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Montana's tribes find hope during the chaotic first 100 days of Trump's second term

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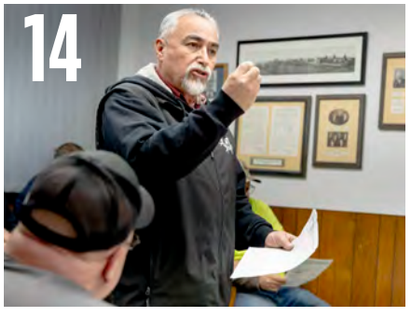
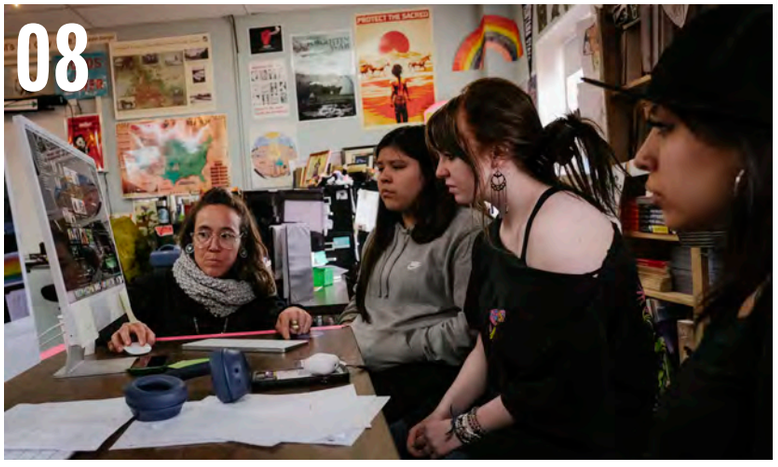
Cover image by Owen Preece
Jerrid Gray, project manager for Little Shell Tribal Enterprises walks above a cut of travertine at the Yellowstone Rock quarry in Gardiner.





THE 2025 EDITION

President Donald Trump released his 2026 budget proposal on May 2, which included more than $163 billion in cuts, including cuts to programs that directly affect Indigenous nations. Some of the more noteworthy cuts include more than $600 million from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

This budget proposal will very likely go through months of debate, negotiations and revisions, if not a complete overhaul, before it is ever approved. This could be seen as a precursor that could further weaken the federal commitment the nation's leaders made in the treaties it signed with Indigenous nations.

The 2025 Montana Native News Honors Project explores the uncertainties faced by Montana's tribes in the first 100 days of Trump's second term. The stories highlight the unique, and direct, relationship that Indigenous nations have with the federal government, which makes these communities particularly susceptible to the actions of the U.S. President.

While Trump's proposed budget would cut $187 million from the Bureau of Indian Education, the Chippewa Cree tribe on the Rocky Boy's reservation is planning its next move to keep schools afloat. The Crow tribe is navigating the proposed $1 billion cut to the National Park Service, that threatens cultural preservation by restricting access to resources vital to traditional practices.

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians is working to make itself financially independent from the federal government by exploring economic development amid a proposed $624 million cut to economic development programs, including the Minority Business Development Agency. On the Blackfeet reservation, families are fighting for their dream of homeownership amid a slew of red tape and a complex legal environment that is likely to be exacerbated amid Trump's proposed $28 billion in cuts to various housing and urban development programs.

While Trump's budget seeks to cut about $1 billion from mental health programs, reporters on the Flathead and Fort Peck reservations looked at well-being among tribal members. On the Fort Peck reservation, political harassment and violence have increased since the election, leading to more division in the community. On the Flathead reservation, Native youth are working to support each other and shape their future independently from the federal government.

The Northern Cheyenne community is working to address the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People crisis, which is facing fallout from the proposed $107 million cut to the public safety and justice program under the BIA. From the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, an elder man is coming to terms with his reliance on social programs, which are under threat of reduction or elimination.

During Trump's first 100 days in office, Montana tribes have both shared experiences and faced unique challenges. This project captures a moment when there is much uncertainty about what the future will hold. In the ever-shifting landscape of federal policy, Montana's tribes are asserting their sovereignty and adapting to the unknown before them.

Sincerely,

Montana Native News
Honors Project Staff

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Targeted by Trump

How youth on the Flathead Indian Reservation shape their own future

Story by **HANNAH STAUS**

Photos by **MADDIE MCCUDDY**

It was a Saturday morning earlier this year when 20-year-old Jet DuMontier stood in the vegetable aisle of a Walmart store on the Flathead Indian Reservation. DuMontier was wearing their black cargo pants and a gray hoodie. Their partner had just moved into a new apartment and needed to buy basic groceries to start a new chapter of their life. DuMontier enjoyed watching the people surrounding them, while their partner debated what to buy.

Then a teenage boy lifted his shirt toward DuMontier to show the gun on his hip.

"It was very intentional because he didn't have his shirt up the first time I saw him," DuMontier said. "I'm sure he was reacting to us."

DuMontier and their partner were both born biologically female and both identify as nonbinary and use they/them pronouns. They were affectionate in the supermarket. That's how DuMontier assumed the boy recognized them as a queer couple.

Concentrating on their shopping list, their partner hadn't seen the gun. But DuMontier became quiet. As a queer person, all the alarm bells were ringing for DuMontier.

"I felt so unsafe," DuMontier remembered. "The second I saw that, all this horrible shit just started going through my head. A fucking Walmart shooting."

DuMontier's thoughts ran wild. They went through all the possible scenarios of what could happen next. How could DuMontier save them from the situation? They only knew of one nearby entrance and exit. DuMontier thought of all possible escape routes while they pushed their partner into the next aisle - away from the gun.

It didn't come to a shooting that Saturday. The boy's mother told him to put his shirt back down.

"He didn't look a day older than 17," DuMontier recalls.

But even though there was no violence that day and no physical signs of racism or queer hostility were left behind, psychological scars remain. DuMontier is now more mindful of where and when they show affection to their partner in public. They don't feel safe on their reservation anymore.

Election results of young voters

Nearly half of young voters across the nation, dubbed Gen Z in popular media, voted for Donald Trump in 2024, a significant increase from his previous presidential bid. About 47%

LEFT: Gracie Bell and her sister, Brittny Reed, hold hands in support of each other. Gracie will graduate soon, and would like to go to school in Oregon, Washington or Montana.

cast votes for the Republican candidate last year while about 36% did the same in 2020.

At the beginning of March 2025, there were 2,108 enrolled citizensof the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes aged 23 and younger, according to Robert McDonald, the tribes' spokesperson.

Like most of Montana, the polling places located in the major towns on the Flathead reservation supported Trump, including St. Ignatius and Ronan. Voters in Arlee supported the Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris, according to results posted by the Montana Secretary of State's office.

However, since the election, young people have swayed. Many have grown more disillusioned and concerned with the economy, its environmental policies, and the overall treatment of diverse communities. Like DuMontier, some feel targeted by policies of the current administration as their rights to climate mitigation, education, and diversity are under attack.

In fact, the Institute of Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School released a report in April showing that only about 15% of young people believe the country is moving in the right direction and less than one-third approve of Trump's performance.

The worries that young people have are as diverse as the young people themselves. Many mentioned that their main concerns are: school closures, growing racism and the fact that tribal resources, as well as natural resources, are being stolen. But in the face of mass layoffs and an uncertain economy, young people are now also worried about future job security, especially in nature conservation, which is important to the CSKT tribes.

Nevertheless as often in difficult times, this burden also sparks motivation in some to try even harder.

Queer youth under attack

"I have the feeling that people have become bolder since the election," said DuMontier, a Salish-Kootenai and Mexican descendant. "Hate is coming to the surface more now than it was before. It is such a scary feeling. I don't ever want to feel scared to hold my partner's hand, just because we are visibly queer."

Being a young, queer person is becoming more and more difficult with new orders being made every other week that directly impact queer people's lives. Executive orders by President Donald Trump, such as recognizing only two genders defined at birth and withdrawing support for gender-affirming care for transgender youth, directly affect youth throughout the U.S. Especially American Indian and Alaska Native youth, who are also often affected by racism.

"I've really taken a step back from going out and going to town, because of that aspect of safety," DuMontier said. They are a Tribal Historic Preservation student at the Salish Kootenai College where they are also part of the Spirit of Many Colors club, a student initiative and safe space for the queer community on campus.

Jet and their sibling Chula DuMontier were part of a group of high schoolers at Two Eagle River School that started the Two-Spirit beading group Nkʷuwilš. Translated to English, the group is called 'Coming together as one' and it is a youth-led safe space for Two-Spirit and Native LGTBQ+ people to build community.

ABOVE: Jet DuMontier, they/them, is passionate about standing up for queer rights and is quite outspoken. DuMontier attended Two Eagle River school, and now attends Salish Kootenai College with their sister, where they run the Spirit of Many Colors Club. This club allows a safe space for LGBTQ members on the reservation. **RIGHT:** Josey Usher, a student at the Two Eagle River School hopes to become a Democratic politician one day. Usher notices flaws under the new administration, and wants to help represent the rights of Native Americans and their reservations, as well as the Two-Spirit community.

Supporting each other in community

Sheldon Clairmont is the Community Engagement and Youth Programing Coordinator of the Montana Two Spirit Society.

According to him, Two-Spirit is a contemporary pan-Indigenous term used by some Indigenous tribes to describe Native people who fulfill a traditional third-gender or gender-variant social role within their communities, often encompassing both masculine and feminine traits. Within their tribes, two-spirit people often fill spiritual, ceremonial and leadership roles, and are considered sacred. To some

> "We can't really exist in our current government."
>
> JOSEY USHER | STUDENT AT THE TWO EAGLE RIVER SCHOOL

Josey Usher wears a pair of black converse shoes scribbled with political messages like, "Digital Silence", "Deny, Defend, Depose", "Eat the rich, feed the poor", and "Kamala Harris 2028."

Gracie Bell and Josey Usher watch their teacher Jaimie Stevenson help edit the audio parts to this weeks' edition of Inside the Nest. Stevenson is the Two Eagle River history and journalism teacher, as well as a mentor and friend to many of her students.

Two-Spirit people, this term also describes people who are gay and lesbian as well.

Being Bitterroot-Salish himself, Clairmont is a point of contact for Two-Spirit youth and has noticed how the new government has affected their sense of security.

"But I also think in other ways, this is not really anything new for us as Indigenous people," Clairmont said. "Our lives and well-being are in flux, like everyone else is just feeling it right now, this is what we've been dealing with for centuries."

Jet and Chula DuMontier both went to the Two Eagle River School in Pablo. The school is often a safe harbor for all the children who struggled at public high schools. Tribal parents founded it in 1974 as an alternative school for Indigenous students who did not succeed in traditional public schools. The Flathead tribes run the school, but it is federally funded as a Bureau of Indian Education contract school.

In the high school, the DuMontier siblings joined a student-led queer club, formerly called the Fruit Bowl Club. The club still exists, but its members choose not to go public with it anymore out of safety concerns.

"We can't really exist in our current government," Josey Usher said while she played with the laces of her Converse shoes. The 15-year-old with dark eye makeup and red-brown hair had written "Deny, Defend, Depose" and "Kamala Harris 2028" in Sharpie on them. She joined the high school queer club when she moved from homeschooling to the Two Eagle River School.

Usher noticed that most of the members look for safety in their club, especially if they have a home that doesn't support them, but also safety from the government. Being bisexual herself, she says she is comparatively okay.

"Every day I wake up and I'm like, we're gonna get through the day. No matter what happens with our politics, you're going to get through it eventually," Usher said. But she said she has many friends who are suffering.

"I don't worry just about my friends. I worry about my mom. That's why I always go into town with her," Usher said.

She hopes to become a Democratic politician and campaign for the rights of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Until then, she is working for the school newsletter to get her voice heard.

> "We're hopeful. We're staying the course and just running day-to-day as if everything is the same and will be the same next year"
>
> RODNEY BIRD | SUPERINTENDENT OF THE TWO EAGLE RIVER SCHOOL

Making their voice heard

The video school newsletter "Inside the Nest" was born when the high school students were supposed to archive old newsletter episodes for the 50-year jubilee of the Two Eagle River School. This inspired the youth to do their own reporting and publish clips on Facebook.

Gracie Bell joined the newsletter when she transferred from Billings to Pablo. The 17-year-old with long brown hair was sitting at the kitchen table with her mother Holly Reed. Both were wearing colorful shirts with a Native American design. Their aunt designed them.

The whole family moved from Billings to Pablo and now lives in student housing because Reed started studying Nursing at Salish Kootenai College.

Ever since Bell joined a democracy event with her old high school, she has been deeply interested in politics. As the political editor, she informs her peers mostly about politics that affect the reservation.

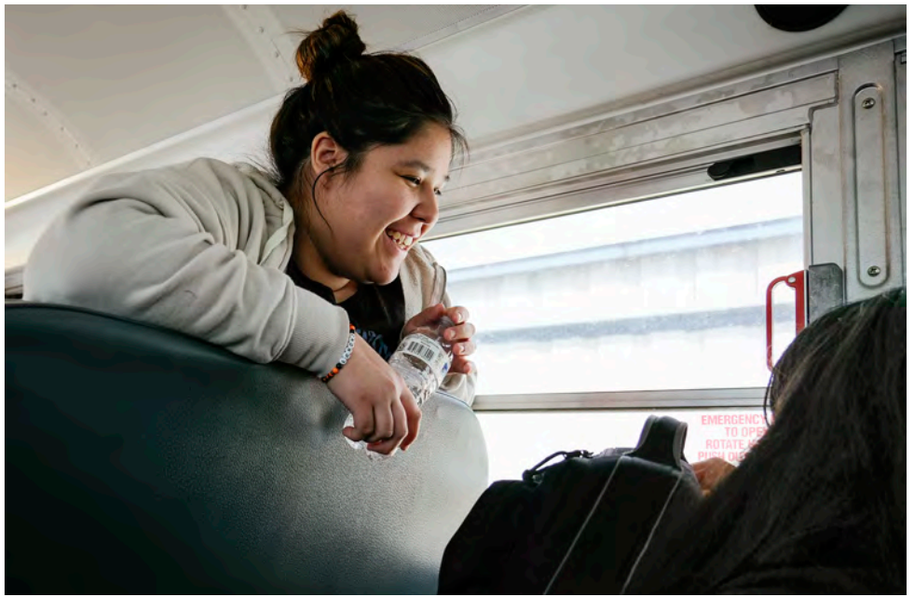
"I try to keep up with the 2025 American Indian Caucus in Helena. I think it is pretty awesome that they have local people in the caucus that know the struggle of living on the reservations," she said.

But she often has the feeling that her classmates don't really know what is going on in politics.

"I just feel like not only does it have an effect on my life, but it has an effect on everybody's life, especially being Native and Crow," Bell said.

She pointed out that the Department of Education is facing massive budget cuts as well as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which was forced to close offices throughout the country, including two in Montana. "That puts a lot of reservation schools at risk that don't really have the funding."

Holly Reed and her wife, Christine Nomee, laugh as they watch a music video that featured their daughter, Gracie Bell. Reed and Nomee are supportive of Gracie and her career goals.



Gracie Bell laughs with her sister, Brittny Reed, on their bus ride home. Bell and Reed are from the Crow reservation, and recently moved to the Flathead reservation.

The policy has already had a very real impact on Bell's life. She originally wanted to join the Marines after high school and then study medicine at Harvard.

But Bell has abandoned her big plans. She still wants to go to the military but after that, she only wants to apply to colleges in Montana, Washington, and Oregon.

"I just don't want to go somewhere where there is stuff like the whole immigration and customs enforcement situation and the CIB (Certificate of Indian Blood) and tribal identification thing, I don't want anything like that happening to me at all," Bell said. "I think just living in bigger cities does scare me."

Despite the challenges that these changes bring, her interest in politics and her involvement in the school newsletter shows that Bell no longer wants to be a bystander. After the "Inside the Nest" project ends, she wants to continue her work and start her own social media blog to inform her friends.

Informing tribal members and beyond

Sam Sandoval, editor of the tribal newspaper Char-Koosta News, encourages youth like Gracie Bell to go into journalism. He sees the responsibility of journalists to inform the tribal citizens and beyond about what is going on in the tribal world, politically but also socially.

"I think our newspaper was one of the very few at the beginning of the MMIW crises to talk about that," Sandoval said, referring to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women epidemic.

Stories like that have power beyond the borders of the reservation. Char-Koosta News has already made it into the national news several times.

School closings are the main concern

The Two Eagle River School newsletter is being advised by Jaime "J3" Stevenson in her history classroom. On the other side of the hallway, is Stephanie Fisher's classroom.

She is the science teacher at the school and is currently building a traditional Salish canoe with the students.

Arabella Nicolai, Justice Antoine and Antone Takes Horse are in Fisher's class. As they sit around a table preparing their presentation on how their tribe might deal with water scarcity in the future, they worry about their own future.

"All the struggles that we have to face on the reservation, not all of us can be at school all the time, and not all of us are motivated to go to school," Nicolai said.

And Takes Horse added: "It is not even just that. Some weren't even having full-on rides [to school]."

For many students, the school also has a history in their family. Often the students' parents also went to the same high school. But with federal funds being cut in education, the students worry that there may soon no longer be a safe haven for them anymore.

"I got [a] younger sister [who] I would like to come here, but how things are going, [our school] might not be here in a couple years," Takes Horse said. "But I feel like [this school] could make

her have more opportunities and maybe, have her come out, like, actually be herself a lot more, rather than just being part of a clique or part of someone's group."

Nicolai has a cousin who was supposed to go to the Two Eagle River School this year. But her uncle has the same concerns as Takes Horse. He doesn't want to send his child to a school that might have to close soon meaning his child might have to change schools in the middle of the school year.

At the moment, there are no concrete decisions that would indicate that Two Eagle River School could be closed. Rodney Bird, school superintendent, has been working with the Office of Indian Education and the Bureau of Indian Education and said he and both agencies are optimistic.

"We're hopeful. We're staying the course and just running day-to-day as if everything is the same and will be the same next year," Bird said.

Some of the optimism comes from the fact that Native Americans are not a race, but a legal status with treaty rights. Therefore, federal acts that target diversity don't, or should not, apply to tribes and their programs.

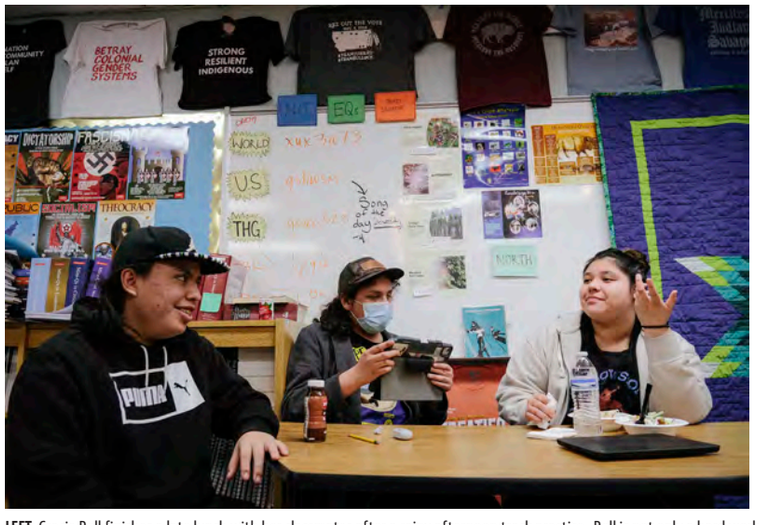
But he understands the political climate and the tenuous hold it has over programs like the Department of Education, concerns his students.

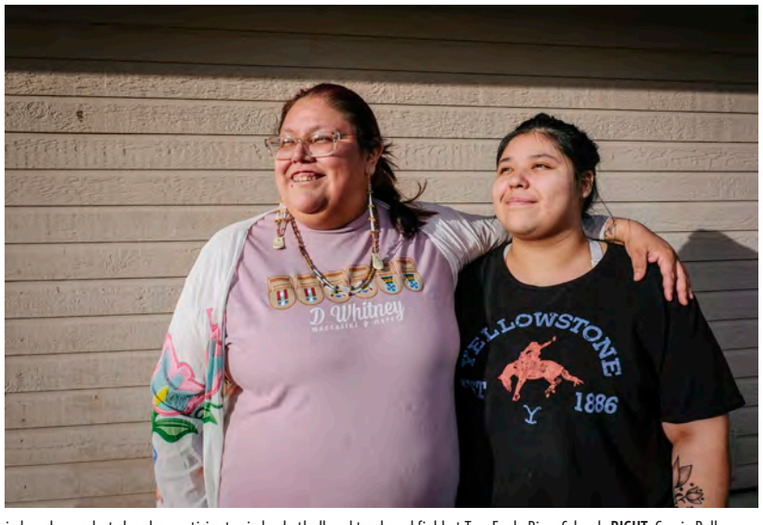
In the classroom, job security and the financial benefits tribal youth receive to build a life after school and to compensate for colonial disadvantages are topics of conversation among young people.

"Because now, even just this, it's also affecting a lot of our jobs that depend on the same type of funding, like firefighting. My brother could possibly lose his job, just because of what's going on, and that could affect money circulating in my own home," Takes Horse said.

His classmates share his concerns. "A lot more people

Gracie Bell and her sister Brittny Reed walk to their home on the campus at Salish Kootenai College. They live in student housing with their mom, Holly Reed, who is studying nursing at the college.





LEFT: Gracie Bell finishes a late lunch with her classmates after a rainy afternoon track practice. Bell is not only a hard worker in her classes, but she also participates in basketball and track and field at Two Eagle River School. **RIGHT:** Gracie Bell and her mother, Holly Reed, live in student housing at the Salish Kootenai College with the rest of their family. They moved from the Crow reservation this past year after Reed started nursing school at SKC. Since then, Gracie began attending the Two Eagle River School. Gracie grew a deep interest in politics in her previous school, but since transferring to Two Eagle River she's been able to utilize her passion in the school's journalism project, "Inside the Nest." Gracie is often informing her family on what is going on within the current political climate.

A student places stickers on their motorcycle helmet during a Spirit of Many Colors club meeting.

Jet DuMontier leads a game of dictionary charades at a Spirit of Many Colors meeting. DuMontier and their sister, Chula, came up with the game as kids. The siblings hope the club can be a safe place for anyone on campus, not just the queer community.

> "Things have been pretty spooky recently."
>
> CHULA DUMONTIER | SALISH-KOOTENAI AND MEXICAN DESCENDANT

will be struggling to make ends meet," Justice Antoine said.

For 18-year-old Arabella Nicolai, the new cuts make little sense, as they are not simply random government aid to the tribe but have been set out in black and white in treaties.

"That's why the Hellgate Treaty was made. It was because of what they're doing now. We literally had lawyers from here go up to Washington just to show them our treaty rights, to prove that they couldn't take away our resources," Nicolai said.

She recently joined the "Inside the Nest" project to inform her classmates about what they can do and if their benefits are getting cut, but also to make her voice heard. She also wants to report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous People.

At the Salish Kootenai College, the Spirit of Many Colors club comes together once a week. There is laughter from the room where the club members guess the words in a dictionary by drawing them. This is a game that the DuMontier siblings came up with as children.

The students sit around a large table. One member is in the process of putting "transgender pride" stickers on their motorcycle helmet. In the middle of the table is a "Tribal College" magazine. The issue is entitled "Resilience."

About 10 students attend the queer meetings that Chula DuMontier usually leads. It is a safe space for the Salish-Kootenai and Mexican descendant, with long black hair, and her friends to give each other community and to check in with each other.

"Things have been pretty spooky recently," the 21-year-old said. For her, these meetings are there to "just still [know] that we are worthy of providing each other comfort and having good things, feeling good things and supporting each other in that way, regardless of how we are viewed and what people might see us as."

Chula DuMontier wants these meetings to be a place for everyone.

The Spirit of Many Colors club also does outreach to welcome new members and to spread awareness. Currently, the group is planning a talking panel, where they want to serve Indian Tacos and speak about their community and experiences as queer people.

But it is always a balance between being proud and making people aware of the community but also staying safe and not putting a target on their heads.

A balance between safety and activism

After the Walmart incident, Jet DuMontier is even more aware of this than before. They echo a thought that their partner had shared in the club meeting: "This [election] is giving the wrong people false confidence."

In 2023, DuMontier had to cancel a public speech for the Transgender Day of Visibility because white men with guns had come to the march.

Nevertheless, they do not want to stop their outreach. Their community gives them the safety and support they need to keep going.

A deeper divide

The mental toll of rising polarization on the Fork Peck Indian Reservation

STORY BY **KOHL WOLFE**

PHOTOS BY **MARC ANTHONY MARTINEZ**

It was already a miserable day for Robert Manning. He'd just spent hours dealing with the 'five things' email mandate sent by the Department of Government Efficiency on Feb. 22, in which all government employees were required to report their five professional accomplishments of that week.

As the local chapter president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, Manning spent much of that day easing the unsettled federal workforce on the Fort Peck Reservation. At the time, a cluster of presidential executive orders were causing strife and confusion. They suggested big changes for federal employees, perhaps even layoffs.

On his way home, Manning needed to make one stop at the local auto parts store for brake pads for his son's truck.

As Manning was leaving the store, he heard his name in a loud voice that echoed through the building. It was a White man who approached Manning. He flexed his arm in Manning's face and said "MAGA Strong!"

The moment was quick. But it ate at Manning, he felt purposely targeted. He was haunted, so he decided to share his experience and confront the man.

It was March 3, about two weeks later. Manning stood at the end of a long table while the man, Ken Hentges, sat at the other end as a member of the city council.

The small room housed the meeting place for the Wolf Point City Council, which stood at full capacity for the monthly meeting. Those in attendance watched on as Manning read a poem and shared handouts, silently listening as his story grew more intense.

"I don't think you fully understand what your words and your actions really did that day," Manning told Hentges. "I don't think you have the empathy to understand that, and it's not going to be tolerated. It's not ethical, and today, I'm asking for your resignation."

Hentges, who quietly listened to Manning's public comment, finally spoke.

"You literally just took it the wrong way," Hentges said. "I didn't mean anything offensive by it."

A small argument immediately broke out. The councilman dismissed the event. Manning, his voice booming, equated the dismissal of his feelings to "what bullies do." Then they were interrupted.

Wolf Point Mayor Chris Dschaak, slammed the table with his hand to quiet the room. There would be no screaming match in his chambers.

"There's been a divide that goes beyond race, creed, color, religion, all of this," Dschaak said. "Whether you're

ABOVE: Robert Manning reads a poem, "Rich Man's War," to city council members after he discussed an incident he had with a council member. The poem, written by his uncle, details the struggle of small communities fighting each other and losing sight of the common fight against oppressors. **LEFT:** Manning addresses the Wolf Point City Council on March 17, 2025. During the monthly council meeting, Manning brought to the council's attention an altercation he had with a councilman at the Wolf City Auto shop, where the councilman flexed his arm and said, "MAGA Strong."

a Republican, Democrat, Socialist, Communist, that's on your personal time. I don't know how we get back to decency. It seems like we're slipping away from that more and more day-by-day."

The divide that Dschaak described was much bigger than what could be felt in the council chambers that night. It was bigger than in the auto parts store on the day Manning spoke about. It's a divide that permeates throughout the town of Wolf Point, the state of Montana, and the United States.

The first 100 days of Donald Trump's second presidential term has stirred fears throughout Indian Country. Among the targets that the federal administration has focused, many directly touch tribal programs and communities. This includes federal job security attempts to eliminate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs in both the workplace and at schools, and potential cuts to health programs. This doesn't include the rise in incidents like Manning's, which have created extremely strenuous mental health stress.

Overall, more Americans reported feeling mental stress when it came to politics. In its 2024 study, "Stress in America," the American Psychological Association reported that 77% of adults said the future of America was a significant source of stress. In addition, 69% of people said the presidential election was a source of significant stress, an increase from 2016 when 52% of people said the same.

Since President Trump's 2016 victory, and especially since his re-election in 2024, incidents regarding political harassment and violence have heavily increased. According to a 2016 report published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, in the 10 days following the 2016 election, almost 900 reports of harassment were reported across the nation.

In many of the incidents, the harassers invoked Trump's name directly. Like Manning's, many others made ties to the 'Make America Great Again' movement.

Even without the extraneous circumstances created by the Trump administration, Indigenous communities face increased challenges regarding mental health compared to other demographics. According to the National Library of Medicine's 2023 report titled "Resilience and Health in American Indians and Alaska Natives," the disproportionate rates of chronic mental health issues can be directly tied to the effects of generational trauma and other historical instances of trauma.

"Historical trauma manifests in high incidence of future trauma exposure, intergenerational trauma, and is further compounded by experiences of racism and discrimination," according to the report. "Historical trauma is also related to a constellation of psychological, biological, physiological and behavioral outcomes."

Wolf Point, a town of around 2,500 people, sits in the middle of the Fort Peck Reservation, home to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. While a majority of the town's population is Native American, there is a large number of non-Natives living in Wolf Point as well. While the town itself leaned slightly Democrat in 2024, there were a large number of votes cast for Donald Trump.

Career instability affecting mental health

Manning is employed by the Chief Redstone Health Clinic in Wolf Point, where he has enjoyed years of stability as a federal employee. However, since January, agencies like the newly created Department of Government Efficiency have put federal workers like Manning under a microscope.

According to court documents released by the Trump administration in March, more than 24,000 federal workers across 18 government agencies were laid off amid efforts by the government to cut back spending on 'inefficient' government agencies.

While healthcare workers in Fort Peck Indian Helath Service offices weren't targeted in the February layoffs, concerns of job security still ran rampant. With the Department of Government Efficiency's implementation of weekly performance assessments, many at Chief Redstone Health Clinic were left wondering about their futures.

"Many of my co-workers were crying, fearful for their careers," Manning said. "One of my co-workers feared that she would be targeted first, because she had a Hispanic last name."

As the local chapter president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, a nationwide labor union fighting for federal workers rights, many of those working with Manning look to him for support.

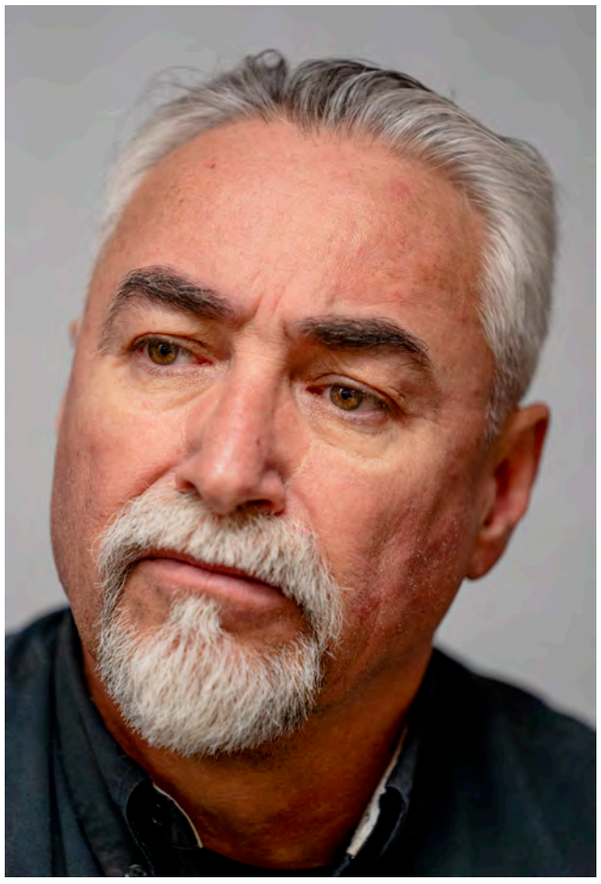
Many were so scared for their jobs that they declined to speak about their experiences due to fear of retaliation.

"These executive orders are creating a hostile work environment," Manning said. "People are scared and intimidated by Trump and his agenda. It's been hell for us federal workers just trying to live."

On March 27, the Health and Human Services Department announced a new round of more than 10,000 layoffs. While IHS wasn't one of the agencies targeted, Manning said that many within the nationwide union would be affected.

Manning is also concerned with the treatment of Native workers as the Trump administration looks to cut back Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts within the government.

Montana Democratic Party Treasurer Lance FourStar,



LEFT: FourStar recalls an experience before the election when he was eating dinner with his wife at Old Town Grill in Wolf Point, when a former sheriff's deputy who is related to him pounded on the window and started saying, "TRUMP, TRUMP, TRUMP." **RIGHT:** Manning is employed by Chief Redstone Health Clinic in Wolf Point. He is the local chapter president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, a nationwide labor union. Many of his co-workers are concerned about their future because of the Trump administration's policies and budget cuts.

an enrolled citizen of the Assiniboine Nation on the Fort Peck reservation, is all too familiar with the concerns that Manning expressed.

Serving as the director of the Montana American Indian Caucus, FourStar works with Native lawmakers within the state legislature, drafting bills that reflect the interests of the state's Indigenous population.

According to FourStar, the caucus was a quick target for representatives at the national level, with several lawmakers identifying it as a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion entity that touted the 'woke' agenda.

In FourStar's mind, the labeling of the Montana American Indian Caucus and other such organizations as 'woke' represents a greater issue within the United States.

"There's a fear tactic that's happening in our nation, and it trickles down to the state legislature, and locally as well," FourStar said. "I know that a lot of people are watching the news and seeing the conversations that people are having. People are being polarized."

FourStar's concerns aren't unfounded. According to a 2022 Pew Research Center report on growing political polarization in America, there is a widespread belief among those who identify as either Republican or Democrat that the opposing party's policy is harmful to the country, with 78% of Republicans and 68% of Democrats holding these beliefs.

FourStar is a sitting member of the Wolf Point City Council. He was in attendance for Manning's public comment. FourStar is no stranger to the harassment that Manning said he felt that day.

During the 2024 election season, FourStar used social media platforms like Facebook while campaigning for a spot in the Montana House of Representatives.

While looking through a Trump-supporting family member's Facebook page, he came to a realization.

"I recognize many of these people, but I have no idea what their views are," FourStar said. "We live in the same community, but unless I go to their business or see them at a game, I'm not going to have an interaction with them."

Wanting to build a bridge and connect with those he usually wouldn't interact with, FourStar decided to begin adding people he believed held political opinions that differed from his own.

> **"I don't know how we get back to decency. It seems like we're slipping away from that more and more day-by-day."**
>
> CHRIS DSCHAAK | WOLF POINT MAYOR

Within minutes, he regretted the decision.

"Right away, a community member started attacking me," FourStar said. "He was calling me these names because I'm a Democratic candidate and I'm the treasurer for the Montana Democratic Party."

As a public member of the Democratic Party, FourStar knew that online harassment was a possibility. This wasn't his first experience with trolling online. Usually, he wouldn't think anything of it, and the messages would usually stop after one or two comments.

When the interaction turned more threatening, FourStar understood that this was unlike anything he'd experienced before.

"He said he was going to do everything he could to make sure that I lost everything," FourStar said. "He would make sure that I'd be left on the corner drunk, asking for spare change."

FourStar admits he struggled with alcoholism for almost three decades. He now holds his five years of sobriety very dear. He knew what it was like to be on the streets with nothing, and it's something he hopes to never experience again.

After more messages threatening FourStar and his family, he filed a report with the Roosevelt County Sheriff's Office, and the messages stopped.

FourStar has never publicly spoken about his experience until now. By doing so, he hopes to shine a light on not only his experience and ensure that it isn't normalized in an increasingly polarized society.

"The best thing I can do is take that experience and try to do something proactive with it," FourStar said. "I can communicate to the public that this behavior is happening because of candidates and campaigns like Donald Trump's. They make it okay for

people to do that, and it's not okay."

Finding safe spaces

Once again, Robert Manning stood at the end of a long table, recounting the night he said he was taunted by Hentges. This time, he was far more calm. The energy in this room was far less intense compared to the previous night at the city council meeting.

There's no large audience to hear his words. Besides his wife, Carrie Manning, the only people that sat around the table are co-workers of Carrie's, eager to listen.

After recounting the story yet again, he sat down as the group digested his words. The silence was only broken by the sound of dust being brushed away from Manning's work uniform, as Carrie jokingly scolded him about his messy appearance.

"Look at how dirty your shirt is," Carrie laughed, wiping Manning's shoulders. "You can't be messy when you're getting your picture taken."

"I had no time to change before I came here," Manning responded. "I had to come straight from work."

For almost two-and-a-half years, Manning has come to this building to get away. Opened in 2023 with the help of a grant through the Spotted Bull Recovery Center, the Safe Place acts as both a functioning center for recovering addicts and as Manning's quiet place.

A licensed addiction counselor, Carrie Manning spearheaded the operation, as well as the creation of Celebrate Recovery, a weekly meeting where sober members of the community gather to acknowledge their shared struggles.

In the days following his confrontation with Hentges, the city council member, Manning experienced a barrage of emails, letters, and ultimatums that left him in a state of panic. So much so, that he now doubts his own memory of the event.

The owners of Wolf City Auto, a NAPA franchise, the store in which the alleged harassment occurred, contacted Manning through a lawyer, challenged Manning's story and provided a video of the incident.

During the city council meeting, Manning recalled the councilman raising his arm with the palm of his hand facing forward, which he saw as a Nazi salute. While there is clear audio of Manning's name being called out as well as the 'MAGA Strong' gesture being visible, there is no footage of a Nazi salute.

The owners of Wolf City Auto were not named during Manning's public comment, but the letter attached detailed that the store and its owners felt that they'd been subjected to unfair and unwanted attention as a result.

In a post shared to Facebook, one of the owners of Wolf City Auto shared the video and, in a lengthy comment, dismissed the event as a "simple and almost friendly interaction" that was knowingly exaggerated by Manning.

"For Rob to say that he won't come into our store because of this incident is silly," the post read. "I post now because it was a false accusation that can cause serious damage to our business and livelihood.

Robert Manning and his wife, Carrie Manning, talk to coworkers at the Spotted Bull Recovery Center about the city council meeting where Manning addressed the council about the confrontation he had at Wolf City Auto. Carrie Manning is on the city council and works at the Spotted Bull Recovery Center, where parents and youth can go for help with recovery.

Lance FourStar rereads "Rich Man's War," the poem Robert Manning handed out at the city council meeting on March 17, 2025. FourStar is the Montana Democratic Party Treasurer and is an enrolled member of the Fort Peck Tribes.

The Wolf City Auto shop in Wolf Point is where Robert Manning had an incident with a Wolf Point City Councilman on March 3, 2025.

> "I'm praying I don't lose everything for coming forward and speaking about what's happening here."
>
> ROBERT MANNING | CHIEF REDSTONE HEALTH CLINIC EMPLOYEE

Ruining our business reputation and questioning our integrity all so you can play the victim is where I have to draw the line."

In a statement released publicly, Manning clarified his comments.

"I did not call the business owners Nazi's, and I sincerely hope that no one took my words that way," the statement said. "If my statement caused any misunderstanding or hurt, I deeply regret that."

While Manning believed that statement would be enough to satisfy the legal issues, something still ate at him; the events of the video still didn't fully match what he remembered. He watched it so many times.

"According to that video, I'm wrong," Manning said. "God help me, is this dementia? I'm worried. My wife is worried. My mind still can't believe that video."

Social media attention

The attention from the Facebook posts were widespread throughout Wolf Point. Many comments accused Manning of fabricating the story, others called into question his position as the union president, and whether or not he could be trusted in the role.

Hentges however has stayed silent. No lawyer messages, no public addresses, not even a social media post. Even during the city council meeting, no indication was given that he denied the event.

For Manning, the moment that he hoped would spark a wider conversation about the state of things in Wolf Point turned against him in a way he could see coming.

"I knew I was going to become a target," Manning said. "Being the union president, I already am. This just made the target that much bigger. I'm praying I don't lose everything for coming forward and speaking about what's happening here."

Even with the threats of legal trouble and questions about his memory of events, Manning said he wouldn't go back in time to avoid the city council meeting. Even if the events he remembered didn't fully match reality, he knew what he felt was real.

"I did not want to hear my name called out and then be flexed on," Manning said. "I did not want to be told 'MAGA Strong.' I still believe that's not normal behavior and should have been brought to the council's attention."

Even after a week as bad as Manning's, there's always light at the end of the tunnel. On March 22, five days after the city council meeting, the Manning's were able to leave Wolf Point behind for a weekend.

After all, they couldn't miss walking their daughter down the aisle.

"This is the thing we've talked about, the things you have to look forward to," Manning said. "There are plenty of good things happening in this world too."

Search for **survival**

Rae Peppers, right, hauls haybales with her husband James Peppers while feeding cattle on their farm on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. Rae Peppers has been leading advocate for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People in Montana.

The Northern Cheyenne tribe creates local solutions to save its people and future from the MMIP crisis

Story by **HOLLY MALKOWSKI**

Photos by **JAMES BENTON**

Content Warming: This story contains themes and details of violence and murder

When Paula Castro reported her 14-year-old daughter, Henny Scott, missing on Dec. 8, 2018, the police denied her an amber alert.

They wouldn't give a reason why. Castro didn't feel like they were taking her seriously.

They still didn't take action when Scott missed Castro's birthday on Dec. 11. That was when Castro knew the situation was dire.

According to a press release from the United States Attorneys Office, Scott was last seen walking out of a residence. She was found deceased 20 days later, on Dec. 28, just 200 yards from that residence.

An examination determined her cause of death as accidental and said she died of hypothermia. It said she had no preexisting trauma and was wearing lightweight clothing despite being outside in the cold. The report states that alcohol use was a significant condition of her death. The attorney's office cannot prove any federal crime was committed, and therefore did not seek any federal charges.

Fighting for political justice

Castro's experience in the struggle for justice and answers isn't unique. Across the reservation, and Indigenous communities nationwide, families with missing loved ones often encounter similar issues, like a lack of urgency and communication from law enforcement. Because of this, the momentum to solve the

Paula Castro feels she never got justice or closure in the death of her daughter, Henny Scott. The police report stated she died of hypothermia. Many in the community, including Castro, believe it was a murder.

problem comes from the community members who band together to help each other during these crises.

Before her death, Scott and Castro had a great relationship.

"We went everywhere together and she was always happy," Castro said. Scott was planning on going into the military and becoming a doctor.

As the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People devastates Native communities like the Tsis tsis'tas, systemic failures have forced the people to take initiative. On the Northern Cheyenne reservation citizens work to raise awareness for MMIP and systemic change through community gatherings and legislative advocacy. Feeling abandoned by both local and national governments, the Northern Cheyenne people continue to rely on each other in the fight to bring their loved ones home.

Local law enforcement struggles

Only the FBI is allowed to investigate cases that occur on tribal reservations, which can be difficult because the bodies are often found just outside of reservation boundaries in bordering cities like Hardin or Billings. Those become county cases.making it difficult for families to report or follow. The overlap of jurisdictions causes officers to defer to others. Often do not thoroughly complete or share reports.

According to the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force Report data from 2023, Indigenous people make up 6.2% of Montana's population, but 30.6% of people reported missing. Of those missing Indigenous people, 68% are female. According to NativeHope.org, about 15% of missing people in Wyoming are Indigenous, half of Montana's percentage. The Montana task force was recently extended for another 10 years, meaning the force will be active until 2033. It was created to improve communication between agencies, identify barriers to the MMIP movement and track data on Montana Indigenous people. There are currently 47 Individuals listed in the missing persons database.

For the Tsis tsis'tas community, these aren't just names in a database. They are friends, siblings, parents, grandparents, spouses and community members.

During his first presidential term that began in 2017, Donald Trump signed an executive order to create a task force known as Operation Lady Justice to assist with Missing and Murdered Indigenous People cases and improve coordination between departments working on these cases, such as local law

LEFT: Advocates for Kaysera Stops Pretty Places wear bright red shirts and necklaces while attending a status hearing at the Big Horn County Courthouse. The necklace depicts an image of Stops Pretty Places, whose remains were found in 2019. **RIGHT:** Rae Peppers spends each afternoon feeding the cattle they raise on their property. This year she is doubling the size of her garden, hoping to raise more food to help those in need in her community.

Allie Peppers hugs her grandfather, James Peppers, after riding her pony, Sweetpea, around her grandparents' farm. She works side by side with them while herding and feeding the cows.

enforcement and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The two-year task force, which consisted of seven members, including two Indigenous women, ended in 2021.

In its reports to the president, the task force praised its work holding listening sessions throughout reservations and border towns nationwide. However, none were held in Montana.

Rae Peppers, who was serving as a Montana representative during that time, said she never saw anything come out of that task force. In fact she considers it a stunt. Other community members hadn't even heard of the task force. During his second term, so far Trump has made no mention of any orders relating to missing Indigenous people.

In fact, the Trump task force was created with little input from stakeholders, according to a public statement from grassroots advocates, which included Northern Cheyenne woman Desi Small-Rodriguez. The statement alleged that advocates, "had no opportunity to take part in the design of the initiative as a whole, much less specific items such as listening session structure, outreach plans, or project leadership."

The statement also went on to say the listening sessions that were held were inadequate and inaccessible, and the cold case review teams failed to make a significant impact on the crisis.

The Northern Cheyenne citizens echo this statement and do not feel like enough has been done by the government to help the missing and murdered epidemic on their own reservation.

Melissa Lonebear shows the location where Kaysera Stops Pretty Places was found in the outskirts of Hardin, less than half a mile from the Northern Cheyenne reservation. Five days after she went missing, she was found behind a bush in someone's backyard.

In the Legislature

Rae Peppers stands on the porch of her bright blue house overlooking a mile of dusty road slicing through a backdrop of trees and 1930s tractors. It's the life she says she wouldn't trade for anything. She said working on the farm is an escape for her, otherwise she is constantly thinking about all the missing people from her community.

Peppers served for the Montana Legislature, representing District 41 from 2013 to 2021. She advocated heavily for change for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People and served a large role getting Hanna's Act, an important bill regarding MMIP, passed.

Hanna's Act is a Montana bill that authorizes the Department of Justice to assist in the investigation of missing persons cases. This was influential in MMIP cases because prior to this, cases were handled completely by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or local law enforcement, which caused jurisdiction issues and confusion. The act aimed to create better communication and an efficient system for sharing information.

Hanna's Act is named after Hanna Harris, a 21-year-old woman who was murdered near the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations in 2013. The act also forced the Department of Justice to hire a missing person specialist, Brian Frost. According to Peppers, Frost came to the reservation once to introduce himself, but she has not heard of him being there since.

Peppers said that passing Hanna's Act in 2019 was extremely difficult and she experienced

RIGHT: Rae, James, and Allie Peppers herd a mother and her calf through a gate on their farm. Rae Peppers, a former state representative, has spent much of her career fighting for MMIP issues.

racism and pushback every step of the way. She refused to stop fighting until it was passed. The bill was brought up on the first day of a legislative session in 2019 and did not pass until the last day of the session after many delays like losing funding and missed deadlines.

Peppers said she was shocked at the blatant racism she encountered from other politicians, some calling the act "An Indian Bill" and therefore dismissing its relevance. During this time, she had to remind other Indigenous representatives, and herself, of how strong they are.

"Wipe your tears away and don't ever let them see you fucking cry," Peppers said.

Though Peppers was not re-elected for office in 2020, her work did not stop. Peppers is extremely involved in Northern Cheyenne and is actively working on getting her masters in Native American Studies with a focus on the Missing and Murdered phenomenon.

Peppers is the Board Treasurer of Pretty Eagle Woman Resources, a nonprofit run by Yolanda Fraser focused on raising awareness for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People crisis and bringing support to those who have been affected by it. She also helps with Star, a community-led search and rescue group put together to help find missing people.

Peppers is a full-time financial assistant at the Northern Cheyenne Development Corporation. She works from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. and then she goes home and she and her husband, James Peppers, go to work on the farm. The two, along with their granddaughter Allie Peppers and her pony Sweetpea, feed and water the cows and move them around to help with calving.

The Peppers said they have it down to a system so they can handle the farm, just the two of them, but Allie gets to name all the animals. They live mostly off of what they can grow themselves and just recently expanded their garden so they might be able to help other community members due to the rising prices from inflation and the unknown effect of the tariffs.

In the back of the lively house is a small office, the walls are lined with diplomas and certificates. She said her focus in her dissertation is specifically on predators and people who think they can come onto the reservation to commit a crime because of the lack of law enforcement.

"My research is on predatory targeting. Our women are targeted because the reservations are grey areas," Peppers said. "They know they can come on here and do whatever they do because our laws are so poor, especially in Indian Country."

She hopes to complete her dissertation by the end of the year and plans to run for office again in the future because she feels she can still do more.

Peppers said the fight is within the people who are still looking for answers. She doesn't believe the government will handle the problem, but the people will.

She said she is concerned about the lack of response from the tribal government and the BIA. The agencies officers are not part of the community and did not make any effort to integrate themselves, she said. The bureau also recently cut over 100 employees due to the drop in federal funding.

The tribe has been involved in several lawsuits concerning policing on the reservation already and stories swirl the community of police brutality and law enforcement covering up evidence. As frustration with law enforcement grows, the community becomes more determined to seek justice and demand accountability.

One of these organizations is Star: a search and rescue team that is run by the community, ranges from between 20-50 people who communicate via Facebook, according to LeVonna Littlebird-Graham.

There is a common meeting

Yolanda Fraser smudges herself to purify the body, soul, and mind during an MMIP event in Missoula. Having lost so many family members, Fraser wants future generations of her people to hold the flame for the movement and continue to fight for the safety of the community.

Melissa Lonebear, center, wears a red shirt advocating for justice in an MMIP case about Kaysera Stops Pretty Places. She and members of Pretty Eagle Woman Resources attended a status hearing at the Big Horn County Courthouse in Hardin on April 1, 2025. Kaysera was murdered five years ago, and the courts have yet to prosecute anyone for the murder.

Rae Peppers has been fighting for her community for years. She was a driving force for passing Hanna's Act, which created a position in the Montana Department of Justice to investigate all Missing and Murdered Indigenous cases. Peppers is working on a Ph.D. in MMIP issues and plans to continue advocacy work for the movement.

place and from there the groups spread out and begin to search. Often, they are found and returned home. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Overnight into March 28, the search group found a young woman who had been missing for three days, deceased. Littlebird-Graham said you could feel the heaviness throughout the community because of this news. She and her family were up late into the night helping to look for her.

On the Northern Cheyenne reservation, this happens quite often. Littlebird-Graham said typically the searches do not end tragically, and most people are found and returned home by the search group.

The tribe does not have its own police force currently, instead relying on the BIA, an agency in the U.S. Department of the Interior. The community members are dissatisfied with its law enforcement program.

BIA officers on the reservation refused to sit for an interview and said all questions must be directed to the BIA media contact, who never responded.

Kaysera Stops Pretty Places went missing just 10 days after her 18th birthday. Her body was found five days later in the neighborhood where she was last seen.

Stops Pretty Places was the granddaughter of Northern Cheyenne citizen Yolanda Fraser. When Pretty Places passed, Fraser started a nonprofit called Pretty Eagle Women Resources in her memory. The nonprofit raises awareness for MMIP through community efforts and outreach and provides support and advocacy for the families of those affected by the crisis.

Fraser works with Peppers and others to put on events like walks and rallies. Fraser was also appointed to the task force as the representative from the Tsis tsis'tas.

Fraser, Peppers and others sat outside the Hardin County Courthouse on April 1 for the status hearings of criminal endangerment charges related to the cases of Stops Pretty Places and Selena Not Afraid, a teenager who was murdered in the bordertown of Hardin in 2020. Afterwards, some of the group went to Stops Pretty Places' memorial, which is near where her body was found.

"I don't think policies should take precedence over someone's life," Fraser said.

When Henny Scott was missing, her mother Paula Castro did everything in her power to find her, even if the police didn't take her seriously.

Frustrated with law enforcement, Castro eventually formed her own search group to look for Scott and found her quickly outside the residence near Muddy Creek where she was last seen.

Castro said she had asked the police to look for her at the residence about two weeks prior and never heard if they did or not. She said even after Scott's body was found, the residence was never taped off and people continued to freely go in and out.

The police told Castro they could not move the body until the morning and someone would sit with Scott until then. She said she saw the police officer drive away from the scene and asked if she could stay with Scott so she wasn't alone. She was denied access.

Castro said Scott was covered in bruises and clearly had a broken nose and scratches across her chest, like someone had reached out to grab her. When Castro went to pick up Scott's belongings, there was a winter coat.

Castro said the police would not tell her how long Scott had been out there or how long she had been dead. Castro also mentioned a Snapchat video she had seen of some teenagers jumping Scott at that same house that she told the police about, but they did not include it in the case. She said that throughout the time Scott was missing, the police barely contacted her and she felt like she was left in the dark.

"I was just going crazy through that whole time and I was like 'Well what's going on? What do they know?" Castro said.

She said even at the funeral home she wasn't allowed to bathe or dress Scott.

Tragically, her experience is one of many. Community members often find the bodies of friends and loved ones before law enforcement does. For the Tsis tsis'tas tribe, the community efforts are life saving.

Standing alo

RIGHT: Julie Mitchell is pictured at her home in Great Falls. During the 1940s and for decades after, Mitchell's mother lived on Hill 57 in Great Falls where many Little Shell people endured isolation, racism, and poverty.
BELOW: Chairman Gerald Gray opens gates leading to the Little Shell tribe's new arbor in Great Falls. The Little Shell tribe, historically known as landless Indians, now owns 800 acres in Great Falls.

The Little Shell tribe seeks self-sufficiency through economic development

STORY BY **ROSE SHIMBERG** PHOTOS BY **OWEN PREECE**

The view from her dining room, which looks out toward a golden-brown hill against a clear blue sky at the western edge of Great Falls, holds a deeper meaning for Julie Mitchell.

"I can see our history from our window," she said.

The site, known as Hill 57, is where citizens of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, including Mitchell's mother, lived in poverty for generations. Segregated from the wider Great Falls community, they were subjected to vicious racism and denied basic necessities, including medical treatment.

"My mom used to say that they settled there because of the sunset," she said. "It was so beautiful there."

Beyond Hill 57, there is something bigger on the horizon. It's a large, flat-topped mountain: Mount Royal. It is the site of a planned multi-million-dollar resort and event center; a project citizens hope will strengthen the tribe's presence in Great Falls.

Mitchell's dining room now has a clear view of her tribe's future.

Since winning its century-long battle for federal recognition in 2019, the Little Shell tribe has leaned heavily into economic development in an effort to reduce its reliance on federal funding. It's a goal that tribal administrators consider increasingly urgent since the re-election of President Donald Trump. While some are wary about the rapid pace of expansion, hopes are high that economic projects can catapult the tribe to its ultimate goal— complete self-sufficiency.

In his office in Great Falls, Little Shell Chairman Gerald Gray picked up a small, framed photo of himself and other tribal leaders standing behind former President Joe Biden. It was 2023, and Biden had just signed an executive order strengthening tribal sovereignty, giving tribes more freedom in allocating federal funds and redesigning programs to reflect trust in tribal decision-making.

"Trump just rescinded it," Gray said.

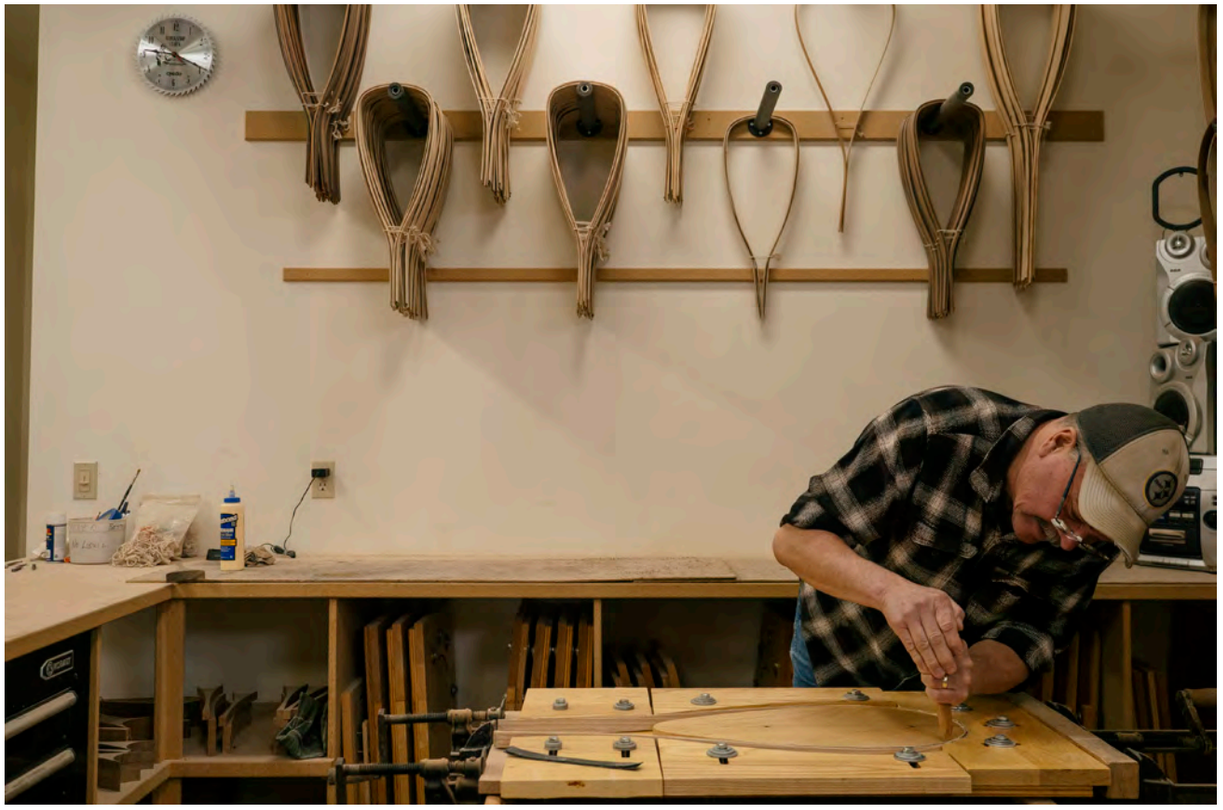
Gifts from other tribes hung on the walls, bestowed to the Little Shell after its recognition. The official document recognizing the tribe, signed by Donald Trump in 2019, hung on an inner wall. The irony of the situation was not lost on Chairman Gray— the man who had granted their long-awaited sovereignty now threatens to strip it away.

Having held his office since 2012, Chairman Gray is often seen as the face of the tribe. He's a businessman, having worked in research and development at media agency G&G Advertising for more than 20 years. Leveraging this experience, he aims to lead the tribe to economic success.

"When our economic stuff takes off, [we'll] just tell the government we don't need [funding]," he said. "Thank you, but give it to a tribe that really needs it."

Trump's early-term rhetoric, Gray said, put tribal citizens on edge. The first few weeks of the new administration saw a frenzy of executive orders that sowed chaos throughout Indian Country. This included potential layoffs at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service, as well as cuts, or pauses, to funding for tribal programs. Although many of the actions have been pulled back, blocked or halted temporarily, the chaos continues, and tribal citizens remain uneasy.

For instance, if a proposed federal funding freeze had remained in effect, work on the Little Shell's



TOP: Craftsman Mark Klette hammers components into a wooden form at Blue Ribbon Nets in Bozeman. This is one of the first steps in making a fishing net by hand.
ABOVE: Jerrid Gray, project manager for Little Shell Tribal Enterprises, shows off a net featuring a dreamcatcher pattern that he helped design. After the Little Shell tribe took over the business in 2020, they began incorporating biodegradable materials into their nets and marking them with the dreamcatcher motif.

> "If this money starts going back to the members, you're not relying on the government or anything like that. There's no thumb pressing down."
>
> COLTON GRAY | YELLOWSTONE ROCK

first housing development would have ceased. Its health clinic would have shut down. More abstractly, the freeze represented a disregard for tribal sovereignty, setting a dangerous precedent.

"We want to be self-sufficient. But it's going to take a little bit of time," Gray said. "We need to still rely a bit on the federal government [and] hold them to the [treaty] obligations they agreed to. And when they don't do that, it tramples all over [our] sovereignty."

The Little Shell announced its resort plans in December 2024. Though permitting will take several years, it's projected to bring in more than $65 million in annual sales and $9 million in annual tax revenue. It will include a casino, bowling alley, indoor waterpark and a 9,700-person capacity arena. The completed project is expected to provide more than 430 permanent jobs.

Gray is confident that the resort will attract tourism to Great Falls and benefit all residents, further legitimizing the tribe in a community he says is still laced with discrimination.

Rebecca Ingham, the executive director of Great Falls, Montana Tourism, said she first heard about the resort through the December press release. She said the project seems to align with the community's strategic initiatives to grow its travel industry, presenting an opportunity to host entertainment, trade shows and larger conventions in Great Falls.

"There's a great need in Great Falls for available convention space," she said. "The resort does open up the opportunity to bring additional people into our community."

Open for business

While the resort is the tribe's biggest project yet, it's not its first business endeavor. Since 2020, the tribe has steadily expanded and diversified its portfolio under Little Shell Tribal Enterprises, LLC, which manages smaller businesses including a lakeside recreation area, a federal contracting business and travertine quarries.

"We have four or five different opportunities in the mix," said Brian Adkins, the Economic Development Director for Little Shell Tribal Enterprises. "Probably two or three of them will happen this year."

The funding, he said, comes from the Pembina Settlement, a class action lawsuit stemming from the U.S. Department of the Interior's mismanagement of trust funds. While the money was granted in 1985 to descendants of the Pembina Band of Chippewa Indians, the Little Shell tribe couldn't access its share, $500,000, because it wasn't federally recognized.

"Here's the good news," Adkins said. "It sat in a trust account where the United States government invested it. And [by] the year 2000 it had grown to several million."

According to Chairman Gray, all of the tribe's current holdings are turning a small profit, but it's still feeding back into operating costs. He hopes revenue can soon support a non-discretionary fund for tribal citizens with fewer restrictions than federal dollars.

Like most tribes, the Little Shell still relies heavily on the federal government. The BIA currently funds their government and enrollment, and the Housing and Urban Development supports its housing program, including a major development in the works at the base of Hill 57. The USDA powers its popular food sovereignty program, which is attracting a line of cars around the building less than a year after its formation. Adkins believes returning these services to the tribe is a wise decision in uncertain times.

"Anything that was funded federally is something that should be used with caution, because it may not be there," he said. "The majority of tribes rely on a lot of federal government money. We want to be in a position where our economic development does that for us."

A feeling of home

Not every business venture has worked out. Little Shell Pet Products, a water supplier for home aquariums that the tribe acquired in 2023, quickly shut its doors due to unreliable retail partnerships. The tribe also acquired a gym in Great Falls but eventually sold it when its free tribal membership model didn't turn a profit.

Cheyenne LaFountain is the former manager of Little Shell Pet Products. Promised a leadership position at one of the tribe's future acquisitions, she was given a receptionist job to support herself in the meantime. Despite the change in position, LaFountain said she enjoys working for the tribe and supporting its mission of self-sufficiency.

"All it takes is the [federal] government to say, 'Well, we're not gonna give you that grant,' and it can shut the whole system down," she said. "What Gerald's trying to build is important."

The Little Shell tribe was officially landless for much of its history after refusing to sign a 19th century reservation treaty. While offices are located in Great Falls, the tribe now has citizens in all 50 states.

Without a reservation, LaFountain said, locally concentrated citizens have become a huge part of the Great Falls community. But when her father grew up in the area, she said, the intense racism he experienced led him to suppress his Little Shell identity.

"[He was] ashamed to be Native American for a long time," she said. "He wasn't immersed in that part of our culture."

Noel Yelvington is another tribal employee with a long family history in Great Falls. Her mother grew up in a small house on Hill 57 with 13 siblings.

ABOVE: Luke Adkins, left, helps Colton Gray load large blocks of travertine bound for a Little Shell owned processing facility in Idaho. Blocks like this one can weigh as much as 20,000 pounds. **RIGHT:** Colton Gray, one of two employees at Yellowstone Rock, holds a red can of red spray paint used to mark imperfections in blocks of travertine before they leave the Little Shell's quarry in Gardiner.

Beyond racism from non-Natives, she said, Little Shell citizens faced discrimination from other tribes before they were recognized.

Yelvington has worked as the tribe's public health nurse for six months, organizing cooking and exercise classes, prevention programs, and naloxone (Narcan) trainings. She said the tribal programs that have sprung up are building a stronger sense of community and identity, which is difficult considering the Little Shell are scattered with no reservation to serve as a tribal home.

"Now that we're federally recognized and able to do these programs, people are coming together," she said.

Colton Gray grew up outside of Great Falls, and struggled to connect to his Little Shell identity when he was younger. To him, the resort center and other projects in Great Falls, which include an arbor built over the summer and a patchwork land base surrounding Hill 57, are important steps in connecting the dispersed tribe.

"It'll give us a bit more of a feeling of home," he said.

Colton is Chairman Gray's nephew and one of two employees at the tribe's travertine quarry in Gardiner. Travertine, formed in Yellowstone's geothermal landscape, is a soft architectural stone in pure white and rose-colored varieties. In 2020, the tribe bought the company Yellowstone Rock and has been the only domestic travertine supplier ever since.

While Colton prefers to stay out of politics, he's concerned about the direction the new federal administration is heading and what it could mean for tribes. Economic development is necessary, he said, to ensure a sustainable future.

"If this money starts going back to the members, you're not relying on the government or anything like that," he said. "There's no thumb pressing down."

His cousin, Jerrid Gray, is the

chairman's son and project manager for multiple businesses owned by the tribe. On a snowy Monday morning, he arrived at a workshop outside of Bozeman and helped craftsman Mark Klette shovel the driveway at Blue Ribbon Nets, the two men joking around as they worked.

The Little Shell tribe bought the American-made fly-fishing net business in 2021. While Klette stayed on from previous ownership, Jerrid oversees creative direction, putting a Little Shell touch on the products.

"I wanted to design the bottom to resemble a dreamcatcher," Jerrid said, holding out one of the creations he updated to include a biodegradable net, reflecting values of sustainability.

Though Jerrid is deeply concerned about the Trump administration's threats to tribal sovereignty, he's hopeful about his tribe's momentum.

"The fight has been for so long to even get recognized," he said. "I think we've been like a roller coaster, slowly puttering up and super close to that pinnacle where everything [will] fall into place. That might just be my optimism, but I really hope that's what happens."

'I don't want them to fail'

While recognition and resulting development are building a home for the Little Shell, it has brought with it a small but vocal group of dissidents, according to Chairman Gray. Tribal enrollment surged post-2019, and some people were upset when they didn't meet the criteria. Others want direct payment from the federal funding the tribe now receives each year.

"We can't give them money because the federal government doesn't allow that," Chairman Gray said. He said funding is closely monitored. In the face of claims that the tribe is mismanaging federal money, Gray cites years of clean audits.

The tribe receives $480,000 in federal money annually. Gray said if the tribe were to disburse this money, it would amount to $75 per person. It is best used to support projects from which all citizens can benefit, he said.

Still, posting every business decision the tribe makes gives opponents more ammo to use against the tribe's leaders, he said.

"Anything we do, they turn into a negative," Gray said.

According to Gray, the council has had to take several measures in response to threats from members and non-members, including locking its offices and muting virtual comments on Zoom at quarterly meetings.

But to Julie Mitchell's daughter, Rylee, that step has made her feel like she has less of a voice from afar. While attending tribal council meetings remotely from

RIGHT: Rylee Mitchell, an enrolled citizen of the Little Shell tribe, stands with her dog Rider outside her home in Butte. Rylee is concerned that the tribe is moving too fast and lacks transparency in its business dealings.
FAR RIGHT: Cheyenne LaFountain was the manager at Little Shell Pet Products until the business was shuttered in 2024. Promised a leadership role in a future Little Shell Tribal Enterprises business, she now works as a receptionist for the tribe in Great Falls.

The Little Shell Tribe was federally recognized in 2019 during Donald Trump's first administration. Little Shell Chairman Gerald Gray keeps a framed copy of this document in his office in Great Falls.

Chairman Gerald Gray makes a phone call outside of the Little Shell Miijim Center, which houses its food distribution program, in Great Falls. Chairman Gray is on the phone constantly communicating with tribal citizens, council members and business partners.

Butte, Rylee Mitchell said that while her comments weren't muted, they were sent through a moderator who could choose whether or not to share them.

Mitchell is aware of tribal business ventures because she stays involved in the meetings and addresses confusion with the chairman directly. But many citizens don't take that initiative. She believes efforts like including tribal businesses on an easy-to-find website could help build trust.

"It's just as important for us to be self-reliant," she said, adding that it's also important to be transparent.

While Mitchell supports the council's goal of self-sufficiency, she's concerned about the pace of the tribe's expansion.

"My biggest fear is they're pushing too hard, too fast," she said.

On top of their economic efforts, the tribe recently announced its intention to take over control of its health clinic from Indian Health Services this summer. Having seen other tribes try to do the same and fail, eventually asking IHS to take them back, Mitchell doesn't want this to happen to the Little Shell.

"I just don't want them to fail," she said.

It's better to be deliberate than hasty when pursuing economic development, said Ian Record, a Washington D.C.-based consultant who has worked with more than 100 tribal nations. If a tribe's initial economic development initiatives and specific businesses fail, the community can then be overly risk-averse moving forward.

While Record hasn't worked with the Little Shell directly, he said that as a newly recognized tribe, it has a clean slate to work from, rather than having to clean up from prior, failed approaches. This opens up all kinds of possibilities for self-determined economic development. The foundational work they do now is critically important to their long-term success.

"You want to make sure that whatever direction you take [is] informed by the tribal citizens, it's supported by them," he said. "If an economic development initiative doesn't have all its ducks in a row, both in terms of having the community on board and having the right people in the room driving it, it tends to fall apart at some point."

Not fast enough

Back in Great Falls, Julie Mitchell has a similar mindset: she believes her tribe can become self-sufficient if everyone has a voice in the decision-making process.

"We can become self-sufficient if we go the right way," she said. "If we can work together, and everyone can agree."

While citizens can express their opinions at quarterly meetings, she believes going a step further and putting out notices directly seeking community input could make people feel like their concerns are heard. Doing so may also address the anger that appears online.

Mitchell is enthusiastic about the planned resort and the job opportunities expected to follow as long as the tribe holds true to its promise to hire qualified tribal employees. In her opinion, a Tribal Employment Rights Office would ensure equal access to opportunities.

Record also emphasized that while it can be hard to find qualified tribal citizens for jobs, it's important to invest in promising individuals and support the education and training they need to give back to their community— and then hire them for critical roles so they can do just that.

He said the tribe should look to hire the best people in the initial phase. "Some of which may be non-Native," he said. "But that's not where you want to stay. You want to ultimately be growing your tribal citizens' capacity to lead in all of those key economy-building roles."

Julie Mitchell believes the council is doing the best it can in navigating a tough transition.

"When you're on council, you have to be the type of leader that helps everybody," she said. "It doesn't matter what they do or what they say to you, just swallow your pride, bite your tongue, help them tomorrow."

Rolling through the golden farmlands outside of Great Falls, Chairman Gray pulled up at an unassuming gate alongside Stuckey Road.

Stepping out of his idling Corolla in a black jacket, jeans and a belt buckle bearing the letter "G," he went to work on the lock, wind ruffling his hair.

To him, the vast expanse on the other side was a triumph— the tribe, landless for centuries, now manages more than 800 acres, a testament to its growth.

Driving into the expanse, the arbor stood on a windy hilltop with a clear view of Mount Royal, a specter of the event center already on the horizon. A trio of horses trotted and grazed in the distance.

Here, the chairman exuded confidence in his plan to lead the tribe to self-sufficiency, chuckling at the thought of the tribe moving too fast on economic development.

"We're not moving fast enough," he said.

The powwow planned for this summer will be the biggest yet, he said, looking out at the brand-new pillars. Citizens from near and far will camp in the sprawling fields, on land that's finally their own.

Laughing good-naturedly, he got back in his car.

"We've got to catch up to everyone else," he said.

Protecting education

Amid constant federal changes, the Chippewa Cree tribe on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation must navigate the future of funding for its schools

STORY BY **SAV CHAVEZ**

PHOTOS BY **SOPHIA EVANS**

When students walk into the cafeteria at Rocky Boy Elementary School, they are greeted by a salad bar with fresh vegetables, a warm meal that was prepped in the school's kitchen and a woman named Kathryn Baldwin. Often referred to as Ko-kom, meaning "grandma" in Cree, Baldwin greets the busy bodies as they dance around the room with their cultural meal of boiled meat and bannock, requested by a school board member.

One-by-one, the small voices of the children thank Baldwin as the classes circulate through the small cafeteria. The smell of boiled beef, as bison was not accessible for this meal, and bannock filled the room. Giggles and squeals fill the air as the kids sit with their class to enjoy the meal Baldwin helped make.

The Rocky Boy schools work hard to make a cultural meal, like this, once every month for students. On March 18, 2025, Baldwin arrived at the school at 6 a.m. to prepare the "juneberry soup," which was made with blueberries, simmered in a large vat. This meal would be fed to all 500 of the students.

This is significant on different fronts. For now, it's the fact that the school has the resources to feed its entire student body, all of which are on the free and reduced lunch program. Under this program, Rocky Boy schools can feed more than 500 students twice a day and provide snacks for the classes and after-school programs. Statewide, about 51% of students are eligible for free lunches at schools, which is designed for students from lower income households.

The free lunch program is just one of the identified targets that President Donald Trump's administration has focused on as it seeks to cut billions of dollars from the federal budget. In its first 100 days, the administration has caused a stir in the education field with program cuts, canceled grants and an ever present threat to gut, if not

FAR LEFT: Cook Kathryn Baldwin stirs a large batch of blueberries while making a soup for a traditional lunch served at the Rocky Boy schools. The soup would normally be made with Juneberrys. The school also served bannock and boiled meat and vegetables as part of their cultural meal.
RIGHT: Kerry Murphy lines up her preschool class after recess at Rocky Boy Elementary School. In 2022, Murphy graduated from a 14-month language program through the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization nonprofit organization and has taught Cree since.

Krystal FourSouls was a student in the Rocky Boy School District and has been principal of the high school for two years.

completely dismantle, the Department of Education.

While many of the fears have yet to come true, educators across the country are preparing for the worst case scenarios. On Montana's reservations, administrators are still hoping for the best.

The free and reduced lunch program is federally funded and with proposed federal budget cuts, there is a risk to not just Rocky Boy students. The free and reduced lunch program is funded by the Department of Agriculture, a department that nixed $1 billion from two programs that helped food banks and school meal programs in March.

"I know we are going to be able to keep going, we are. It's a really tough topic and it's one I have been avoiding having a conversation on because I'm emotional about it," Krystal FourSouls, principal at Rocky Boy High School, said.

When the Department of Agriculture cut $1 billion, it directly affected the Local Food for Schools program, which started under President Joe Biden in 2021. The program helped schools and child care facilities buy from local farms to give them an opportunity to purchase fresh food and use smaller producers rather than rely on large corporations. It lost $600 million in the cut.

Losing the numbers

Earlier this year, the National Center for Educational Statistics laid off all but three of its 130 staffers, a move that could put funding for vulnerable, reservation-based schools in jeopardy.

The center was established in 1867 to collect and analyze data on education trends across the country, including student academic success and teacher productivity. Over time, the results gathered by the center have become crucial to determine the amount of funding that should be directed to Title I and rural schools. In Montana, there are 296 school districts considered rural and many of that fit the Title I determination. This includes 31 schools located on Montana's tribal reservations. Public schools have not yet been directly affected by President Donald Trump, although many have been hit with the fallout from canceled grants and budgets cuts. However, it is no secret that the administration has targeted public education by removing staff from the Department of Education and by reducing grants.

On reservations, which operate on land held in trust by the federal government, there is minimal, if any, tax base. Trust land is generally not taxable. The statistics center provides the necessary numbers that determine the amount of aid a school receives based on the number of students, which can fluctuate every year.

Without a center to update the numbers, schools may see a decrease in funding. For instance, Rocky Boy is already seeing a 4% dip in its funding due to inflation. The aid covers instructional supplies, mental health counseling, library books and more. It also funds 38 of the 104 staff at the schools, which is all the central staff for the district. This includes all custodial staff, the district's Cree immersion teachers, special education tutors, clerks, administrative assistants in both schools, the dean of students and more.

Stone Child College lost two grants: One for technical reasons in its grant report; the other because the program was stonewalled from the funder.

"It's very scary right now," FourSouls said. "I was almost in tears. I had to turn the TV off because my mind is wondering what's going to happen to us? What's going to happen with the kids?"

She was referring to the executive order that Trump signed in March calling to dismantle the Department of Education. Before that, the move was a threat that had been hanging over the head of administrators since 2024.

"I have poured so much into these kids, the teachers have poured so much into them, what's going to happen to them?" FourSouls said.

The executive order did not officially shut down the department as that would take an act of congress, but it is another slash at the public education system in America. The order came a few weeks after the Department of Government Efficiency cut about $800 million from the Department of Education, staff and faculty at schools across the nation are feeling threatened.

Home grown

FourSouls grew up in the Rocky Boy Public School system, then she attended Stone Child College to pursue her degree in early education. She taught at the Head Start program, working with children from ages two to five. She moved her way up into her position now as principal of Rocky Boy High School, which she has held for two years.

"I'm here as a tool to help my students, my staff. I'm here to make sure things run accordingly. I don't believe in authority, I believe in compassion," she said.

While she has these fears, she has trust in the district's superintendent and believes

in his plan to keep education on the reservation safe and accessible for all the students.

"Our superintendent has a really high regard for our kids, for our school, for our teachers and for our way of life," she said.

Preparing for the worst and hoping for the best

For Voyd St. Pierre, Rocky Boy Public Schools superintendent, planning for the future means looking at Impact Aid funds. Impact Aid is available to schools that are located on federal lands, including tribal reservations. St. Pierre said the district has managed to conserve these federal dollars into a backup account that should help stave off effects from budget cuts, at least for a while.

"Impact Aid has a hand in every one of our 11 budgets," St. Pierre said. "If we were not getting any Impact Aid for the next two years, we would survive. We wouldn't have any problems meeting payroll, upgrading and maintaining because we have that reserve in the bank right now, but that's our reliance."

Of the 42 school districts in Montana that receive Impact Aid funds, Rocky Boy Public Schools are the fifth highest recipient, amounting to $5.5 million. Impact Aid brings in a total of about $85 million to Montana in 64 schools. The aid makes up about 45-50% of the school's annual budget.

The reserve of funds has been slowly growing over the past 15 years, leaving the high school with $3 million and the elementary with $7 million to last on if the aid was gone. For the past five years, the schools took 20% of the funds they receive from the aid and put it into the reserve.

Because the reservation is on federal land, the amount of taxable land is small compared to surrounding towns. For the 2025 taxable valuation, Rocky Boy sits at the bottom with $205,741 for both the elementary school and high school, while neighboring towns like Havre and Box Elder both break $1 million, Havre receiving nearly $24 million for its elementary school and more than $27 million for the high school.

Fourth grade teacher Bonnie Rosette assists a student working on a sentence structure exercise during class at the Rocky Boy Elementary School.

"If the funds run out, we would have to start cutting positions and programs. All nonessential positions would be cut, programs would be cut and then we would have to look at staffing position cuts. This would create larger classroom sizes," he said.

According to the National Center of Education Statistics, Rocky Boy Schools has a student-teacher ratio of just over 14-to-1 during the 2023-24 school year. St. Pierre said, should the district lose its Impact Aid, a classroom could increase to about 25 students. The schools already struggle to fill positions and find substitute teachers which leaves teachers with little time for emergencies and ailments. The loss of any instructor would be devastating to the remaining staff.

> "What do we do when there is no time to plan, no time to think."
>
> BONNIE ROSETTE | FOURTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER

The Rocky Boy's reservation has a 25% teacher turnover rate. The turnover rate for Montana is 9% of full-time teachers leave every year. In the state, nearly 31% for first year teachers and more than 27% leave within their first five years.

"We used to get 15 applications at a time. Now we are lucky to get one or two," St. Pierre said. "Everyone wants to teach in Bozeman, Missoula, those urban areas."

Battling in the classroom

While her position at the school is not currently at risk, fourth grade teacher Bonnie Rosette thinks about her students every day.

"All of these changes, all of these mandates are going to affect them [the students]," Rosette said. "Preparing by supporting each other is all we can do right now."

Rosette has been at the school for five years, after taking a break from the teacher preparation program at Stone Child College. The break was originally to take time to reflect and ground herself, but quickly she found herself spending time in local libraries learning more about public education.

She went through old constitutions and learned how superintendents in each county were elected and where each school was planned to be built and on what land it was going to reside on.

"If I didn't quit my job and I didn't go into researching, I wouldn't have understood all of this about education," Rosette said. "We had issues in the history of education, we've always had issues."

Rosette, a first-generation college graduate, now goes through her day feeling an array of emotions when she thinks about what could be happening in D.C. She, among many others, feel a heavy anxiety blanketing over them, an anxiety that has led children to begin asking questions about federal policies. Still, she

Middle school students at Rocky Boy Elementary School play basketball during lunch recess. Students at the school are at risk of losing extracurricular activities and the free and reduced lunch program if the Trump administration were to dismantle the Department of Education.

LEFT: Stone Child College President Cory Sangrey-Billy stands in the skywalk of the tribal college on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation. Stone Child College was chartered in 1984 and now offers bachelor and associate degree programs in 19 areas of study. **CENTER:** Rocky Boy School District Superintendent Voyd St. Pierre stands in the foyer of the high school before attending a board of trustees meeting. St. Pierre has worked for the district for 35 years and works with the National Association for Federally Impacted Schools and the Indian Impact Schools of Montana. **RIGHT:** Clintanna Colliflower has worked as the education department head at Stone Child College for the past two years.Prior to her work at the college, she worked for Rocky Boy Public Schools.

feels optimistic.

"Native people have always been resilient," she said. "People have gone through difficult times in life and continue to be resilient. At the same time, I find it to be very detrimental for rural spaces. What options are there when there are no more options."

As her classroom filled with the small voices of fourth grade students asking for help on their assignments, Rosette thought about what the future of education might look like after the next four years. Working close with students with Individualized Education Program plans, she tries to offer the additional help that may be needed while pushing through the storm of questions that clogs her mind.

Individualized programs are designated for students who require tailored teaching for specific classes. They are designed by a team of school administrators, educators and the students' parents.

Rosette works with students in language arts, focusing on nouns, adjectives and verbs, to make sure the tailored lesson plans are followed for each student. In March she walked her students from classroom-to-classroom, taking them to learn their next subject. She thinks about the privilege teachers don't have: time.

"What do we do when there is no time to plan, no time to think. I feel sometimes teachers are defeated too, and they just think 'Well, whatever happens, happens,'" Rosette said. "We need to start planning for potentials. I wonder how can I be of service? How can I help outside the classroom?"

The attack on education isn't solely felt within the Rocky Boy Public Schools, but at Stone Child College. With two grants already out the door, confusion and worry continues to rise at the college as faculty begin to plan their worst-case scenarios and what to do if they happen.

"There is nothing we can do at this moment," Cory Sangrey-Billy, president of Stone Child College, said. "It's scary, but I am choosing to be optimistic."

Feeling ignored

Among the cuts to the Rocky Boy's reservation district include a $357,000 grant from the National Institute of Food and Culture, which was lost in March. Under Trump's executive order targeting diversity programs, the grant included the word "equity" and

Chontay Standing Rock, center, leads a singing group during Rocky Boy High School's Language and Culture Day. Standing Rock and fellow high school graduate Cedric Belcourt returned on Language and Culture Day to teach young men songs and share stories about the opportunities singing has presented to them.

Noelle Wright serves herself from the cafeteria's salad bar during lunchtime at the Rocky Boy Elementary School. Wright was in a preschool Cree immersion program last year before starting kindergarten this year.

had been flagged. This grant supported 11 students at the college who were enrolled in a science, technology, engineering and mathematics related program with their tuition and fees, some receiving a stipend as well.

Eric Shulund, math professor at Stone Child College of 21 years and grant coordinator, said the program has managed to cover the students' semester fees and the college is financing the stipend amount with money from the American Indian College Fund. Without this aid, administrators fear the students could drop out.

Stone Child has received the grant for more than 20 years according to Shulund, who has been running it for 16 years. The removal of the grant was unexpected as they were given no notice.

"Business services logged into ASAP [Automated Standard Application for Payments] and on there you can see a list of all the grants we're getting funding from. Well, our grant just wasn't there anymore," Shulund said.

He received an email in March from the people in charge of the program stating that the first tribal meeting, which would require Shulund's attendance to comply with grant requirements, was canceled and would resume in the near future. There has not been a meeting since.

The early education program has also felt stonewalled by the government. They have received no updates on the future of the grant program. The meetings, held monthly in Washington, D.C., were for the school's personal grant coordinator to meet with the grant managers in the capitol to check in.

"We usually have monthly meetings like clockwork but recently they have been continuously canceled," Department Head for Education Clintanna Colliflower said. "We don't know for sure whether we will be receiving the grants for our third cycle or not yet. We usually would know by now."

Originally from Fort Belknap, Colliflower came to Stone Child to work specifically on one grant and has now been there for two years.

The college acts as the grant coordinator for all of the partners that receive the 2001 Coming Together for our Children grant, which supplies a total of about $2 million for Stone Child and its five other partners throughout the state.

Since the turnover of the presidency, the college has received little to no word on what is happening with this grant. The grant is distributed by the American Indian College Fund; a nonprofit group which supplies grants and scholarships for Indigenous schools and students.

"These grants fund our students and if there's no funding, there are no students," Colliflower said.

She works in one of the five offices that reside in the log cabin next to the main building for the college. The cabin only houses the education department. If severe cuts were to hit the department, Colliflower would be the only one safe from losing her job as the head director.

"What about us? If he [Donald Trump] decides to take funding away, we're screwed," she said. "We're out of a job, a paycheck. I would probably be the only one safe because of my position, but then I would be the only person teaching all the classes and running the department by myself."

While the overbearing worry for the students on the reservation may feel as though it outweighs the joy of every day, the staff are finding ways to offer the children and college students the experience they deserve.

For the public schools this means the faculty and staff are not looking at issues with classroom programs, but instead focusing on putting food on the students' plates. FourSouls worries for the students, as for some, it is the only meal they recieve..

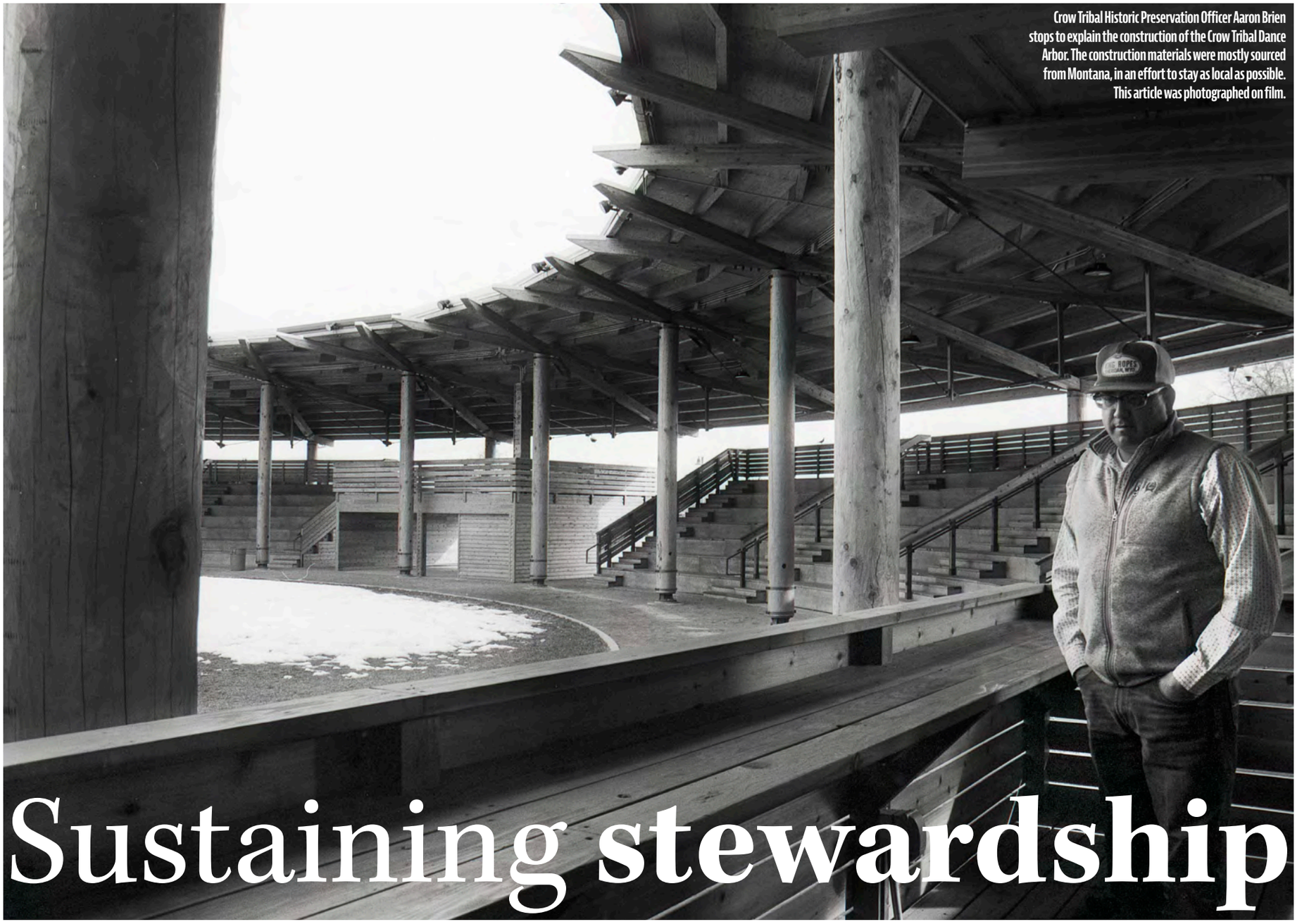
"I'm really worried about the program because there are some kids that come to school to eat. We have our backpack program where on Fridays, the coordinators put stuff out so the kids can grab something, so they have food over the weekend," FourSouls said.

Holding out hope

Every other Friday, the high school holds a half-day for "Language and Culture Day" where the students hear from a community member during a morning assembly and after have the chance to participate in different activities.

The Elder Advocacy Group that works at the high school participate in the activities as well. Some options for activities that day include singing songs in their language, cooking cultural meals, playing Indigenous games and participating in a language lesson with Mahchiwminahnahtik, the language revitalization program on the reservation.

"What's happening here today is a dream come true. To have days other than Native American day where you're able to immerse yourself in culture, immerse yourself in language, to be able to be in the presence of elders, it is literally a dream come true," FourSouls said. "If programs are cut then all of our hard work as Indigenous people, what are we going to do? I know we're going to keep going but are we going to have that support?"



Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Aaron Brien stops to explain the construction of the Crow Tribal Dance Arbor. The construction materials were mostly sourced from Montana, in an effort to stay as local as possible. This article was photographed on film.

Sustaining stewardship

How federal cuts are eroding the foundations of Crow culture

Story by **LUCY DECKER**

Photos by **FOX CROASMUNCHRISTENSEN**

The blades of the helicopter pulsed as the United States National Guard flew the archaeology team from the Crow Agency to the Little Big Horn Mountains in northern Wyoming. As the helicopter landed, the drifted December snow dispersed, exposing the landscape below. The sky seemed endless as the views were untouched. The team's mission was to keep it that way: undisturbed and protected.

The site, which is located south of the Crow Indian Reservation, but would have been a part of the tribe's traditional homelands, was identified by the National Guard for 50 landing pads for training purposes. The particular location of this build would be inhibiting fasting sites, where the viewshed is just as important as the rock structured fasting beds that lie on the landscape.

In an effort to fight for cultural preservation, half of the proposed territory was denied due to flights impeding the culturally significant viewshed and so the remaining area could be used without specific time restrictions to not disturb fasting quests.

Without the members of the Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office being present to protect sacred views, stone formations and sites are compromised. Landing sites could be built, plowing over ancient structures and significant pieces of cultural history could be lost.

"As a preservation officer, our first love, our first passion, our first relationship is culture," Aaron Brien, the Crow preservation office director, said. "The job is to protect any aspect of culture, and any time I can do that is a win."

The Trump administration's budget cuts to the National Park Service are having a ripple effect that could reach unexpected targets, especially for tribes across the country. These reductions not only hinder efforts to preserve public lands but also exacerbate climate change by limiting conservation initiatives.

Brien is growing increasingly concerned that his efforts to conserve and protect culturally significant sites are at stake for being demolished under various construction projects as funding cuts have taken away resources and staff for preservation offices. The National Parks Service, which once funded preservation efforts, is no longer able to sustain offices across the country. This could lead to Crow culture and history being erased.

When President Donald Trump took office in January, among his first moves was to implement a slew of layoffs throughout the federal government. This included about 1,000 park service employees, mostly probationary workers, which were announced in February. In addition, several federal grants have been canceled or ignored, with $140,000 of frozen funds. Together, these actions have affected the Crow Preservation Office, which falls under the park service.

This is likely not the end of it. Trump's proposed 2026 budget calls for a cut of more than $1 billion to the National Park Service.

However, Brien said, even in the face of an uncertain future, he will remain focused.

"If I was to lose my job, or if the funding was to go away and I couldn't do this job anymore, I would be involved in preservation in some fashion," Brien said. "I could leave this job knowing I had wins. There were moments where I, without a doubt, protected something, or preserved something or reintroduced Crow people to something that had been forgotten."

Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency's clean air and water programs were in the crosshairs and are now being undone. This includes reversing climate change and natural disaster efforts. While worldwide effects are expected to take place, land practitioners of the Crow are hurting to keep their cultural practices alive.

For Indigenous communities like the Crow tribe, the cuts also threaten cultural preservation by restricting access to resources vital for traditional practices. Medicinal healers who rely on the land for gathering essential plants face direct impacts as protected areas shrink and environmental degradation increases. As the National Parks Service funding disappears, both the ecological and cultural heritage of the Crow people are at risk, raising concerns about the long-term consequences of these policies on Indigenous sovereignty, environmental sustainability and the fight against climate change. The landscape is the root of Crow culture.

Brien sits at an L-shaped desk filled with books and papers. Behind him, a map of the Crow reservation fills the wall and his bright red hat contrasts the beige room. The Crow Tribal Preservation Office is located in an old building, a former gas station, next to the tribal museum. The office runs under the authority of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Office staff travel to several surrounding states to preserve the Crow culture. In most cases, the team walks the entire planned construction line of a proposed site, looking for artifacts and signs of culturally significant territory. If there are signs, construction is stopped and reevaluated with the preservation office.

Brien said practitioners of Crow belief and culture are stewards of the landscape. Those who respect the ground they walk on and hold it near and dear to their heart will be given blessings in abundance.

"The root of the whole thing is to protect culture and to preserve as much as we can, because every little piece, it's all part of this puzzle." Brien said. "We're trying to paint a picture of who we are, whatever we can preserve, whatever little part, whatever reconnection we can."

Aaron Brien, director of the Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office, works at his desk in the office. Preservation Office funds are expected to cover the salary of the preservation officer and some travel, freeing any additional budget to be used for other vital purposes. The financial award being frozen by the Trump administration has forced the office to triage projects by significance.

The office receives thousands of requests per year. The overwhelming volume of requests is then sifted by interest and importance.

"When I say we're overworked, our capacity for our office does not match the workload," Brien said. "So what's coming in and what's going out, the ratio is bad. So losing any member of that team affects that ratio. So that means it falls on another person."

Brien regularly deals with complicated interactions between project managers and other archaeologists brought to the site, many are focused more on completing their contracted project than accuracy.

In the Little Bighorn Mountains Project, Brien's actions put a halt

Aaron Brien, left, Luella Brien, right, and two interns debrief after cutting the locks on a large shipping container full of items left by the previous owners of the Crow Indian Reservation Museum. The container was opened for the first time to resupply the gift shop and see if any artifacts were inside.

Miranda Rowland, left, and Aaron Brien, right, look on as Miranda's son, Bruce Rowland, center, holds two stuffed fish found in the container unlocked for the Crow Indian Reservation Museum. Brien and Miranda Rowland began dating after she reached out to learn more about her cultural heritage.

LEFT: Mullein stalks sit in a box on the table in Cedar Rose Bulltail's kitchen, waiting for wax to melt on the griddle before being dunked. Bulltail started collecting mullein due to its relative abundance and ease of access. **RIGHT:** Cedar Rose Bulltail coats a stalk of mullein in its first coat of wax before coating other stalks in a second layer of wax. Bulltail switched focus to making salves, candles and other remedies after leaving her career in wildland firefighting due to long-term knee pain from an injury.

to construction of the landing pads, stalling a project that was slated to start construction this summer. However, under Brien's determination, the site's cultural significance deserved more consideration.

"My job isn't to make friends. And that's hard because I'm a friendly person by nature," Brien said. "Our job is to protect cultural resources, and so if that means I have to inconvenience somebody, then I have to. And I take that very seriously."

Despite the extensive accuracy efforts set in place by Brien, budget cuts and unrealistic expectations are causing stress to the preservation office.

"We receive thousands of requests in a year," he said. "I mean, I could hire people to help but now we got no money though. We're not an economic office. We do not want to chase dollars, you know, that threatens the purpose and the job."

While budget cuts are not final and could change, or be withdrawn entirely, tribal cultural practitioners are concerned with ongoing crises that administrative actions could exacerbate. So far, Trump, who ran his presidential campaign on a promise to "drill, baby, drill," promoted oil and gas projects and fired scientists and experts responsible for the National Climate Assessment, which tracked the effects of climate change on the nation, according to the New York Times.

"I've seen a lot of loss with climate change." Cedar Rose Bulltail, who owns Cedar Rose Creations, a small business in Crow Agency, said. As part of her business, Bulltail makes medicines and skin care products using plants and herbs considered traditional to the Crow.

However, Bulltail said she noticed that some of the plants she uses are growing in fewer quantities, which she blames on the warming climate.

"Some of our plants require a specific environment to live," she said.

The Crow Nation is the first tribe to define "Indigenous medicine." According to the First Nation Medical Board, the Indigenous medical board for traditional medicine, Alvin Not Afraid Jr., the previous Crow tribal chairman, signed a resolution in 2018 that states, "Indigenous medicine is the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to Native cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness including, but not limited to alternative, complementary, holistic and integrative approaches."

Bulltail is a well-known medicinal healer on the Crow reservation. Her deep-rooted knowledge of culturally significant plants is the basis for care for many tribal members. Bulltail's kitchen is lined with every type of glass bottle, tin and dish imaginable. The delicate scent of various heated oils wafts out her door as she infuses her salves and soaps. Her husband stands in the kitchen watching her with a smirk-like smile as he admires her craft.

"I can't stress it enough. Your medicine is in your backyard," Bulltail said.

Bulltail's green thumb is unmatched, but she has noticed a decrease in resources throughout the years.

As budget cuts have stripped away employed stewards of the land, Bulltail is still persistent with her practices.

Mullein, a flowering plant that is used worldwide to fight infections, has been her go to recently because it is readily available and can be easily retrieved without the harm of overharvesting.

"When you are working with mullein you are working with grief," Bulltail said. She aims to help Crow citizens to heal both physically and mentally from pain and trauma.

Kristen Brengel, Senior

The setting sun blazes through thin clouds and the low-hanging awning of the east entrance of the Crow Tribal Dance Arbor. The arbor was constructed in 2024 as the culmination of years long efforts to design a new arbor for the Crow Days Powwow.

Cedar Rose Bulltail discusses the beginnings of her medicinal practice. Her father died while she was in college, leaving her grieving for years. This grief was connected to her work with mullein after reading that working with mullein is working with grief.

Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association is actively working on giving a voice to affected offices, regions and groups suffering from the funding cuts.

"When a new administration comes into place...it can really send so many communities into a tailspin." Brengel said.

The new administration is refusing to host meetings with different sectors being affected by the budget cuts. Brengel notes that this is incredibly worrisome as there are large holes in communication.

When a new administration steps into their roles there is usually a grace period. "But this has been just an attack, a full-frontal assault on so many of us," Brengel said. "My heart breaks for the tribes."

Brengel has been focused on ways to increase land stewardship and climate change efforts despite the lack of funding.

"It just sucks because after Biden made all these billions of dollars of investments in clean energy, we are going to stop contributing to it," Brengel said. "This administration doesn't think climate change is a problem. There will be a setback for the next four years."

In 2023, the preservation office commissioned the construction of the Tribal Dance Arbor. The 62,000-square-foot structure is the heart and center of the annual Crow Fair, one of the largest annual gatherings of Indigenous groups in the U.S. It includes traditional powwows, parades, rodeos, horses and dancing. The arbor is packed full with spectators as the surrounding areas are full of food and art vendors.

The arbor was Brien's idea, and its design was generally drawn up by him as well. Every element used to construct the arbor was made in Montana. He wanted to create a space that held pride for Crow culture. The mouth of the arbor opens up to a circular arena, full of spectacular craftsmanship and design.

During certain hours of the day, the sun peers through the top illuminating the entirety of the inside of the arbor. Although there is no security for the arbor, it is left unharmed. Not a single sign of graffiti or vandalism is present. Brien believes it is because Crow people wanted and needed a prideful cultural space.

"It's become a safe haven," Brien said.

Maintaining Medicaid

James Spencer, 69, relies on Medicaid and Social Security to help him navigate his health problems and cover his living expenses. He fears the government services he needs are being threatened by the Trump administration and their policies targeting government spending.

Finding stability in a maze of healthcare

Story by **BROOKE BICKERS & SAV CHAVEZ**
Photos by **BROOKE BICKERS**

It's 4 a.m. when James Spencer's internal clock gets him out of bed, and he makes his way to the kitchen. He brews a fresh pot of coffee and flips through TV channels, eventually landing on CNN. From a desk drawer, he grabs his smoking materials and heads to the front door, leaving it slightly ajar as he lights his pipe, blowing smoke into the morning dark.

As the door of his small, rented home in Billings shuts behind him, he walks to the bathroom. From his medicine shelf, he places three pills in the palm of his hand: one for cholesterol, one for vitamin D and one for blood pressure; the same ones his wife used to take before she died of a heart attack. Pills he can afford thanks to his Medicaid and Medicare insurance plans.

Spencer, 69, is a citizen of the Gros ventre tribe on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Through most of his life, Spencer relied on the Indian Health Service for his healthcare needs. The service is a federal program, promised to tribes through treaties with the United States. When he turned 65, an IHS employee helped him switch to Medicaid. At 69, he also began receiving Medicare, which he says acts as a bridge to independence and allows him access to better care.

The IHS system has strict guidelines on how it can be accessed. Some tribes require patients to receive care at facilities based on reservations, or provide limited services at public clinics on reservation border towns.

President Donald Trump's nomination of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the Secretary of Health and Human Services placed a new focus on Indian Health Services and its role within the federal government.

Calling it the "redheaded stepchild" of the federal health department in a statement to ICT, the news site formerly known as Indian Country Today, Kennedy vowed that IHS would be one of his "top priorities" over the next four years.

The statement came after almost 900 IHS jobs were under immediate threat of termination in February, before Kennedy quickly rescinded the decision, citing a lack of proper alternative healthcare on reservations.

Something Kennedy has set his eye on is Medicaid, hoping to cut funds to "save a significant amount of federal dollars." Over the next decade, cuts to Medicaid could add up to $2.3 trillion if the plans are followed through.

Spencer doesn't have to pay out of pocket for any of his health care needs. Everything gets covered by insurance—whether it's prescriptions, checkups or X-rays.

"I never get a bill. They send me here, they send me there, I go. I never get a bill," Spencer said.

For Montana, about 300,000

James Spencer often smokes first thing in the morning and periodically at different times of the day at his Billings home. He refrains from smoking in the house in order to follow his landlord's rules. With Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security under the scrutiny of the current administration, Spencer worries about his health care and about losing his home.

James Spencer watches the morning news on CNN and CBS as part of his morning routine, which includes waking up, brewing coffee, smoking cannabis, watching the news and taking his medication.

James Spencer pauses briefly while struggling to swallow three of the medicines he takes each morning. He relies on the Medicare and Medicaid programs to help cover his vitamin D and his pills for high blood pressure and cholesterol.

people are on Medicaid, 20% of that are Native Americans. In Missoula, All Nations Health Center has more than 2,000 people that receive care. About 90% of its patients are on Medicaid.

"If anything were to change, we would be worried about our patients. We were worried about the DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] stuff. We were worried about our patients not being able to receive care because we are with the Indian Health Service," Alexis Johnson, eligibility specialist at All Nations Health, said.

The federal government covers 90% of Medicaid costs for Montana while the state covers the remaining 10%, which amounts to about $100 million. If Congress follows through on proposed cuts, Montana could expect to cover up to more than $625 billion to keep providing care to low-income patients.

Spencer grew up in the small town of Hays and went down a rocky path, from addiction to jail time to homelessness. Since then, he's been sober for 31 years and has rebuilt his life. When he looks back on the hard times, he finds comfort in his daily routines.

"So just take it day by day. That's about all you can do," he said.

His days may be simple, but Spencer finds joy in the little things. He views his daily trips in his 1994 Chevrolet to the library as an escape from the stillness of his home.

"I go to the library," he said. "I don't even have to go there, but I just do it just to get out."

It's not really about the books. Instead, it's about breaking the cycle of isolation.

Beyond daily rituals, Spencer also finds stability in the support of Social Security and food stamps. Together, they help him maintain a stable, healthy standard of living. Without that support, Spencer knows he wouldn't be able to live with the independence and security he does now.

"Without Social Security and Medicaid and Medicare," he said, "I'd just be another bum on the street."

As the day winds down, Spencer lies in bed, listening to the soft, echoing sounds of a televised basketball game. It's the perfect end to a quiet day.

But outside that calm, the world of health care remains chaotic and uncertain. Spencer urges the Trump administration to "get your act together" and do better for Native communities. Though recent decisions have kept Medicaid expansion safe in Montana, he wonders for how long.

And if the attacks on Medicaid continue, what will that mean for Native communities like Fort Belknap?

Lillian Poulsen and Kohl Wolfe contributed to this report.

Amber McEvers White, 58, sits in her living room on the Flathead reservation. Although McEvers White bought land on the Blackfeet reservation, she was unable to build a home due to various complications with the tribe.

A complex white picket fence

The 'red tape' surrounding Indigenous homeownership on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation worsens under Trump's administration

Story by **EMILY MESSER**

Photos by **TAYLOR DECKER**

After 40 years living in Seattle, Amber McEvers White wanted to move home to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Her mother, Wilma North Peigan, an elder, was struggling to get around in the tough winters.

To prepare for this life change, McEvers White lined up everything she thought she needed. The land was purchased. She had, in her hands, construction plans for a home inspired by the Yellowstone TV show on a budget; three bedrooms, two levels.

Six years passed, and nothing moved forward.

McEvers White had tried to find anything. She applied first for a lease site, buying land and then looking for other options. She made a flight home, more than 20 phone calls and sent several email messages. But in March of 2023, the builder was ready to cancel the deal.

"It's just a frustrating process. I felt like I couldn't even get anything on my own reservation," McEvers White said.

Homeownership has always been complicated on tribal reservations. Even removing the economic factors like high unemployment on many reservations, the unique relationship that tribes have with the federal government make landownership technically impossible, removing any hope of building equity in a home.

In fact, the American Dream of a white picket fence is 15% less likely for American Indians compared to White Americans according to a 2022 survey by NeighborWorks America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that advances opportunities for affordable homes in every state. Now, with the reelection of President Donald Trump, the red tape is thicker, the costs

are higher and the dream is that much farther for many tribal citizens.

"The Bureau of Indian Affairs just had a bunch of agency offices shut down. So that's going to impact the ability for homeownership in a big way," Robert Crawford, a contractor for the BIA, said. "[The BIA] haven't really released any of that information yet. [Housing and Urban Development] is definitely being affected, but I don't know to what extent."

The entire state of Montana is facing a severe housing crisis with skyrocketing prices and a limited housing stock, making the state the least affordable in the U.S. according to the National Association of Realtors.

In Browning, where McEvers White was hoping to build her home, the path to ownership is just one option on a reservation with nearly 10,000 people. There are run-down homes, low rent apartments and a minimal private rental market.

For McEvers White, moving home was a logical option to take care of her mom and live closer to her family after living in the Seattle area for the last 40 years. She took the first steps into homeownership in 2019.

"I lived away for a number of years and we saved a lot of money to do this because we knew we didn't want to retire in Washington," McEvers White said. "People that don't have the money, I don't even know how they go about getting what they want or getting what they need."

In the end, McEvers White purchased a home on the Flathead reservation just to be closer to her family and back in Montana.

On the Blackfeet reservation there are about 6,000 homes that were built in the 1970s and they are considered "hands off," meaning the tribe has no control over them. Blackfeet Housing Authority, separately from these homes, maintains about 400 low-rent apartments and there are currently 200 people on the waitlist. The private rental housing market on the reservation is almost non-existent. That leaves the Blackfeet Housing Authority unable to provide enough housing.

Crawford, a real estate specialist and Blackfeet citizen said there are 3,000 to 3,500 people who own homes but there is a current need for about 3,000 more homes.

This has led Crawford to implement the Pathways Home: A Native Homeownership Guide, an eight-hour course developed by the National American Indian Housing Council to educate tribal citizens on leasing, purchasing and owning homes.

Counselors in the program are certified and paid through the U.S. Department of Urban Development. Crawford doesn't have the resources to teach the course in person anymore and has streamlined the process by creating an online class.

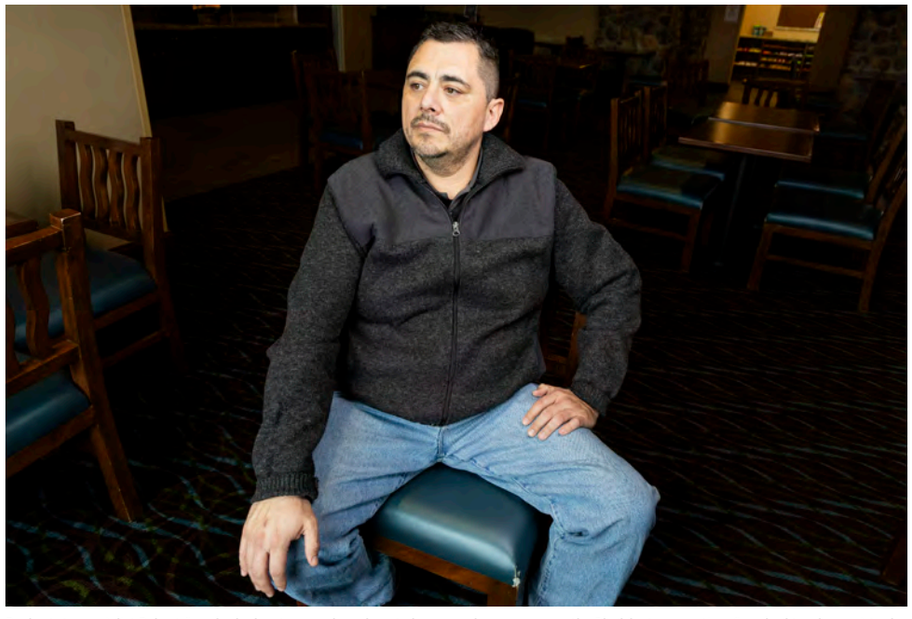
> "It's just a frustrating process. I felt like I couldn't even get anything on my own reservation."
>
> AMBER MCEVERS WHITE | BLACKFEET CITIZEN

However, when Crawford worked for Blackfeet Housing and the Tribal Land Department, he was limited to working with low-income tribal citizens, many of whom weren't ready for homeownership. But once he helped them build income and credit scores, Blackfeet Housing would kick them out of low rent housing because they wouldn't then qualify for the program.

"I didn't have an assistant or anybody to help me out," Crawford said. "I fell too far behind on my other work, so we put everything online."

Crawford said there are two significant roadblocks to

Blackfeet citizen Wilma North Peigan says that it's a family tradition to live in East Glacier. North Peigan lives with her daughter Amber McEvers White on the Flathead reservation so that North Peigan can be cared for.



Real estate specialist Robert Crawford educates people on how to become a homeowner on the Blackfeet reservation. Crawford teaches a virtual class required by the tribe for those that are becoming homeowners.

homeownership: the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the lack of education. He said he spends about 90% of his time just putting out information.

"They just don't know where to look. You can't know what you don't know," he said. "It's not something people think about every day, but when they do think about it, it becomes the most important thing."

In 1981 the median age of a first-time home buyer was 29 years old. According to the National Association of Realtors it has risen to 38 years old in 2024.

Obtaining the trust land

There are four common types of land that can be used for homeownership on reservations. Each of these have technical differences, though they each require heavy bureaucracy.

•Allotment or allotted trust: This is the oldest form of land that comes from the Dawes Act of 1887, which gave the head of household an allotted piece of acreage that is held in trust by the U.S. government. The tribe has no control or say over the operations on the land unless it is illegal activity.

•Patent fee: Taxable land that can be owned by anyone, tribal or not tribal citizen. The land is not held in trust and the landowner can sell or gift the land without BIA approval.

•Tribal fee: Land the tribe purchased from an owner who has defaulted on a mortgage or property taxes. The tribe often offers these plots as homesite leases and requires additional permissions for certain activities such as commercial or agricultural uses.

•Tribal trust: Tribally owned land that can be leased to tribal or non-tribal citizens. The tribe has full control over this land to mine, drill or keep as wild. However, when it is a lease, the leaseholder does not own anything below the surface.

During her six-year effort to build a home, McEvers White applied for a homesite lease – a 2.5 acre lot – through the tribal Land Department. Such lots are available to Blackfeet citizens.

Her first attempt was to obtain patent fee land. McEvers White, her daughter and her brother all applied for homesite leases next to each other and just a 10-minute drive from her mom's house in East Glacier.

These homesite leases typically last 25 years or for as long as the individual's mortgage. The lease costs $120 a year and requires a council resolution. The resolution is a timely process according to Gracie Show, a real estate specialist at the Blackfeet Tribal Land Department who previously managed the homesite leases.

> "It's not something people think about every day, but when they do think about it, it becomes the most important thing."
>
> ROBERT CRAWFORD | REAL ESTATE SPECIALIST AND BLACKFEET CITIZEN

Each council member must approve the lease site as well as the minutes from the meeting in which the lease was presented before the resolution is final. But not every lease is granted. The tribe can decline it due to the location if it splits up agriculture land. McEvers White remembers her lease being granted quickly.

The resolution is then sent to the BIA for approval. The agency may request additional information or require surveys which can cost upwards of $3,000. These BIA checkboxes to obtain a Title Status Report are a "hassle," Show said, which is why the Land Department began to survey land and create subdivisions of ready-to-develop lots in order to simplify the process.

McEvers White applied for her lease in August of 2019 and said the tribe approved it right away, but the process stalled waiting for the BIA. While at home in Seattle, McEvers White's phone dinged with a confused text from her brother. Attached to the message was the BIA's paperwork stating her application was incomplete.

McEvers White was given 30 days to clarify her paperwork. She said she reached out to the land department to correct her address and follow up. But she was left with no response. It wasn't until a year later that the BIA called and asked for the documents.

"I did all that and I paid for it. And here's my check," she remembers telling them on the phone. "I got so frustrated with the process. I didn't feel like anyone knew what they were doing."

Moving forward, the process doesn't seem to be getting any easier. The Department of Government Efficiency announced plans to close 25 BIA offices in 2025, about 27% of its locations nationwide. This includes two Montana locations.

"The impact on Bureau of Indian Affairs offices will be especially devastating. These offices are already underfunded, understaffed, and stretched beyond capacity, struggling to meet the needs of tribal communities who face systemic barriers to federal resources," stated Jared Huffman, a U.S. House Natural Resource Committee ranking member in a press release.

However, the BIA has a notorious reputation for its bureaucratic culture even without considering potential downsizing.

The BIA office on the Blackfeet reservation refused an interview and directed all communication through the BIA media contact. After five emails, the media contact did not provide any information.

McEvers White never received approval from the BIA and when she tried to make the yearly payment, the agency declined it. She felt discouraged and decided to find another path to homeownership. McEvers White spent the summer of 2022 at her mom's house and during those three months she was asking anyone if they were selling their land and making offers. Finally, a lot became available at a price higher than her range. She made an offer.

McEvers White's offer was accepted in October of 2022 for the 41-acre lot and she was finally feeling hopeful that she could start the building process.

The right of way

The next step for McEvers White was to obtain building plans and find a contractor. All contractors who build on the Blackfeet reservation must be vetted by the Tribal Employment Rights

THE TOTAL AMBER MCEVERS WHITE SPENT ON TRYING TO MOVE HOME TO BLACKFEET WAS $300,000

$260,000 was spent to purchase the 41 acres.

$15,000 was spent on house plans.

$4,000 was spent on fencing repairs for the 41 acres.

$1,000 was spent on surveys for the homesite lease.

Organization Office. McEvers White spent $15,000 on building plans.

Then there was the water right of ways. It should have been a simple step. McEvers White would have to go through a homesite lease. She was confident the tribe would grant the request.

What McEvers White soon discovered was that a neighboring lease holder held the right of way to the water that ran under the plot. The dispute intensified quickly and McEvers White decided to abandon the lease.

She also abandoned her dream of building on her reservation.

"I was so determined because we had a lot riding on it. I just did what I had to; jump through all the hoops I had to," she said. "Only to find out I needed permission from the leaseholder and not the tribe."

After months of fighting right of way rights and the overall build not moving forward, the contractor grew frustrated and wanted to give up on her project.

There was a condemned house near her mom's that had been abandoned for at least five years. While it needed a "new everything" it was a consideration, but at another cost.

"You want to be with your tribe and your family," McEvers White said.

But there was still no home, and now no pending home. McEvers White, 58, and her husband Stan White, 63, were ready to move home and retire. Wilma North Peigan, Amber's mom, said their family has lived in the East Glacier area for generations and that's why they want to continue living there.

"I was really trying to make it work and I just couldn't and I just had to let it go," she said. "It was a lot of energy and a lot of time away from my husband to make sure our future was where we wanted to be and that's where he wanted to be."

After spending about $300,000 on attempting homeownership on her reservation, it was time to pivot. McEvers White decided to buy a house in Polson, on the Flathead reservation, a reservation with houses for sale without jumping through the loopholes.

No rentals in site

There is an overall housing shortage throughout Montana that seems to be seeping into tribal communities. Julius ManyGuns-Pinkerton, a third-grade teacher at Browning Public Schools moved back to the reservation in June 2024. She and her husband Steven made too much money to live in Blackfeet Housing low rent apartments.

The family now lives in ManyGuns-Pinkerton's aunt's house. Walking in the small three-bedroom house, her oldest sleeps on the living room couch while her 4- and 2-year-old children share a bedroom with her and her husband. There are seven people living in the house in total. Overcrowding in homes on the Blackfeet reservation is a common problem due to the lack of housing availability.

"There's so many people hurting for homes," ManyGuns-Pinkerton said. "And then you see the people that did go out and then come back, like myself, and we're still struggling. We make too much money to live here."

ManyGuns-Pinkerton applied for a homesite lease but has not received a definite answer. While she tried to talk to lenders, she struggles to make it work.

"It's really hard to think that here I am a teacher, homeless with my children and still living with family," she said.

There are only a handful of lenders working on the reservation due to the extensive lending requirements imposed by the BIA. Add to that the bureaucracy of obtaining land. Crawford said this has made for a 7-8% success rate to homeownership because every third person who tries, gives up.

"It is just the sheer amount of red tape that is put there with good intentions," Crawford said. "They say, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.' But it really does harm tribal members. It's meant to protect them, but it really causes these wide-ranging problems."

ManyGuns-Pinkerton is considering purchasing a model home which would require a $10,000 down payment to secure the home, a cost ManyGuns-Pinkerton is willing to take to get her kids into their own home on a homesite lease.

With the cost of building being so timely and difficult with the tribe, Crawford has been passionate about getting model and 3D printed homes on the reservation. The cost of building a home has increased by 34% in the last five years according to the National Association of Home Builders, but now with increased tariffs the Wells

Amber McEvers White, a Blackfeet citizen, sits at her brother's house in East Glacier. McEvers White lived in Seattle for the previous 40 years before moving to Polson to be closer to her family and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

Julius ManyGuns-Pinkerton and her family of five live in her aunt's three-bedroom home on the Blackfeet reservation. ManyGuns-Pinkerton lives with her aunt because it is difficult to find a house on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

Lockley Bremner, a descendant of the Blackfeet Nation, stands in front of his house in Browning. Bremner and his family were happy to obtain a house after struggling to find a lender, which he said was the hardest part of becoming a homeowner.

Fargo and the Association's survey is estimating a $9,200 building cost increase per home.

Lending on reservation land

The NACDC Financial Services was established in 2010 by Elouise Cobell, a well-known Blackfeet citizen who sued the federal government over holding Native land in trust. NACDC provides four different types of home loans along with guidance through the process.

"We aren't a bank, we have more time to walk people through the process," Patty Gobert, the executive loan administrator at NACDC Financial Services said.

While the process is different through the tribe depending on the type of loan, financial services is a community centered organization and builds loans based on the community's need.

This isn't the only tribal lender, there are three "big" Native lenders in Montana, according to Crawford. Each have their own requirements and dollar limit.

"Getting a loan on an Indian reservation is pulling teeth. It is incredibly, incredibly hard. The land never truly belongs to us, but it belongs to us," Crawford said. "I won't say it's because of the lenders. I'd say the lenders have bent over backwards."

Lockley Bremner, a Blackfeet descendant, went through the pathways course in 2004 and thought it would be a "slam dunk" to build a home. While Bremner quickly obtained a land plot, he could not find a lender to finance the construction.

"One of the things the bank said was that they don't do long-term trust property. Luckily we were able to find a piece of land that wasn't in trust. It was a lot of hard work," Bremner said.

Bremner, his wife and four kids were able to purchase a 50-by-120-foot lot of reservation fee land from his grandma at a "family deal" for $1,000, which was a third of the market value. This helped Bremner avoid issues surrounding trust land. He and his wife headed to the bank with perfect credit.

"We got a letter back from SunTrust Mortgage, that said there's no market for home loans on reservation," Bremmner said. "We were like 'What?' Just shocked that we were denied the mortgage or loan to build."

But Bremner, who had a plan with his wife Brandy to build a house before they were 30, kept moving forward and found the Native American Bank. They secured an adjustable-rate mortgage which has a five-year fixed interest rate with the option to refinance to a fixed-rate.

"They're not really the kind of loan you want to get, but it was what we could get. We finally got a loan after a year of trying," he said.

Bremner started with a high interest rate, which made it hard to "get above water," he said, this was the only option. However, in 2021, Bremner was able to refinance and take advantage of the HUD 184 loan, a 15-year fixed at a 2.8% interest rate.

But even after finding the right loan, lenders typically require insurance.

Crawford said there are only about four companies that insure homes on tribal lands but if it's tribal trust, people are left to shop around to find the insurer willing to cover the home.

"It's confusing if you're showing an insurance adjuster or an insurance agent and they're like, 'What is this? You own the house, but you don't own the land," Crawford said. "That sounds really risky.

He said sometimes insurers won't even entertain taking accounts on reservations because they are unfamiliar with tribal lands.

McEvers White is now in Polson, Montana with her mother by her side. While she is still away from her family and tribe, they make a couple yearly trips to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation each year.

FURTHER IMPACTS: TARIFFS & THE CANADIAN BORDER

Now with the re-election of President Donald Trump, many federal changes are coming down. McEvers White along with other tribal citizens are concerned not only about the impact on homeownership but the impact on their economy.

McEvers White said the tariffs are messing with people's lives and putting a higher strain on the buyer and she sees no purpose in what he is doing "other than to destroy our economy and our way of life."

Two Blackfeet Nation tribal citizens filed a lawsuit against the federal government on April 4, alleging that the Trump administration's imposed tariffs on Canada were a violation of the Constitution and treaty rights.

The members, State Sen. Susan Webber, D-Browning and Jonathan St. Goddard, a rancher named the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Secretary and the United States in this suit. St. Goodard crossed the border which is a common practice for members and paid over $300 in tariffs for a new tractor part. He stated in the court document that this cost caused him "financial stress" according to Montana Free Press.

"He's a negative destructive force. I don't like what he's doing and I don't like how many people are living in stress and fear," she said. "I don't see anything positive coming."

The changes to the BIA, increased tariffs and employee cuts to federal agencies could make the 7-to-8% success rate to homeownership lower and pause applications to homesite leases altogether. Ultimately, increasing the 'red tape' to homeownership and hurting the overall Blackfeet Nation economy.

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At the University of Montana, we are committed to the success of our Indigenous students. It begins with the "family education" approach in our American Indian Student Services office and ripples through our inclusive and rigorous academic programs and our extensive student support services. At UM, Native Griz earn an education that prepares them to advocate for their communities, reach for their dreams and change the world.