



# AIANEA National Council Teleconference Minutes

Monday, August 15, 2016

11:00 pm Pacific, 12:00 pm Mountain, 1:00 pm Central, 2:00 pm Eastern

*Respect, Harmony and Beauty*

## **Council Members & Guests Attending:**

### **President**

*Athena Cholas, New Mexico*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Vice President**

*Dr. Carol Crouch, Oklahoma*

### **Secretary**

*Melissa Sturdivant, Texas*

### **Treasurer**

*Pam Crow, Texas*

### **Northeast Regional Representative**

*Cassius Spears, Rhode Island*

### **Southeast Regional Representative**

*Debbie Henry, Georgia*

*attending for David Elliott, Alabama*

### **West Regional Representative**

*Susan Looper, Rhode Island*

### **Past Presidents Attending:**

*Steve Durgin, Washington, DC*

*Tanya Meyer-Dideriksen, Iowa*

## **AIANEA Elders Attending:**

*Elder Ted Herrera*

*Elder Loretta Metoxen*

*Elder James Sappier*

## **Meeting Minutes:**

- a. The meeting was called to order at 1:10 pm (Central) by Athena Cholas.
- b. Athena stated that the meeting structure will be slightly different and more informal than our traditional meetings for the National Council. Athena invited our AIANEA Elders to attend the meeting, and wanted to provide an opportunity for the Council to meet with our Elders and to provide a listening session. Athena suggested that we address our important tasks initially and then address administrative tasks, if time allows, at the end of our meeting.
- c. Athena took roll call of those attending the meeting. She invited the Elders to introduce themselves, and asked if one of our Elders could begin our meeting with a blessing or prayer.
- d. Elder Herrera offered a prayer in his ancestral *Nahuatl* language to open the meeting.
- e. Tanya provided an update for the on-going work of the Elder's Committee. In May, the Council had asked the Elders Committee to translate definitions of our Association's "Respect, Harmony and Beauty." Elders have also been asked to help develop several prayers and other information for our AIANEA members to use if they are giving educational outreach programs in their communities. Tanya indicated that the Elders have been working on these items with several of them contributing and developing information to use.

Tanya reported on the current work with the *Elders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* book which is in development. She indicated that work has slowed in recent months but the committee, although smaller, is still working on the project.

Tanya discussed that with the recent retirements of employees, we have had some gaps with reps serving as Liaisons with our Elders. But, she was recently in touch with Ciro Lo Pinto and he wants to continue working on the book project. She sent some information for him to review. Tanya also reported that she is trying to get in touch with John McCoy through another member, Ivan Dozier. So, she is excited about that prospect of getting this re-invigorated and getting ahold of John to see about Elder Jerry's portion of the book.

Tanya invited our Elders to share whatever is on their hearts.

Elder Herrera began by expressing his appreciation to be on the teleconference call. He also shared his "appreciation for Melissa and all that she does and the grace in which she does everything." Elder Herrera went on to express his appreciation to Dr. Crouch for the exceptional Working Effectively with American Indians (WEWAI) session he attended in Oklahoma in March. He thanked Carol for her "hospitality and graciousness extended to him and his wife, JoAnn."

Elder Ted shared that he was gifted the seeds of the Muscogee Hece (tobacco) plant while there and he has been working to cultivate the Choctaw heirloom seeds, and that he is so appreciative of this gift. He has transplanted them in larger containers and in the ground as well. "Big Sister," the largest of the plants, is about five-feet tall. Elder Ted indicated that "for years, I was unable to grow ceremonial tobacco, but with advancements in technology and being able to meet so many people in our Family, I am now able to grow it." Elder Ted was in touch with a Muscogee grower from Leonard, OK, and also shared that Melissa has helped him with some pointers from her botany and medicinal plants background.

Elder Ted wanted to convey his appreciation to everyone that helped with the WEWAI session, sharing that "Traditional tobacco is important to us in our offerings and our prayers, and now I can grow it." Elder Ted extended his heartfelt appreciation to Carol because he feels this is a priceless gift. Carol shared that she will convey this message to members and leaders of the Chickasaw Nation when she meets with them in the next few days. Carol expressed her sincere appreciation to Elder Ted and JoAnn for being involved and contributing so much to the WEWAI session. Elder Ted thanked Tanya for her report and all that she does for them.

Elder Loretta Metoxen joined the call.

Elder Jim Sappier talked about the importance of ceremonial tobacco as part of his Tribe's sweat lodge ceremonies. He first shared how he prepares the tobacco for the ceremonial uses by first burying it and then drying it in the sun. He stressed it must be prepared in this manner before it is shared. He usually prepares and shares some tobacco with the five Tribes in Maine each year. Elder Jim discussed some of the significant historical uses of tobacco with our culture, and especially with the Penobscot Tribe. He shared the story of when the Penobscot People were sick and dying, and how a woman, the Chief and the medicine man each had a dream of how to cure the sick. All, but the woman, ignored the dream and told her to go home. Elder Jim continued the story of how the People continued to die and they each still had the dream. They finally agreed to do what was in the dream and they killed her. They dragged her body across the ground and as her flesh was torn from the body; the bones ground up ... "and from her bones, tobacco was born, and from her flesh, they received corn – physical and spiritual food for the People." Elder Jim continued with sharing that in different Tribal ceremonies, often, tobacco is used as a blessing. Even at the United South and Eastern Tribes' meetings, they use tobacco to cleanse and bless the rooms before the meetings are conducted. Elder Jim shared that their blessing asks the Creator to "Let no evil enter."

Elder Jim feels that in the future, we will see more blending of the spiritual aspects of healing with that of more traditional medicine and Indian health services. Climate change is not readily accepted, but it is here and is not leaving; "a slow gradual change is occurring." Elder Jim stated, "More and more people need to start looking how they fit into the ecosystem."

Elder Loretta agreed with what Elder Jim had shared about the importance and use of tobacco and about our fragile ecosystems. Loretta stated that she had majored in public and environmental administration in college, and in addition to reading Elders' teachings over the years, she had enrolled in ten or so environmental courses as part of her formal, school education. She shared "the formal teachings did not disagree with the traditional teachings of the Elders," and even with older transcripts of Elders' testimony from when the Public Works Administration was active. "The more recent scientific teachings are directly in line with these traditional teachings." Elder Loretta went on to share "we have not yet taken a stance on this and how climate change is affecting us and our cultures. Individual tribes may have been engaged, but we have not collectively spoken out about this issue." Elder Loretta feels that "this is an urgent matter and it calls for addressing it in urgent terms." Elder Loretta stated that "We need to change how we treat Mother Earth."

Elder Loretta shared that at present, the Indian Land Working Group, is meeting at the Oneida Nation. This group helps address issues and assists at the grassroots level with changing of "fee lands" to "trust lands" for Tribes and individuals, and ensuring that Indian land and resources are managed appropriately. They help with policy

development to help Tribes. They have an interest in climate change, too, and how we can effectively address that.

Elder Jim shared that when he was young, “Each spring they would travel to the coast.” And, as they arrived, “They would eat seaweed.” Elder Jim shared that they would dry the seaweed dulse and use it as an intestinal cleansing each spring. With this in mind, Elder Jim stressed that “We need to be eating our foods based on the seasons, eat foods based on our ecosystems and those of where we live because if we rely on the foods we grow, we limit the intake of commodity-based food systems.” “If we live on what we can grow and harvest, then we would not have trouble with diabetes and cancer.” He believes that when we started with commodity exchanges is when our People began to be sick with heart disease and diabetes, and cancers. Elder Jim shared “If we go back to relying on our spiritual relationship with the land and all Creation, then we will live more complimentary with our environment and live healthier. We are not eating our traditional foods, and we need to get back to that.” All agreed with Elder Jim’s comments.

Tanya closed this portion of the meeting by thanking our Elders (Elders Ted, Jim and Loretta) for joining the National Council teleconference today. It was a special time and she thanked the National Council for inviting them to be a part of the meeting today. Tanya added that Elder Norman Lopez had really hoped to be on the call, too, but that he was traveling today and was not sure that he could make it. Tanya shared that the Elders Committee is so blessed and privileged to hear stories and sharing of culture each time they meet, but this was a special treat to have them participate in a National Council meeting and be able to share what’s on their hearts with the AIANEA leadership.

Tanya shared some special tidbits on each of the Elders.

1. Tanya stated that Elder Loretta has served on the Elders Committee for 14 years and works diligently with the WEWAI sessions to help with those trainings. Tanya shared that Loretta’s knowledge in the sciences and culture always connects to what is relevant and at issue before the audience at the time. Tanya shared a personal story of how “connected” Elder Loretta is, and how special all that she brings to the Elders Committee. Elder Loretta shared that she has worked in national-level Indian Affairs representing the Oneida Nation since 1968. Elder Loretta stated that twenty-nine of these years has been serving as part of the Business Committee for the Oneida Nation, and nineteen of these has been serving as the Tribal Historian. Tanya praised Elder Loretta for sharing her extensive knowledge, and added that Elder Loretta has traveled the world and all the states to learn all that she has and that we are very privileged to have her as part of our Association’s Elders Committee.
2. Tanya stated that Elder Jim is one of our newest Elders and that he joined in 2013. She added that he was a speaker at the WEWAI session in Rhode Island a few years earlier, and then was asked by Roylene and Tanya, and he joined our Elders Committee. Tanya also indicated that the story that Elder Jim shared earlier in the meeting about the creation of tobacco is one of those he shared with the making of the Elders DVD that is in production right now, and it might also be included as part of the AIANEA Elder DVD that is also proposed. Tanya commented that Elder Jim is always willing to share his culture and his Tribe’s stories, and we value those tremendously. Tanya recounted Elder Jim’s comments and concerns about climate change and the need for us to reconnect with our ecosystems and to find a balance and spiritual relationship with Mother Earth, and she added that this is something he is passionate about and a lesson we all can learn. Tanya shared this is something she is finding more and more important as well and understands his teachings. Tanya commented that Elder Jim always brings us back to center and the spiritual aspect of everything that surrounds us. Tanya shared that Elder Jim had gifted to her some tobacco several years ago, and she felt very honored with this gift. He had simply asked her to share this as she felt so moved. Tanya did share this gift over time with several people. Tanya thanked Elder Jim for his gift and felt it had reached many more and wanted to tell him this.
3. Tanya stated that Elder Ted has been on the Elders Committee since 2007 and “officially” joined when the Association met in Corpus Christi, but he had been involved for several years prior to that while working with Harold Bryant. Tanya reflected and stated that Elder Ted is such a leader and provides motivation and a stepping stone for others to get involved and be motivated. Tanya commented that when the Committee began to outline the structure of the *Elders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* book, Elder Ted was there to begin that foundational work and lead us with suggestions like the actual naming of the book and the structure to guide the framework. Tanya also added that she feels that Elder Ted genuinely speaks and shares from the heart like the one he shared about the gifting of the Muscogee Hece, and these stories are inspiring and touch us all.

Tanya asked Athena and the Council for help, and added that she and Melissa had discussed this, but wanted to know if the Council could involve the Regional Representatives in assisting in finding possible candidates to serve on the Elders Committee. Tanya added that we are in need of volunteers to serve as the POC or the representative to a respective Elder. Tanya asked if we can include our AIANEA Regional Reps in the process to

help find interested members to serve in this role. For one individual, we are waiting for supervisor's approval to work with Elder Loretta since Ann Perales' retirement. But, specifically, we need help with Elder Joe Joaquin. Athena asked about the job description and what is expected. Tanya responded and stated that she would work on gathering that information. Athena discussed our role in NRCS and asked how can we encourage and develop a model for mentoring and developing relationships with Elders in our communities across the nation. How can we encourage people to do this? Tanya will work on starting a framework for these guidelines.

- f. Athena commented that there is a lot of support from HQ and the Diversity and Recruitment Branch for the Association. They want us to be successful and to be leading these efforts. They are willing to provide resources, and want to listen to what we identify as barriers for recruitment and retention of AIAN employees. Athena wants us to strengthen our visibility through our webpage and newsletter. We should be doing more formal correspondences to the State Conservationists. She believes we also need to bolster our communication with the public through our Facebook page.
- g. Athena added that she is hopeful that the Elders' work on defining our logo/motto will help re-engage people and get them involved with the Association. She commented that we think we know what the words "respect, harmony and beauty" mean but having a true understanding of the meaning of these words will help guide us and help us re-connect to the land. When members are asked to speak at Diversity Days, they will be able to share this information and meanings with the larger NRCS and public communities. Hearing from the Elders about such things as the creation story of tobacco serves as just one example of what we have to share with those we serve.

Cassius thanked Elder Ted and Jo Ann for the time he had with them in Oklahoma at the WEWAI session and that he appreciates the time he had to learn from them. Elder Ted extended his appreciation to Cassius for his comments and also sent well wishes to Cassius' family.

- h. Cassius commented on his work on the Regional Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (RTCAC) for the East and stated that they had recently met. Food sovereignty is a topic of general concern right now for many Tribes and is directly related to the Elders comments. Tribes want to have ownership of the foods they eat and to determine what foods are needed, and to grow their own foods. Cassius explained that the RTCAC discussed this and this information will be passed along to the leadership and the Chief and that this is important. "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" (TEK) is also very important to Tribes and NRCS needs to work to determine how we can be flexible in how we implement programs with Tribes. "Capacity Building" is another topic discussed and an item that is of importance to Tribes and how NRCS can assist Tribes with expanding their capacity to further their Nations. Cassius shared that all of the Elders' comments are part of the RTCAC work and are being communicated to the highest leadership levels within NRCS and he wanted to share this, and wanted to share that Tribes are being listened to as well.
- i. Elder Jim commented that all of the animals and the plants that live in our ecosystems is what we need to rely on, and he shared some stories of plants and animals his Tribe relies on for wellness like Birch tea and Fiddleheads. "People need to understand what they should be eating and what should be eaten seasonally because this is important." Elder Loretta commented on the local foods she grew up on, and although they were "organic," they knew them as their traditional foods. Elder Loretta discussed the tragedy that resulted from the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign of 1779 and that "they recorded in their diaries as they marched through the Iroquois Confederacy," known as the Six Nations, and carried out their scorched-earth policy, "destroying everything." Elder Loretta shared that they recorded in their diaries, "They destroyed the orchards of plums and other fruits. That is how we know what our traditional foods were – from the records of those who destroyed them." "The villages relied on these foods and would store them for up to seven years for later use." Elders Jim and Loretta discussed how they stored their foods in the ground to preserve them for later.
- j. Athena mentioned that we are extending the deadline for awards and asked that we consider nominating members. Athena would like for the next newsletter to highlight the recipients of the awards. Athena would also like to have an area to highlight the Elders and wanted to know if we could have quotes from the Elders. Discussions followed regarding the schedule for dissemination of newsletters and how to make this happen more consistently. Athena would like to have an area dedicated to the Elders for each of the newsletters. She would also like to include information about the WEWAI sessions and other trainings conducted. Tanya asked if an announcement has been distributed asking for contributions. Athena would like to set a deadline for September 20 and plan to distribute it in early October.
- k. Carol left the meeting and extended her appreciation to our Elders for joining us today; and, "We are blessed to have them."
- l. Athena discussed the status of our webpage, and stated that Roylene had contacted her to voice her concerns

about the outdatedness of our webpage. Athena relayed that Roylene had attended the WiN/APIO (Women in NRCS, and Asian-American Pacific Islander Organization) conference and many folks had asked about the Association and commented about our webpage. Athena added that she had been in touch with Gina but did not know what the status of this work at present.

- m. Susan commented on how much she has enjoyed the call and having the Elders involved. She added that she has been stretched and understands that everyone is. Susan further commented that she had talked with Gina and has offered to assist with the webpage development and maintenance. Susan stressed that this needs to be the Association's priority. "Let's get something up and running and add to it over time." Susan would like to see us do a survey and reach out to our membership and ask them, "What can we do to add value to your membership?"

She would like to do this for her region at least. Athena commented that we need this feedback but her concern is that we need to have the structure in place so that we can respond adequately when members voice their opinions and requests. At present, Athena feels that we do not have the members to respond and put things in place. Athena added that we already have a list of things we need to be doing and can't get these items done now. Susan suggested that we can ask our members if they would be willing to step in and help with these things. Athena will ask Gina for a listing of businesses that can help with website development so we can get this started. Athena added that if we wait until the ideal process is in place and functioning, we will still be waiting. Susan commented that she has been looking at employee association websites, and we can determine the functions that are in place and if this is something we would like to add to ours. She added that we could see what company the other employee groups are using and we might see if we can get something started. Cassius added that there are several free websites available that might be an option to get something up and going in the interim while we get the other work completed. He will forward this information to the board. He added that his Mother has developed a webpage for some work she was involved with, and he would be willing to help us with this.

- n. Susan will be attending the West Region's RTCAC meeting in California in August. She hopes that Elder Norman Lopez will attend, and Tanya commented that he plans to be there.
- o. Elder Ted commented on the audit conducted a few months earlier with his wife, Jo Ann, Pam Crow and Melissa attending and participating. He discussed the donation made by Harold Bryant's widow, Judy, in support of our scholarship fund. Elder Ted asked if we could write something about this and include it in the newsletter when it comes out in October. Athena commented that she plans to do this and the Scholarship Committee is working on the details for setting up the scholarship account. Athena added that we also need to discuss the audit which was conducted.
- p. Elder Jim shared some thoughts about Mother Earth and how we are all connected. He stressed that "We need to realize the impact of the spiritual self and that we are all connected." Athena thanked everyone, "their good actions and intentions, and doing what we can to assist our customers across the country and our employees." Elder Jim closed the meeting with a traditional blessing.

q. Treasurer's Report August 13, 2016

Wells Fargo

Beginning Balance 19,423.59

Less Bankcard fee 35.00

Current Balance 19,388.59 No outstanding checks. This does not include the \$6000.00 scholarship fund from Judy Bryant although it is in the checking account

Frost Bank

Beginning Balance 130,596.54

Current balance 131,947.31

Audit Report April 29, 2016 in Round Rock, Tx

Reviewers: Ted Herrera, Melissa Sturdivant, Joanne Herrera & Bess Forester

All accounts were reviewed and found to be in balance with no discrepancies.

Being no further business, the meeting was concluded at 2:33 pm (Central).

Minutes respectfully submitted by Melissa Sturdivant, AIANEA National Council Secretary. Please respond to [melissa.sturdivant@tx.usda.gov](mailto:melissa.sturdivant@tx.usda.gov) with comments or corrections.