoma ceremonial shield from the Eve Auction House in Paris, France. After four years, I had the honor of conducting negotiations with the consignor of the shield, coordinating a process with federal officials for taking possession of the shield and ensuring its safe return to the United States, and finally, the great and humbling experience of welcoming home the sacred shield. The Pueblo of Acoma appreciates the assistance of so many who contributed to this most important effort.

This year, in addition to responding to the pandemic and doing all that we could to protect our people, I am grateful that we could initiate and complete a suite of infrastructure projects including a tribal-wide natural gas line, Phase I of a comprehensive broadband initiative, and have arrived at the final steps in establishing our own Electric Utility Authority.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE?

The pandemic has most certainly dished out so many unprecedented issues for all governments. This, by far, has been the greatest challenge. I am grateful for the internal professional capacity of the Pueblo who have continuously provided guidance during this pandemic. We have learned a great deal from this experience while also making great sacrifices as a community to ensure the Pueblo of Acoma's survival.

What advice would you give someone considering running for office for the first time? Since I did not run for this position, nor would I ever consider running for public office (I've always considered myself a terrible politician), I cannot offer any advice. However, what I will say to anyone who is a leader, or aspires to become

a leader, is how very important it is to work with and maintain close communication with the people you represent. Also, consider the implications (hopefully all good) of your work and actions on the present, but most importantly, on the future of the community/tribe.

IS THERE A CONSERVATION-RELATED RULE, POLICY OR IDEA YOU'D LIKE TO SEE IMPLEMENTED AT THE LOCAL, STATE OR NATIONAL LEVEL?

I have always advocated for meaningful consultation, which I strongly believe, if done right, yields the best ideas and collaborative processes for achieving new policy development and change. I am hopeful that federal and state governments and the private sector make this a priority and devote time and resources for this work. One area I feel still needs consideration and discussion is the idea of co-stewardship/management of public (and other) lands. If an opportunity for this was to evolve, I strongly believe that ideas around conservation-related policy and actual, on-the-ground conservation activity can be fostered. We all have a great opportunity to think critically and creatively about conservation and how engaging Native American knowledge and ideas can contribute to a more holistic approach to the stewardship of our natural resources.

HOW IS LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN YOUR COMMUNITY WORKING TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES OF SYSTEMIC RACISM AND RACIAL INEQUITY?

Upon my appointment in 2019, one of my initiatives was to develop a tribal framework for addressing issues surrounding systemic racism, racial inequality and any similar internal issues that are unhealthy for the Acoma people. One example includes strengthening inclusivity – identifying the roles of and opportunity for Acoma women to be part of tribal governance processes and other initiatives/affairs of the Pueblo. The framework development was interrupted by COVID, but some initial internal conversations set a good foundation for future work among tribal members. The Pueblo wishes to create a collective understanding about how best to be part of social movements on these issues, while also critically thinking about how the Pueblo itself sets its own boundaries to ensure these social ills do not infiltrate into our traditional lifeway.

AS A LOCAL LEADER, ARE THERE ANY LESSONS LEARNED/ADVICE YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH FELLOW LOCAL OFFICIALS ON RESPONDING TO THE CURRENT PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES?

I want to express the tremendous pride I have for all tribal leaders and communities who have exemplified true resiliency and commitment to upholding cultural core values. We must continue to honor and live by our cultural teachings and fulfill, as best we can, our inherent responsibility to protect the people, our culture, language and the natural environment.

The pandemic has informed us of many things, including the identification of some missing components within our tribal (and non-tribal) organization. Last year, as part of a tribal-wide reorganization, the Pueblo realized the benefit of this critical component as we had the professional capacity to respond appropriately to the pandemic. This structure aided us in identifying some of those crucial components like data accessibility. For example, it would have been helpful to know the number of households with and without internet access for the purpose of general communication, virtual health monitoring for COVID-19 positive individuals and families, and remote working for tribal employees and virtual classroom education.



Throughout our continued response to COVID-19, we have also developed new processes for information gathering and data management and access. We are also documenting the impact of this pandemic on the Pueblo of Acoma, from the issuance of the very first Proclamation on March 11, 2020 declaring a State of Emergency, to the more recent Vaccination Plan and development of unprecedented written protocols for the traditional appointment process of new leadership, which was disseminated Dec. 28 to the tribal community.

