

Rock the Rez

Mille Lacs Band, other state tribes host events to encourage Indians to get out and vote in November

By [JODIE TWEED](#)

Staff Writer

ONAMIA -- It's been 80 years since American Indians were granted the right to vote.

While they typically haven't voted in large numbers, an initiative is under way at Minnesota's 11 Indian reservations to get Indians out to vote in the November election, a move that could demonstrate to politicians that Indian voters are a strong force on the political landscape.

Friday, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe hosted Rock the Rez Vote Campaign Tour 2004, a free public concert and get-out-the-vote event at the Grand Casino Mille Lacs Events & Convention Center near Onamia. An estimated 200 people attended the free event, which included music by Robby Romero and Red Thunder, Mille Lacs Band's Little Otter Singers and Mille Lacs Band member Cole Premo and his band, Dubiously Grand.

Melanie Benjamin, chief executive for the Mille Lacs Band and co-chair of the state-wide Get Out The Vote campaign, told concert goers that the Native voice is strong when they band together.

"I just can't stress how important it is to get out there," said Benjamin. "Let's show the state of Minnesota what Indian country can do when we get together."

Rick Anderson, who works in the Office of Government Affairs for the Mille Lacs Band, said only about 17 percent of the Mille Lacs Band's 2,600 eligible voters are registered to vote. Their goal is to increase the number of registered voters to 50 percent this year, he said.

"I really think they don't think their vote counts and we want to show them it does," said Anderson.

The Mille Lacs Band's Get Out The Vote committee has been giving away T-shirts and buttons about the importance of voting at powwows and other community meetings. Before the Oct. 12 deadline they had been pre-registering voters.

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe member Cole Premo, 17, and his group, Dubiously Grand, performed Friday at the Rock the Rez Vote Campaign Tour 2004, a free public concert and get-out-the-vote event at the Grand Casino Mille Lacs Events & Convention Center. Brainerd Dispatch/Nels Norquist

Before the Nov. 2 election, tribal youth will go door-to-door with adults on the Indian reservation to encourage people to vote, and the band is offering free rides to anyone in the community who needs them to go vote.

The Mille Lacs Band has created a voter's guide that will be sent to band members to introduce them to their local, state and national candidates and where they stand on the issues.

Judy Hanks, a Mille Lacs Band employee and statewide Get Out The Vote project coordinator, said teams have been established at all 11 Indian reservations in the state to encourage Indian voting. While it's too early to tell if this effort has paid off, Hanks said the campaign has given the tribes a sense of camaraderie. Mille Lacs Band members, members of other tribes and non-Indian community members attended Friday's concert.

"It's a fun way to get people together and say, 'Let your voice be heard on election day,'" said Hanks. "You can make a difference."

Shane Aune, a Mille Lacs Band member, brought his wife and children to Friday's concert. Aune said they came for the music. Aune said for the first time ever, his van is sporting a political bumper sticker, one that supports John Kerry.

Aune said he is impressed by Kerry and his stand on issues, including the protection of the environment.

"I really expect the numbers to be a whole lot higher this year," Aune said of Indian voters. "Even the youth are looking at the issues. They're thinking about it."

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Jamie Edwards, a Mille Lacs Band member, manned a Kerry/Edwards booth outside Friday's concert. He has been working full time for the Kerry/Edwards campaign to encourage Indian voters to cast their votes for the Democratic presidential candidate.

"I think Kerry has a well thought-out position and a real clear understanding of tribal sovereignty and the trust responsibility that the federal government has with tribal government," said Edwards. "I think voting is critical and I think people are beginning to realize the Native American vote is critical. This is a close race and this is a swing state and I think the Native voice can really make a difference."

Benjamin told concert goers she was not telling anyone which candidate they should vote for but simply encouraged them to vote, adding they can register to vote at the polls as long as they bring proper identification.

Hanks said there are 33,000 eligible Indian voters in the state. She said the Get Out The Vote project likely will continue beyond the November election to encourage increased Indian voter turnout at future elections. She said they will be surveying Indian voters as they leave the polls to find out if their efforts to get them to the polls made a difference.

JODIE TWEED can be reached at jodie.tweed@brainerddispatch.com or 855-5858.