

Washington, D.C., lessons for representatives



**JENNIFER MCLEOD, DIRECTOR,
UNIT I**

Aaniin Anishnabeg!

I hope that your holidays with your families were heartwarming, mine certainly were.

This year our 2-year-old granddaughter, Bella, danced in the powwow circle for the first time. What joy there was watching her get up on her toes, twirling, skipping and nodding her little head in time with the beat of the drum.

December was a beautiful time for me personally and professionally. I made my first trip to Washington, D.C., on behalf of our tribe. I reflected on the importance of this journey, and thought about our ancestors who had made this journey before me. I realized that our mission has not changed: To meet with federal leaders to educate them about our people; to advocate for the fulfillment of treaty rights; to push for support of legislation favorable to tribal people; to create new partnerships and strengthen existing ones; to find new sources of support for our people; to be a “visible voice” for the tribe known as the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

I was in DC for five days. Our tribal delegation consisted of Chairman Payment, Director Abramson, Director Massaway, Mike McCoy (government relations director) Meghan Kelly

(federal liaison) and I. Although I was not allowed to attend the meeting with President Obama (only Chairman Payment and Director Abramson were invited), I was privileged to “walk the Hill” and meet with various members of Congress, high level staff and tribal leaders from across the United States.

I want to acknowledge all of the work that all of our tribe’s program directors and staff did to help our delegation be a success. I was so proud of the professional and informative folders, brochures and information sheets (known as “white papers”) that were created. I want you all to know that the legislators were impressed and I could not have done my job without the tremendous support of our people back home!

The following is a very brief breakdown of who I met, and what we talked about. I was often part of a “team presentation,” however, there were times when scheduling required that I present on my own. It was an intense time with daily early morning tribal delegation strategy sessions held prior to “walking the Hill.”

I began with a half-day meeting with the National Congress of American Indians at its embassy. There were numerous presenters, all focused on FY 2014 budget recommendations. Then I attended a meeting regarding the Department of the Interior budget strategy. These meetings were specifically for, and about, tribal people. Leaders from tribes across the country gathered to share stories of common need, and how tribal nations effectively advocate for change at a federal level.

Our tribal delegation met with Congressman Dan Benishek, and we presented him with a beautiful black ash basket made by tribal member Bernadette Azevedo. We educated him on the history of the Charlotte

Beach issue. Congressman Benishek was keenly interested in the Special Diabetes Program for American Indians (SDPI), and the funding inadequacies for the Bemidji Area. He requested a follow-up meeting with me later in the week.

We met with a congressional staff member in Senator Carl Levin’s office. Our purpose was to strengthen and reinforce an already positive relationship. We presented our “white papers” and urged support for the coming SDPI.

In Congresswoman Candice Miller’s office, we met with her new “tribal” staff person. This was an excellent meeting! We discussed the sequestration, budgetary issues, SDPI and the inadequacy of tribal healthcare funding. It was great to have a congressional “staffer” dedicated to tribal issues!

Our meeting with Congressman John Dingell Jr. was outstanding. A long-time supporter of our tribe, the meeting focused on the “fiscal cliff” and our planned mandatory trust applications for land. Congressman Dingell was especially impressed by the success of our tribal energy program. Chairman Payment and Director Abramson have a longstanding relationship with Congressman Dingell, and I learned a great deal from them in this meeting.

We had separate meetings with congressional staff from Congressmen Camp, Peters and Clarke’s offices. We discussed the sequestration, budgetary issues, SDPI and the inadequacy of tribal healthcare funding. We also spoke of the unique nation-to-nation relationship between tribes and the federal government. I led a meeting in Congressman Upton’s office, explaining the tribal energy audit, and urging additional funding appropriations for tribal programs.

Senator Stabenow’s was

a very successful meeting!

Chairman Payment presented her with a “strawberry” black ash basket. In addition to the “white paper” issues, we discussed sewage pollution in the St. Mary’s River, and other natural resource topics. Senator Stabenow was very receptive, and knowledgeable about our tribe, and concerned about our needs.

We had additional meetings with “staffers” from other congressional offices as well, and with each we presented “white papers,” spoke of funding needs, and in short, told our stories.

As with most people, politicians also like to know when something they’ve done has helped. I closed out my time in DC with a second meeting in Congressman Benishek’s office. I believe there is genuine concern regarding the lack of healthcare funding in our Bemidji area and I look forward to his support.

I wish to say miigwech to Aaron Payment, Cathy Abramson, Keith Massaway, Mike McCoy and Meghan Kelly for helping me navigate the streets of DC, the many buildings and the politicians. Their insights and guidance were invaluable. This trip made me realize how important it is for our tribe to be represented “on the Hill.” Washington, D.C., is vast and the federal legislators are inundated daily by texts, emails, phone calls and letters from individuals, corporations and special interest groups. It would be easy for them to forget about us, and now I understand completely that which our ancestors clearly knew — telling our stories “in person” matters.

Miigwech to all of you for the opportunity to serve our tribe as my ancestors have done. It is an honor for me to stand before federal Congress personnel and say, “I represent the Sault Ste Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.”

Please continue to contact me

with your thoughts and concerns. You can reach me through my personal phone, email, Facebook or Twitter. I appreciate those of you who have already contacted me and I encourage others to reach out to me as well. Miigwech to all,
Bamapii,
Jen
(906) 440-9151
Email at Jennifer.mcleod.2012@gmail.com.