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GIDUWA CHEROKEE NEWS

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Food Sovereignty Event brings Community Together

UKB and Echota brings traditional processing of hog fry to UKB celebration grounds.

LANI HANSEN, Senior Reporter

TAHLEQUAH, Okla- Bringing the community together like the old days, is what the United Keetoowah Band and Echota Behavioral Health (EBH) wanted when planning for the traditional hog fry.

To start off Native American Heritage Month, which is recognized for the month of November, the tribe and EBH hosted the Food Sovereignty Event. This event started in the early morning as two hogs were donated from Oklahoma State University Agriculture Department.

Men from the community came out to present a similar traditional way of processing the hogs, from putting them down to skinning them out. Following they took the meat of the hog and started preparing it as they cut it out and it was time to cook it.

“The last time I saw this process done before, I was about five years old,” Prevention Team Kaleb Proctor said. “My family used to do this, and I have also watched elders do this too. What they used to do is hang the hog from the tree for the process of the meat, but we had to adapt this time and use a tractor. This is normally a whole day process.”

The processing and cooking of the hog meat took all morning and was ready to serve at noon. EBH had some of their youth serving meal trays to the elders in attendance.

“Our youth always love to volunteer, they always ask when the next event will be,” Prevention Team Angel Wolfe said.

Along with the hog fry there was volleyball, stickball, painting and bingo during the whole day. Tradition Keeper Lena Deere and her daughter Jesseca taught a painting session.

“The volleyball and stickball were something we wanted to do so the kids can enjoy being outside and playing, instead of being on them phones,” Wolfe said.

The goal that EBH wanted was to allow the elders and adults to enjoy fellowship without having to worry about their kids.

“This event was special and it was a great turnout,” Wolfe said.

EBH would like to thank the community for coming out and trusting them on doing this event, to the volunteers and council for helping out.



Some men from the community came to help with the processing of the hog meat.



Larry Pritchett cooked the hog meat for the meal being served that day.



Finished paintings from the session with Lena and Jesseca Deere.



Several stayed around to play bingo after the meal.

GONA Training comes to UKB's Diamondhead Resort

A training of cultural, healing, and planning curriculum for tribal communities.

LANI HANSEN, Senior Reporter

TAHLEQUAH, Okla- The United Keetoowah Band proudly hosted the Gathering of Native Americans (GONA) training at the Diamondhead Resort.

GONA is a curriculum with the One Fire Associates, a research and evaluation firm that supports tribal communities and building their data and evaluation capacity, according to President CEO Dr. Jamie Bartgis. Facilitators with GONA are going across the United States and Guatemala working with the Mayans.

“One of the things we are focused on is building healthy communities who can resolve these huge issues that we’re having with our environment,” Bartgis said. “Those issues vary from community to community, but they’re all interrelated. So, we’re training helpers in different communities to be able to facilitate conversations, a healing process, so together they can create collective plans to make actionable change.”

This training is a cultural, healing, and planning curriculum for tribal communities to address the impacts of historical and intergenerational trauma. Training programs exist to teach facilitators how to lead a GONA, which is based on the four developmental phases of belonging, mastery, interdependence, and generosity. These trainings are for a range of community members, including tribal leaders, social workers, and youth workers, to help their communities heal and plan.

Master GONA Facilitator Maria Trevizo said her first time attending a training she didn’t know what it was about, but by the end of it she learned it was a response to a call on how to motivate communities who were struggling with substance abuse.

“We talked about the phase of belonging of people or babies,” Trevizo said. “That shaped the curriculum, as once we belong and feel safe, the next part we would talk about what happened. As part of this was the ‘where did it come from,’ and so there was the examination of the process.”

GONA focuses on resiliency, the joy and what is good in Indian Country. Its third phase is interdependence, which covers how to work together and how to be a healthy servant leader. The fourth phase is generosity, deciding of what to commit to and how to support belonging and mastery.

Master GONA Facilitator Seprieno Locario said, “This is more of

a framework to me. As, I have this framework to do belonging, to talk about what happened and go to the GONA process, we have a chance to invite community strengths to participate and help us lead this effort.”

As part of this framework, Locario spoke about it allows tribes, tribal nations, tribal communities and tribal families to be a part of a healing process in real time, unpacking and the strength of the curriculum is it’s built on collaboration.

Locario said they invited UKB Historic Preservation Roger Cain to highlight the rivercane and the importance of preserving the cane and how it’s vital to the community. They also had an opportunity to come together to break bread and have a hog fry.

At the end of this four-day training the facilitators had the opportunity to come together and present what their learning outcome was and how they will facilitate a GONA in their own community.

UKB Tribal Administrator Jennifer Cole-Robinson attended the training and stated, “This has given me the skills and tools needed to facilitate a GONA in our communities to help with their growth.”

GONA Facilitators wanted to thank the tribe for the support, guidance, welcoming, space and location.



Roger Cain presented on the importance of preserving rivercane.



Facilitators made bracelets out of rivercane.

The United Keetoowah Band's Right To Seat Its Congressional Delegate

240 years ago, the Cherokee People signed the 1785 Treaty of Hopewell with the United States Government promising the Cherokee a delegate seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The position guaranteed in that treaty, and reaffirmed in the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, grants the Historic Cherokee Nation a non-voting delegate seat. As successors-in-interest to both treaties, the United Keetoowah Band has the right to a delegate seat in Congress.

Several years ago, the Tribe acted on that right and appointed an accomplished Tribal attorney and UKB Member Victoria “Tori” Holland as the UKB Congressional Delegate. Tori lives the Keetoowah Spirit both in her advocacy work for the UKB, as well as her legal work for Tribes across Indian Country. She has served as the Deputy Attorney General for several Tribes, regularly prosecutes Indian country crimes, reviews contracts and regulations, drafts Tribal codes, and



represents Tribes in negotiations. Tori is deeply passionate about the rule of law and helping Tribes exercise their sovereignty. Through her work, she knows what the UKB needs to succeed and is the right voice to represent Keetoowah people.

The Historic Cherokee Nation

no longer exists as it did when the Treaty of Hopewell and Treaty of New Echota were signed. Now, three federally recognized Cherokee Tribes are descendants of the Historic Cherokee Nation, and all three are equal successors-in-interest to the historic treaties – United Keetoowah Band,

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. It is important to remember that the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is NOT the Historic Cherokee Nation. Shared Cherokee history is clear, as is the Cherokee People’s shared right to a congressional delegate.

The United Keetoowah Band has made great strides asserting its inherent and unlimited sovereignty since the Treaty of Hopewell and Treaty of New Echota were signed. As the Tribe continues to expand its impact and prosper, it becomes more vital with each passing year that the UKB needs the voice that it has selected in Congress – as is our right.

It is time for Congress to finally keep its promise, to the whole Cherokee people, made more than 200 years ago. The United Keetoowah Band is ready for the next chapter in the implementation of this treaty right. It’s time Congress seats Keetoowah Delegate Tori Holland.



Assistant Chief
Amos Ketcher
aketcher@ukb-nsn.gov
918-457-9645



Secretary
Caleb Grimm-Smith
csmith@ukb-nsn.gov



Treasurer
Sonja Gourd
sgourd@ukb-nsn.gov



Cooweescoowee Dist.
Clifford Wofford
918-822-1953



Delaware Dist.
Tishaleta Smith-Guevara
918-718-4366
tguevara@ukb-nsn.gov



Flint Dist.
Frankie Still
918-507-1822



Goingsnake Dist.
Willie Christie
918-822-3803



Illinois Dist.
Janelle Adair
918-457-7067



Saline Dist.
Charles Smoke
918-457-7071



Sequoyah Dist.
Donald Adair
918-931-0941



Tahlequah Dist.
Sammy Allen
918-931-0177

December Edition



Chief's Corner

JEFF WACOCHE
Principal Chief
jwacoche@ukb-nsn.gov

Siyo Keetoowah Family,
As we enter the holiday season, I want to begin with gratitude. Gratitude for our elders. Gratitude for our families. Gratitude for every United Keetoowah Band Member who shows up, works hard, and keeps our Tribe moving forward.

We are also forever grateful for our Keetoowah Veterans. This Veterans Day, we came together for the UKB Veterans Appreciation Luncheon and Veterans Day Parade, celebrating the courage, sacrifice and service of Keetoowah Veterans who, alongside their families, have made profound and often unseen sacrifices in defense of the United States. Speaking with so many of our Veterans that day filled me with pride and deep reverence.

This time of year reminds us what truly matters: caring for one another, protecting our future generations, and honoring the spirit of being Keetoowah. That spirit guided every step we took in 2025. And this year, we took big steps.

Defending UKB Rights

Our work to defend and protect Keetoowah rights continues in Washington, D.C., and at every level of government. Whether defending Keetoowah interests in legislation, protecting our land and economic rights, or securing needed health care funding, we were proactive, engaged and busy standing up for the future of our people.

In January, the United States Department of the Interior released

an M-Opinion that reaffirms UKB's jurisdiction on the Oklahoma Cherokee Reservation. Interior concluded that the rights over the Oklahoma Cherokee Reservation once exercised by the Historic Cherokee Nation continue today through both the UKB and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma equally.

Advancing Keetoowah Healthcare

We finalized a historic agreement with the Indian Health Service for Hospitals and Health Clinics funding. This marks a major step forward for the UKB Health System: expanding care beyond Behavioral Health and Contract Health to direct patient care. It is the result of years of advocacy by the UKB, and it will mean better services for more Keetoowah families.

The UKB Purchased and Referred Care (PRC) program has officially served its 1,000th patient. That's more than just a number, and a big number at that! It shows that our people are turning to us for care, and we are stepping up to meet that responsibility. The UKB PRC program launched in January and has already expanded access to vital specialty care across our 14-county service area. The PRC team is working closely with our Wellness Center staff to make sure our

members get the care they need and have a right to.

We broke ground on a new Council House, we opened the new Saline District Community Center, we marked the first anniversary of our UKB Courthouse, and we joined together for our 75th Keetoowah Celebration.

We came together as a community in the aftermath of tornados, we stood together in Washington advancing our Tribe's rights, and we enabled needed health care access. This was a good year. I am proud to work alongside our dedicated UKB Council, but most importantly, I am proud of you, for without your support these achievements would not have been possible.

Looking Ahead to 2026

We will carry this momentum into the new year. More health care opportunities. More protection of our rights. More opportunities for our people to thrive on our shared Cherokee Reservation. We are inherently sovereign, unapologetically Keetoowah and always moving forward.

A Holiday Blessing

As we gather with our families this month, I pray for warmth in your homes, safety in your travels, and joy with the people you love. May the Creator bless you and continue to watch over the United Keetoowah Band.

Wado and Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Happy New Year.

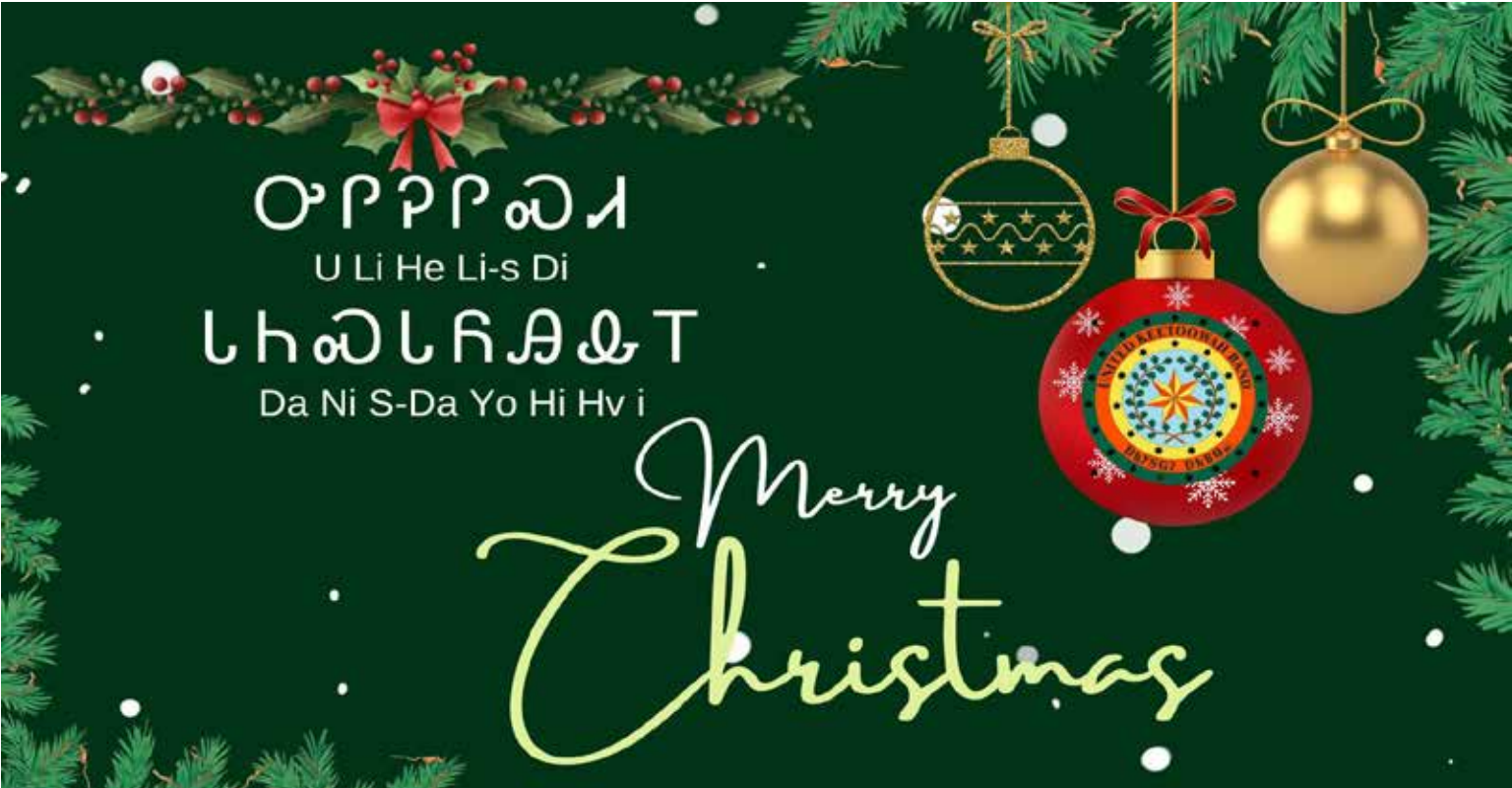
Chief Jeff Wacoche

White House Event



The UKB was grateful to be invited to the Native American Coalition for Economic Prosperity Event. Wado to Vice President Vance for convening an important discussion on issues impacting Indian Country. Thank you to Assistant Secretary Kirkland and U.S. Treasurer Beach for your time devoted to addressing issues affecting Keetoowah rights and sovereignty. The UKB's voice is heard loudly in Washington, D.C.!

Pictured with Vice President Vance, Assistant Secretary Kirkland and U.S. Treasurer Beach are Chief Jeff Wacoche, Secretary Caleb Grimm-Smith and Tribal Attorney Bryan Shade.



2025 - A Year in Review at the John Hair Cultural Center and Keetoowah Museum

“It is a privilege for us to share Keetoowah history from our ancestors' knowledge, perspective, and experience.” Museum Director Ernestine Berry

Marilyn Craig, Museum Marketing Coordinator

TAHLEQUAH - 2025 has been a busy and eventful year for John Hair Cultural Center and Keetoowah Museum. The mission of the museum is to bring Keetoowah history, culture, and traditions to the public through educational exhibits and cultural experiences that stimulate discovery, understanding, and enjoyment and understanding of Keetoowah lifeways.

One of the museums most popular programs is the Staff Development Lunch and Learn Series. Employees are granted administration leave for lunch time to come to the museum and learn or improve skills with a cultural craft. The class size is limited to ten people, and classes are usually full.

This past year classes included flat reed weaving, mini stick ball sticks, as well as making frybread, basket starts, grape dumplings, SE design painting, Kanuchi making, beading, and baby moccasins.

There is little doubt that the employees that take these classes will become the tribe’s future culture bearers and tradition keepers, and the people that will keep the culture alive by teaching traditional lifeways and crafts to younger tribal members. The Lunch and Learn program is sponsored by Echota Behavioral Health and the Tribal Opioid Response “Healing our Nations Together” grant. This grant pays for the presenter, as well as all materials for the class and lunch for the participants.

Another cultural program at the Keetoowah Museum is the Getting Back to Basics series. This features three subject areas – Gathering and Harvesting, Canning, and Sewing. Each subject has three four-hour class times. Classes are held monthly on the second Saturday from 10 to 2. The last class for 2025 was held on November 15 and it was the final session of the sewing series.

This past year, the museum hosted a couple of new events including a MMIW REDdress Project exhibit and walk, in conjunction with Keetoowah Lighthorse. These events give voice to the missing and murdered indigenous Women, Men and Children. The REDress Project is a display created with empty red dresses, to give a visual reminder representing the many MMIW/MMIP.

Keetoowah employees toured the museum hallway exhibit and then walked a mile around the complex. The museum staff were waiting at the end of the walk with strawberry floats for everyone.

Chief Wacoche read a proclamation that said: THAT we recognize and mourn every Indigenous woman, girl, man, and boy who has been taken from their families and communities; and, THAT we commit to advocating for stronger protection, better investigations, and greater accountability at every level of government and jurisdiction; and, THAT we will work to uplift the voices of survivors and families, and to honor the memory of our loved ones with action and advocacy; and THAT we will continue to educate our citizens and the broader public about the MMIW crisis and the broader issue of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples; and THAT we call upon all members of our Band, our neighboring tribes, governments, and organizations to join in this urgent work of remembrance, justice, and prevention.

Another brand-new event this past year was hosted at the museum during the Keetoowah Celebration was the Keetoowah Quilt Show, which opened on October 4 and ran through the month of October. The event was a crowd pleaser, and many members came up to the museum to see the quilt show, shop in the gift shop, and buy a Celebration T-shirt. Organizers expect more en-

tries and more participation for next year’s show, which will open Saturday, October 3, 2026.

The National Endowment for Humanities was the source of an Interpretive Planning grant that the museum was awarded for 2024-25. A dozen UKB members along with museum staff came together, initially for a three-day planning session. After that, the group met four more times during the year. The group was tasked with identifying how to tell the story of the Keetoowah people, both in media and in the museum. Some main points they wanted to stress were:

- The Creator said, “You shall be Kituwah.”
- In the beginning, we were all Kituwah.
- The Keetoowah are Guardians of the Culture.
- To get away from European encroachment, the people of the lower towns migrated to the West in the early 1800s to Arkansas Territory, and they ceded their lands back East in a treaty for this land. At this point, they became known as the Western Cherokee.
- Sequoyah migrated to Arkansas with the Western Cherokee.
- After close to 30 years, in 1828, the US government forced the Western Cherokee to move farther west to Indian Territory. They began to be referred to as the Old Settlers.
- The Old Settler’s welcomed the Cherokee people that came on the Trail of Tears.
- The Keetoowah organized under the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act
- The tribe’s corporate charter and constitution was ratified on October 3, 1950.

The plan also includes additions and minor improvements to the history gallery that would make the exhibit more interactive, which is extremely popular with children.

The JCCHM also coordinated the tribes’ 2025 Summer Youth Program. Last summer, there were six summer youth that worked 7-9 weeks at different tribal departments including Education, Indian Child Welfare, Historic Preservation, Environmental, Human Services and of course, the Museum.

The Keetoowah Historic Preservation staff has generously provided plants and labor to create and maintain a medicine garden in front of the John Hair Cultural Center and Keetoowah Museum.

“We’re focused on growing cultural practice materials for the John Hair Museum to use for their cultural workshops and presentations,” said Historic Preservation Director Roger Cain. Plants currently growing and thriving in the garden include Kochani, Buckbrush, Bee Balm, Coral Honeysuckle, and Rivercane.

“This plant (Rivercane) is important to us,” says Cain, a member of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians and a tribal ethnobotanist. “For me, it’s part my culture and my heritage. It’s part of our DNA and RNA. It’s part of why we’re Cherokees.”

Keetoowah first language speakers continue their translation work in collaboration with Northeastern State University in Illinois. Five speakers, Ernestine Berry and Kyndal Aimeron meet every other Friday in a zoom meeting. The language is also incorporated in games like ring toss at special events and meetings.

The museum also sells craft kits to make cornhusk dolls, mini stickball sticks, basket kit, mini gourd masks, and flat reed mat kits. The museum has a group of volunteers who assemble the kits, in fact, those volunteers are essential to the museum’s success.

“Volunteers have assisted us with everything from cooking lunch for our language instructors’ meetings to



Tribal employees Ashley Hopton and Toni Workman with the baby moccasins they made during Lunch and Learn.



Carolyn Swimmer, Jami Studi-Dick, and Michelle Downing make bread and butter pickles in a “Getting Back to Basics” canning class.

decorating the gift shop and museum for holidays and the Keetoowah Christmas Art Show and Sale, assisting with hosting special events, and putting together craft kits and in setting up and cleanup as well,” said Barbara Girty Foster, Assistant Museum Director.

“I am most proud of the mission that we serve in everything that we do at the museum. We have a vision that guides our goals to offer events, programs, classes, and cultural activities that inspire learning and participation by tribal members, students, volunteers, and the public. My goal for 2026 is to increase visitation and sales,” continued Girty Foster.

Museum Director and tribal historian Ernestine Berry said, “I am pleased that the Museum has made progress toward achieving its Vision. The vision of being the premier location for learning about and experiencing Keetoowah history and culture. It is a privilege for us to share Keetoowah history from our ancestors' knowledge, perspective, and experience.

In the past, some have said, ‘The Keetoowahs have no documentation.’ But I thankfully declare that the Keetoowah historical record is intact and plentiful! Visitors from many states hear the Keetoowah story for the first time. They are amazed by the amount of documentation we have on display. Some have said, ‘This is so much, I will have to come back again!’ And that is exactly what we want to happen,” she said.

Nine UKB Elders travel to ancestral homelands through THPO Program



First stop of the Heritage Immersion Experience trip was made to the University of Arkansas – Sequoyah National Research Center.



The group visited to the Bald River Falls.



The group spent time at Red Clay Historic Park near Cleveland, Tennessee

STAFF REPORTS

TAHLEQUAH, Okla- An agreement with Dr. Danielle Shelton (Coordinator, Trail of Tears MOA Implementation, Forest Service, Southern Region) initiated in 2022 titled “Heritage Immersion Experience” led the United Keetoowah Band Tribal Historic Preservation Office to make a trip to the ancestral homelands.

THPO staff attended a meeting of the UKB Elders Committee to announce opportunities for involvement, and the UKB Tribal Council was consulted so that the opportunity to participate was extended throughout the Keetoowah community.

The trip was facilitated by Historic Preservation Office Section 106 Coordinator Donna Gourd, who recruited Dale Eagle, Crew Lead of the US Forest Service funded Keetoowah Timber Strike Crew, to drive and assist participating Elders with baggage. In total, nine adults made the trip which spanned a two-week period and included stops in Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia and crossed Kentucky and Missouri as well.

Gourd said the itinerary was developed to gather historical information specific to Old Settler Cherokees who are the ancestors of the modern UKB, and to meet with

Forest Service staff to provide consultation on repatriation and interpretive media at various public access sites.

Pete Kingfisher served as Project Coordinator and, with Eagle, was one of three men who made up the group, including Richard Fields, husband of Sheila Fields, one of the five female participants including Norma Jimerson, Billie White, Sarah Noble, and Sharon Benoit.

The first stop on the Heritage Immersion Experience was Little Rock, Arkansas, site of the University of Arkansas’s Sequoyah National Research Center, which is headed by Dr. Daniel Littlefield, renowned scholar and historian who conducted a tour of the SNRC facility and spoke to the participants about sources of Old Settler history as well as the life and work of the revered Old Settler, George Gist, also known as Sequoyah.

After leaving Little Rock, the group traveled on to Decatur, Tennessee, where they stayed for four days on the Hiwassee River, as the location was central to other sites of significance that had been scheduled for tours by Dr. Shelton.

Prior to departing Tahlequah, the group learned that Dr. Shelton had been furloughed because of the federal government’s shutdown but had graciously volunteered her time to act as guide. In addition to

scheduling tours of various Cherokee historic sites, Shelton had arranged meetings with other Forest Service staff to discuss Section 106 consultations and potential uses of Ft. Armistead, a site in the old Cherokee country that has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is currently under Forest Service protection.

Many of the sites visited during the Heritage Immersion Experience have now been converted for cultural tourism, including Red Clay, location of Cherokee seasonal gatherings in the early 1800’s, and the site of the last Cherokee National Capitol in the old homelands.

Cultural tourism in the area is solidly based on the history of our Cherokee people. For example, the historic Tellico Blockhouse had been a trading post and became a site where treaties between the Cherokee and the United States were negotiated from 1794 to 1807, ceding large portions of land. Tellico is in the same vicinity as the Fort Loudon State Historic Area and the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, all of which are adjacent to the Unicoi Turnpike, a footpath of the 1700’s used by natives that was converted to a toll road in the early 1800’s and now a stretch of highway and hiking trails that draw tourists to the area and supports the local economy. Like many historic locations, the site of the Tellico Blockhouse is now under water because of rivers being dammed to create hydroelectric power.

Students of Keetoowah Cherokee history are familiar with the names “Kituwah,” “Nikwasi,” and “Cowee,” as they are sites of ancient tribal towns where our ancestors lived for thousands of years prior to European colonization; and all three contemporary federally recognized Cherokee tribes recognize Kituwah as the Mother Town of our People.

Participants in the Heritage Immersion Experiences visited these sites and were presented with research done by Dr. Brett Riggs, professor of Cherokee Studies at Western Carolina State University, and recently named honorary member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. Observing locations where history has given birth to cultural tourism in contemporary times was an aspect of the Heritage Immersion Experience that can be of benefit to the participants who volunteer their time at the John Hair Cultural Center and Museum. And the UKB Tribal Historic Preservation Office will certainly benefit from having met and talked with our partners in the U.S. Forest Service. Many aspects of the trip also gave rise to emotional observations that remind us our ancestors endured over one hundred years of cultural upheaval prior to the move west that has forever changed us.

Education Day with the Tulsa Oilers Hockey

UKB Education gives UKB tribal students opportunity to experience a hockey game.

LANI HANSEN, Senior Reporter

TAHLEQUAH, Okla- The United Keetoowah Band Education Department took on the opportunity of Kids Day Game with the Tulsa Oilers Hockey. Students from Kenwood, Epic and Cave Springs all enjoyed seeing the Oilers in action as they took on the Kansas City Mavericks. Although the Oilers did fall short 5-1, it was an exciting game for all students.

Education Director, Dr. Leslie Hannah has built a relationship with those from the Tulsa Oilers over the last few years. This relationship has grown into a great partnership where not only the UKB Education takes part in the Kids Day game, but also the Native American Heritage Night.

“We have been involved in the Native American Heritage Night for the

last four years,” Dr. Hannah said. “This was our third year we were able to take students to the day game.”

The Tulsa Oilers hosts this game just for students from different schools. It introduces them to the game of hockey.

“We can get different kinds of lesson plans out of hockey, such as physics,” Dr. Hannah said. “There was several educational related vendor booths set up at the game, and that’s why this game was designed just for students.”

For Dr. Hannah this was more than attending a hockey game, it was a reward day for UKB students who were chosen from teachers at the school.

“It was a joy watching the reaction on each of these kids faces,” Dr Hannah added. “They had never been to a hockey game before, so I am glad we had the opportunity to give them this experience.”



UKB Education had nine kids from three different schools attend the hockey game.



Kenwood students enjoying the game.



Tulsa Oilers and Kansas City Mavericks in action.

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280 S HWY 10, KANSAS, OK

CONTACT:

TERRIE TURTLE, 918-871-5038

Keetoowah Women Honored at 2025 AARP Native American Elders Event

By Raelie Grayson, Museum Cashier, and Social Media Manager

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK—
Three Keetoowah women were chosen as honorees at the 17th Annual AARP Native American Elder Honors. Betty Holcomb, Norma Jimerson and Eldine Stevens were three out of forty-nine elders chosen for this award. Established in 2009 as the Indian Elder Honors, this achievement is to honor and recognize Native American elders from Oklahoma’s 39 tribal nations for their contributions to their tribal nations, state, and nation.
“I feel honored,” said Betty Holcomb. "This is the first time I’ve gotten something like this."
Holcomb grew up in Adair County. She was chosen as a 2024 UKB Tradition Keeper for domestic arts. She preserves culture through traditional cuisine; her mother taught her to cook at an early age, and she learned how to cook for a family of eleven. Holcomb was a middle child with six brothers and two sisters. When she had her own family, she was still cooking for a family of seven, which included her husband and five daughters.
Holcomb served on the UKB Tribal Council for several terms, representing Tahlequah District. She was a hands-on councilor with a servant’s heart. She was always helping tribal members to do better, whether they were in her district or not.
She remains active with her family and tribe, and she is committed to teaching others about her heritage, culture, and traditional lifeways.
"I'm proud of my family and proud to represent my tribe,” said Holcomb. “I’ll continue to represent our culture.”
Betty was nominated by previous Keetoowah honoree, Rebecca Drywater. Norma Jimerson was born in Cherokee County and grew up in Tahlequah. She attended Sequoyah High School and Indian College where she met her husband Herman Jimerson, Seneca tribe upstate New York.
They have been married for 48 years and have one son and three grandsons.
Norma retired from Hastings Indian Health Services, and then she worked for her tribe for 10 years as Election Board Chair. She also serves on the enrollment committee and housing committee and is very active with the elder committee and Tahlequah district meetings and has helped with the annual Keetoowah Celebration. She is a member of Echota Behavioral Health’s Community Partnership Committee She is currently volunteering with the Cherokee County Health Council’s AmeriCorps Seniors 918 program.
Norma is actively involved in the museum’s “Back to Basics” series, which teaches gathering and harvesting buckbrush, wild onions, and fishing. She has taught traditional classes making grape dumplings and Kanuchi. Norma is a valued tribal elder who continues to give back to the Keetoowah people and provide valuable information for retired people.
“I never really thought about that because I enjoy learning and helping my tribe,” said Jimerson when asked about the impact of her volunteer service. Jimerson was also nominated by Rebecca Drywater.
Eldine “Deanie” Stevens has dedicated her life to serving Native communities at the local and national levels. She established the UKB Environmen-



Three Keetoowah Women were among the honorees at the 2025 AARP Native American Elders Event

tal Department through a federal grant, later serving as federal programs director and on the tribal corporate board, where she helped secure funding and oversee planning for the UKB Federal Programs building in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, now the tribal headquarters. She spent nine years as the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act program manager, working with the Environmental Protection Agency to clean and restore contaminated lands across Indian Country, including the Tar Creek Superfund site.
Stevens has served as board president of the Murrow Indian Children’s Home in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where they have raised bison for more than 20 years. A devoted elder, she continues to serve her church. Ms. Stevens’ lifelong commitment to environmental stewardship, tribal sovereignty and community care exemplifies the spirit of service and leadership.
Past Keetoowah recipients include Ernestine Berry, Former Chief Joe Bunch, John William Cornsilk, Rebecca Dreadfulwater, Sequoyah Guess, Former Chief John Hair, Woody Hansen, Howard Hansen Sr., Former Chief Jim Henson, Dorothy Ice, Jacob Littledave, Cmdr. Norman "Hominy" Littledave, Dr. Ricky Robinson, Albert Shade, Frankie Still, Sammy Still and Former Chief George Wickliffe.
For more information on the AARP Native American Elders Event and to nominate a noteworthy elder, visit their website at <https://states.aarp.org/oklahoma/>

Keetoowah Recognition: Jaelynn McConnell and Desmond McConnell

Siblings help their teams in winning championships.

TAHLEQUAH, Okla- Two kids who are proud members of the United Keetoowah Band have helped their sports teams out in winning championships. Jaelynn McConnell and Desmond McConnell are the children of Kelli Chewey. Jaelynn is in the 6th grade at Edison Preparatory School in Tulsa. Desmond is in the 2nd grade.
Jaelynn and her team won the middle school all-city volleyball champion-

ship for Tulsa. Just a couple of weeks later her little brother won a championship also.
Desmond plays for the TYAA Red Team, they came out on top winning the Indian Nations Football Conference Championship. This team went undefeated, with a record of 12-0.
Their mom is so proud of their achievements.



All-City Champions Edison Prep School



League Champions TYAA Bulldogs 2nd grade team.



Jaelynn McConnell helped volleyball team win championship.



Desmond McConnell helped football team win championship.

Saline District Receives Community Stickball Pole

EBH places stickball poles around communities as part of their culture is medicine.

LANI HANSEN, Senior Reporter

KENWOOD, Okla- Through Echota Behavioral Health, community stickball poles are being placed throughout the United Keetoowah Band’s nine districts with Kenwood in Saline District being the fourth area.

These stickball poles can be found in Vian, Tahlequah at the Speedway, Oaks at the Tucker Memorial Park and now Kenwood by the George Wickliffe Community Center.

“This is part of our ‘culture is medicine’ approach,” Prevention Team Kaleb Proctor said. “So, we look at our cultural activities to prevent substance misuse, along with suicide prevention. If you’re culturally attached with your community this and fellowship like our hog fry are outlets and coping mechanisms.”

EBH Prevention Team pushes the ‘culture is medicine’ as they place these stickball poles in the communities, Proctor believes it’s a sign of a healthy community. More of the youth are learning and playing the game.

“We do want to have a stickball pole in each community, but we have to wait for the district to have either a community building or space and time for pole to go up,” Proctor said.

When the pole is put up it is done in a traditional manner. The head of the pole faces east, it follows the sun as it goes up. As the pole was being taken out, it goes west.

Proctor said, “We try to honor the traditions as close as we can, but still having to adapt. It is also tradition to play one game, so even though it was getting dark we played under the moonlight.”

After the stickball pole went up, members who attended made mini stickball sticks with Tradition Keeper Char Wolfe. EBH provided a meal and David Comingdeer gave a brief history on stickball.




Saline District Rep Charles Smoke and David Comingdeer visiting as they are looking upon the stickball pole.



Men from the community came to help put up the stickball pole.



Tradition Keeper Char Wolfe taught how to make mini stickball sticks.



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