



In Oklahoma, A Blessed Groundbreaking to 'Serve Everyone'

By Nicole A. Walker

What do dynamic cultural exhibitions, spectacular native architecture, an oral history theater, and a dynamic family visitor center have in common? They are just some of the core components of one of Oklahoma's most ambitious and cutting-edge projects to date. The American Indian Cultural Center and Museum (AICCM), a 125,000-square foot facility, is currently being constructed in the heart of Oklahoma City.

To many, the state of Oklahoma is simply just another state in the vast union of what we call the United States. However, there is much more to Oklahoma than meets the eye, such as its rich Native American culture. Oklahoma has a unique story and history that differentiates it from many other states in the U.S. "Tribal nations have stories to tell about their journeys from their ancestral homelands. Their identities are woven into what we now call the state of Oklahoma," said Gena Timberman, executive director of the Native American Cultural and Educational Authority, which is the state agency responsible for the construction of the facility.

In 1994, the Native American Cultural and Educational Authority was created with the sole purpose of constructing the museum—all in an effort to generate awareness and understanding of Native American tribes in the area. Donated by the city of Oklahoma City, the site for the AICCM was once home to more than 50 oil-producing wells and gas wells. Site remediation—a process of which has taken over a decade—has been marked by the removal of more than 7,000 discarded tires, old pipelines, as

well as salt, petroleum and oil residues. With the financial assistance of agencies as the Oklahoma Energy Resources Board and the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, remediation costs were shared, and the AICCM was able to take one step closer to existence.

Blessed ground

In keeping with traditional Native American culture, a Groundblessing was held on November 1, 2005. This blessing, the ceremonial groundbreaking event, gave the site a spirit of community along with a sense of renewal and strength. It's the vision of both the native community and the Native American Cultural and Educational Authority that the AICCM will serve as the gateway to Indian Country. Included on the site will be a 4,000-sq-ft. visitor welcome center as well as other retail establishments, such as a resort hotel and conference center, and arts and craft market. Not only will visitors hear about the stories and experiences of people from 39 different tribes, but they will also have the opportunity to visit various tribal destinations and partake in other Native American cultural activities.

The design of the museum is entitled "of the earth" because, according to Timberman, "we are people of the earth and because of our (strong) relationship to the earth." There is a special promontory that will encircle the beautiful structure that begins below ground and ramps up to 90 feet high at its peak. It has taken over two years and 40,000 truckloads of earth to build the walk, which is how Indian people have built with the earth generations before.

Other building features include a radiant heating and cooling system that will be built within the slabs of the structure. Hot and cold water will circulate through the system, helping supplement heating and cooling capabilities, while high efficiency and low emission features in the mechanical systems are present. Also, wood beams, wood decks, sun shades, and natural lighting will be incorporated into the framework.

The \$150 million project did not just materialize out of the blue. In fact, the vision is a culmination of more than 40 years of planning for this construction, supported by an unprecedented level of partnership both from state and local agencies. Support has come not only from Oklahoma City, but also from agencies such as the Water Utilities Trust, the Riverfront Redevelopment Authority, pipeline owners, and Oklahoma Gas and Electric.

Entities have come forward with a strong sense of commitment to the project. Reaction from non-Native American communities has been very positive, particularly in the tourism arena—which is pivotal because increased tourism means a tremendous economic boost for the state. It is estimated that within 20 years, the AICCM will generate more than \$3 billion—much of which hopefully will flow to the state of Oklahoma's bottom line.

Although there is currently no set opening date, Timberman, who is Choctaw, concludes: "This project will serve everyone, not just the native community." **BFN**

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