

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

The University of Montana School of Journalism



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OPEN FOR BUSINESS

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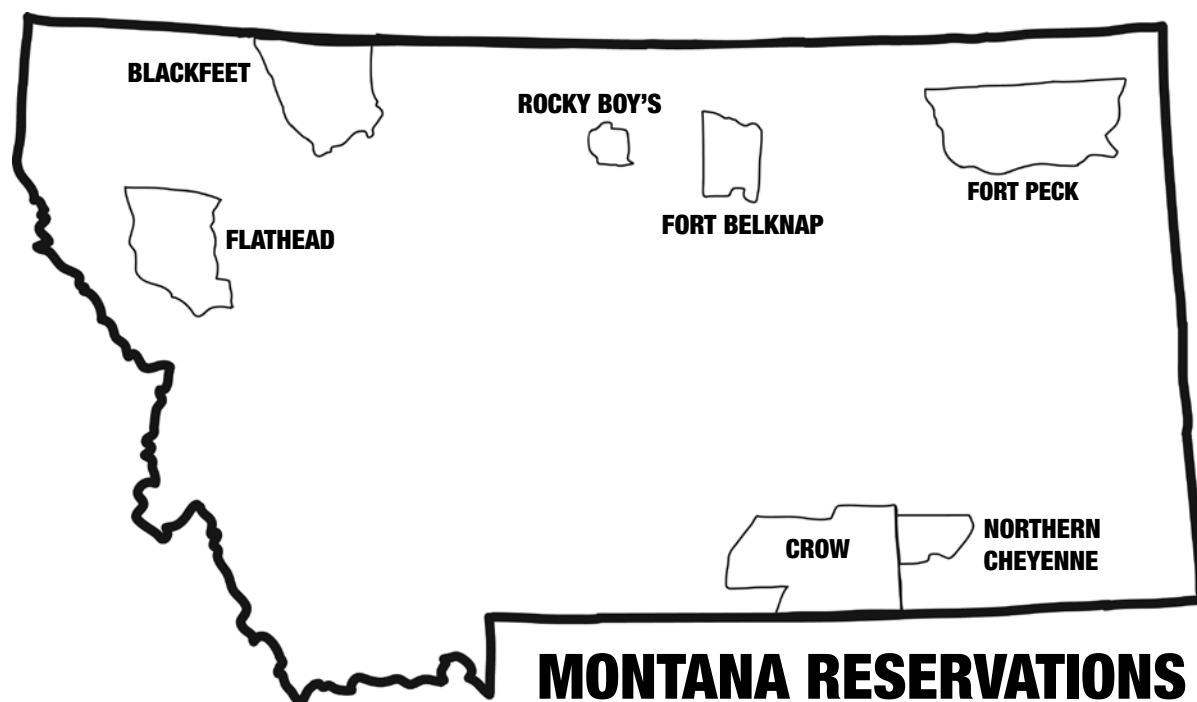
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Unemployment rates are alarmingly high throughout Indian Country, and Montana is no exception. With seven out of 10 able-bodied men and women out of work on some reservations in the state, these numbers can be hard to ignore.

Few would argue that jobs are easy to come by elsewhere in the United States, but the nationwide 9 percent unemployment rate — though high by recent standards — pales in comparison to reservations in Montana.

So when careers define our lives and our families, what does this mean on reservations where economic resources are scarce or blocked by bureaucracy?

Mainstream news coverage of reservations across the country often focuses solely on economic struggle, but rarely offers insight into what's being done to fix it. This coverage fails to recognize that where there are challenges, there are also solutions.

Many on Montana's reservations are creating jobs and business, not just for themselves, but for their tribe. Their persistence and creativity has led to opportunity on reservations, allowing tribal members to work in the community they cherish and on the land they grew up with.

This year, The University of Montana School of Journalism's Native News Honors Project explore stories of this path to success, and what it takes to make it work on the reservation. The path has been different for each of Montana's first people.

On Fort Peck, success means rising and setting with the sun in hopes of turning a profit for the tribal ranch. A flower and coffee shop on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation has found a dedicated market, as has the Flathead Reservation in specializing in high-tech electronics manufacturing.

For those gazing out the window of the bus taking them to and from Fort Belknap and Havre for work and school, the journey to success is a long one. In cities and towns across the state, the landless Little Shell tribe has taken their fortune and success into their own hands.

Wide plains and tall peaks separate these stories, but each is centered on the way Montana natives make a living as individuals and tribes, in spite of long odds.

The Native News Honors Project is reported, photographed, edited and designed by students at The University of Montana School of Journalism. This is the 21st annual edition.

The school appreciates the counsel received from Ian Record who is the manager of educational resources for the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy at the University of Arizona. Financial assistance for the project came from The University of Montana and the School of Journalism.

If you have comments about the project we'd like to hear from you. E-mail us at jason.begay@umontana.edu, or jeremy.lurgio@umontana.edu, or write to Native News Honors Project, School of Journalism, University of Montana, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812.

Cover Photograph by Sally Finneran

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The Chippewa Cree tribe uses its sovereignty to create a non-traditional business

story by **SAM LUNGREN** | photographs by **NICK GAST**



ROCKY BOY'S

The floor manager ignites the blackened end of a braid of sweetgrass then deftly extinguishes the flame. Thick smoke spirals over his hand, wafting a thin but sharp scent after the cubicles.

"I give thanks to the creator for the gift of another day," says Clyde Brown, his voice soft and rumbling.

His dark, commanding eyes sweep the faces of the seven employees watching him. It's early, an April morning.

"I give thanks for my life and my children and my loved ones."

He is standing in the call center of Plain Green

Loans, a venture that offers online, high interest loans.

"I pray that this place succeeds."

By all accounts, the fledgling business — illegal in most places outside the Rocky Boy's Reservation — has done just that.

"I pray that it provides for our families, that it puts food in our stomachs and roofs over our heads."

The sweetgrass braid still smoldering, Brown walks to the man sitting in the next cubicle, letting the smoke drift over him. The man takes two fingers and smudges ash on his forehead. He closes his eyes and inhales, moving his lips slightly. The man looks up and smiles, Brown steps next to the woman to the left, who prays in her own manner.

On this goes, clockwise around the room until every employee has been blessed.

Brown sits back down at his desk, blots the remaining embers from the sweetgrass braid and clicks on the wide, split-screen computer monitors before him. More computers fire up, headsets go on and another day has begun at the loan center on Rocky Boy's Reservation — an unlikely business in an even more unlikely location.

As sovereign nations answering only to federal law, Native American tribes have long pushed the boundaries of surrounding state and local laws by offering goods and services illegal off the reservation — gaming and firework sales being obvious examples.

In 2011, the Chippewa Cree tribe's creative capitalism evolved into another market: financial lending.

With the blessing of the tribal council, tribal members Billi Anne Raining Bird-Morsette and Neal Rosette Sr. started Plain Green Loans last

April. In the year since, they have made thousands of short-term, high-interest loans all online. Profits are already into the millions.

"This has been great for our tribe," said Raining Bird-Morsette, who is now the CEO. "Ninety percent of our employees were struggling before they got the job."

All but two of Plain Green's 21 employees are Chippewa Cree, making the company one of the largest employers on Rocky Boy's. After an upcoming round of hiring, they hope to employ more than 40.

About half of the enrolled Chippewa Cree tribal members reside on the Rocky Boy's Reservation in northcentral Montana, 20 miles south of Havre. These 3,400 residents live on the small chunk of high plains rising into the pine-strewn Bear's Paw Mountains, more commonly known as the Bear Paws. Jobs there are often seasonal and scarce.

From the last labor force estimate, Tanya Marie

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

The current unemployment rate on the Rocky Boy's Reservation is 67.9 percent, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

LEFT Clyde Brown makes a round through the office, checking up on his verification representatives. The 17 representatives working in the Plain Green Loans call center gather necessary information from customers in order to approve their loans.

RIGHT Tribal Councilman Ted Whitford sits at his desk in Rocky Boy Agency. Whitford is a member of the Chippewa-Cree Business Committee, which oversees businesses like Plain Green Loans, LLC. and the Northern Winz Casino.



Schmockel, the tribe's grant writer and planning assistant, calculates the unemployment rate at 71 percent. However, she said the data was taken during the summer when the workforce is at its highest. Some estimate that unemployment may reach 80 percent in the winter, when construction and other outdoor industries end with the onset of the harsh northern Montana weather.

"I worked the oil fields in North Dakota before. Good money, but it's a young man's job and I'm going to be 42 here in a couple weeks," Plain Green Verification Representative Paul Gopher said. "I got pneumonia and had to come home. No more working outdoors braving the elements."

After starting last August, Gopher has risen to the No. 2 position for the morning shift.

"I enjoy going to work," Gopher said. "It's not out in the freezing cold or 90-degree heat. What I enjoy most is the people. We have good crew. There's a bunch of us working who wouldn't be otherwise."

Beyond being a salve for the chronic underemployment, Raining Bird-Morsette says she hopes the venture will help create some self-sufficiency for what is one of the smallest reservations in Montana. The tribe wholly owns Plain Green, so all profits go to a board of directors to be distributed among the tribal departments and the larger community.

Those profits have not been insignificant.

Large posters line the call center walls broadcasting the monthly revenue numbers. The sequence begins at \$10,000. It climbs quickly to \$99,570.56, and up to \$232,111.36 four months later.

"(Plain Green is) doing lots of good things for the tribe," Gopher said. For instance, he said, tribal members received a \$150 stipend at Christmas last year. "That was due largely to Plain Green and the money we generated," Gopher said.

More than \$3 million in profit has already been funneled into the Rocky Boy's Reservation. The five-member board of directors (three council members and two community members) has put those funds to use in the form of infrastructure, housing, healthcare, recreational facilities, scholarships, field trips and community events. A certain percentage is also being reinvested in the business.

Nearly everyone was caught off-guard by how well Plain Green has done right out of the gate.

"At this point they've exceeded those projections and doing quite well," said Tribal Councilman Ted Whitford. "I mean I've never seen a business take off like this and be so successful in a short period of time."

Whitford sits on several tribal boards including the Chippewa Cree Business Committee, the tribal governing body, the Community Development Corporation and Plain Green Loans. He credits the runaway success of the lending venture first to the tribe itself. Specifically, "An ag-

gressive tribe, aggressive board, people working together."

But the No. 1 factor, he said, is Think Finance, the tribe's associate. It is a financial firm out of Fort Worth, Texas that both operates and contracts with online lending companies.

"(Think Finance) came in with their portfolio, their customers," Whitford said. "It was a mature portfolio that we brought in."

Think Finance Chief Executive Officer Ken Rees explained that though the company helped set up the Chippewa Cree operation, the tribe wholly owns and operates Plain Green Loans and simply contracts with Think Finance for technical assistance and use of their banking software platform.

Whitford said that because of the widespread state crackdowns on the payday loan businesses — so far 42 states have enacted laws eliminating or placing strict regulations on high interest loan companies — outfits like Think Finance shifted to working with sovereign Indian tribes, where the same rules do not apply.

"So that was their avenue of continuing their business," Whitford said. "It helps us both out."

Clyde Brown, the call center floor manager, split time growing up between Rocky Boy's and Great Falls.

"It was a good childhood, it was good to be up here and be a boy," Brown said. "There is nothing

"WHAT I ENJOY

MOST IS THE PEOPLE.

WE HAVE A GOOD CREW.

THERE'S A BUNCH OF US

WORKING WHO WOULDN'T

BE OTHERWISE."

Paul Gopher, Plain Green Verification Representative

better than being in the country where you experience fishing, camping, hunting, horseback riding, things like the Powwow, Sun Dance, Round Dance."

However, like many young Native Americans, the isolated reservation started feeling small.

"It was hard to find a job. It was hard to get on my feet because of a lot of reasons," Brown said. "I was young. And I was getting in trouble — drinking and fighting. Just partying too much, really. I was supposed to be in school and I did more partying than I did school."

Alcohol is banned on Rocky Boy's. After he got arrested for related charges "a handful of times," Brown decided he had to leave.



ABOVE Employees work in front of framed signs that display how much money Plain Green has given back to the tribal council every month. The company generated nearly \$1 million for the tribe in only six months.

He moved to Phoenix to join his sister, find work and try to turn his life around. He ended up staying for 13 years, working several customer service supervisory jobs. He also met Misha, the Navajo woman who would eventually become his wife. Then came their son, Mateo.

"I kind of grew up down there and matured down there," Brown said. "It was helpful. That time in the city made me realize that I had to work for whatever I wanted."

Things were going smoothly until the economic crash hit Arizona hard in 2008.

"It got bad down there for a while. I think I went a year and a half with no work," Brown said.

Out of options, he applied for a job with the Burlington Northern Santa Fe LLC in Montana, and last February, flew home to prepare for the interview. It was Brown's first time back to Rocky Boy's in over a decade.

Brown's very presence commands attention. A calm, deliberate demeanor coupled with a shaved head and a 6-foot-4, linebacker frame, it's easy to see why supervisory roles suit him. Plain Green had not yet opened its digital doors, but Brown heard about the verification supervisor position, applied and was given the job.

"I'm a spiritual person," Brown said. "I think this was meant to be, everything that happened and brought me back home."

Though some are skeptical of Plain Green's methods, Brown is all too familiar with the circumstances that would bring people to a high interest loan company.

"Living in Arizona, I had to take these high-interest loans out and it helped me when I needed it," he said. "So if it helps people when they need it and we do everything by the rules, I have no problem being a part of that."

Others do have a problem with short-term, high-interest lending, however. Governments have generally not been favorable toward the practice (often known as payday lending, a term the Chippewa Cree reject). Aside from the 42 states that have regulated or eliminated the practice, Montana voters in 2010 passed Initiative 164, which set an interest rate cap at 36 percent.

Plain Green, on the other hand, adds an extra decimal place to its highest introductory annual percentage rate – up to 379 percent.

For example, a \$1,000 loan from Plain Green

carries a 299.17 percent rate, and can be paid off in 24 biweekly payments of \$124.16. In this scenario, and according to Plain Green's website, that borrower of \$1,000 will end up paying back \$2,979.84.

In contrast, "payday" loan interest rates, which are set on schedules a fraction the length of Plain Green plans, are as high as 600 percent.

Out of respect for the inevitable I-164 litigation, Plain Green does not lend to Montana residents.

Republican State Sen. Dave Lewis was among the supporters of payday lending bill.

"The people who were making use of it were probably the people who could least afford the interest rate," Lewis said. "Their argument was that it was the only place they could get money but I never really bought that. I think that if you had any credit at all you could go to a credit union and get short-term loans. The people who could least afford it were paying this 300 percent. It just seemed crazy to me."

However, Lewis stops short of condemning the Chippewa Cree for their venture into the market.

"They are a tribe. They can do anything they

want. That's the bottom line. I don't think it is a good idea but I don't have the right to tell them what to do or not to do. The tribes are independent nations. So, good luck to them. There will be some problems, but that is their business."

Raining Bird-Morsette however, is insistent Plain Green is filling an important niche. She said there are many people who simply cannot get emergency funds fast enough through traditional outlets.

"Who can just walk in to a bank and get \$500?" Raining Bird-Morsette said. "It's for emergencies, whether that is a car repair or a medical bill or whatever. A lot are just working people who hit a rough spot."

To counter the bad press and F-rating from the Better Business Bureau, the administration team is working diligently to establish a regulatory framework and best practices for the business, as well as forming the Native American Lending Alliance (NALA) with the handful of other tribes in the market. The hope is that the more organized, ethical and legitimate the business appears, the less likely legislation will be passed against it.

The Better Business Bureau that serves Montana does not accredit any sort of online

lending business, according to Kris Byrum, the lead investigator for the office. However, through diligence, more time in business and responding to their five outstanding complaints, Plain Green certainly could earn themselves an 'A' rating, Byrum said.

"We would like a business to respond, no matter how ridiculous a complaint may be," Byrum said.

Raining Bird-Morsette said that Plain Green is trying very hard to meet the bureau's standards in the hope of improving their grade.

"We take all complaints very seriously. We respond as quickly as possible," she said. "But when you compare the number of complaints to the number of loans we have given, that is a very small portion of our customers."

Bobbi Favel is the Plain Green compliance officer and charged with dealing with complaints and establishing the regulatory ground rules.

"A lot of people are not educated enough to understand what it is we are doing here," Favel said. "In the past, the whole payday lending deal has gotten a bad rap and that is not exactly what we do here. We do installment loans. I've heard the misconceptions about predatory lending and I think that we try to portray ourselves as a viable business on the Internet."

The distinction they draw between "payday" and "installment" loans is the time allowed to repay. Payday loans generally must be paid off within two weeks. With the installment loans offered by Plain Green, the borrower returns via bi-weekly payments, for up to several months — a big difference in the minds of the Chippewa Cree.

At the end of a day packed with supervising the call center, Clyde Brown leaves the Plain Green office in Box Elder and drives up through Rocky Boy Agency, deeper into the Bear's Paw Mountains to his home in a small valley. Misha, Mateo, their newborn daughter Bailey and his three Jack Russell terriers are waiting for him.

"I was raised just like any other boy, digging outside or fishing and I wanted that for my son but you can't do that in the city," Brown says "Here I can let him discover for himself, the mountains and stuff like that. I definitely wanted to bring my family back but I just didn't know how or what the circumstances were going to be."

As the sun begins to vanish past the broad plains to the west, Brown walks across the yard and enters a small garage. Chairs, towels and miscellaneous garage clutter are scattered about, but what dominates the room is a large, tan colored dome, approximately four feet tall and 10 feet wide. Brown ducks his tall frame in through a doorway in the dome, kneels on the rugs and

carpet strewn about inside, and prepares a fire around the pile of large stones in the center of his sweat lodge. He places a braid of sweetgrass in the flames and walks back to the house.

"Plain Green has offered me a lot financial wise, stability," he says. "It gave me confidence to know that I could rely on this company to put food on the table and a roof over my family's heads. This job let me come home."

This June, Brown plans to finally complete the Chippewa Cree rite of passage: fast alone for four-days and four-nights on top of Mt. Baldy.

"It is to become a man," he says. "I didn't do it when I was 14 and I believe that is why I have had so much bad luck growing up."

Half an hour later, the stones are red-hot and friends, family and neighbors start to show up.

"This is where we come to believe," Brown says, prepping for the sweat. "This is a place for us to give thanks and to pray and to ask for blessings, just like anybody else's church. We come to cry, we come to laugh. For any reason, especially to give thanks for what we got."

A group of eight has now assembled. Crouched over, they pile into the lodge one by one and sit in a circle around the stones. Brown ducks in last, pulling down the thick wool blanket over the entrance as he goes.

His dark, commanding eyes sweep the faces watching him.

"I give thanks to the creator for the gift of another day," he says solemnly, and ladles a splash of water on the stones, sending a flood of fierce heat throughout the lodge.

TOP Clyde Brown walks down the road outside his home on his family's land. Brown and his family utilize their sweat lodge, pictured to the left, multiple times a week to reflect and pray.

MIDDLE Clyde Brown sits in his home, where he lives with his wife, Misha, his son, Mateo, and newborn daughter, Bailey. Brown is thankful to have a job that allows him to live near his family on the land he grew up on.

BOTTOM Clyde Brown watches his son, Mateo, play a video game on his Nintendo Wii. Brown said his job at Plain Green makes it easier to provide luxuries and amenities for his family.





story by **WILL FREIHOFER** | photographs by **MEGAN JAE RIGGS**

ABOVE Russel Burland inspects a component with a magnifying glass to make sure it is ready to be assembled onto a circuit board. S&K Electronics has contracts with companies such as Raytheon, TerraEchos and the Department of Defense.

WIRED TO SUCCEED

Before she built circuit boards, she beaded.

The steady hum of electronics hung thick in the air as Tammy Koehler peered through a magnifying glass at a blank piece of familiar green circuit board.

Using a pair of tweezers, she nudged an electrical component the size of a sesame seed around its surface. The weight of her hand rested entirely on her pinky finger. It's a trick used to lift her wrist from the counter, preventing even the faint rise and fall of her pulse from affecting the careful placement of such miniscule pieces.

"They're easy to lose," Koehler said.

Tucked into her blue anti-static jacket, her employee access card's lanyard is adorned with a tightly woven bead ornament — sky blue, with a sunset-hued strip splitting its center.

"I think it's all hand in hand — small work soldering and beading," Koehler said. "It has a lot of the same technique."

Koehler's lanyard reads S&K Electronics, her employer for the last 18 years. The 'S&K' stands for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation.

When it's finished, the electrical board built by Koehler will be launched into space by NASA as part of a satellite designed down the road at Salish Kootenai College.

If all goes to plan, the board will power the camera on the first satellite ever designed by a tribal college. It will be an orbiting testament to the growing electronics industry taking root in the Mission Valley.



The U.S. government's history of purchasing goods from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes began with the Lewis and Clark expedition. The explorers bought horses from the Salish to aid in the party's crossing of the Bitterroot Range. William Clark was impressed with the horses, calling them "elegant" in his journal.

The government no longer needs horses from the tribes. Instead, it's looking for trustworthy and durable complex electronic components for missiles, night vision scopes and fighter jets. And today they still seem pleased with the products they find on the tribal lands of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes south of Flathead Lake.

The present-day Flathead Reservation differs vastly from the six other reservations scattered across the state, beginning with its population. Roughly three out of every four residents are non-native, according to the census data from 2000. It's a stark contrast from the demographics found in more remote reservations in Montana like Rocky Boy's or Fort

Peck. Unemployment is also lower and average income is higher than on other reservations in the state.

At S&K Electronics in Ronan the demographic ratio is flipped, with close to two-thirds of the company's workforce registered as native.

Inside the company headquarters a hallway of framed native art leads to a large boardroom, where inside sits S&K Electronics' General Manager Larry Hall. Hall's hair is close-cropped and white, and it's with the cautious meter of a man used to watching his words that he explained how the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes came to be involved in the business of manufacturing electronics components for the Department of Defense.

"It was a vision to try to find ways of developing diversity within the Flathead Reservation in the way of economies," Hall said.

Before 1985, the majority of funds flowing through the tribe came from extraction industries – like agriculture and timber sales – as well as government services. Tribal leadership was eager to create future jobs on the reservation,

and electronics manufacturing seemed a promising industry to explore. "Electronics was the buzzword in the '80s," Hall said.

That buzz can now be heard in S&K's factory floor in the steady drone of machinery and fans. It is here that the company has managed to continuously employ tribal members for almost three decades.

"We are now considered a sustainable, viable long-term company," Hall said.

S&K hopes to continue its steady growth in revenue and attracting bids that allow it to provide jobs to aid the reservation economy. "One of our main goals is hiring," he said.

Today, S&K Electronics has just under 100 full-time employees, 40,000 square feet of manufacturing space and annual revenues of more than \$20 million. Though the specific tribal affiliation of employees is not tracked, as a native-preference employer Hall said the company has 59 full-time Native American employees.

S&K Electronics' incorporation in 1985 would be the first rung in a ladder of tribal ventures into high-tech fields. Initially a small-scale venture with the

**"IT WAS A VISION TO TRY
TO FIND WAYS OF DEVELOPING
DIVERSITY WITHIN THE FLATHEAD
RESERVATION IN THE WAY
OF ECONOMIES"**

Larry Hall,
General Manager
S&K Electronics



LEFT Tammy Koehler holds a circuit board at S&K Electronics on the Flathead Reservation in Polson. Koehler has been employed by the company for 18 years and says beading skills help develop techniques for circuit board assembling.

ABOVE Tammy Koehler assembles circuit board components. Koehler says she knows there are other jobs available in her field outside the state but she enjoys the mountains of Montana.

S&K ELECTRONICS BY THE NUMBERS

1985

Year S&K Electronics was incorporated

98

Number of full time employees at the company

180

The most people employed by S&K Electronics at any given time

60

percent — Portion of S&K Electronics employees registered as Native Americans

40,000

Square footage of S&K Electronics manufacturing space

\$2.2

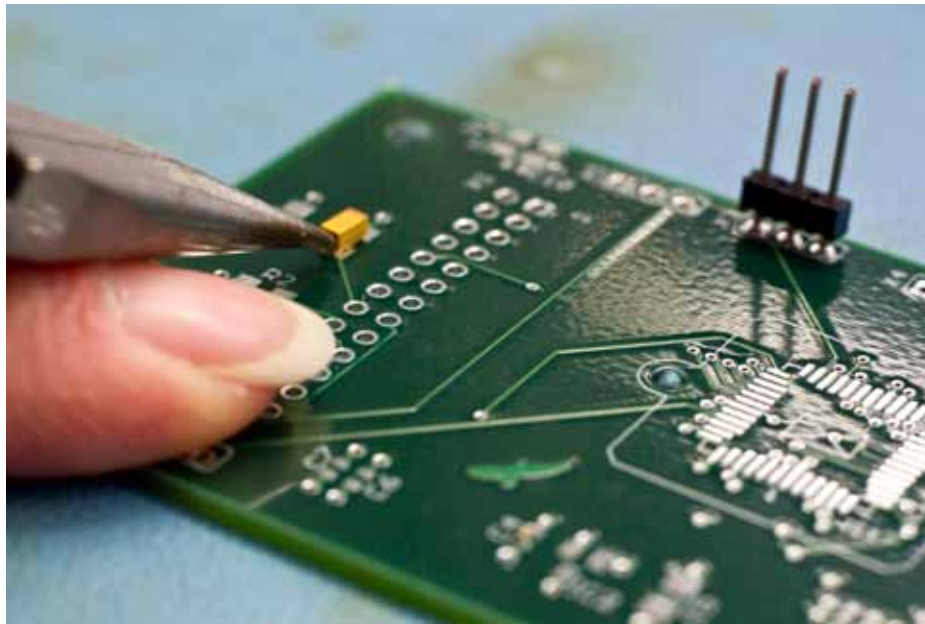
million — Size of the contract with BAE systems for M16 rifle scope components announced by S&K Electronics in June

\$20

million — Total sales of S&K Electronics in 2010, it's fifth consecutive year in the black

10,000

mph — The speed at which S&K Electronics assembled circuit board will orbit the Earth



ABOVE Tammy Koehler points at a tiny component on one of the circuit boards she is assembling. The components come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes as its lone shareholder, the fledgling company quickly qualified as an 8(a) small disadvantaged business under the U.S. Small Business Administration. It's a valuable designation that gives preference to eligible companies in the high-volume field of defense contracting.

Companies with federal contracts to supply the Department of Defense are required to subcontract at least a portion of their work with 8(a) businesses, a requirement which helped S&K Electronics to develop working relationships with enormous multinational companies like Raytheon and Lockheed Martin. Such relationships have helped lead to continued work in the industry, including a \$2.2 million deal with BAE systems to make components for night vision scopes for M16 rifles announced in June.

Success in the industry also spurred the 1999 spin-off of S&K Technologies in St. Ignatius, which today has six companies under its wing tailored to a variety of contracting fields including aerospace and environmental restoration. S&K Aerospace announced a \$975 million contract with the U.S. Air Force in March, and though the majority of the funds will go to purchasing and jobs outside Montana, its ownership by the Salish and Kootenai tribes suggests its success will pay dividends elsewhere in the Flathead Valley.

In the boardroom at S&K Electronics, the portraits of four employees are mounted on a display stocked with S&K-branded pens, notepads and ceremonial sweetgrass. Each employee wears an unmistakable proud grin, and holds a different product exemplary of S&K's manufacturing niche toward the camera — like anglers mugging with a prize catch.

The four wear distinctive light blue jackets hatched with a faint grid of thin black lines — wires, which prevent static shock from zapping delicate circuits. One man holds a fist full of orange, white and blue wire harnesses, another holds a DVD player-sized electronics box used in chemistry labs.

Tammy Koehler, the constructor of the NASA project circuit board, is featured in the display's center, and balanced between her two steady hands is a grass-green circuit board. Its surface is decorated like a cityscape, crowded with silver-rimmed black boxes and rectangles common to any modern device that beeps or blinks. Her smile is the widest of the four.

Having risen from an entry-level job as an assembler to her current title of production coordinator, Koehler's position now entails ensuring things run smoothly on the circuit board manufacturing line, which Hall said accounts for some 80 percent of the

company's business.

"There's a big responsibility to organize things to make sure they happen on time — or to make them go even faster," Koehler said.

Growing up on the reservation, Koehler envisioned herself working for the Navy or attending beauty school. She left the Flathead for a year to work in cable assembly at Tamsco Instruments in Seattle, but found the bustle to be too much.

"It was too big for me. I'm not a city girl," she said.

Returning to Montana and beginning work at S&K, Koehler learned the ropes of circuit board assembly — experience she now uses to train new employees to the task. Koehler said patience is an essential virtue for this line of work, one that she practices while beading or putting together puzzles on her own time.

Though now in a management position at the company, she said her duties still include hands-on work assembling boards by hand — as she does now, with Hall peering over her shoulder.

This satellite-bound circuit board the two held before them is a prototype, different than the majority of those shipping from Pablo under the S&K brand. For starters, only one will be made. That means it must be assembled by hand rather than passed through the whirring bowling lane-length sequence of

"WE ARE NOW

CONSIDERED A SUSTAINABLE,

VIABLE LONG-TERM COMPANY.

ONE OF OUR MAIN

GOALS IS HIRING"

Larry Hall,
General Manager
S&K Electronics



ABOVE Tammy Koehler interacts with co-worker Charles Merritt. Koehler says she likes working at S&K Electronics because it's like a second home.

white and black machinery in the front of the facility. This board is simple by S&K standards, and the company is building it free of charge.

The size of a playing card, its job will be to power and transfer data from a postage stamp-sized camera mounted in its center. Its operators will be a few miles away at the Salish Kootenai College campus, and will be the first tribal college to design, build and operate a satellite that will orbit the Earth.

Two and a half miles south of S&K Electronics at the Salish Kootenai College campus, five students sit in a white walled laboratory stuffed with computer stations and electrical components. On the floor, a shoebox-sized robot attempts to find its way around a backpack while computer engineering professor Thomas Trickel looks on. It bumps the pack, backs up, turns, and tries again.

“The first task is to get the robot

rolling, the second task is ‘now, let’s make it react,’” Trickel said.

Here in computer engineering lab three, Trickel is using simple robotics systems to acquaint students with the interplay between software, hardware and mechanics. This complicated relationship is necessary to craft working systems in the engineering world.

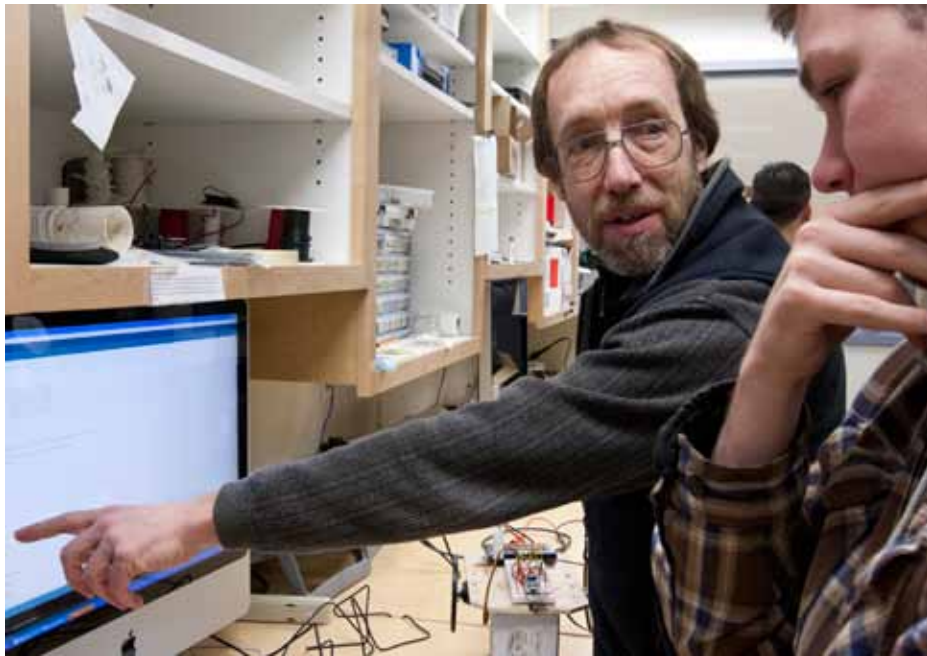
A former electronic engineer at Intel in California with wire-frame glasses and a storm cloud gray beard, Trickel found

his way to western Montana when his wife came to teach at the tribal college’s nursing program. While explaining Salish Kootenai College’s CubeSat program, the NASA project named for the small, cube-shaped satellite being built, Trickel’s eyes were drawn to students’ workstations around the room monitoring their progress.

“I see this satellite as a vehicle for training,” Trickel said of the project, which is sponsored by NASA. “A lot of

SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE CUBESAT PROJECT

Students at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo are working on a miniature cube-shaped satellite which the group hopes will be the first ever designed by a tribal college to orbit the Earth. Following the passage of a flight readiness review by NASA in August of 2013, the 10 centimeter-sided cube will be cleared for inclusion on a NASA rocket which will eject it into the atmosphere some 300 to 400 kilometers above the Earth's surface. While in space, the CubeSat will travel at speeds up to 10,000 mph while communicating with a ground station on the campus of Salish Kootenai College and attempt to capture pictures of the Flathead Reservation from space. Such a mission requires rigorous engineering, according to program mentor and tribal college professor Tom Trickel. "We've got to work up in space, which is a rough environment," Trickel said.



LEFT Computer engineering professor Thomas Trickel troubleshoots with Robbie Davis during computer engineering lab three at Salish Kootenai College on the Flathead Reservation. S&K Electronics made a circuit board pro bono for Trickel as part of the NASA CubeSat program.

engineering is building to learn, and that's what we're going to do."

Trickel is one of four faculty mentors overseeing a group of engineering and science students at the tribal college working on the satellite.

Slightly larger than a Rubik's Cube at four inches to a side, the instrument will use solar panels to power a camera system capable of imaging the Earth and astronomical objects, as well as transmitting and receiving communications from a ground station on the Salish Kootenai College campus.

Provided the project passes its flight readiness review in August of 2013, the satellite will be launched into the earth's orbit by a NASA rocket.

"The team's preferred launch date is in July or August of 2014 when the skies above the Flathead reservation are most likely to provide a clear image for the satellite," Trickel said.

As always, funding is an issue, and Trickel said that Hall's offer to construct the specialized electronics boards required for the project has been welcome. "S&K Electronics has been a huge help," he said.

Paying for the single board to be assembled elsewhere could cost close to \$1,000, Trickel said.

The project hopes to trigger the camera mounted on the circuit board built by Koehler at the precise moment the satellite passes over western Montana. The result will be a picture of the Flathead Valley from space that will be used to

get students excited about science and technology.

"We want to go into classrooms and say 'here's an actual picture we took in space of the reservation,'" Trickel said. "We're going to try to get them to say 'That's possible? We can really do that?'"

Another objective will be to use images from the camera to analyze aerosols in the atmosphere. "That's the goal," said Ryan Young, a computer engineering student and CubeSat team member, "to contribute to the scientific community with factual information."

In the robotics laboratory's far corner, Young and fellow computer engineering student Robert Sanchez assemble a gearbox for a separate project. The piece will help make tiny adjustments in the orientation of a spectrograph, an instrument capable of tracking the sun across the sky from ground level. The piece will measure the electrical current in the sun's rays to determine what gasses the light is passing through.

Growing up on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, Young says that his interest in science and technology led him to seek out and attend a summer science camp held at Montana Tech in Butte while in high school.

Joining the Navy in 2001, Young worked in aviation ordinances while stationed in Everett, Wash. "I was a bomb builder," Young said. "When I was in the service I noticed that the engineering

department was having more fun than my department."

Now holding a research position funded by NASA's Tribal Colleges and Universities Project, Young hopes a successful CubeSat program will draw more young students to follow his footsteps. "I think engineering programs need to have more outreach, because that's what got me interested," he said.

The computer engineering program has graduated three students since its start in 2008, and each is gainfully employed in the field. One is the director of information technology at Salish Kootenai College. Another, Kody Ensley, worked for NASA's Robonaut program to help design the hand of a man-shaped robot developed for use on the International Space Station.

Trickel hopes that the hands-on experience offered by the CubeSat program will help equip his students to work, be it for an existing entity or as entrepreneurs.

"The hope with this program is that they might be able to start businesses on their own," Trickel said.

For Hall and S&K, the situation is a win-win. As a native-preference employer, the more educated the local workforce is in the fields of science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM), the better.

"We're always supporting STEM efforts in the school system," Hall said.

With careful planning, execution and a little luck, an operational testament

"THE HOPE WITH THIS

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THEIR OWN"

Thomas Trickel,
Professor
Salish Kootenai College

to the Flathead reservation's high-tech chops will orbit the globe in the next few years. Though the college's selection to participate in the highly competitive NASA CubeSat program is a major step, Trickel cautions that anything involving rockets in outer space is far from a sure thing.

Montana State University has been involved with three NASA launches and only one success. One rocket exploded after launch and another ended in the Pacific Ocean, Trickel said. "It is rocket science, after all," he said.

For Trickel, one of the intriguing subplots to school programs in computer science and engineering lies in the hope of meeting the growing worldwide demand for solutions in the field.

"Our ability as a country to continue to produce science and engineering

students is going to affect how we're able to compete," Trickle said. "China puts a lot of money into their STEM programs."

Hall also hopes that investments being made into high-tech fields on the Flathead Reservation will continue to pay dividends. But it's no small task to attract the large contracts that allow him to add positions at S&K Electronics in the global marketplace of manufacturing.

Hall recalled a time in 2003 when his work force was as large as 180 employees. That was when S&K had

the contract to package power tool accessories manufactured by the Jore Corporation in Ronan. Those jobs have since faded.

"We can only maintain those jobs if there's work to do," Hall said.

For now, there is work to be done, evidenced by the 98 full-time positions currently on the S&K Electronics payroll. The parking lot is full. The machines are humming.

The company, like the tribal members it employs, is working.



RIGHT S&K Electronics general manager Larry Hall values sustainability in the company. **BELOW** Guy Stinger inspects a circuit board component on the assembly line at S&K Electronics. Of the 98 employees, 59 are Native American.





A LONG WAY TO GO

ABOVE Jessica Long Knife is one of the last people to get off the bus to the reservation's southern communities. She lives outside Lodgepole, which has a population of 265, according to the latest census.

The cold April morning wind cuts through their jackets, causing people to shiver as they wait for their ride to work.

But Gerri Stiffarm escapes the cold in her car, which sits idling in the parking lot. She waits for the bus to pull in.

As soon as the shiny white vessel appears, the faces of those waiting outside light up at the thought of the heat and a comfortable seat. Stiffarm is just glad she only has to pay a dollar to get to her job 45 miles away.

Stiffarm works at the Aaniiih Nakoda College on the Fort Belknap Reservation as

the Success Center coordinator. Although she's an enrolled tribal member, Stiffarm doesn't live on the reservation, and said there's no way she ever would.

"There's nothing to do there," she said. "There's no extracurricular activities or decent housing."

So instead, she lives an hour away in Havre and rides the bus to work every day.

The road linking these two communities is U.S. Highway 2. For some people in this rural area – home of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine tribes, this road is an escape route, leading to a better opportunity. For others it is simply a conveyor belt getting

them to and from work. Some think of it as an obstacle due to lack of transportation, or expensive gas.

But the creation of a bus system in 2009 was supposed to change that. It was supposed to connect the people on Fort Belknap, where unemployment reaches 70 percent, with job opportunities in Havre – a town where unemployment is below the national average.

But few ride the bus into Havre for work and many only exacerbate the economic challenges of Fort Belknap by taking what little money they have to businesses off the reservation.

Before the bus existed, expensive tanks of gas and a lack of transportation separated Havre and Fort Belknap. It was a challenge for people getting to work, school, and recreation, said Barb Stiffarm, the executive director of Opportunity Link.

Opportunity Link is a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing poverty in northcentral Montana. Through the organization's research, it found that an inexpensive and reliable transportation system could really benefit people. This sparked the idea for the North Central Montana Transit system – the bus.



FORT BELKNAP

**“THE OPPORTUNITIES
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WE JUST NEED
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THAT WE CAN BUILD
THE BRIDGES TO GET THERE,
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THAT ARE NECESSARY
TO GENERATE PROSPERITY.”**

Barb Stiffarm,
Executive Director
Opportunity Link

“The opportunities are there; we just need to figure out ways that we can build the bridges to get there, so that we can build the opportunities that are necessary to generate prosperity,” said Barb Stiffarm, who is not related to Gerri Stiffarm.

Barb Stiffarm said before the bus system, the cost of getting to work made it seem like it wasn’t worth the struggle.

“We’ve had a lot of people who have tried,” she said. “But when the majority of their paycheck is going out the window because they’re having to drive those distances, they give up trying. So we’re not keeping them in those jobs they need to be in.”

Opportunity Link’s buses are getting people from Havre to work on Fort Belknap, but, for the most part, they aren’t helping people living on Fort Belknap get to work in Havre. Instead, most people use them to go shopping, run errands, or get to school in Havre.

Tracy King, Fort Belknap’s tribal council president, thinks racial tension may be holding people back.

“When I was younger I had to out work

all of these Indian haters,” he said. “Every place I went to work off the reservation, somebody wanted to challenge me.”

King is a tall man with light-colored eyes framed by glasses. Most days he wears jeans, a plaid button up shirt and a black cowboy hat to work.

His voice is friendly but assertive, and he takes time to think before he speaks.

“I’ve cussed a lot of people out that put me down because they thought their education is way up here, and our Indian people is way down here,” King said. “And I would tell them, ‘This is bullshit. I’m not going to put up with it.’”

He said most young people don’t want to endure the discrimination they feel, so they just go back to the reservation to find work.

“You know, it’s different because they expected me as well as others to fail,” he said. “That’s what they want us to do is fail.”

Barb Stiffarm says the main challenge in getting people to take the bus for work

in Havre is the bus’ schedule. Even though it gets in to Havre at 9 a.m., it leaves by 3 p.m. to get back to Fort Belknap, and that doesn’t fit the typical workday.

“It’s just one of the constraints on the system that we have,” she said. “There are people that we’re missing out on being able to ride the bus because of the schedules.”

Barb Gardipee, a tribal member who lives on the reservation, said it’s the long ride and the hours of the bus that keep her from using it.

“That’s too much time to get there,” Gardipee said. “And if I had an 8 o’clock job in Havre I wouldn’t be able to make it.”

Gardipee concedes that if the bus could get her to a job with regular hours, from 8 to 5, she might take it. But then said she’d have to find a ride from her home in the southern part of the reservation to Fort Belknap Agency in the north, where the bus picks up people.

“It’s just messy,” she said.

RIGHT Barb Stiffarm serves as executive director of Opportunity Link, the poverty reduction non-profit that created North Central Montana Transit. By reducing annual transportation costs in the region, she hopes that frees money for other budget items.

BELOW A North Central Montana Transit bus drives to Fort Belknap Agency one evening after picking up riders in Havre.



Despite the fact that the schedule isn't perfect for people looking to work in Havre, Stiffarm is very proud of what the bus has achieved.

At first, Opportunity Link predicted it would have about 250 riders a month, but they underestimated. When the transit system started in 2009, Stiffarm had to scramble to find bigger busses to accommodate all the riders. Now, the system averages around 1,600 rides a month.

Shawn Snow, a 55-year-old man who rides the bus two or three times a week from Fort Belknap to Havre, said he loves the bus because it gets him out of the house and gives him an opportunity to mingle.

"It allows me to get to therapy, saves me money, and gets me to the library," he said. Without the bus, Snow said he'd probably just stay home and daydream.

"I'd get bored and I'd be depressed," he said.

Snow lives in Hays on the southern end of the reservation and rides the shuttle to Fort Belknap Agency at 7 a.m. so he can catch the bus to Havre. If it weren't for the bus, Snow said he would have to pay someone \$30 to take him to town. He also said he'd only get to see his therapist about once a month, but with the bus he's able to go once a week.

King, the tribal council president, agrees the bus has had a positive effect on the people living on the reservation. He said it saves people money, which allows them to have better lives, put more food on their tables, buy nicer clothes and boost their self-esteem.

"You can see the difference in people, even when they're waiting for the bus,"

King said. "It's like an excitement about it, like 'Hey I got a ride. I can go to school without worrying.'"

But Michelle Fox, who heads an economic development group on the reservation, doesn't want people like Shawn Snow to have to go to Havre every time he needs a basic good.

Fox's organization, Island Mountain Development Group, works to create business on the reservation. It's started a deli, coffee kiosk, small grocery store and restaurant.

"We wanted to build a few businesses where we don't have to send our money over (to) town everyday," she said. "The biggest problem here is that our money doesn't stay here."

Fox said the tribes have a \$400,000 payroll that flows off the reservation

"WE WANTED

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OUR MONEY DOESN'T

STAY HERE."

Michelle Fox,
CEO
Island Mountain
Development Group



Jessica Long Knife spends four hours each day on a bus, commuting between Fort Belknap's southern town of Lodgepole and Havre. Long Knife studies biology at Montana State University-Northern and hopes to become a doctor.

almost immediately. This is great for the surrounding communities, but not her own.

“Look around. Do you see any construction? Do you see anyone building houses? There’s no commerce here,” she said.

And the lack of commerce does not encourage economic growth, and therefore leaves unemployment rates at a standstill.

Even if the bus isn’t carrying people to work, and isn’t keeping money on the reservation, it is at least carrying some people to a brighter future.

Jessica Long Knife, a 21-year-old college student, wakes up at 6:30 a.m. to get to school at Montana State University-Northern by noon. Long Knife lives on the southern end of the reservation, so she first she catches the shuttle that travels the 35 miles from Hays to Fort Belknap Agency. She then catches the bus to Havre.

Each day, Long Knife spends four hours getting to and from school, traveling a total of 160 miles.

“You have to be really dedicated to ride the bus,” she said. “Especially living so far from school.”

On her way to Havre, Long Knife usually sits in the same seat everyday — the one right behind the wheelchair lift.

She puts her feet up on the metal bar in front of her, slouches in her seat and stares out the window at the landscape racing by.

She lets her mind wander, but also considers all of the things she has to do. She is a biology student with the goal of becoming a doctor.

Life was a little easier for Long Knife when she was getting her associate degree in allied health at the tribal college on Fort Belknap. Now she has to schedule her classes around the bus.

“I was in genetics but had to drop it because it was a night class and I didn’t have a ride home,” she said. “I really wanted to take that class.”

Long Knife said she’s wanted to be a doctor since she was 8. The bus brings her closer to reaching that goal every time she takes it to school.

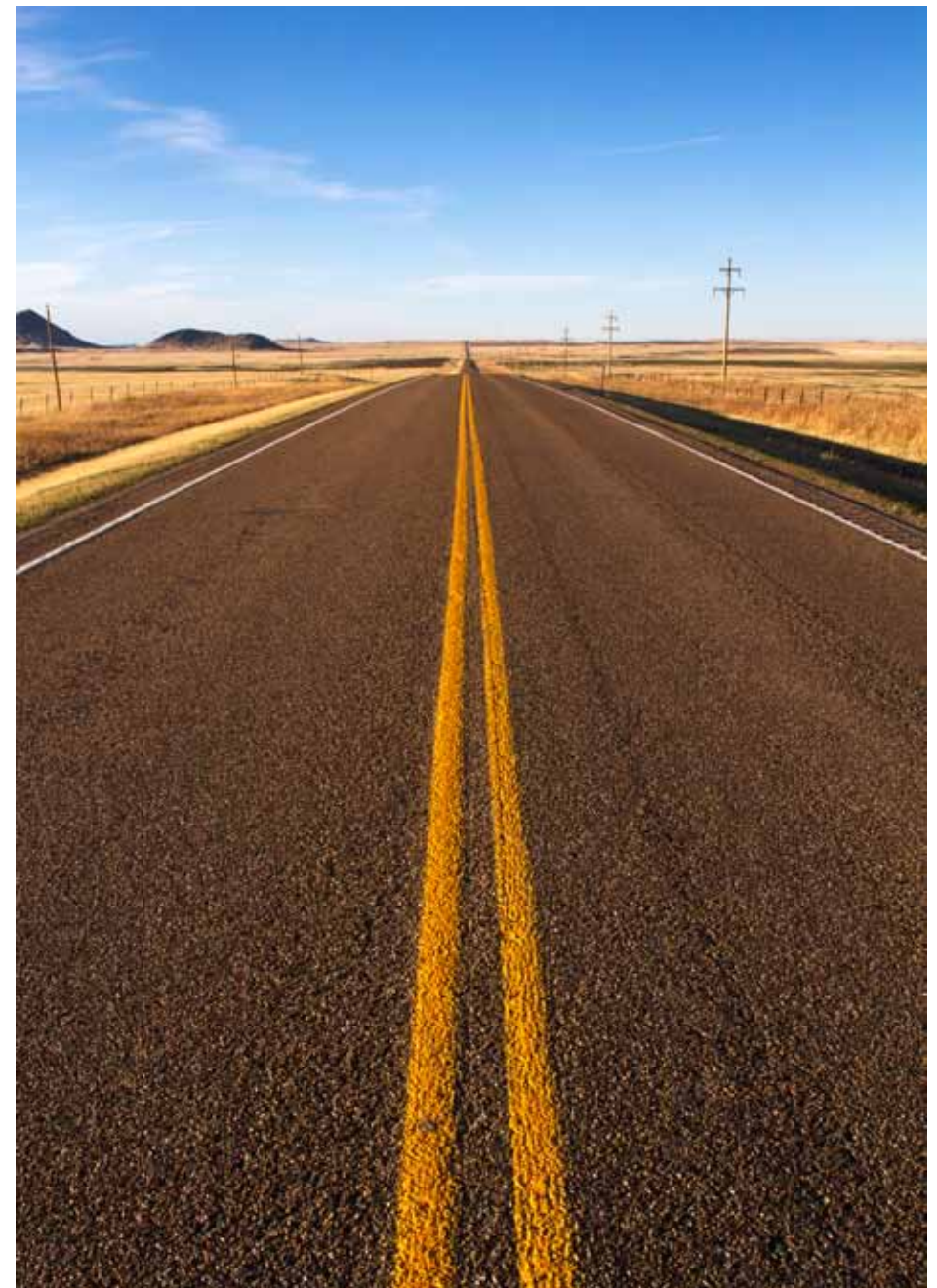
“I probably wouldn’t be going to school if it weren’t for this bus,” she said. “I’d probably try to get a job first, so that I could move to Havre. Then I’d go to school.”

Having the bus lets her live on the reservation where she can be with her boyfriend and take care of her younger brothers and sisters.

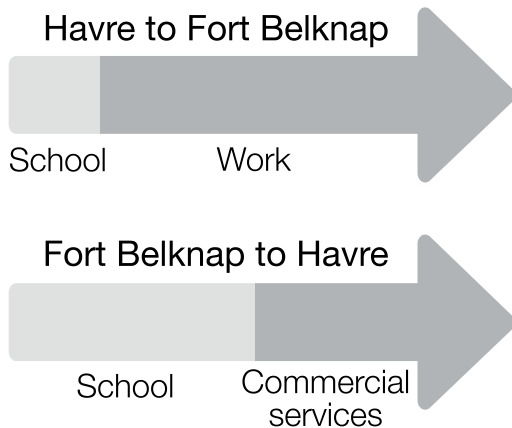
“It’s irritating sometimes, but it’s worth it,” she said. “My life would be totally different otherwise.”



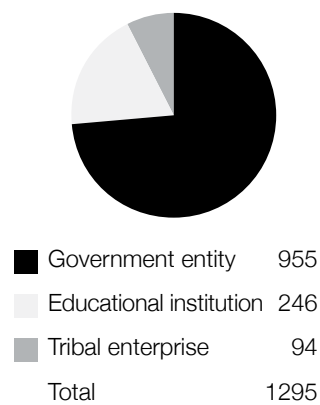
17



Rider destinations



On-Reservation Employment



Source: Opportunity Link survey of riders

Source: Tribal Planning Development Office
*includes part-time and full-time employment

TOP RIGHT Rana Weber talks to passengers as they get on the bus in Havre. Drivers for North Central Montana Transit often learn the names regular riders and build a camaraderie with them. **BOTTOM RIGHT** The Fort Belknap Indian Community is a 40-miles-by-30-miles swath of rural Montana. The long distances make it more expensive to live here, particularly when the nearest grocery store or bank could be a 40 mile drive away.

A RANCH HAND SHORT

Fort Peck struggles to bring ranching to a new generation



story by **KELLY CONDE** | photographs by **SALLY FINNERAN**

ABOVE Niki Smoker uses binoculars to get a better look at a heifer that has gone into labor on the Fort Peck Tribal Farm and Ranch. During calving season Smokers' job is to keep an eye on heifers calving for the first time in case they have trouble giving birth.



Powered by its lowest gear, the old, blue flatbed pickup truck slowly rolls through the pasture. Inside its cab sits Lenny, a furry black and white cattle dog. He is alone, observing the scene ahead of him.

On the flatbed, balanced atop hay bales stacked in a pyramid, a short, lithe, Native American cowboy is tearing, bare handed, into a bale and tossing the dry chunks off the back to the herd of cows, which trail behind.

Glancing ahead, the cowboy, Dave Madison, notices a cottonwood tree in the truck's path. He descends, stepping from bale to bale, jumps to the ground and runs to the driver's side door. He

stands with one foot in the truck and turns the wheel with his right hand to avoid the tree, his left holding onto the outer edge of the door frame.

With the truck's path momentarily free of cottonwoods, Madison re-climbs the stack and continues to feed the cows, making an occasional, short, loud, "Hah" as he tosses a particularly heavy block of hay to the herd.

This is not his ideal way to feed the cows. Normally, someone, other than Lenny the dog, would be in the truck, steering it around the trees. Normally someone would be there, just in case the haystack toppled and Madison were to get caught underneath. But the Fort Peck tribal ranch is short on help, and there are only so many hours in a day for its ranch manager.

So, while two of his ranch hands work together to feed other herds, Madison puts his truck in the lowest gear, gives it some gas and works alone.

On the reservation, where unemployment is more than 50 percent, according to the Bureau of

Indian Affairs, "Help Wanted" scenarios are rare. Yet, outfits like the tribal ranch and other privately owned ranches are seeing vacant job slots go unfilled with increasing regularity.

The number of ranches owned by Sioux and Assiniboine tribal members has increased from 100 to 167 in the last 10 years, but the proportion of people willing to work on those ranches has not. Dave Madison is one of many ranchers on the Fort Peck Reservation struggling to find committed ranch hands. Madison said there are very few young enrolled members who have the skills or the impetus to do the job.

"There's just not enough native people into farming and ranching," Madison said. "They just like the eight-to-five job and ranching ain't really an eight-to-five job."

Managing the tribal ranch requires long, hard hours, especially in the spring. With a herd of 700 cattle, around 600 of which, on this late March day, are on the verge of calving, Madison rises long

before the sun and sets long after it. Every piece of the 2,000-acre ranch and 32,500 acres of grazing land is his responsibility. Every member of the herd is under his watch.

"There's a small window of time in the spring. If you ain't got it done then, you ain't going to get it done," Madison said.

Driving back to the barn, the big truck overwhelms Madison. He has long black hair and wears a red bandana around his neck. When talking of his lack of help, Madison's eyes grow wide, his callused hands leave the steering wheel and turn upward, empty.

"If I could find one or two guys that would work full time. Ain't too many guys around anymore," he said. He speaks in fragmented sentences and long pauses. His accent is a combination of the soft eastern Montana drawl and the sharp twang of a competitive roper. "They like their weekends off."

Right now, Madison has three part-time ranch



ABOVE Dave Madison quickly adjusts his truck's route through a pasture. When Madison feeds the cattle he does so alone, letting the truck putt along by itself while he throws the hay off the back.



ABOVE Niki Smoker, right, talks with her mother while her granddaughter Justine plays with her cell phone. Smoker brings her granddaughter Julia to the ranch frequently but for Justine, visits to the ranch are more rare. Madison thinks that part of the reason he struggles to find good ranch hands are because there aren't many kids who grow up around ranching.

"THIS IS A BUSINESS.

WE HAVE TO BRING IT OUT

OF THE HOLE. I DID NOT ALLOW

OUR TRIBAL GOVERNMENT

TO INTERFERE WITH

OUR BUSINESS AT HAND."

Floyd Azure, tribal chairman

hands, two of whom are white. Because the ranch is owned by the tribe and is meant to benefit its members, Madison would prefer to hire Sioux or Assiniboine workers. One or two natives who will live on the property and work as hard as he does. Madison insists that is the only way to be successful at ranching.

"To do it right, you have to live the life," he said.

Living the ranching life is not what many youth on the Fort Peck Reservation want. So they come, they work, they hate the hours or the labor or both and they leave. Madison said, including the extra help needed in the spring and summer, he has gone through somewhere between 80 and 90 ranch hands since he started managing in 2004.

Still, Madison and his wife Deb have been successful in managing the ranch. When Madison was hired eight years ago, the ranch was in almost \$1 million of debt.

"It was on its last leg," Madison said.

The Madisons already had their own ranch, an expanse of rolling yellow hills dotted with 150

black cows and cut by a small stream 30 miles north of the tribal ranch. Right now their daughter, Karli Madison, runs that ranch. Dave Madison took the tribal ranch manager job simply to see if he could do it.

"I took it just because it was kind of a challenge to run a ranch this size," he said. "It was struggling and I just wanted to see if I could make a difference I guess."

On top of the huge debt, Deb Madison recalls the ranch itself was in shambles. Fences were crumbling, the herd was uncontrollable, and though it was only March, there was no hay to feed the cows.

"It was pretty unbelievable, actually really unbelievable," Deb said.

They started with the physical maintenance. Rebuilding the fences. Mowing the lawns. Buying more hay. Then they moved to the financial maintenance. Wading through land leased and unused, land used and un-leased, unpaid payrolls, employees unneeded.

"It was running pretty wild. Like money was no object. When I took over we changed the format a little bit," Madison said.

Tribal Chairman Floyd Azure was on the board that managed the ranch when Madison was hired.

"Pretty much all it was, was a money pit," Azure said. "For years they would just throw money into it."

The Fort Peck tribes originally purchased the ranch in 1993 as a business venture. Officials hoped it would provide jobs for enrolled members and revenue for the tribe. But the ranch tanked, due to a combination of a string of

LABOR FORCE DETERMINATION

7,544

total members available for work who are age 16 and older

3,772

members available for work including those not considered to be actively seeking work

1,343

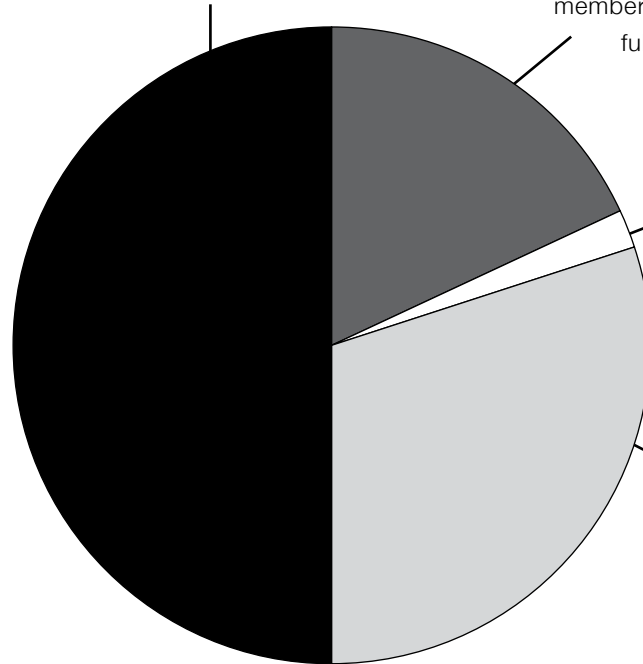
members employed full time

152

members employed part time, seasonally and/or short term

2,277

members able and willing to work but unable to find work during the entire year



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

The current unemployment rate on the Fort Peck Reservation is 53.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.



ABOVE Dave Madison gets up early to feed cattle so he has time to get other things done during the rest of the day.



ineffectual ranch managers and both a tribal council and management board, interested more in using the ranch for personal reasons than to develop a successful venture.

Azure recalls the board, Fort Peck Inc., approving personal use of the equipment, and giving away hay to friends and family as well as general overspending and mismanagement.

When the board hired Madison, it adapted a new management direction. It fired its CEO and solidified its original goal to make the ranch profitable by separating itself from the tribal council. "This is a business," Azure said. "We have to bring it out of the hole. I did not allow our tribal government to interfere with our business at hand." Azure believes that prohibiting the tribal council's involvement in the business side of the ranch allowed the ranch to finally flourish.

"It started out wrong from the beginning because politics were playing in it," Azure said. "Took us a long time to straighten it out but I think we finally got it on track."

Another way the ranch separated itself from the tribal council was by taking out loans from a bank rather than using the tribal government as their financier as they had in the past.

"I think the biggest thing is we've treated it like our own. We've paid really close attention to the bottom line," Deb Madison said.

Azure concedes reshaping the Fort Peck Inc. board was not the only factor in turning the ranch around.

"I can congratulate Deb and Dave for doing that. They've stuck by it for all these years and they've created one heck of a herd," Azure said.

It took more than rebuilding fences and finances to make the ranch profitable. It took a deep understanding and love for cattle. When the Madisons started at the ranch, the cows were wild. They would shy away from horses and humans. Loading and unloading them from the trucks was nearly impossible.

So they worked day by day, on horseback and on foot with the herd.

"This cowboy part, there's an art to handling cattle," Madison said. "And once the cows have been handled in the same way consistently, once they get knowing what you want them to do, it makes you feel like you're a cow whisperer."

Now, when Madison walks through the middle of the herd, the cows don't run away, they calmly part for him. And for the last two years in a row, the tribal ranch made a profit. Last year saw a profit of \$120,000. It only took Madison eight years to reshape it into a successful business.

Late March and early April is calving season on the ranch. The older cows, those that gave birth before, are left in the outer pasture by the river.

The novice mothers, usually two years old and referred to as heifers, need to be watched. "They just don't stretch in the back as big as them old cows so they need some help," Madison said. "So you got to keep them separate so you can keep a close eye on them."

Calving season is important because this is how the ranch makes its money. The calves are born in the spring, stay with their mothers throughout the summer and are sold in November for \$1,000 each, the anticipated price for this year. Making sure both the heifer and its baby make it through the birthing process alive is essential to the business.

This spring, if all goes well, Madison is predicting at least 600 healthy calves when all the birthing is done.

Behind an old log cabin, Native ranch hand Niki Smoker sits on a log stump, cigarette in hand, binoculars around her neck. She is scanning the large, muddy corral, looking for signs of a cow in labor. During calving season, this is Smoker's primary job: to sit all day and watch the heifers. Smoker is almost as enthusiastic about the cows as Madison. From her perch on the log, she points to where she "pulled" her first calf. "She was bellowing like crazy, made me cry," Smoker said.

She points again to where she pulled her second and third calf. Each spot holds the drama of the experience — the moaning heifer, the tiny and slimy hooves. The calf's face, is like that of a grey, wet doll, not yet alive, not yet aware. And then the release and the first breath.

As Smoker recounts the births, Madison gazes at the herd from a neighboring stump. But soon he is fidgeting. Stillness is not his strong suit. Even during a break, he would rather be moving. Madison picks up a rope lying in the grass and starts twirling it over his head. His other passion in life, besides ranching, is roping. The only time Madison leaves the ranch is to attend roping competitions.

He demonstrates different roping techniques: the ocean wave and the butterfly. Every time he tosses the rope, his enthusiasm grows. Soon he is in the corral attempting to rope the hind legs of the heifers.

"Quit irritating the heifers. We'll have a dozen babies tonight," Smoker says.

Smoker loves being a ranch hand. And she loves working for the Madisons.

"They are good to me, I like spending time with them. I'd rather work for them than anybody else, including myself," Smoker said.

Technically, Smoker does work for herself. She owns a bar and grill called the Horseshoe Bar 10



ABOVE Dave Madison helps stretch a laboring heifer that was having trouble delivering her calf. The heifers sometimes need assistance having their first calves.

minutes down the road from the ranch. The bar stands alone on the corner of two empty roads. It is the only food and drink establishment for miles and if Smoker were to keep it open regularly, she could have a successful business. But her business hours are few and unpredictable. She would rather be out with the cows.

Smoker is one of the few on the reservation who chooses ranching, particularly Madison's brand of ranching, as a lifestyle rather than a job.

Smoker is a rare find on the reservation. Many ranches throughout Fort Peck have difficulty filling ranch hand positions.

Enrolled member Tom Flynn has a ranch 20 minutes north of the tribal ranch. He owns 300 head of cattle and works completely alone.

"I used to tag them all, but I'm getting too old for that," Flynn said, leaning against the chipped wooden fence that holds his heifers.

Like the Madisons, Flynn wants to hire a good

ranch hand. And like the Madisons, he is making due without. His cows go untagged, and his days are always full.

"We say we don't have jobs, we don't have jobs. Most people don't want to work," Flynn said. "There's a lot of potential for a lot of jobs in the (agriculture) industry. People just don't want to do it."

Flynn, who is round in the face and red from hours in the sun, grew up ranching. His father owned the largest ranch on the reservation at the time. Other than a short stint working oil and construction, ranching has been Flynn's life.

"If I didn't do it, I'd probably be locked in the clinker somewhere," Flynn said.

His ranch is more modest than his father's was. Yet, as he speaks of how his cows are fed only all natural green grass and hay and how some of them were recently sold in Japan, his pride for his herd shines.

To him, ranching has always provided job security, which is rare on the reservation. And though he won't reveal any specifics, Flynn admits that he does at least break even.

Flynn has a 23-year-old son whom he hopes will one day take over the ranch. For the time being, however, Thomas Flynn Jr. is not interested in ranching.

"I wanted to just go out and get a job. Just do something else for a little while," Tom said.

Tom works at the Ace Hardware in Wolf Point, Mont. He has the same round face as his father's. He speaks timidly, as if everything he says is being graded. Tom has many friends who gave up ranching for other things. He is not surprised that ranchers such as Dave Madison and his father are having a hard time finding workers.

"There's not a lot of people who have kids that are my age that are into farming and ranching," Tom said.

Instead, kids his age are going to college or finding jobs in town. He said the long hours and repetition of ranching is too hard and boring to be appealing.

"It's because kids grow up and they want to be in town more I guess," Tom said. "They don't really want to sit out in the field all day."

Good paying jobs are hard to find in the two biggest towns on the reservation, Poplar and Wolf Point. Kids who grew up on a ranch, however, have an advantage over others in finding those jobs, Tom said.

"That's a big thing around here," he said. "Finding someone who knows how to operate equipment and stuff. I suppose that's one of the reasons I got my job over at Ace."

With the jobs in town being filled by kids who grew up on ranches, the only employees available to work for Flynn or Madison are people unaccustomed to the harsh rhythms of ranching and with no skills to get the job done.

Madison hopes that when he finally finds his young native ranch hand, he can train him to take over as ranch manager. Madison knows that one day he will want to go back to his own small, quiet operation.

That day was threatening to come sooner than he planned when, in April, the tribe decided that it was time for the ranch to expand.

"We are trying to increase the herd," said Tribal Chairman Azure. "We want to try and double it."

To Dave Madison, doubling the herd would be impossible at this point.

"They were just trying to go too fast," Madison said. "It's hard to jump into it with both feet not knowing where the bottom is."

Madison and Deb are planning an expansion. They would like to increase the herd from 700 to 1,000 and they would like to do it over five years. The council, however, is a bit more ambitious.

"We just want to get it bigger, we want to market it into Europe," Azure said, "We got some of the best beef there is. I'd like to see it in Washington DC."

Madison made it known that he did not agree with that plan. What came next was an onslaught of criticisms and rumors. People criticized his management of the ranch, the fact that he had two white employees, and they said Deb did all the work while Madison just sat around.

"I was ready to quit," Madison said. "It was a lot of damn thankless nights."

Part of the problem is Madison is not very receptive to suggestions. Madison dismisses some of the plans proposed by the tribal council and others as outrageous.

"They are just a pie in the sky. They ain't got no substance to them. They are just somebody's random thoughts drinking coffee," Madison said. "I'm not sure what they want. You want a nice ranch? Or do you want to take all the money off of it and let it go to hell?"

Madison said none of them really understand the amount of work it takes to manage the ranch, and how much more work it would take to expand.

"They don't know how good I treat this ranch, I mean I just love doing it," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't put up with so much B.S."

Chairman Azure made it clear that he appreciates what Madison has done for the ranch. He also made it clear that, as long as Madison keeps up the good work, the tribe wants to keep him as the ranch manager.

"He's proved himself very well," Azure said. "As long as he doesn't get any flack from the council. As long as we let him do what he's supposed to do."

And that's all that Madison wants: to be left alone to do his job. To him, the worst part about managing the tribal ranch is dealing with the attention it receives. He would rather work through



his days observed and analyzed only by the cows.

Madison is antsy through dinner. He noticed one calf with no mother while he was out with the herd earlier in the day. He wants to get out and feed it before it got too dark.

With the sun drifting red upon the pasture, Madison captures the calf. He pulls a bottle of formula from the truck and shoves it in the calf's mouth. At first the calf resists, but within seconds, he is eagerly suckling.

"This calf has no mama," Madison said. "It'll have to be my baby."

ABOVE Tom Flynn owns a small ranch on the Fort Peck Reservation. He says that while ranching on the reservation isn't exactly easy, he gets some benefits as a tribal member, including lower tax rates on tribal land.

RIGHT Dave Madison opens the door to one of the many buildings on the tribal ranch that need some repair. The Madisons said everything was in disrepair when they took over management of the ranch.



MAKING IT WORK

story by **ALYSSA SMALL** | photographs by **JOHN CREPEAU**

**"WE ARE SCATTERED.
SOCIETY HAS KIND OF
PUSHED US THAT WAY
YOU HAVE TO LIVE, AND TO LIVE
YOU HAVE TO WORK"**

Monique Legg,
Little Shell member

James Parker Shield stood on the decrepit wooden porch of an old, boarded-up, vandalized building. Looking out at the overgrown lawn in front of him, he pointed to the far end of the property. That's where the teepees will go.

He strolled along the property's sidewalk, thinking of the many gatherings his tribe might have here. Instead of old concrete foundations along those sidewalks, there would be vendors selling food, jewelry and artwork.

"This is where we'll put the straw bale building," he said as he closed in on the far right corner of the seven-acre lawn.

The plans don't stop there. Shield turned back to the building, the Dallas Cowboys baseball cap on his head casting his spectacled eyes in shadow.

The building is 15 miles outside of Great Falls. Almost a century ago, it served as the headquarters for the Morony Dam. If Shield gets his way, it will be the home of a fully functional tribal business, the first of its kind for the Little Shell band of Ojibwe. The Montana tribe has no reservation and, after decades of legal wrangling, continues to go unrecognized by the federal government.

Today, the state of Montana owns the land and is looking to hand it over to the Little Shell, which has no money to pay its



ABOVE James Parker Shield stands on the deck of a century-old building — a building that he hopes will serve as a visitor center for his tribe. As the director of government affairs for the Little Shell tribe, Shield thinks the tribe should offer cultural immersion camps at the visitor center 15 miles out of Great Falls.

own tribal officials, let alone buy land. Shield said the land and building would serve as a gathering place, the closest version of a reservation the tribe has seen.

Without a reservation, the Little Shell members are scattered around the world, from Great Falls (where the largest concentration of Little Shell live today) to France.

Tribal leaders say that without a place to gather as a tribe, the 4,500 enrolled members have lost touch with each other and their culture.

But being without a reservation hasn't been all bad, Shield said. He talks of the success of his fellow Little Shell who, according to the Department of Labor, have managed

an unemployment rate of only 10 percent. This is much better than most of Montana's seven reservations, some of which report up to 70 percent unemployment.

Shield knows that without a reservation his tribe has learned how to live in the urban world. "The Little Shell are hustlers," he said. "We've adapted and not only survived; we've thrived."



ABOVE Lisa Sims, corporate vice president of Highway Specialties in Great Falls, does not remember any interaction with the extended Little Shell tribe when she was growing up. She said her family filled the place of her tribe both when her father shared Little Shell traditions like making bannock, and when relatives from Canada would bring beadwork during visits.

**“NOT DEPENDING ON
THE GOVERNMENT
FOR ANYTHING MAKES ME,
I THINK, MORE APPRECIATIVE
OF WHAT I GET
FOR MYSELF. YOU SHOULD BE
A GOOD STEWARD
OF WHAT YOU HAVE.”**

Lisa Sims,
Little Shell member

The Little Shell have spent decades fighting for federal recognition as a tribe. Although they have seen small successes locally, the national movement has stalled. In 2000, Montana recognized the Little Shell as a tribe, offering some financial support, but it pales in comparison to federal treaty rights provided for recognized tribes including funding, health care and education.

Perhaps even more valuable would be a

land allotment. Upon recognition, tribes are guaranteed a minimum of 200 acres.

Shield, who was appointed director of government affairs for the Little Shell by Tribal Chairman John Gilbert, conceded that not having a reservation has forced the Little Shell to adapt to the world around them. Even as the tribe continues its push for federal recognition, Shield said the Little Shell's members have benefitted in some ways from integrating into urban areas, something that might not have happened if they'd had a reservation.

Maylenn Smith, director of the Indian Law Clinic at the University of Montana School of Law, agrees with Shield, although she is quick to point out that there are too many factors to consider before making a blanket statement about the tribe's success without a reservation.

“Not having a reservation, they have assimilated into society, but on the other hand, there are a lot of successful Indian entrepreneurs on reservations,” she said. She cited the Flathead Reservation, which has many successful businesses thanks to its urban nature. She stressed that many Little Shell are located in urban areas where both customer and job markets are much stronger than on most reservations.

Monique Legg is one Little Shell member whose career flourished as a result of living

in an urban area. She was hired as a bank teller in Helena in her early 20s and found a love for the profession. Sticking with the bank, putting in the hours and taking classes to improve her skills helped her move up the ladder to her current position as assistant vice president of Valley Bank in Helena.

“Growing up, the way I was raised, I don't think you're really meant to succeed,” she said.

With Little Shell aunts, uncles and cousins living all within a few blocks of her house in Helena, Legg grew up with a familial support system much like one a reservation provides. But growing up in a more urban area means getting jobs that take you away from family and home, and now only she and a cousin remain in Helena.

“We are scattered,” Legg said. “Society has kind of pushed us that way. You have to live, and to live you have to work.”

The Little Shell have taken root all over the world, and even when several live in the same town, that doesn't mean they know each other.

In Great Falls, enrolled Little Shell member Lisa Sims is busy at work making street signs.

Her sign shop is filled with large machines that hum, drill and slice on command. She is the only person who works in the shop and she moves to each contraption with speed and precision.

After 23 years in the construction business, she has risen from flagging traffic to her position now: corporate vice president of Highway Specialties, which employs up to 90 people in its busiest time of year and takes on an average of 35 contracts per year.

Sims said she loves the variety of her responsibilities at work. In a single day she could be in her office doing payroll, and then



ABOVE “There are no such things as banker's hours,” said Monique Legg, assistant vice president of Valley Bank in Helena. Legg laughs when she recalls her first jobs at a Burger King and a movie theater.

LITTLE SHELL TIMELINE

1830 Turtle Mountain Chippewa begin migrating west with the buffalo.

1879 One band crosses the Missouri River and establishes a small settlement where Great Falls is today.

1892 The U.S. government sends a delegation to the Turtle Mountain Reservation to address poverty and starvation. Chief Little Shell tries to get more metis, or mixed-blood Indians, recognized as Chippewa, but delegates will not hear his arguments. Chief Little Shell walks out of the meeting, and the Turtle Mountain band agrees to the Ten Cent Treaty, selling the tribe's 9.5 million acres of land for 10 cents an acre.

1896 Congress orders all Cree Indians in Montana to relocate to their reservation in Canada. Some Little Shell are mistaken for Cree and shipped north in cattle cars with the Cree.

1906 The Ten Cent Treaty is finally ratified by Congress. More than 500 Chippewa file for trust land. Congress receives complaints about the number of Indians settling on public land all over Montana and North Dakota, and these Chippewa are denied benefits from the government.

1978 The Little Shell submits its letter for intent to the Montana State legislature for recognition.

2000 The state of Montana formally recognizes the Little Shell as a tribe.

2009 The federal government denies the Little Shell's petition for recognition, arguing the tribe does not meet the legal requirements of federal recognition, including a failure by the tribe to display political influence over its scattered and landless membership.

have to run out for a traffic control job. Later, she could be back in her workshop making signs.

She lives by the wisdom of her father, who spent years working for Montana sheep ranchers and receiving a bundle of hay to sleep in and blankets in return. She keeps his lessons close: life achievements are special and should be taken care of. To Sims this meant that if she wanted something, she had to go out and get it.

"Not depending on the government for anything makes me, I think, more appreciative of what I get for myself," she said, thinking of times when she visited her family on other reservations and saw others who do not appreciate all that they have. "You should be a good steward of what you have," she said.

But not having a community of Little Shell meant her family didn't know what tribe they belonged to until she was a teenager. They had to dig into the past to solve the mystery.

"We always knew we were native, we just didn't know much else," she said. "I guess for

us it's the job of the individual to make sure we know we're a part of something bigger."

"Little Shell have such a sense of overcoming things that we aren't afraid of failing," Shield said. "That's how I got where I am today."

He grew up in a shantytown in Great Falls located on Hill 57. He remembers the Indians there using large metal basins as bathtubs. Every once in a while they would pile into trucks and take their tubs to the meat packing plant across town. There, they would purchase all of the innards that the plant couldn't use.

"We called it tripe," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "And it wasn't so bad. Some of the parts that we ended up getting are delicacies, depending on how you prepare them."

For almost 200 years the Little Shell have approached their problems with this make-lemonade spirit.

Bands of the Chippewa, including the Little Shell, began migrating with the buffalo in North Dakota and Montana in 1830. While the rest of the tribe continued

to migrate, one band crossed the Missouri River in Montana in 1879 and established a settlement of about 25 families near where Great Falls is today.

When delegates from Washington wouldn't hear Chief Little Shell's pleas for a larger reservation and more financial help, he walked out of the meeting. This left other Chippewa Indians to sign a treaty, effectively selling their land for 10 cents an acre.

With no land to call their own, the Little Shell squatted on public land all over the states, creating shantytowns like the one on Hill 57.

Shield remembers scavenging at the dump for food, scrap metal, clothing and anything else useful that they could find, all for the sake of survival. "Every dirty job in this town was done by our people," he said. "Fencing, picking rock, shoveling manure — that's a dirty, hot, funky job."

It was rough, Shield said, and when he was kicked out of high school for fighting in 1967, he headed south to Oklahoma, where he lived in the streets, worked where



ABOVE Patrick and Philip Legg participate in the flag song during the Kyi-Yo Celebration in Missoula. After not growing up in Helena, Patrick feels that having to seek out his heritage has been a more enriching journey than if the information had been right in front of him.

he could and fell in love. Taking this path in life meant a late start on the traditional track to prosperity. Eventually he headed back to Great Falls, where he attended the College of Great Falls and, at the end of his time there, he was appointed executive assistant on Gov. Ted Schwinden's staff, moved up to serve as the state coordinator of Indian affairs, and then worked with Rep. Denny Rehberg as a regional campaign coordinator and a field representative.

Since then, Shield has held every job from art gallery owner to Great Falls Tribune columnist. He also started an economic advising business and a magazine aimed at covering Indian issues in Montana. "I'm like weeds," he said with a shrug. "I've sprung up everywhere."

Patrick Legg has learned that if he wanted to know something about either his heritage or his future, he had to be the one to figure it out.

When he and his older brother Philip started mowing lawns in Helena at eight and 10 years old, they didn't want much more than some spending money. They weren't trying to be entrepreneurs. But not long after going door-to-door around their neighborhood, more than 20 families and businesses around Helena had hired the two boys to maintain their lawns.

"Patrick was just a little squirt," said their father, Kevin Legg. "He couldn't even push a mower by himself."

Within the first month they paid of their mower and weed eater and began budgeting for more equipment, Social Security and insurance bills.

A lawn care business like theirs would have been difficult to grow on a rural reservation because it wouldn't have had as many clients.

"I could have worked residentially-wise, maybe," he said. "But the commercial clients, which ended up being probably a little more than half (of the clients), that's how it ended up getting big."

The year Patrick graduated, Fire and Ice, which is the official name of the lawn care and snow removal business, had taken on 82 accounts — 48 for mowing and 34 for plowing — and that wasn't even at the business' peak. They had dropped several accounts at this point because Philip had left for college and couldn't help out in the summer because of internships. Taking on so many accounts taught these brothers dedication and hard work, the same traits that have persisted in their tribe.



ABOVE Patrick Legg stands in front of the lawn care equipment he and his older brother Philip purchased in the past decade. The brothers started Fire and Ice, a lawn care and snow removal business, when they were 8 and 10 years old.

Looking back on more than a decade of long, hot summers, Patrick is proud of the success of Fire and Ice. Most of the money they saved up went to paying a good chunk of each of their college tuition bills — Philip's at the University of Great Falls and Patrick's at the University of Montana. Now the brothers are both college students pursuing futures in law enforcement with the U.S. Forest Service. Patrick also hopes his future will include writing and singing country music.

He also wants to learn his tribe's language and continue dancing at the powwows he's come to love. Monique Legg had made the effort to enroll the boys in a school program when they were younger that would help them get back in touch with their heritage.

"I knew my boys would be lost if I didn't complete that circle," she said. "Then, the next thing I know, they would come home from school and know more than I did."

Shield works away at his desk in his Indian art gallery right across the street from the C.M. Russell museum in Great Falls. His white coffee mug proudly displays the Little Shell tribe's seal, which he designed.

He knows how hard it is to find solid

facts about his tribe, but he hopes the tribally owned visitor center at the Morony Company dam will help. Shield wants the tribe to offer cultural immersion camps on that land.

But that decision is a ways down the road.

For now, he's hoping he'll succeed at orchestrating his next big project: finalizing the tribe's ownership of the would-be visitor center.

Shield sees an inherent unfairness to the federal recognition process, which requires the tribe prove details of its past that he doubts some recognized tribes would be able to prove.

"We do everything (recognized tribes) do without everything that they have," he said. "We shouldn't have to strive for things other tribes take for granted."

The tribe has a few bills sitting in federal committees and, in planning a new appeal, is hoping the support of the Montana state legislature will lend the tribe an extra hand.

He and tribal chairman John Gilbert are convinced that if the government voted to recognize the Little Shell, the tribe would become an economic force to be reckoned with unlike any seen before. The business expertise they have garnered over the years would make them unstoppable, they said.

All they need is a chance.

Never one to sit still, Shield has taken it upon himself to fix up the old Morony building while the state works out the land deal. The tribe has decided to devote most of the \$70,000 provided by the state to the visitor center. Still, that money won't pay for much.

To make up the difference, Shield has contacted the Montana Conservation Corps for help in renovating the building's spacious deck. He hopes for donated help from other tribal members with skills in plumbing, architecture and construction.

Shield has ripped up carpet to reveal hard wood floors and identified holes in the walls that he'll need to fix. Bat droppings litter every surface. He has spent hours inside this building working by flashlight and breathing through an air filtration mask to avoid health risks.

But for one day, he disregarded the enormous amount of work in store to show one of his employees the building. They inspected every room, and despite decrepit condition within each, Shield was still thinking ahead. He told her to pick her office now before all the good ones are taken.

STOCKING THE AISLES

A community looks to a new grocery store as a foundation for economic development



story by **EMILY DOWNING** | photographs by **PATRICK RECORD**

ABOVE Josh Embody was out of work for a year before he landed a job at Glacier Family Foods. Embody said he looks forward to being able to help pay bills at home.



BLACKFEET

The first customer had yet to walk through the grocery store's automatic doors when the deli's meat slicer claimed its first victim.

An emergency room visit later, Marion Whitford laughed at the white gauzy bandage covering the stitches on her finger. It's OK, she said. Like the rest of the employees at Glacier Family Foods, she's still learning how to do her job.

"It's going to be great once you get everything

down pat and running smoothly," she said.

Meanwhile, Whitford's co-worker Merle Joseph Spotted Bear Jr. was learning how to operate the coffee machine perched on the deli's counter as several others worked behind him. Laughter filled the air. Without the positive environment created by his co-workers, the 25 year old said the job would be a lot harder.

"Teamwork is one thing you have to have here," he said. "Everyone likes to have fun together."

By the time Glacier Family Foods opened its doors for the first time on April 4, the employees were a little more comfortable with the new skills required by their jobs. The crowds that filled the store on opening day considerably sped up the learning process for Whitford and her colleagues. Near-constant lines at checkout and at the deli counter kept the employees on

their toes all day. Most managed to keep smiling throughout the long day, though, trying to live up to the standards their manager, Emerald Grant, set for them.

Grant said if Glacier Family Foods is to be successful, it is up to the employees to make the customer want to come back.

"Like I told all my employees, the customer's No. 1," he said. "They're the ones that pay our bills, our salaries. We're going to take care of them. If they need help with their groceries, we'll carry their groceries out."

Although Glacier Family Foods adds 56 new employees to the Blackfeet Reservation's year-round workforce, the people behind the store's creation hope it will do much more than create immediate jobs. For the last 20 years, members of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council and the community bounced around the idea of open-

ing a tribally owned grocery store to attract other businesses. It only came to fruition after the Siyeh Corporation, the business arm of the Blackfeet tribe, took on the project.

In 2010, the Siyeh Corporation conducted a market analysis that confirmed the Browning community and the Blackfeet Reservation could support a second grocery store (Browning's long-standing Teeple's IGA is the first) as well as the competition it would bring to the market.

Competitively driven prices at the local grocery stores could entice more people to shop on the reservation, stemming the flow of traffic — and the flow of money — to outside towns like Cut Bank, Kalispell and Great Falls. For many people on the Blackfeet Reservation in northwestern Montana, Glacier Family Foods is a sign that things might be looking up.

The plains of northernmost Montana are home to Browning, a town of a little more than 1,000 people that serves as the hub of the Blackfeet Reservation. Stray dogs trot through the streets, winding around haphazard buildings that are eternally battered by the wind coming off the Continental Divide.

On April 2, two days before the opening of Glacier Family Foods, the constant motion of cars entering and leaving the full parking lot of the IGA made the grocery store seem almost as busy as the highway that passes in front of it. Inside, the grocery was filled with customers depleting shelves and employees restocking food. Families with small children sought affordable brands. Young adults lined up at the tobacco counter to buy packs of cigarettes.

A sign on the community bulletin board in the store's entrance read, "Need work. Will do anything." It's a common cry for help on the reservation, where unemployment is at nearly 70 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Most of the jobs that can be found in the area are temporary, in seasonal industries like construction or hospitality — Glacier National Park's proximity keeps tourist traffic through the area high in the summer.

Virgil Edwards, the assistant manager of Glacier Family Foods and the chairman of Siyeh, said the corporation began looking for a location for the store and working with outside wholesalers before presenting the idea to the council in 2008.

Negotiations between outside businesses and the tribal government are often a hassle, he said, because it's hard for all parties to agree on details like hiring and wages. As a result, Siyeh went to many Montana wholesalers like the Independent Grocers Association, Albertsons and Majestic Foods, but no one was keen on the idea of a store owned by a tribal government, Edwards said.

Finally, United Retail Merchants, the Spokane-based wholesaler behind stores like Super One Foods and Rosauers, said yes. First Interstate Bank in Great Falls was also willing to grant the tribe a loan.

There was a condition for the outside support, however: There had to be a way to keep tribal government from meddling in the store's business. Outside companies worried that too much tribal control over a reservation enterprise could negatively affect business.

Edwards said creating a buffer zone between the two entities has proven a key to success for tribal businesses nationwide, as shown by research conducted by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. He said that kind of safeguard is often missing on

the Blackfeet Reservation, allowing exploitation by the tribe's elected officials. It's not uncommon for people to use their connections to control aspects of a business, like who is hired or fired, or where the money goes, Edwards said.

"We have violations of our constitution, policy and procedure, personnel issues by council members today," he said. "Once they're elected, there's no control or check on our political leaders. We really have no way of reining them in except for them to police themselves."

The Siyeh board opted to create Glacier Family Foods as a limited liability company, which helped form partnerships with outside entities like United Retail Merchants.

Reis Fisher is a member of the tribal council and a supporter of the store from the beginning. He also serves on the store's five-member LLC board, alongside fellow councilman T.J. Show and three members of the community. The LLC was a necessity at the start of the project because of a history of tribal government interference in business, Fisher said. It's important the two entities remain separate and that's what the LLC designation is meant to do.

"The government is to make law and policy and be the catalyst for development, not run the business," Fisher said.

The tribal government's history of becoming too involved in business on the reservation is something Ronald Kittson, who serves on the Montana State Tribal Economic Development Commission, said he hopes won't carry on into the future.

Kittson, a former council member who

TOP Glacier Family Foods store manager Emerald "Beep" Grant believes the tribally owned store is just a steppingstone for what is to come on the reservation.

MIDDLE Marion Gobert worked on the roads at Two Medicine in Glacier National Park before Glacier Family Foods hired her. She looks forward to learning something new.

BOTTOM On opening day, the customers and employees of Glacier Family Foods embodied the reservation's excitement. Cherrish Cutfinger (left) said she had been out of work before she began working at the grocery store, and that she had missed helping customers. Dawn Rutherford (right) was excited for the new store and the reasonable prices.



BY THE NUMBERS

195 Blackfeet residents are presently employed in the food retail industry including gas station/convenience stores. This data is based off of personal survey of each establishment, all of which said their employment numbers have been fairly consistent over the last five years.

\$9 per hour is what the average (non-management) employee at Glacier Family Foods makes.

\$21,114 is the average salary in the food industry on the Blackfeet Reservation.

\$158,042,084 was spent on economic development on the reservation in fiscal year 2003. This was the most recent data available.

TOP 5 EMPLOYERS

- 1. Oil industry
- 2. Truck Driving
- 3. Government jobs
- 4. Private Sector
- 5. Seasonal jobs/construction

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

The unemployment rate on the Blackfeet Reservation is 68.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"IF WE HAVE SOMETHING HERE THAT ACCOMODATES THE COMMUNITY, THAT'S GREAT BECAUSE THOSE DOLLARS STAY HERE IN OUR COMMUNITY."

Mike Kittson, Blackfeet Tribal Employment Rights Office

played a role in the early stages of developing Glacier Family Foods, said the old tribal grocery store, which ran in the 1960s and '70s was an example of that corruption. Members of the council – and more often their relatives – would get away with putting their store purchases on charge accounts, few of which were ever paid off. That's why the business was unsuccessful, he said.

"You've got to protect business from us councils," he said. "We ruin businesses. We tear them down for political reasons. You've got to admit this goes on and you've got to admit we need protection from ourselves."

Grant, the store manager, said he's aware of more than a few people who are worried about the customer service going a little too far. Charge accounts turn into a bad habit that can lead to the bankruptcy of a store, and Grant said he will have none of it.

"That's why we have the LLC in place, as kind of a buffer zone between this store and the council," he said. "They know they're not supposed to do it, but I'll have one or two councilmen in the next six months try it. I hope they don't, but I'll cross that bridge when it happens. A lot of people are worried about that, which I can understand, because they've seen it happen in the past."

The same goes for employment. Grant said he won't hire or keep an employee just because an influential friend or family member asked him. However, Glacier Family Foods does make a priority of hiring Blackfeet tribal members and descendants.

Mike Kittson is a compliance manager at the Blackfeet Tribal Employment Rights Office, which ensures local businesses give tribal members priority when hiring. The office helped Swank Enterprises, the contracting firm that constructed the supermarket, hire tribal members during construction. Kittson said hiring locally keeps money in the community, especially when it comes to a retail business like Glacier Family Foods.

"If we have something here that accomo-



ABOVE Assistant manager Virgil "Buggy" Edwards hands out uniforms after an employee meeting one day before the store's opening. Edwards is the chairman of the Siyeh Development Corporation, which began its search for the store's location in 2008.

dates the community, that's great because those dollars stay here in our community," he said. "For every dollar that pays another employee, that will in turn shop at that store."

The morning of April 4 dawned gray and blustery. It was not the blue-sky day Grant had in mind for the Glacier Family Foods opening.

The weather didn't keep people away, though. As 10 a.m. rolled around, the parking lot started to fill and a crowd gathered in front of the store's automatic sliding doors. After a half-hour of speeches by the store's managers, members of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council and Earl Old Person, honorary tribal chief, it was finally time.

It took nearly five minutes for the people at the back of the throng to filter through the doors. Inside, the people hoped to be among the first to wander the new tribally owned grocery store's aisles. They carefully scanned the prices, checking if the store would live up to their expectations.

Glacier Family Foods is that nice facility to purchase groceries. Its cheery yellow walls, wide selection of food and unsullied new building are inviting to the residents of Browning, who have been waiting for this store for nearly two decades. The energy of the opening-day crowd as it waited outside the sliding glass doors brought a sense of excitement and importance to a brisk, gray April morning, for both the shoppers and the employees.

Charlie Flammmond, the head of the meat department, grinned proudly at an almost-

full case of meat. He said he's ready for the job, though he admits he has a big task in front of him. He's got a lot of food, food that spoils quickly, to look after. He said he expects it to go quickly, though: People on the Blackfeet eat a lot of meat. They buy it in large quantities, even with the higher prices, so they can make it feed entire families.

He said he's not too worried, though. If there's one thing he can do, though, it's this. He used to work in the meat department at the IGA. That was 22 years ago. In the meantime, he's kept his meat-cutting skills sharp by lending his services out to friends and family. It's his trade. He doesn't know much, he said, but he sure as hell knows how to cut meat. And now Glacier Family Foods has given him a place to do that.

After a long day of grocery shopping, Gertie Heavy Runner sat at the kitchen table in her house on the outskirts of Browning. She checked the soup on the stove, waiting for her great grandson to come home for lunch. He and his two small children, who Heavy Runner calls her "sixth generation," are living with her right now. It's a fun living arrangement, she said, though not when the little ones try to wrestle with her. Horseplay is just not as enjoyable when you're 88 years old, she said with a laugh.

Heavy Runner visited Teeple's IGA, just like she usually does. Today, however, Heavy Runner made another stop: The opening of the new Glacier Family Foods.

Heavy Runner said she liked what she saw at the opening, but said she — and a lot of other



ABOVE The new store offers groceries at competitive prices—something that hasn't been the case for the reservation in the past. Before Glacier Family Foods opened, the reservation was served by one grocery store: Teeple's IGA.

people — will still shop at the IGA because that's what they've been doing for decades.

"There's just some things that you're used to buying there," she said.

But, she said, Glacier Family Foods will give Teeple's a run for its money. The new store has more variety and more selection. For those that are unable to leave the reservation for shopping trips, like Heavy Runner, it's nice to have more options at home.

Joe Gervais, who teaches entrepreneurship classes at Blackfeet Community College, said Teeple's IGA is already responding to increased competition in the local market.

"The sales have been more aggressive and the prices have come down in general at the

IGA," Gervais said. "So it's good already. Before we opened the store, they reacted."

That much is evident. On the Monday before Glacier Family Foods opened its doors, for instance, Teeple's IGA was charging 89 cents for a pound of bananas, the same as the cost of a pound of bananas at the Lee and Dad's IGA in Belgrade. By Wednesday night, Teeple's had decreased the price of bananas to 59 cents per pound.

Teeple's co-manager, Leo Wikstrom, said the increased competition will only reinforce the IGA's tie to Browning.

"Teeple's has been here since 1934," he said. "Our company has a commitment to staying in this community."

If Glacier Family Foods can do the same, Gervais said, it could send a signal to other businesses that Browning could be a more permanent home.

"Its success is going to be an indicator that other large businesses like that could do well here," he said. "Two or three years down the road if it's thriving and vibrant, it will really send that message."

At the very least, it will give people a place to shop close to home, reducing what Gervais calls near-constant traffic between Cut Bank and Browning on U.S. Highway 2. If Glacier Family Foods can keep even half of that traffic on the reservation, it will be interesting to see how spending powers change in the region, he said.

Grant, the manager of Glacier Family Foods, is more certain of the positive effect his store will have on the community. It won't bring in millions of dollars to the tribal account, he said, but he does look forward to the opportunities the store could bring in addition to employment. He said there are concrete plans to build a gas station in a corner of the store's parking lot.

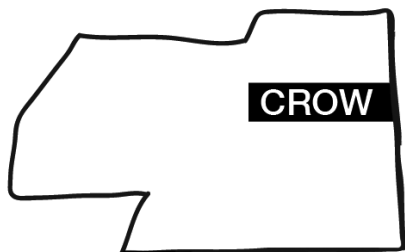
Grant said he sees the potential for the area around the store to turn into a strip mall with other stores, bringing the community the commerce it needs to revive its economy. It all hinges on the success of Glacier Family Foods.

"Browning hasn't had a lot of that stuff," he said. "We're going to try to broaden the horizons here."



Crow tribal LLC program attempts to play catch-up with off-reservation businesses

story by **HANNAH GROVER** | photographs by **ABIGAIL REDFERN**



By now, the few acres should be more than a dry lot. Water from the well she dug should be pumping into RVs. The empty, sun-baked field should be lined with camping trailers as tourists explore the adjacent Chief Plenty Coups State Park.

The lot should not be a barren stretch of land.

Bernadette Smith has high hopes for the land, located near Pryor on the Crow Reservation.

In 2001, Smith secured the rights to use the land's water via a well she drilled on

her own. She then paid to install electricity that campers could tap into. She even secured a prized license designating her park as a limited liability company from the Crow Nation.

In all, Smith said she wiped out her savings, tens of thousands of dollars, on the project before it stalled indefinitely. That was more than a decade ago. The land and her investments have since languished, as Smith tried and failed to find any type of assistance to revive the RV park.

"It's just land with a well on it, with electricity, and with a sewer tank," Smith said.

Smith's problems are similar to entrepreneurs throughout Indian Country.

Navigating across tribal and federal borders has made business financing difficult. Although tribes, like the Crow, have launched programs to help, success rates vary depending on the resources available to potential business owners.

The problem that derailed Smith's plan came when banks off the reservation refused to recognize her business, even with the Crow LLC designation.

The Apsaalooke Limited Liability Company Act, adapted by the Crow tribe in 2006, allows Tribal members to file for a tribal LLC. This designation is meant to meet both state and tribal business requirements and should be recognized across reservation borders. The Crow

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

The unemployment rate on the Crow Reservation is 46.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

LEFT Bernadette Smith points out developments she has made to the property she owns in Pryor. After she added a well to the property, she planned on opening an RV park on the land.

RIGHT Smith wants to finish developing an RV park on her land in Pryor. She believes an RV park would benefit tourists visiting the Pryor area and the Chief Plenty Coups State Park.



legislature hoped the LLC Act would help promote entrepreneurship and combat high unemployment rates.

Yolanda Good Voice, an economic development officer for the Crow Reservation, said the LLC program has a learning curve that people are still trying to navigate. Last year, about 100 individuals came to her to talk about starting a business and through the first quarter of 2012 she had helped 30 people.

There are two options for opening a business on the reservation: a sole proprietorship, in which a single individual owns an unincorporated business, or an LLC. Some people prefer the LLC because it is a hybrid between a corporation and a sole proprietorship, so it offers the best of both worlds.

Good Voice said the LLC also provides more protection than a sole proprietorship. Sole proprietors risk personal assets, including their homes to creditors or in legal disputes. An LLC protects personal assets, so long as personal assets are kept separate from business dealings.

The tribal LLC program is available to anyone living within the reservation boundaries, including non-tribal members.

However, Good Voice said the lack of codes and laws on the reservation has created problems for the tribal LLC program. She said she hopes the tribe can move forward and adopt more codes and laws for business.

Good Voice said the Crow tribe is playing catch up with off-reservation businesses.

"They've been doing it for 120 years, and want us to do it in 20," Good Voice said.

However, despite the tribe's best efforts, a Crow LLC isn't equivalent to a Montana LLC designation. They'd have to apply for a state license, which is more costly.

Bernadette Smith filed for an LLC almost immediately after the tribal council approved the program.

"When the LLC Act was passed, I thought, 'Well, this is one way to get into the business world,'" Smith said. But the finances needed to start the RV park just didn't turn out the way she'd hoped.

She wiped out her savings to pay for the construction. She has been told that it will take at least half a million dollars to get the RV park running.

"I was pretty upset with myself for not

making good choices, not figuring that out," Smith said.

Smith didn't have a business background or training on how to start and run a small business.

Once she got started, she encountered unforeseen challenges. She said everything was mind-boggling. She had to develop a logo and a business plan. She had to project into the future how much money she thought the RV park could earn. And no one was there to assist or advise her.

Although banks would be hesitant to dole out a business loan to an entrepreneur with admittedly little business experience, Smith thought the tribal LLC provided legitimacy to her venture and would have made the process easier. However, even considering her inexperience, Smith faced an uphill battle that tribal communities face across the nation.

Banks rarely grant sizeable business loans to individuals living on tribal lands, which are usually held in trust by the federal government. Individuals rarely own their land outright and therefore cannot use it as collateral to back loans of any type.

John Berg, the executive vice president of Heartland Financial, which runs

**"WHEN THE LLC ACT
WAS PASSED, I THOUGHT,
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WAY TO GET INTO THE
BUSINESS WORLD.'"**

Bernadette Smith, tribal member

a subsidiary bank, Rocky Mountain Bank, in Billings, said that lending to any start up company is high risk, especially if the companies are unsecured. In order to decrease the risk, the banks might take collateral, such as equity on homes.

However, without clear titles to their land, Crow business owners have no right to use their homes to back a loan.

Berg said that if the person seeking a loan is buying assets for the business, the banks can take these assets as collateral. This would have little to no benefit for Smith, who would invest any loan money directly into the land.



ABOVE Timmy Falls Down, the owner and only employee of the Long Otter Cafe, cooks fries by the order. Falls Down says he wants his customers to consider his cafe a place to come in and relax.

Bernadette Smith's brother, Rick Smith, has been successful despite the lack of recognition off the reservation. Rick owns a firework stand and ranch. He has an LLC that covers both his ranch and his fireworks stand. The fireworks stand employs eight Crow tribal members. But, when it comes to equipment for his ranch, Rick has to go off the reservation.

After getting a tribal LLC, he went into an auto parts store and asked to set up a charging account, which would allow him to buy now and pay later. At first, the store was willing to set one up with him. Then it found out his LLC was a tribal LLC. Two or three weeks later, he got a letter telling him he could have a cash-only account,

but not the account he had hoped for.

"People want to get into business," Rick said. "But they really can't because they have so many obstacles in front of them and they just don't want to overcome the obstacles."

Good Voice said one of the main problems inhibiting business development on the reservation is a lack of rental space. While office space is readily available for rent off the reservation, in Indian Country people have to build their businesses from the ground up — an expensive investment considering zoning rights, infrastructure and actual construction costs.

However, for others, like Timmy Falls Down, the owner of Long Otter Cafe in Pryor, building from scratch didn't mean going into a lot of debt.

The Long Otter Cafe first opened its door in 2011. Falls Down moved back to the reservation because his oldest son's special educational needs were not being met in Billings. Even the private schools weren't able to give the boy the personalized care that the family found in Pryor. But Falls Down needed to secure a financial plan to support his family on the reservation.

Falls Down turned to an assignment he completed in a business class at Rocky

Mountain College. He had to design a small business and come up with the pricing based on the average household income of the selected area. He ended up drafting preliminary plans for the Long Otter Cafe.

Falls Down and his grandfather used to joke about starting up a coffee shop, cafe or grocery store in Pryor. The assignment earned him an A and, when his grandfather, who owns and operates a nearby guest ranch, saw the plans he agreed to loan him the money, interest-free, to start the cafe.

Falls Down's family already had the land for the cafe. All they had to do was build the facilities, which originally

consisted of a building the size of a large shed. There was no room to sit inside and customers would line up along the sidewalk while waiting to be served.

Business started slow for the Long Otter Cafe. But, Falls Down eventually turned that around. Since then he has expanded from a coffee shop to a full-fledged cafe providing affordable meals.

When the cafe saw more success, Falls Down ripped out a wall and built an addition. Now around 30 people can sit in the cafe and enjoy their meals.

“You do have to be a big dreamer and you do have to be a big talker, but you have to back that up,” Falls Down said. “You have to work really hard. You have to dream big and start small.”

Falls Down flipped on a switch. The “open” sign glowed red and green. Within a few minutes, the first customers started to show up, asking if the cafe was open. He greeted each customer by name and knew how they liked their food prepared. He even knew some orders in advance.

A couple customers asked for nacho supremes. Falls Down cut up a tomato and mixed it in a blender to make salsa while the meat cooked on the stove.

Customers hand him money — cash only. He says he’d like to get a card reader. But, it’s a tough sell to banks, he said. His only option right now would be to install a reader that charged the Long Otter Cafe a fee per number of swipes, which could get expensive.

Falls Down said he understood the bank’s hesitation and general reluctance to invest on the reservation. Bank managers just don’t know the rules on the reservation and whether they would have the authority to enforce debtors to follow through on their side of the agreements, he said.

Falls Down, who has so far managed to privately finance his business, knows that debt is not an option. He has managed to stock his cafe frugally.

When it came time to expand, Falls Down looked for used industrial equipment, like his stove, which he purchased from a cafe that had gone out of business in Lodge Grass. He then spent hours filing the grease off and repairing the contraption.

Falls Down managed to use the Ap-saalooke LLC program to his advantage. The tribal designation helped legitimize the cafe owner to set up business accounts with food vendors and banks, he said.

There doesn’t seem to be as easy an answer for Smith’s stalled RV park. Still, she continues to hold onto her LLC license.

“I’m still trying to start a LLC business because that’s my children’s land and they can continue on with that after I’m dead and gone,” Smith said.

Bernadette also works as a rancher. She keeps her cows in a pasture near the unfinished RV park. But, she said she’d like to diversify as she gets older.

“Ranching supports itself,” Smith said. “That’s something to keep me busy. The RV park was going to be a business that would help the local economy.”

She said she thinks having the RV park there would bring in more money and more visitors. Perhaps the park could even have a resident artist. In addition to helping Pryor, she said Fat Buffalo Enterprises — the name of her business and a take on her childhood nickname — would keep her family busy. Her children would learn and help people.

“I firmly believe that there’ll always be tourists and a RV park would be one way to create jobs and provide a service,” Smith said.

She stood in the midst of the weeds, pointing to the landscape around them. The Pryor Mountains rise up on the horizon, still capped with a blanket of snow. She calls Pryor God’s country. Even after more than a decade, she remains optimistic. It’s just a matter of time, she believes, until the RV Park gets off its feet. The weeds will be replaced with grass. Then people will start coming.

TOP Rick Smith owns a successful fireworks business that benefitted from the LLC Act.

MIDDLE Timmy Falls Down attributes his cafe’s success to his personal willingness to do the work and to adapt his business to the customers in Pryor.

BOTTOM Falls Down tells his son to start working on his homework. Falls Down says he likes that his cafe is so close to his son’s school, because the proximity helps him be more involved with his son.



FROM THE GROUND UP



ABOVE Troy and Vikki Cady have spent 16 years creating The Flower Grinder establishment. Vikki began by driving to Billings each day to attend flower school, once that was completed they started the business out of their house for the first few years until they found a location to build a more traditional brick-and-mortar business space.

story by **MORGAN SPARKS** | photographs by **KYLE HOLLINGER**

The dry, iron-red dust that lines Cheyenne Avenue was the only place her business could grow.

Vikki Cady's Flower Grinder is an anomaly along Lame Deer's main drag, the

beacon of entrepreneurship for the town – a flower shop in a community where unemployment is several times higher than the national average.

While flowers are only a part of her

business now, they were always her dream.

The Flower Grinder has been a mainstay in Lame Deer, the capital of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, for 14 years. A unique hybrid, the shop started by selling flowers and added an espresso machine five years later.

With less than 20 private enterprises

across the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Cady's shop is unique in that it is not run out of the home and it provides goods rather than services. Her success stems from a combination of a persevering entrepreneurial spirit and maintaining healthy distance from a tribal government mired in red tape and bureaucracy.

The reservation, with almost 5,000 residents living on 445,000 acres, has only three actual private stores or shops, all located on Cheyenne Avenue: The Flower Grinder, the IGA grocery store, and Hardware Hanks. The avenue is a five-block stretch of worn pavement that, because of a rare setup between the tribe and Rosebud County, is the most entrepreneur-friendly district on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

Still, as it stands, the street's south side is dominated more by empty lots and abandoned buildings than thriving businesses.

Since 1998 Cady has offered coffee shop delicacies to an increasingly addicted market. Her most popular sellers are flavored lattes and her famous iced tea-lemonade energy drinks. One would be hard pressed to find a resident of Lame Deer who hasn't sipped on one of Cady's drinks.

Cady spent most of her life in and around the reservation, growing up on a ranch while her father, now tribal President Leroy Spang, worked as a miner.

Sixteen years ago, after many years

**“OUR TRIBAL SYSTEM
OF GOVERNMENT DOESN'T WORK
VERY WELL. I HAVE REALLY LOST
CONFIDENCE IN THE SYSTEM.”**

Clara Caufield,
Editor of A Cheyenne Voice

working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Cady quit her government job. With the support of her husband, Troy, and some save money, Cady paid the \$1,500 tuition fee to enroll at Just Flower Design School in Billings.

“It was just something that I totally enjoyed,” she said.

Over the next two months, Cady would drive 200 miles daily, six times a week to attend school — her odometer racking up 9,600 miles over the period. Rising early, Cady would be out of the house by 6:45 a.m. to reach Billings by 8 a.m.

“While I was going to school I just couldn't wait to get done. I just had all these big ideas,” she said.

It was not an easy road after graduating from the program. Cady spent the following two years trying to get her business off

the ground. Luckily for the Cady's, Troy had a successful pre-existing construction business, K-D Company, that helped keep the family afloat.

Of course, an important part of any business is real estate. Cady passed on several building locations. She knew to be successful she needed a prized position on Cheyenne Avenue. She knew she needed township land.

Lame Deer, the heart of Northern Cheyenne country, is a dusty town of 2,000. A single intersection with hanging red lights commands visitors to stop — but there isn't much to stay for. Aside from a fill up at the Cheyenne Depot or a stop at the IGA for groceries, there is little to spend money on in town. Street vendors selling knick-knacks and food line the streets in the afternoon, but there is little permanent business to be found.

Aspiring entrepreneurs on the Northern Cheyenne face a gauntlet of challenges.

First and foremost is the tribe itself.

Cady said any serious private business ventures seek Cheyenne Avenue real estate because it is the sliver of the reservation that isn't held in trust by the tribe. It's considered a township, not reservation land and therefore does not fall under the bureaucracy of the

tribal government.

“By being that way, you are your own,” Cady said. “You don't have to deal with the tribe.”

Cady took advantage of this anomaly. She bought land and opened her shop on the small block of township land that — while located within the reservation borders — belongs to Rosebud County.

A square starting where the eastbound U.S. Highway 212 intercepts Lame Deer at Cheyenne Avenue, it extends south a mile toward the new tribal headquarters. The 1998 chamber of commerce map shows a majority of the town's businesses located within this square.

Neither the tribe nor the county really knows the history behind the township land. Some suggest that the parcel was grandfathered in as a pre-treaty settlement. Others contend that the county bought back the land in the late 1920s to encourage non-natives to move into Lame Deer.

In any case, those interested in private enterprise know its worth. Cheyenne Avenue is home to all of the private enterprise in Lame Deer. With three businesses, it's a far cry from Wall Street; however, the ease of operating a business without interference from the tribal



ABOVE In 2010, The Flower Grinder was in serious risk as the service station next to them caught fire. Short of that scare, the Cadys have been running The Flower Grinder safely and successfully since 1998.

N. CHEYENNE BY THE NUMBERS

4,000 Miles: Distance it takes one of Vikki's roses to travel from Ecuador to Lame Deer.

9,600 Miles: Distance traveled by Vikki over the two months she attended flower school in Billings. She drove 200 miles a day, six days a week, for eight weeks.

20 Less than 20 private businesses are on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, most of which are run out of peoples' homes.

3 Private Businesses on Cheyenne Avenue, all of which are located on township land.



ABOVE Troy and Vikki Cady, owners of The Flower Grinder establishment. **BELOW** Clara Caufield, creator of A Cheyenne Voice, the only locally produced paper on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, maintains a hope in people on the reservation but has concerns about the effectiveness of government to help stimulate economic growth on the reservation.

government makes the township land a dream for entrepreneurs.

A center for self-determination, market values in the township are determined by buyer and seller – not the tribal government.

“Our tribal system of government doesn’t work very well,” said Clara Caufield, a former tribal council member and owner of A Cheyenne Voice, the reservation’s independent newspaper. “I have really lost confidence in the system.”

Caufield, who publishes her paper 20 miles away in Colstrip, chose the location to avoid renting from the tribal government and because of a lack of infrastructure in Lame Deer.

That lack of infrastructure is just another hurdle for reservation entrepreneurs. The tribe is hoping to address this in plans that

include constructing a proposed strip mall and renovating existing buildings to create office space.

“What I am pushing for is to create opportunities, but not only opportunities, but infrastructure for Native American small business, which is pretty nonexistent here,” said Allen Fisher, the economic development officer for the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Housing Authority.

Fisher, who is also a former elected official in the tribal government, hopes to foster business growth on the reservation through projects like the proposed strip mall and another reclaimed building, which, when renovated, would lease office space.

However, the strip mall project is six years in the making and still in developmental infancy. The tribe is hoping to purchase

a significant portion of township land on which to build the strip mall. The land would also be further developed to encourage more business like The Flower Grinder.

Fisher said the project is currently looking for an architect to draw up designs and he is working to hash out a cost — maybe as high as \$1.4 million.

Fisher explained, using vague terms, that the capital for the project would come from three separate sources: a major grant, the tribal government and a large loan.

There is some doubt in the community about the viability of such a project. Even if the project were to get off the ground, the worry remains that the tribe would be a difficult landlord.

Caufield said that even if the tribe had such a space in town, she still wouldn’t move



her paper there from Colstrip, though she would like to.

“Governments aren’t in the business of making money, at least this one isn’t, they’re in the business of providing services to people,” Caufield said.

After the year-and-a-half long search for township space on Cheyenne Avenue, Cady found her place, a small lot, just 150 by 50 feet, which she bought from her uncle with a loan from the First Interstate Bank in Hardin.

Soon thereafter, the Cadys acquired a portable building, a former schoolhouse, at a school auction in Busby for \$450. Using Troy’s contractor skills, they refurbished the graffiti filled, slumping building into one of Lame Deer’s longest running private businesses.

“The older generation that were really like skeptical about my business, saying ‘oh it will never last, a flower shop in Lame Deer,’” Cady said smiling. “They come in now, ‘Oh you did so well, you proved us wrong.’”

While Cady’s business has always been successful, she said it grew drastically with the addition of the coffee side of the business.

Painted creamy brown with magenta trim, The Flower Grinder is directly accessed via a short sidewalk across one of the few maintained lawns in Lame Deer. There, a spacious porch greets those wanting flowers or coffee.

Stepping inside, visitors can either peruse the flower display to their right, which directly connects to the flower cooler in the adjacent room, or wander left to look at the rhinestone-happy purses, belts and flip flops – “bling bling” as Cady calls it.

The shop is almost always noisy. In the morning and just after noon, the clank of Torani syrup bottles mix with the high-pitched whine of the espresso machine and the whirl of the espresso bean grinder.

In the back room, where bar-height countertops allow for flower arrangement, the phone rings what seems like every 15 minutes with orders for flowers.

Cady’s busiest month for flowers is May, which includes Mother’s Day and graduations at the local schools and the tribal college. Near as busy are February, for Valentine’s Day (during which they did 300 deliveries this year as opposed to the usual one or two a day), and April, for proms and Administrative Professionals Day, a result of the reservation’s largest employers being both tribal and federal governments.

Other floral work includes sprays and coffin adornments for funerals, general day-to-day arrangements for events like anniversaries, and single-cut flowers like roses and daisies.

Another major original hit of Cady’s, like her energy drinks, are her glitter-laced flowers. Inspired by the rhinestoned apparel and accessories in the shop, they were a quick hit with the women of the regions’ country western culture.

Troy, who works in the shop during the winter months during the construction off-season, said the coffee business picks up as temperatures drop. Generally the shop will see between 60 and 100 drink customers a day.

In the morning this usually means some combination of coffee, steamed milk and a Torani syrup. In the afternoons, the drink of choice is usually one of Cady’s special energy drinks that, with one shot, contain 4,900 percent of the recommended daily value of the vitamin B-12, used purportedly for its energy giving properties.

For any Cheyenne looking to finance a startup on the reservation, they face the classic Catch-22 seen on tribal lands.

With much of the reservation held in trust by the federal government, individuals and families don’t often have the collateral for a significant loan because they don’t own their land. Even if they did, the median household income on the reservation is slightly more than \$23,500, and 60 percent of people on the Northern Cheyenne are unemployed, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Without collateral and no start-up capital, finding the revenue to finance any entrepreneurial endeavor seems mostly out of the question.

“As a Native American trying to start a small business or any type of business here on the reservation ... it’s pretty tough,” Fisher said.

Both the tribal government and the local bank do offer loans on the reservation. However, some residents are hesitant to wade into a financial relationship with the tribe, and the bank is mainly a satellite branch of its partner in Colstrip. Cady only uses the bank in town to deposit her till and will drive the 60 miles northwest to Hardin if she needs a loan.

“A big thing as always here on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is finance, finding the capital to create business,” Fisher said.

For entrepreneurial spirits like Caufield, the recipient of a \$7,500 Indian Equity Fund grant from the Montana Department of Commerce, grant money is available. Other economic development grants include the Rural Opportunity of Self Sufficiency grant from the tribal housing authority and others offered by local industry giants in Colstrip, like Western Energy.

But the problem remains the same. Even with the capital backing them, where do business entrepreneurs setup shop?

“Well there’s no infrastructure for that and that’s something we’re working hard on today,” Fisher said.

Fisher is hard at work on the strip mall deal. He believes that by providing the infrastructure so lacking in Lame Deer, the tribe can help jumpstart a mired economy.

The unstated elephant in the room with the idea though, is the tremendous loss of private township land to the hands of the tribe. If the project took off, it would take the land invaluable to private enterprise on Northern Cheyenne and transfer it into tribal control.

Some, like Fisher, see this as important step forward as the tribe encourages business. Others though, lament the loss of such a large portion of the township land.

Tuned to 104.9 FM, a Top 40 station out of Sheridan, Wyo., the small black boom box perched on a high shelf in the back room of The Flower Grinder pumps

out the voice of pop star Nicki Minaj.

In the next room over, Cady stands adorned in her normal garb, blue jeans with a pattern set in rhinestones on the back pockets, a white t-shirt, and her red “The Flower Grinder” embossed apron. Her fingers, with their pink painted nails, grasp the blue shears, cutting the stalks of a new shipment of roses.

Aside from her and Troy, the shop employs Leola White, 23, a transplant from the Wind River Reservation, and 25-year-old extended family member Ryhal Rowland. The Flower Grinder has a constant flux of employees though, many of them family members and friends who work the heavy business days, usually at no cost beside gas and caffeinated compensation.

Demand remains constant, Cady said.

“There’s some mornings if I am late, due to like the icy roads or whatnot, somebody will call me up and say, ‘Hey you were 10 minutes late,’” she said. “So it’s like crazy, they really watch my business here.”

Cady said the future seems bright for her shop. She is looking to build a new building on the property, one with a larger space where two or three people could work at once making drinks and more room for gifts, especially jewelry.

She hopes to keep The Flower Grinder rooted and growing on Cheyenne Avenue, the only place on the Northern Cheyenne that could foster such a successful, yet unconventional, business.



ABOVE Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day are the busiest times for The Flower Grinder. Between those holidays they are busy selling coffee and other beverages.

She found a place here. You could, too.

Shawnee Rose Skunkcap, a University of Montana senior in psychology and a Blackfeet tribal member, stands near UM's Payne Family Native American Center. The building houses Native American Studies, American Indian Student Services and related campus programming under one roof. When completed in 2010, it was the nation's first building of its kind on any university campus. UM works to improve Native enrollment, achievement and success. Unique programs support students and their families as they embrace academic life and transition to campus.



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