

# Native American Indians get out the vote “rez-style”

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People's Weekly World Newspaper, 10/07/04 12:09

CASS LAKE, Minn. Sitting in her tiny office at Leech Lake Tribal College here, Elaine Fleming ran through the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) activities she is helping to organize among the college's students, faculty and staff. They had just held a successful Rock the Vote Rez Style concert that attracted many of the college's 209 students.

We are trying to get them to think about what their issues are, and the importance of the vote, Fleming said.

This is the 80th anniversary of the Indian Citizenship Act, passed in 1924, which finally gave the indigenous peoples of this country the right to vote. This year, the National Congress of American Indians is spearheading a grassroots voter drive, Native Vote 2004. The slogan, appearing on billboards, posters, T-shirts and buttons is 80 years ago they couldn't. Today you can. Vote 2004.

Fleming is chair of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department at the tribal college, where she teaches history, philosophy, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/indigenous) studies, and women's studies. She is also mayor of Cass Lake, a town of 860, within the reservation boundaries of the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe tribe.

Fleming, 52, grew up here. This is her first involvement in electoral politics. I always hated politics, she told the World.

But after writing and teaching about human rights issues, she said, last year she decided to run for office. She is the first Anishinaabe mayor and the first female mayor in this town, which is 60 percent Native American. She prefers the term indigenous American because it encompasses the global fight for rights as indigenous nations, so often ignored. We are nations with the nation.

Fleming paused to review a flyer promoting a mock election. Other events include a candidates forum the first ever in Cass Lake. Students will get a chance to voice their views at open mikes and on Don't give us no sheet tell us your issues speak-out sheets.

The neighborhood where Fleming grew up was declared a Superfund toxic site in 1984. The area, which covers one-fourth of the city, is contaminated with dioxins and other cancer-causing toxins from a lumber mill now owned by International Paper Co. The mill is closed, but the cleanup that was supposed to have been completed years ago is still unfinished. The water remains contaminated.

People can't use well water to wash their cars or water their gardens," Fleming said. She is angry at the Bush administration's hostility to environmental concerns. In particular, she noted that the administration has blocked refunding the Superfund cleanup program, which was originally paid for primarily by corporate polluters.

"We are spending billions and billions on war. We need to reallocate that money," she said. "Let the Iraqis have their rights as indigenous Iraqis. We have so many needs here."

Judy Hanks is statewide coordinator of Native Vote 2004 for Minnesota. She is an enrolled member of the Leech Lake Band, and is public relations coordinator for the Mille Lacs Band in Onamia, Minn. She spoke to the World before heading to a statewide Native Vote team meeting. Minnesota has about 33,000 Native eligible voters living in 11 reservations as well as in urban areas like the Twin Cities.

Recalling the closeness of the 2000 presidential race, Hanks noted that the Mille Lacs tribe has some 2,600 eligible voters. In this year's hotly contested presidential contest, those 2,600 votes could determine the outcome, she said.

Native American voters have played a pivotal role in key races over the past few years, including the victories of Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano and South Dakota Sen. Tim Johnson in 2002. Thus, they see the power of the vote in making political leaders address their long-ignored needs. Many of these are the same as for all rural voters, said Hanks: housing, jobs, economic development, and health care. She noted that indigenous Americans have the highest rates of diabetes in the country, but the least funding for health care.

But for Native voters this year's election is also about electing a president and Congress that will respect tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. The Supreme Court has ruled against tribal hunting and fishing rights in the recent period, and the next president will likely be filling two expected vacancies on the high court, Hanks noted.

The nonpartisan Native Vote 2004 campaign is aiming to get 1 million indigenous voters informed and activated nationwide. The grassroots efforts have grown into more than I ever anticipated," Hanks said. "People are getting excited."

Tribes and urban Indian groups are holding candidate forums and GOTV and vote-protection training. Mille Lacs will do a mailing from the tribe's chief executive to all members 18 and over reminding them of the importance of voting. The mailing will include voter registration forms (Minnesota has same-day voter registration—people can register on Election Day), polling place information, and an absentee ballot.

Each tribe in the state has a GOTV team, and they are coming up with innovative ideas, Hanks said proudly. One Fond du Lacs woman suggested renting a plane to fly over the rural community with a GOTV banner, and the team just may do it.

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