BISKINIK

March 2026 Issue

A look at Indigenous representation in film and television

By Kendra Germany-Wall

In recent years, on-screen Indigenous representation has surged, bringing Native faces, cultures, languages and stories to viewers around the world.

In January 2024, the Biskinik shared with readers a list of current and upcoming Indigenous film and television projects. Much has happened since the publication of that article.

In this month's issue, we bring you several examples of not only Indigenous media, but also the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' involvement in projects, as well as Choctaw actors, writers, producers and set designers who are making their mark on the industry.

Echo

In 2024, "Echo" premiered on Disney+, introducing Marvel fans to Choctaw culture, language, and stories through Choctaw superhero Maya Lopez, played by actress Alaqua Cox (Menominee). Like her character, Cox is deaf and a partial amputee, making her the first Indigenous superhero and one of the first actresses with a disability to star in a leading role in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Disney and Marvel approached the project and its cultural representation with respect and research.

Teresa Billy, assistant director of the Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna, served as the official translator for the show, ensuring the accurate use of Choctaw and allowing viewers to watch a fully subtitled version on Disney+.

Sinners

Last year, Ryan Coogler's "Sinners" not only broke records, but also offered Choctaw representation on the big screen in a huge way.

Set in 1932 in the Mississippi Delta, the film's main characters confront a supernatural evil during what was supposed to be a night of fun and debauchery at their newly opened juke joint.

The film stars Michael B. Jordan, Hailee Steinfeld, Miles Canton and Jack O'Connell. The critically acclaimed movie grossed $368 million and made history with 16 Oscar nominations, the most ever for a single film. "Sinners" won four Critics' Choice Awards and was nominated for seven Golden Globes.

The filmmakers consulted with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians on cultural accuracy and language, and featured Mississippi Choctaw tribal members, including a posse of Choctaw vampire hunters, stunt drivers and horseback scouts. Some of the Choctaws involved in the film were Tobiah Ben, Mark Patrick, Jay Wesley and Eric Willis. Jaeden Wesley performed an opening war chant, an exciting and historic use of Choctaw language in a major motion picture.

"Sinners" is available to stream on HBO Max.

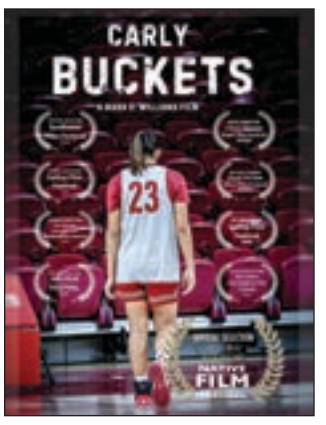
Brave

Dallas Goldtooth (Mdewakantonwan), Amber Midthunder (Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux), Wes Studi (Cherokee) and the late Graham Greene (Oneida) will soon star in "Brave," a dramedy from Indigenous director Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw).

The film follows Uncle Jack, a veteran who reconnects with his orphaned niece, Jillian, who is dying.

Jillian's last wish is to find a home for her dog, and a liver transplant could save her life. Jack is a match, but his years of alcohol abuse prevent him from helping in the way he believes he should.

There is no set release date for "Brave." However, the Biskinik will share updates as they become available.



Carly Buckets

"Carly Buckets," a 2025 short documentary directed by Choctaw filmmaker Mark D. Williams, is gaining national attention for its portrait of young Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians basketball standout Carly "Buckets" Keats.

The award-winning film highlights Keats' journey and her community's support, while also focusing on resilience within Indigenous communities.

The documentary has won Best Short Documentary at the 2025 Gallup Film Festival and Best Documentary at Check The Gate Film Festival. It was also selected for the JXN Film Festival and featured at the Holba' Pisachi' Native Film Festival.

"Carly Buckets" is part of Williams' work spotlighting Indigenous youth and culture.

"For me, telling these types of stories is the opportunity to tell it the right way. From our own voices and perspectives, filmmaking gives us a way to do that. There is a sense of pride when we see people we know, or who look like us, being represented on the big screen. With my film, 'Carly Buckets,' it was important for me to show not only her talents as a basketball player but her struggles as well," said Williams. "What she went through was something a lot of our Native youths could relate to within their own communities. I hope our young people see that reflected on screen and know that their stories matter."

Williams would like to thank the Keats family for allowing him to tell their stories.

"Some were tough to tell, but their contribution helped shape my film," Williams said.

He would also like to thank the University of Arkansas, Carly's past and present coaches for their contributions.

He most of all thanks Carly Keats for "trusting me with putting her journey out there for the World to be inspired from," said Williams. "Yakoke."

Readers can watch the film and more of Williams' projects on the Digital Feather Media YouTube page.

Williams and Digital Feather Media are in post-production on "There's No Crying in Stickball," which follows the underdog Tvshka Homma Ohoyo stickball team as it competes in the World Series of Stickball in Mississippi. Filmed across the Choctaw Nation and funded in part by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the documentary features tribal members, including Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr. and Chief Gary Batton.

For updates on the film's progress, visit the There's No Crying in Stickball Facebook page.

More to Check Out

There are so many great examples of Indigenous representation in film and television, and the list continues to grow. Below is a short list of recommended titles. For more, visit biskinik.com.

Reservation Dogs TV-MA • Drama, Crime, Comedy • 2021-2023 • Hulu

Reservation Dogs" is a half-hour comedy about four Indigenous teens in rural Oklahoma trying to get to California. Created by Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Muscogee) and Taika Waititi (Māori/Te Whānau-ā-Apanui), the award-winning series features an all-Indigenous team and an acclaimed cast, with authentic stories of reservation life . Streaming now on Hulu and Disney+.

North of North TV-14 • Comedy • 2025-Present • CBC, APTN, Netflix

"North of North" is a Canadian comedy series about an optimistic young woman who tries to reinvent herself in her small Arctic hometown, where everyone knows each other's business. The show was created by Stacey Aglok (Inuk) and Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (Inuk). Filming for season 2 is currently under way. Streaming now on Netflix.

This Issue

On page 4, read about Sterlin Harjo's "The Lowdown," featuring Choctaw tribal members Siena East as Deidre and Alyssa Cawthon as costume designer.

Page 6 features Steven Paul Judd's work in Hollywood, including his writing for the series "Dark Winds," starring Zahn McClarnon (Hunkpapa Lakota) and Kiowa Jordan (Hualapai).

On page 8, learn about Choctaw tribal members, including Mike Mushulatubbe Simpson, who are working as background actors in film and television.

On page 11, readers can find an update on Choctaw tribal member J.P. Gauna and his continued success in film and television.

Faith, Family, Culture

Na Yimmi, Chukka Achvffa, Im Aivlhpesa

Chief Gary Batton

Choctaw Nation is hiring

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma prides itself on being an "Employer of Choice" and one of the best places to work in, not just Oklahoma, but the entire world.

We work hard to help our associates reach their full potential through training, access to education and a welcoming, nurturing environment.

We want our associates to feel needed and fulfilled in their work here on the reservation. We are always looking for just the right candidate to support the Choctaw Nation and its operations, businesses and our entire Nation's focus on meeting the needs of our tribal members and guests. We try to recruit the best and brightest candidates for our tribe, so my question to you is – Are you that person to take the Choctaw Nation to the next level?

We want good people on our team who share our vision of 'Living out the Chahta Spirit of faith, family, and culture' as we work together to provide opportunities for growth and prosperity. Our culture is changing people's lives in a positive way, and we do this through teamwork and collaboration. We value everyone's thoughts and ideas. As I meet new associates (how we refer to our employees), I am always impressed by their new ideas, energy and passion. We welcome their fresh point of view and innovative approach as they help us carry out our mission in a great way.

Preference is given to tribal member candidates for our roles, but tribal membership is not a requirement for employment at the Choctaw Nation. If you're interested in working for the Choctaw Nation, we're interested in hearing from you, and our resource fair is a great opportunity for us to meet and say "Halito" to you and answer your questions about the many opportunities available at the Choctaw Nation. For more information on the resource fair, visit careers.choctawnation.com for more information.

The good feeling of helping others is what drives me as a Choctaw Nation employee and as the Chief. If you're interested in helping our members and guests, we're interested in hearing from you!

Yakoke and God Bless!

Tribes react to Stitt's final State of the State Address

By Kendra Germany-Wall

Gov. Kevin Stitt delivered his eighth and final State of the State speech Feb. 2, kicking off the 2026 legislative session and outlining his priorities, which include education oversight, tax cuts, public safety, economic growth and state finances.

Stitt made several accusatory statements about public safety, including calling medical marijuana "one of the greatest threats to public safety" and claiming the industry is "tied to increased cartel activity, human trafficking and foreign influence."

Stitt criticized the U.S. Supreme Court's McGirt decision and said tribal citizens should be prosecuted by Oklahoma district attorneys under state law, rather than tribal or federal law.

"If you commit a crime in Oklahoma, you should be prosecuted by a duly elected Oklahoma district attorney," Stitt said. "You should be tried in an Oklahoma court overseen by a duly elected Oklahoma judge, and you should be protected by the rights laid out in the Oklahoma constitution. Your race shouldn't call any of these factors into question."

In his speech, Stitt said, "An Indian named Kevin Stitt shouldn't be treated differently than a single mom of a different race."

Stitt also said, "Our forefathers chased opportunity in the Land Run of 1889, staking claims on unassigned lands and building communities from the ground up."

Following the address, Choctaw Nation Chief Gary Batton said Stitt misrepresented the relationship between tribes and the state.

"Tribes and tribal members have sovereign rights, which are based not on race, but on treaties and other agreements between our nations and the United States," Batton said. "Gov. Stitt must recognize this history and respect what it means today."

Leaders from the Cherokee, Muscogee and Chickasaw Nations, along with other tribal representatives, attended the address.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. called Stitt's remarks antiquated and said they undermine tribal sovereignty.

"Everything he said in there was really to erode some of the most meaningful attributes that are left of tribal sovereignty, that we're trying to regain and exercise," Hoskin said. "He would wipe all of those out in service, not to some great day for Oklahoma, but to some diminishment of tribes that really amounts to termination."

Hoskin also referred to Stitt as the most "anti-Indian tribe governor in the history of the state."

Principal Chief of the Muscogee Nation David Hill criticized Stitt's reference to the 1889 Land Run, in which Stitt called the land "unassigned."

According to Hill, the Land Run should not be aspirational.

"The one comment that I did like, that: 'When you're young, you learn to read. As you get older, you read to learn,'" Hill said. "Maybe he should start reading and especially on the Land Run. If you read the history, that's when more land was taken away from the Native people."

According to Oklahoma House Tribal and External Affairs Leader Scott Fetgatter, R-Okmulgee, Stitt's final address worsened divisions with tribal governments.

"When the governor had the opportunity to correct the wrongs he has inflicted on our state's tribes, he instead chose to exacerbate the divide and ignore partnerships that have benefited Oklahomans for years," Fetgatter said.

Oklahoma House Democratic Leader Cyndi Munson, D-Oklahoma City, called the speech "extremely disturbing."

"It's more than apparent that he does not understand the history of our country and our state, and does not respect tribal sovereignty," Munson said. "Tribes do more than enough, not only for their citizens and members, but also for the state of Oklahoma."

In his address, Stitt also addressed education oversight, tax cuts, economic growth and state finances and even called for the elimination of the Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association.

To watch the full speech, visit pbs.org/video/oklahoma-state-of-the-state-2026-lkw4yk/.

Housing Headlines

By Bobby Yandell

Storm season is just around the corner! Do you have your storm shelter installed?

The storm shelter program began in 2012, and this year we will have installed over 8,000 in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Kansas and Missouri. All tribal members in these states, regardless of income, 45 years of age and older, are eligible to receive a $3,500 voucher for an in-ground storm shelter with documentation that they own their home. Those with ambulatory disabilities may receive a voucher for $5,000 for the purchase of an above-ground shelter. All expenses over the voucher amount will be charged to the tribal member.

All tribal members in the five states listed above, under the age of 45 who own their home, are eligible for a $1,750 voucher. You are only eligible to receive this benefit once.

The application is available on the CHAHTA ACHVFFA portal, or you can contact our housing office for an application and return it with your tribal membership and a copy of the deed to your home (the tribal member's name must be on the deed). If all eligibility requirements are met, you will receive your voucher. Simply pick the contractor of your choice, and once they have installed the shelter to your satisfaction, present them with the voucher. The contractor will then submit the voucher to Housing for payment.

You may obtain an application by visiting the Choctaw Nation website at www.choctawnation.com , the CHAHTA ACHVFFA portal or by giving us a call at (580) 642-6353 or (800) 235-3087 to have one sent to you.

Choctaw Nation
Housing Authority

Stay Connected
CHOCTAWNATION.COM

Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr.

Be ready before the siren sound this storm season

As March arrives, storm season is just around the corner. Spring and early summer in Oklahoma bring an increased risk of tornadoes, hail, high winds, and flash flooding. Knowing how to prepare—before severe weather strikes—can make all the difference in protecting your family, your home, and your life.

In 2024 alone, Oklahoma experienced 152 tornadoes statewide. Understanding storm alerts is critical. A tornado watch means conditions are favorable—this is the time to stay alert and review your plan. A tornado warning means a tornado has been spotted or detected by radar. At this stage, immediate action is required. The highest alert, a tornado emergency, is issued when a violent tornado has been confirmed in the area, posing an immediate threat to life and property and causing catastrophic damage.

The National Weather Service urges everyone to stay "weather-ready." That means checking forecasts regularly, signing up for alerts, and staying tuned to local weather coverage. Every household should have a communication plan and a designated safe space—ideally a basement or interior room with no windows. Bathrooms or closets can offer protection when safer options aren't available. Emergency kits stocked with water, flashlights, batteries, a radio, and first-aid supplies should always be within reach.

Choctaw Nation offers a weather alert program that notifies your cell phone during dangerous conditions. You can access this service through the Chahta Achvffa tribal member portal.

If a tornado approaches, seek shelter immediately. Avoid large open spaces like gyms or cafeterias. Mobile homes, tents, and sheds are not safe. Highway overpasses are especially dangerous due to flying debris. If you are in a vehicle and cannot reach shelter, lower yourself below window level, wear your seatbelt, and cover your head. As a last resort, lie flat in a low-lying area such as a ditch.

After the storm passes, continue monitoring weather reports—storms often come in waves. Check on loved ones, provide first aid if needed, and use caution when inspecting damage. Wear protective clothing, avoid downed power lines, and document damage with photos and notes.

To help tribal members prepare and recover, the Choctaw Nation offers critical resources. The Storm Shelter Grant Program, administered through the Housing Department, aids with above-ground storm shelters for eligible members in Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, and Arkansas. Grant amounts range from $1,750 to $5,000, depending on age and eligibility, including additional support for seniors and those with ambulatory disabilities.

For more information, visit choctawnation.com, click on Services, and search Emergency or Storm. You can also follow the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Emergency Management page on Facebook for updates and preparedness tips. For emergency assistance following a natural disaster, call 844-709-6301. This is a voicemail system, so leave your name, address, telephone number and a brief description of the emergency. A Duty officer will contact you, complete an intake, and see what services can assist you.

Severe weather is unpredictable, but preparation saves lives. With planning, awareness, and support from Choctaw Nation programs, tribal members can face storm season with greater confidence and safety.

Pastor Olin Williams
Employee Chaplain

Justification

Who needs spiritual justification? "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Because of the disobedience of man toward God, all of the world lies guilty before God. "What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; as it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one." (Romans 3:9,10).

When a person is convicted of his state of sinfulness, he seeks to be forgiven and be justified from his guilt.

What is justification? It is an act of God's free grace, whereby he pardons all of the sinner's sins, and accepts him as righteous in God's sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to the repentant sinner, and received by faith alone.

The sinner's work is not sufficient for justification. "For by grace are you saved through faith; and not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8.9). The word "justification", is the pillar and foundation of the Christian faith. It is a word borrowed from the law-courts, wherein a person arraigned is pronounced righteous, and is openly absolved. God, in justifying a person, pronounces him to be righteous and looks upon him as if he had not sinned.

God does not justify us because we are worthy, but by justifying us, makes us worthy. How is a person justified? The works or merits of Jesus on the cross the sufficiency for all aspects of salvation and spiritual life. Jesus did the reconciling work. "And having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth , or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death , to present you holy and unblameable and unreprovable in his sight." (Colossians 1:20-22).

The method of justification is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. "For he made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (2 Cor. 5:21) "And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness, now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." (Romans 4:22-25)

Imputed righteousness is the concept where God credits righteousness to believers through faith in Jesus Christ.

WILDLIFE & OUTDOORS

By Jordan Grotts

With the end of another deer season, we would like to thank every hunter who follows the fish and animal game code by adhering to the season limits and methods of take. We hope that everyone had the opportunity to enjoy Choctaw Country and provide a source of food for your friends and family.

At the Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department, we are keeping an eye on threats to our rich natural resources to ensure their continued abundance for future generations. One threat we have been closely monitoring is the rise in Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in surrounding states. CWD is a deadly illness that affects many species, including deer, elk, and moose. This disease is caused by misfolded natural proteins in their brains, called prions. These prions lead to cell death in the brain, and it may take up to two years for symptoms to visually appear in herds, although it is transmissible throughout this time.

This disease is different from others because it is neither a bacteria nor a virus, and there is no vaccine to prevent its spread at this time. This makes surveillance of the disease critical to ensure tribal members are providing safe meat for their families. It's also important to note that there is no proven link between the disease in deer being transmitted to humans, but it has been advised by the CDC that deer appearing sick should not be consumed.

Utilizing funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we have successfully completed two field seasons, collecting biological samples to send for testing. To date, we have collected nearly 500 samples with help from our processors and taxidermists, whom we work with throughout the reservation. Our top three counties for 2025 collection were Pittsburg (62), Choctaw (61), and Pushmataha (33). We hope to get even more samples for our 2026 season, with a focus on McCurtain and Leflore counties, with in-person check stations and partnering with more processors and taxidermists.

With no positive results, we are happy to report that there appears to be no disease spread to our southeast Oklahoma deer herds, and we are excited to continue this effort for the 2026 season.

You can stay up to date on our upcoming events by following our Facebook page. We hope to see you out there!

Choctaw Nation Wildlife Conservation

James Dry

District 9

Halito from District 9.

I don't know about anyone else, but I was definitely happy when all the ice finally started to melt.

Graduation is right around the corner, so I want to remind all the seniors to submit their college scholarship applications. If you are applying for a Chahta Foundation scholarship, their application will close on March 31. For anyone who needs a reference letter, I would be honored to write one. Whether it be college, career exploration, or other endeavors, I love to encourage our youth to seek opportunities.

If you are graduating, make sure that you apply for your graduation cord or stole on the Chahta Achvffa portal. Congratulations to all the graduating seniors. I am proud of you and look forward to seeing the big things you will do.

The new community center in Durant is still under construction, and we are very excited for it to officially open this summer. With this new community center, we will be able to accommodate over 400 seniors for our Wednesday lunch while also providing staff with adequate office space. On top of that, District 9 currently has 204 Affordable Rental homes under construction as well.

The seniors at the Durant community center voted and recognized Ed Walker as Outstanding Member of the Year. Congratulations, Ed and yakoke for all that you do.

Even though the Choctaw Nation Livestock Show had to be cancelled due to the winter weather, we are looking forward to all of the Livestock Shows coming up.

We appreciate all the hard work our youth put into their animals to get them prepared for the premium sales.

The Choctaw Nation Tribal Council now has its own Facebook page. Follow the Tribal Council's page to keep up with events, updates and important information.

Yakoke,
James Dry, District 9

Photo Provided

District 9 Council Member James Dry take a photo with tribal youth.

Robert Karr

District 11

Halito from District 11! I hope everyone made it through the January snow and ice storm safe and warm. It was a long and challenging week, and I want to thank the essential workers who braved the cold to take care for our community. I'm glad to be entering the spring season.

Due to winter weather, the Choctaw Nation Livestock Show scheduled for January 31 was canceled. I still attended the Pittsburg Junior Livestock Show and Sale from February 24–28 and the Garvin County Premium Sale on February 23. It is always great to see the Choctaw Nation's support of our AG and FFA students, and I am proud of our youth for their hard work.

On February 6, the Choctaw Nation presented a $1 million investment in the City of McAlester to expand the McAlester Public Library. In attendance was Chief Gary Batton, Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr., and fellow council members. This project will also include a Chahtapreneur Coworking Business Center to strengthen economic opportunities across southeast Oklahoma. A Chahtapreneur ribbon cutting and $5k check presentation followed on February 10. Congratulations to Rachel Long of Small Town Behavioral, located at 321 S. 3rd Street, Suite 4, in McAlester.

On February 18, the council traveled to Oklahoma City to meet with state lawmakers and attend a legislative reception. These discussions allow us to address legislation impacting the Choctaw Nation while strengthening relationships with state representatives and senators.

The Youth Advisory Board hosted its annual Senior Banquet on February 20 at the Gather Event Center in Antlers. Through YAB, students learn service leadership skills and promote positive change in their community, which will help them become future servant leaders. Congratulations to Michael Cruz and Grace York of McAlester High School, and Emery Comby and Adriana Montejo of Jones Academy.

I also enjoyed celebrating Read Across America Day on March 2 with students at the Choctaw Nation McAlester Head Start and at Jones Academy. Not only are we fostering a shared love for storytelling which has long been a tribal cultural practice, but we are investing in our youth's literary rates and community connection.

As for upcoming events, Tammy and I are excited to go with our District 11 community center senior group on a trip to OKC on March 30-31 to visit the Citizen Potawatomi Cultural Center, the Oklahoma History Center, and to watch an OKC Thunder game vs the Detroit Pistons. Come out on April 2nd and join the ribbon cutting for our CNO McAlester Judicial Center at 10:00 a.m. Also, the District 11

Princess Pageant will be May 12 at 6:00 p.m. at the community center. We invite you to come support the contestants as they proudly represent our community and culture.

I am excited to announce that this spring, District 11 will open five new Independent Elderly homes at Chahta Tamaha near Jones Academy, along with 30 new affordable rental homes in Alderson expected to be completed this summer.

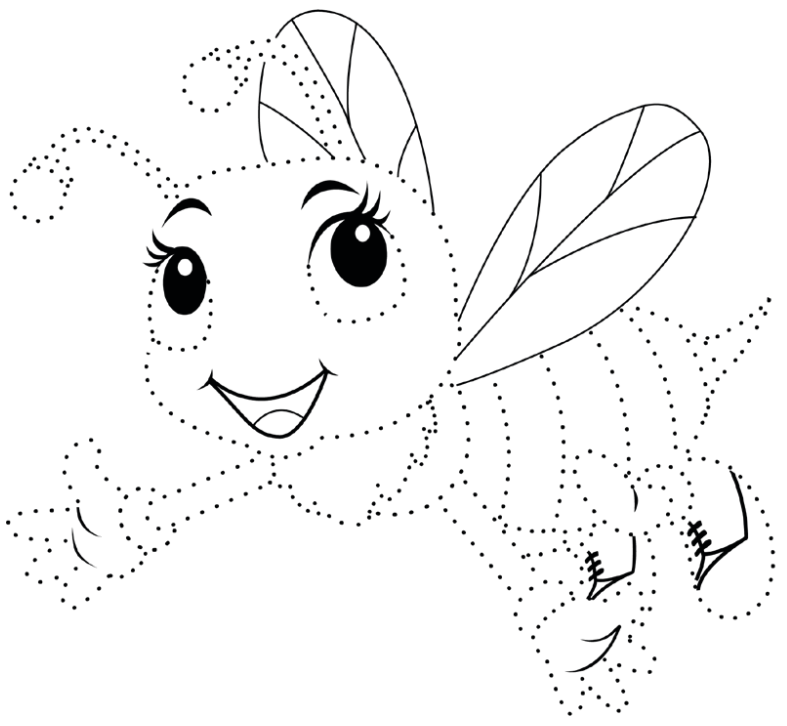
Lastly, don't forget to give our brand-new Choctaw Nation Tribal Council Facebook page a follow to keep up with everything about the Tribal Council.

It is always my honor to serve the okla achukma (good people) of District 11. Please do not hesitate to reach out if I can be of assistance.

Yakoke, Chihowa vt Achukma!

Environmental Protection Service Presents

Chahta Kid's Corner



Connect the dots to meet our new helper!

Choctaw Nation Environmental Protection Service

Anthony Dillard

District 10

Halito chim achukma!

The Choctaw Nation has always drawn strength from its connection to the land, the resilience of its people, and a shared commitment towards a prosperous future. Today, that commitment is reflected in economic development efforts that honor Choctaw cultural values while embracing innovation, entrepreneurship, and long-term sustainability. These efforts are about creating pathways for families to thrive, supporting local business growth, empowering Tribal citizens, and ensuring that the next generation has the skills and opportunities they need to succeed.

Choctaw-owned businesses have the potential to transform and diversify the regional economy. By expanding access to business development assistance, the Nation can help Tribal entrepreneurs turn their ideas into successful enterprises. Workforce development and career training can create long-term economic mobility, while investments in infrastructure can strengthen commerce, improve access to education and healthcare, and attract new opportunities to the reservation. However, economic growth must go hand in hand with environmental stewardship, and the Choctaw Nation is uniquely positioned to invest in renewable energy solutions that reduce costs and protect natural resources.

While economic development strengthens communities financially, expanding ranching operations strengthens something even more foundational: food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is the ability of a Nation to control its own food systems—what it grows, how it produces it, and how it delivers it to its people. For the Choctaw Nation, ranching is not only an economic asset; it is a cultural practice deeply embedded in the land, identity, and history of the people.

By expanding cattle operations, improving grazing management, and investing in processing capacity, the Nation can reduce reliance on external supply chains and ensure that Tribal communities have consistent access to nutritious, locally raised beef while also stimulating local employment. Choctaw ranchers have the opportunity to utilize regenerative grazing practices that improve soil health, conserve water, and enhance biodiversity (for more information about regenerative grazing practices, follow Gabe Brown). Control over beef production—from pasture to plate—empowers the Choctaw Nation to distribute food through schools, elder nutrition programs, emergency services, and community markets. A resilient food system that is Tribal-led, culturally aligned, and sustainable can then promote further opportunities in chicken, turkey, and pork production.

Expanding economic opportunity and expanding ranching operations are not separate goals—they are two parts of a unified vision that strengthens economic foundation, sovereignty, resilience, and wellness. Together, these efforts ensure that the Choctaw people continue to prosper, guided by the values of faith, family, and culture that have sustained the Nation for centuries.

Yakoke!
Anthony Dillard

Regina Mabray

District 12

Halito! We last left off just before the Christmas holidays, which was a busy and fun-filled season. I want to extend my deepest appreciation to our Crowder and Coalgate Community Centers' staff and volunteers for the programs, food, candy, and gifts that were provided for our District 12 children. The decorations were outstanding, and everyone enjoyed the time together celebrating. Thanks also go to Jim and Mary Riley, who were our Mr. and Mrs. Claus at Coalgate, and Richard Allen, who was our Santa at Crowder. They were all perfect in their parts. Also, a big yakoke to Jeff Byington, Delores Walker, Dan Loudermilk, Don Jefferson, and our princesses, Candice Battice Louis and Dorothy Rogers, for braving the cold so we could have an awesome Choctaw Barbie float in the Coalgate Christmas parade. Our community center staff and I took a small break to enjoy lunch at Pete's Place in McAlester for fellowship and a Christmas ornament exchange. We have a wonderful staff!

The new year arrived and was extra special! On January 2, Robert and I welcomed our third granddaughter, Anastasia Rose Mabray, to the tribe! There is nothing sweeter than a newborn baby. I love new beginnings! As a former teacher, I always enjoyed the beginning of a new school year; my favorite time of year is spring, when everything is bright and fresh. That's also what I love about being a Christian. Just for the asking, we can be made clean, whole, and new.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What a blessing!

In January, the Cherokees hosted our quarterly inter-tribal meeting in Catoosa. It is always enlightening to compare notes on what other tribes are doing to help their people and to give them ideas on how we help ours. A highlight of the month was attending a celebration at Atoka, where the Choctaw Nation received a $1.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. This grant will focus on drone technology, which will allow us to deliver medical samples between Choctaw clinics. I believe this is just the beginning of what we can accomplish with drone technology. January was also a time to elect officers for our community centers. The people elected to these positions are vital to our centers, and I thank them for taking their talents and time to make our centers tremendous places for fun and fellowship.

February began with a wonderful partnership between the Choctaw Nation and the McAlester Public Library. The Choctaw Nation's one-million-dollar donation to the library will upgrade the infrastructure, create another Chahtapreneur Center, provide an area dedicated to honoring Native American heritage, and much more. Many tribal citizens in our own District 12 will benefit from this investment.

In closing, I want to wish all our District 12 agriculture students the best of luck in the next few weeks with the livestock shows. Also, best wishes to our basketball teams as they prepare for the playoffs. I encourage everyone to go out and support our youth. Hope to see you there!

Regina Mabray
580-380-7150
rmabray@choctawnation.com

Photos Provided

Some District 12 highlights included the Inter Tribal Council meeting (above), a check presentation (below/left), livestock shows (below/right), and a Christmas party (left) featuring Santa, Cindy-Lou Who and Choctaw royalty.

COUNCIL MINUTES

Editor's note: As of press day, Feb. 12, the February Choctaw Nation Tribal Council meeting had not taken place.

Meeting minutes will be posted online and published in the next issue of the Biskinik. The First Language Speaker and Veteran of the Month will also be featured.

Finding her direction: How Siena East is helping to shape Native storytelling

By Christian Chaney-Sackett

Growing up in West Hollywood, Siena East was surrounded by artists long before she knew what kind of storyteller she would become.

Now, the Choctaw writer, actor and comedian is building a growing career in television and film, with credits including acting roles, writers' room experience, and festival-recognized short films.

Her parents moved to Los Angeles to pursue creative careers. Her mother was a dancer and painter, while her father worked as an actor after traveling between New Mexico and California.

That creative home shaped East's interests early and gave her the confidence to explore new paths.

"Anything I was excited about or interested in, my parents really encouraged," East said. "Art was never a profession that was discouraged."

By her teenage years, East was already exploring acting and writing.

She studied Meisner acting techniques, helped teach classes and wrote short films.

At first, she believed directing would be her path, which led her to attend New York University's film program.

While in school, East discovered another passion: comedy. She began performing stand-up, studying television writing, and focusing on scripts that centered on humor and strong characters rather than dramatic short films.

"Comedy was the way it felt most true to me to tell stories... I had a teacher who said the most important thing is taste," East said. "You're not going to be good for a long time. If you can tell when something isn't working, that's probably the best thing you can do."

After graduating, East returned to Los Angeles and worked to build her career.

She shared a room with her younger brother, took jobs as a production assistant, trained at Upright Citizens Brigade, performed stand-up and sent her writing to industry programs. Her parents stayed supportive, she said, though comedy took some time to warm up to.

As East's career has grown, she has focused more on how Native characters are shown in film and television.

"My whole life, being Native was how I perceived the world," she said. "Through self, through character, through conflict."

East said Native viewpoints should not be treated as small or limited.

"That's not a niche perspective," she said. "It's the only perspective I know."

East said she strives to write complex characters, especially Native women, instead of perfect or polished portrayals.

"I think the ability to be flawed is the ability to be human... I'm more interested in human representation than anything else," she said. "Flawed people who are interesting and compelling and relatable."

That approach carried into her role on "The Lowdown," a drama series created by Sterlin Harjo about a Native-owned news outlet in Tulsa, Okla. and the people who work there. The show features a well-known cast, including Ethan Hawke, and has drawn attention for casting Indigenous creatives in leading roles both on screen and behind the scenes.

Photo Via IMDb

Siena East is a Choctaw writer, comedian and actress based in Los Angeles. East has been a part of several projects, including Sterlin Harjo's "The Lowdown," starring Ethan Hawke.

FX Productions, LLC. Photo

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma tribal member, Siena East, recently played "Deidra" in Sterlin Harjo's most recent television series on FX. "The Lowdown" is rated TV-MA.

East played Deidra, a character she said stood out for her humor, independence and quiet defiance.

"She was funny, human and grounded," she said.

What stood out most to East about this experience was the atmosphere on set. She described the production as collaborative, with a crew that felt more like a family.

"When I left after filming the season, I was legitimately sad," she said.

"I'd left jobs before and thought, 'Okay, next one.' This one felt like college. Everybody cared about what we were making."

She credited Harjo's leadership and the number of Indigenous creatives across departments for shaping that environment.

"Our perspectives are dedicated to being in community with each other," East said.

Along with acting and writing projects currently in development, many of which she cannot yet discuss, East has also returned to stand-up comedy.

She performs mainly in Los Angeles and sometimes in Oakland, California.

According to East, her shows focus on personal topics such as mental health and childhood experiences.

"What I want people to leave with is feeling unashamed," she said. "Feeling heard and seen."

East also shared some advice for young Native artists hoping to work in film, television or comedy.

"There is always room for you," she said. "Share your perspective. Find artists you respect. Work together."

She said much of her progress came from creative relationships built during college and in her early career.

"Art is about creating your own world and inviting people into it," said East. "Your worlds are unique and valuable."

As Native representation in Hollywood continues to grow, East said she hopes future stories will show depth and honesty.

Not perfect heroes. Not simplified symbols. Just people. And, if East has her way, people who are allowed to be funny.

You can stream "The Lowdown" now Hulu and Disney+.

For more on Siena East, visit sienaeast.com or follow her on Instagram @sienaeast.

Cawthon stitches Choctaw storytelling into Hollywood costume design

By Christian Chaney-Sackett

Alyssa Blair Cawthon has helped dress characters in major film and television projects, including "Reservation Dogs," "Killers of the Flower Moon" and "Stillwater."

Now working on Season 2 of FX's "The Lowdown," the Choctaw costume designer continues to build a career centered on storytelling, authenticity and collaboration.

"I had always been interested in filmmaking from a young age and went to college for Film Production. And despite growing up in Oklahoma, I had a passion for all things film and Hollywood," Cawthon said.

"I started my career in the Art Department, and thought that's where I would stay forever," she said. "But I helped a buddy of mine with a costume job in 2014, and immediately felt like I was 'home', as cheesy as that sounds."

That single experience reshaped her direction in the industry.

Though Cawthon did not attend school for costume design, she learned early skills that shaped her career.

Her great-grandmother taught her how to sew, and she later built on that foundation while working on sets.

Over time, she developed a style focused less on technical perfection and more on how clothing can reveal who a character is and what they have lived through.

"But it's not all about the technical aspects when it comes to design, it's about vision and storytelling," Cawthon said.

Cawthon credits her Choctaw heritage for shaping how she approaches her work.

She said Native people carry a long tradition of storytelling, and that history influences her love for costume design.

"I think Native people have a lot of grit and tenacity, and it definitely takes those things to make it in this industry," she said.

Her career has spanned a wide range of projects, from historical films to modern television series.

Each new job requires research, teamwork and flexibility.

Before creating wardrobes, she meets with directors, production designers and cinematographers to discuss tone, setting, and how the visual elements will fit together.

"I get a lot of guidance from the director or show runner of what they are wanting the tone of the film to be, etc. But I like to have meetings with the other department heads, like the Production Designer or Cinematographer and make sure we're all on the same page, and creating a cohesive work of art together," Cawthon said.

No matter the genre, Cawthon focuses on realism and wants clothing to feel lived-in rather than staged.

"Different jobs call for different designs and skills, but a signature of my work will always be that I like things to look as real as they can," she said.

Her creative process always starts with the script.

She studies each character and imagines how they move, shop and choose colors. From there, she builds mood boards filled with photos, fabrics and shades to help directors and actors picture who the character is before the camera rolls.

"I begin by reading the script and just letting my imagination run wild," said Cawthon.

One of the most meaningful projects of her career was her work on "Reservation Dogs."

Cawthon helped shape the characters' everyday style and highlighted Native designers by using their jewelry and designs throughout the show.

"I'm very proud of Cheese's graphic tee collection," she said.

Season 3's "Deer Lady" episode was especially significant to her, and she said she is most proud of her work on this episode.

Cawthon designed uniforms for a 1950s Indian boarding school, a task that required careful research and emotional strength from the Native crew members involved.

While acknowledging the painful history of these institutions, recreating these uniforms offered a unique opportunity to reclaim part of their narrative.

The experience, she added, became unexpectedly healing for those on set.

"To get to create these beautiful costumes and work on them together as a team, and then dress these sweet native kids in them and watch them run around and play and chase bugs and pick flowers in between the takes," Cawthon said. "It was healing."

According to Cawthon, opportunities for Native professionals in Hollywood have grown, but she hopes the industry continues to move forward.

Too often, she said, Indigenous artists are called only for historical or traditional projects rather than modern stories as well.

"I do think a challenge I, and many others, have faced is getting pigeon-holed for 'native only' projects," she said.

She is currently working on Season 2 of FX's "The Lowdown," and calls it a dream assignment.

Looking ahead, Cawthon hopes to keep taking on projects that challenge her and increase Native representation on screen, and one day design costumes for a Choctaw-centered production.

She also encourages young Native artists to take chances and reach out to people already working in the industry.

For Cawthon, persistence matters as much as talent.

"We have overcome so much as a culture," she said, "and I think that resilience and 'can-do' spirit will get you farther in this industry than anything else."

You can see more about Cawthon and her work, visit alyssablaircawthon.com or follow her on Instagram @alyssablairrr.

Photos Provided by Alyssa Blair Cawthon

Choctaw costume designer Alyssa Blair Cawthon has dressed characters on film and TV projects, like "Reservation Dogs" and "The Lowdown."

Upcoming Events

Health Fair – Coalgate | March 11 | 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. | Coalgate Community Center | 103 E California Ave Coalgate, OK 74538 | Stop by to learn about available services and receive free screenings aimed at supporting healthy aging. Offering health screenings, vaccinations and educational resources from Choctaw Nation departments to support community wellness for the elderly population.

Youth Stickball Clinic: Tvshka Hofanti Himitthoa | March 19 | 10 a.m. - 7 p.m. | Choctaw Cultural Center | 1919 Hina Hanta Wy, Calera, OK 74730 | Join us this spring break for our Youth Stickball Clinic! Open to individuals aged 8-17 of all skill levels, the clinic teaches stickball fundamentals in a fun and dynamic setting. The event will be held rain or shine. Players must bring their own sticks, as sticks will not be provided.

Health Fair – Crowder | March 25 | 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. | Crowder Community Center | 707 Bond St Crowder, OK 74430 | Stop by to learn about available services and receive free screenings aimed at supporting healthy aging. Offering health screenings, vaccinations and educational resources from Choctaw Nation departments to support community wellness for the elderly population.

Cinema at the Center | March 28 | 1 p.m. | Choctaw Cultural Center | 1919 Hina Hanta Wy, Calera, OK 74730 | Follow your destiny and join us for Cinema at the Center. This month's movie is Disney's Brave! Doors to Kowi Chito Theater open at 12:30 p.m., and the movie starts at 1 p.m. Admission to watch the movie is complimentary to all.

Mondays in March Speaker Series | Every Monday in March | 5 p.m. – 7 p.m. | Wheelock Academy Historic Site | 1 N Broadway Ave, Oklahoma City, OK 731021 | Join us this March for this special series. Each week features a different topic highlighting the history of Wheelock and the Choctaw Nation, from genealogy and historic capitols to Choctaw Code Talkers and more. RSVP to reserve your spot by phone 580-746-2139 or email at dstandridge@choctawnation.com.

Good Friday Tribal Holiday | April 3 | All Day | Tribal Offices | All CNO offices will be closed for a tribal holiday in observance of Good Friday.

Choctaw Community Meeting, OKC | April 18 | 2 p.m. | Sheraton Oklahoma City Downtown Hotel | 1 N Broadway Ave, Oklahoma City, OK 731021 | Join Chief Gary Batton and Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr. for a Community Cultural Meeting in OKC! Update your tribal membership card, explore program booths, and enjoy a day of culture and fellowship.

District Princess Pageants | Various Dates & Locations | Young Choctaw women (1/16 degree or higher) are invited to participate in the 2026 District Princess Pageants, which will be held from April through June across multiple districts. April dates include District 5 on April 2 at 6 p.m. in Stigler; District 4 on April 7 at 6 p.m. in Poteau; District 3 on April 14 at 6 p.m. in Talihina; and District 6 on April 16 at 6 p.m. in Wilburton. For additional dates and more information, visit choctawnation.com/services/royalty-and-princess/.

NOTES & ANNOUNCEMENTS

AARP Native American Elder Honors Nominations Open

Nominations are now open for the 18th Annual AARP Oklahoma Native American Elder Honors, which celebrates up to 50 Native American elders who have positively impacted our country, Indian Country, the state, and their communities. The nomination period closes on March 31. For more information and to submit a nomination, visit aarp.org/ok.

Curtis Eyachabbe is January First Language Speaker of the Month

Curtis Ray Eyachabbe is a full-blood Choctaw and a fluent Choctaw language speaker.

He was born in Pushmataha County, to Mary and Rufus Eyachabbe.

He and his two brothers and two sisters were raised speaking Choctaw in their home. Curtis has enjoyed Choctaw culture his entire life. He has been a member of the Indian Methodist churches in Pushmataha, McCurtain and Le Flore counties.

The food, songs and fellowship included speaking his native language, which continues as he prays and sings in Choctaw as a member of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Talihina, Oklahoma. He is also a trustee of the Southeast Region of Oklahoma, Indian Missionary Conference.

He retired from the Weyerhaeuser Company after 32 years. During this time, he was known to many by his nickname, Gabby. He was also a legendary fast-pitch softball pitcher.

Curtis currently lives in Wister, Oklahoma, with his wife, Patsy. He enjoys time with their family, including Mark, Jason, Amy, Dawson and Hayley.

OBITUARIES

Glynnie Lee Dill-Pebsworth

Glynnie Lee Dill-Pebsworth, 85, passed away Jan. 5, 2026.

Glynnie was born March 1, 1940, in Boswell, Okla., to Elmer Leon Krebbs and Margaret Helen (Petitt) Krebbs.

She was preceded in death by her parents; first husband Dewey F. Dill; second husband Jerry W. Pebsworth; granddaughter Cathy Dill; and sisters Margie Long and Gloria Jean Wise.

Glynnie is survived by her children Jim Dill and spouse Melody, Terry "Bullet" Dill and spouse Schonna, and Inez Springfield and spouse Eddie; stepchildren Vickie Ensey and Josh Pebsworth; grandchildren Little Jim Dill, Jacob Dill, Tessa Dill, Justin Pruitt, Brandon Butler, Little Terry Dill, April Dill, Trevor Dill, and Cheyenne Springfield; four step grandchildren; 21 great-grandchildren; seven great-great-grandchildren; brothers Edward Krebbs and spouse Linda, Kenneth Krebbs, Mike Krebbs, and Sonny Krebbs and spouse Celeste; sister Suzie Krebbs; and a host of nieces, nephews, other family, and loved ones.

Eddie R. Ferguson

Eddie Ferguson, 88, passed away Dec. 18, 2025.

Eddie was born Aug. 26, 1937, in Oklahoma City Okla., to Joe Edgar and Leottie Ferguson.

He was preceded in death by his wife Diana Deithloff Ferguson; his parents; and brothers Alvin and Kenneth.

Eddie is survived by daughter Tina Knudsen and spouse Chris; son Paul Ferguson and spouse Lori; grandchildren Amanda Postrigan and spouse Andrey, Michelle Stephenson and spouse Patrick, Christina Cavness and spouse CJ, Zane Ferguson, and Nathan Ferguson and spouse Mariah; great-grandchildren Carson, Abigail, Kimber, Connor, Parker and Blake, and Luke who is on the way in January; and many friends and extended family members.

Dorothy Jean Carpenter

Dorothy Jean Carpenter, 86, passed away Dec. 2, 2025.

Dorothy was born March 27, 1939, in Spiro, Okla, to William and Lula Garrett.

She was preceded in death by her parents; and husband Harold.

Dorothy is survived by her children Cindy Burton and John Carpenter; grandchildren Sabrina Martinez (Wes), Aubrie Owen (Michael) and Skylah Ballard (Nick); great-grandchildren Melissa, Rhianna, Brooklyn, Jade, Gavin, Victor, Heidi, Norah, Dylan, Gunnar, Grace, Magnus and Maverick; great-great-grandchildren Mason and Emmerson; as well as many extended family members and friends.

Teela Ann Nichols

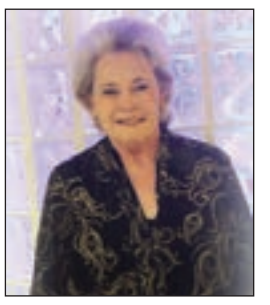
Teela Ann Nichols, 41, passed away Jan. 3, 2026.

Teela was born April 13, 1984, in Talihina, Okla., to Ronald David Nichols, Sr. and Peggy Ann (Taylor) Nichols.

She was preceded in death by her father; first husband Fred Walton; and aunt and uncle Jimmy and Earlene Noah.

Teela is survived by her daughters Lailah Walton and Tiana Nichols Walton; grandchildren Ta'Nieyah and Sione; her mother; brother Ronald Nichols, Jr. and spouse Shay; sister Tamara Douglas and spouse Tim; aunts Laura, and Debbie Watson and spouse Eddie; uncles Darrell Nichols and spouse Tammy, and Bobby Nichols and spouse Becky; along with many other family members, friends and loved ones.

Pridgett Lavonne Turner



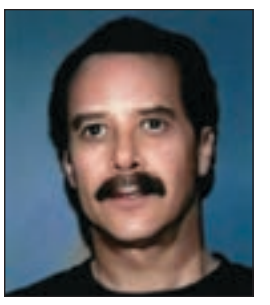
Pridgett Lavonne Turner, 77, passed away Dec. 20, 2025.

Pridgett was born March 15, 1948, in Crane, Tex., to Billy and Imogene (Downey) Moody.

She was preceded in death by her parents; and husband Augustus "Chris" Turner.

Pridgett is survived by sons Matthew Brown and spouse Rachelle, and Charles Brown and spouse Lisa; grandchildren Ethan Brown, Jacob Brown, Brandon Brown, and Cheyenne Lopez, great-grandchildren; sisters Pamela Anderson and Sherry Tracy; and a host of nieces and a nephew .

Stanley Douglas Riddle



Stanley Douglas "Doug" Riddle, 75, passed away Sept. 4, 2025.

Stan was born June 4, 1950, in Oakland, Calif., to Edward Stanley Riddle and Beaulahfay L. "Bunny" Riddle.

He was preceded in death by his parents; and sister Connie Morgan.

Doug is survived by his siblings Eddie Riddle and spouse Ana, Tom Riddle, Debbie Lower and spouse Steve, and Cindy Espinoza; as well as numerous cousins, nieces and nephews.

Gerald Donald Thomas

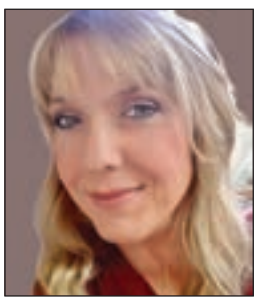
Gerald Donald Thomas, 85, passed away Nov. 29, 2025.

Gerald was born May 16, 1940, to Impson and Lizzie Mae Thomas.

He was preceded in death by his parents; and beloved fur baby Mimi.

Gerald is survived by his wife Betty Thomas; son Monroe James Thomas Sr.; grandchildren James Thomas, Jr. and Atuloa Thomas; and great-grandchildren Nalona Thomas and Niha Thomas.

Thea Lynn Hollingsworth



Thea Lynn Hollingsworth, 43, passed away Jan. 1, 2026.

Thea was born Sept. 23, 1982, in Sulphur, Okla., to Tommy Hollingsworth and Barbara Sue Waggoner.

She was preceded in death by her father; and sister Angela Burton.

Thea is survived by her son Jason Lovelace; best friend John Lovelace; her mother; stepdad Mike Waggoner; grandparents Bobby and Margie Anderson; aunts and uncles Bob Anderson Jr. and spouse Debra, and Billy Andrson and spouse Cindy; nephews Bailey Burton and Brandon Burton; cousins Shane, Kyle, and Stacy: and many other family members and friends.

Betty Jean Armstrong

Betty Jean (Burleson) Armstrong, 81, passed away Jan. 12, 2026.

Betty Jean was born Feb. 8, 1944, in Coalgate, Okla., to David Burleson and Jean Pebworth.

She was preceded in death by her parents; and sister Patti Brown.

Betty Jean is survived by daughters Tamy Richardson and Annabell Callison; sons James Richardson and Bruce Hamil Jr.; and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Biskinik Submission Policy

The Biskinik reserves the right to determine whether submissions will be published and to edit for length, style, and clarity. Items are published on a first-received, first-run basis as space allows. Publication may take a few months due to high volume of submissions.

Submissions may be sent via:
Email: biskinik@choctawnation.com | Mail: Biskinik, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702 | Online: biskinik.com/biskinik-submission-guidelines

Events
Event announcements must be received by the submission deadline. The Biskinik is printed on the third Thursday of the month before the issue month (e.g., the January issue prints in December).

People You Know (PYK)
Tribal members may submit announcements highlighting personal, educational, or professional achievements. Milestone birthdays are accepted for ages 1, 5, 13, 15, 16, 18, 21, 30, 40, 50, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, and older. Anniversary announcements are accepted for 25, 50, and 60+ years of marriage. Wedding, honor roll, and high school or eighth-grade graduation announcements are not published.

Letters
Letters and thank-you notes from tribal members are welcome. Due to volume, not all letters can be published. Letters must be under 150 words and include full contact information. Only the writer's name and city will be printed.

For questions regarding submissions, please contact biskinik@choctawnation.com.

BISKINIK

The premier news source for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

The Biskinik, the official monthly publication of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, is printed each month as a free service to tribal members. To be eligible to receive the printed version of Biskinik, readers must be a Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma tribal member. In effort to reduce waste, the Choctaw Nation restricts most mass mailings, including Biskinik, to one per household. The Biskinik is available to the public online at biskinik.com.

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Biskinik or Bishinik?
On July 10, 2010, Tribal Council approved a bill correcting the spelling of the newspaper, changing *Bishinik* to the proper *Biskinik* as part of ongoing language revitalization efforts.

Editor's Note: *Views and opinions in submitted articles are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Choctaw Nation.*

Biskinik Obituary Policy

The Biskinik publishes obituaries as a free service to Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma tribal members.

Only official obituary notices are accepted. Funeral homes or family members may submit notices issued by a funeral home or published in a local newspaper. Self-written notices are not accepted, and any edits or additions must be confirmed by the funeral home. If no funeral home was used, special arrangements may be considered.

Due to space limitations, printed obituaries include only basic biographical details, "survived by" and "preceded in death" information.

Full obituaries are published online at biskinik.com/obituaries.

Submissions, including a link and photo, may be sent via:
Email: biskinik@choctawnation.com | Online: biskinik.com/biskinik-submission-guidelines | Mail: Biskinik, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702

Steven Paul Judd helps bring Indigenous culture to the world of fashion, art and film

By Christian Toews

Steven Paul Judd has been making waves in Hollywood and has no plans to slow down. You have probably seen his work, even if you didn't realize it. He is a writer, director, producer, fashion designer and visual artist.

From Disney, Marvel Studios and Netflix, he has worked on productions including "Zeke and Luther," Marvel Studios' "Echo" and, more recently, the Netflix hit "Dark Winds," to name a few.

Writing and directing in Hollywood are just the tip of the iceberg of Judd's artistic endeavors.

He is also a prolific visual artist whose work is a fusion of American pop culture and Native American experience. Judd creates paintings, prints, poster art, photography, clothing designs and more.

A collaboration with the popular fashion brand Faherty featured several designs representing Judd's heritage.

"This Thunderbird design incorporates something from both my tribes. The triangles represent the 'diamond pattern' that you see in Choctaw clothing, and the teepee is to represent my Kiowa side," said Judd in an interview with Faherty.

He recently launched a collaboration with the Oklahoma City Thunder. These apparel pieces celebrate Oklahoma City and Native American heritage.

Thunder Photos by Dakota Wahkinney

Steven Paul Judd wears a sweatshirt that he designed for the OKC Thunder. Judd's Thunder designs can be purchased on the Thunder Shop at nbathundershop.com.

Designed by Judd, the clothing features hand-drawn artwork inspired by regional culture, wildlife and community pride, according to the Oklahoma City Thunder website.

Judd mentioned he has more exciting clothing and fashion collaborations coming soon.

In his filmography, he brings Native representation to life, and that is very important to Judd.

"Growing up, I wanted to see someone who represents me in popular culture," Judd said. "So, I always thought I can't wait to grow up and write stuff where I can put a Native person doing cool things."

According to the artist, he maintains his childhood perspective while creating.

"To me, it was just really writing for that 12-year-old me who loved watching TV and movies," said Judd. "So really, that's who I'm writing to. He would have enjoyed getting to turn on the channel and see these things."

This childhood vision has now come to life in shows like Marvel Studios' "Echo," where Judd was instrumental in making the main character Choctaw, a departure from the original comic.

Choctaw culture is prominently woven throughout "Echo," and Judd, along with Choctaw representatives, was a key part in overseeing this cultural representation.

The series features elements such as the Biskinik, or 'little Choctaw news bird,' alongside Ishtaboli, or stickball, and the Choctaw Origin story and a variety of traditional Choctaw dress, enriching the narrative with cultural depth.

The Netflix show "Dark Winds" is now in its fourth season and has reached a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Judd not only writes for the show, but he has also directed multiple episodes.

He said he is currently writing for season 5 and will direct some episodes in the upcoming season.

According to Judd, he has a few upcoming projects he is really looking forward to. One of those is a comic book series through Mad Cave Studios. The series will be adapted from the tabloid newspaper Weekly World News.

Judd, along with screenwriter and comic book author Ken Kristensen and producer, writer and director Tvli Jacob (Choctaw), collaborated in writing the comic book series.

The comic book is currently in production, and he hopes to develop a television series based on it.

Another upcoming project is a feature film directed by Judd titled "Brave."

This movie will be the first film shot on the Choctaw reservation, and the Tribe has been closely involved in its development and preproduction.

Photo by Christian Toews

Steven Paul Judd walks the red carpet during the LA premiere of Marvel Studios' "Echo."

Despite being involved in so many projects, Judd said he has no shortage of inspiration.

"I just love making stuff. Writing, painting, building things, making custom action figures—I was doing it for free before I got paid. I'm inspired by other artists, movies, shows, and comics," said Judd. "Seeing great work makes me want to get better."

Judd encourages anyone who wants to follow in his footsteps not to give up on that dream.

"I always thought it would happen, even when it took years," Judd said. "Eventually, it did."

He encourages those interested in film to consider all facets of the film industry.

"Film isn't just writing or directing. There's carpentry, transportation, catering, mechanics—every skill has a place," said Judd.

To see more of Steven Paul Judd's work and to keep up with his career, follow him on Instagram @stevenpauljudd.

Source to sink: Water operators keep the reservation flowing

By Tabatha Keton

March 22 marks World Water Day, which highlights the importance of sustainable management of freshwater resources.

Water in the Choctaw Nation has always served as a vital corridor for our culture, subsistence, trade and transportation.

This World Water Day, Choctaw Nation is focusing on the people who keep our water systems working and make sure clean water gets to our homes and businesses.

While often overlooked when talking about water on the reservation, water operators are vital to keeping this essential system running.

Despite water's instrumental role in everyday life, rural water systems face unique challenges that sometimes make water treatment and delivery difficult.

In recent years, the cost of materials and chemicals has increased by 200% to 700%.Fixing a leak can cost about $10,000 to $12,000, but only if the right materials are available. Rural water systems often struggle to keep the necessary parts in stock while operating within an aging water infrastructure.

On a "good month," Sardis Lake Water Authority (SLWA) addresses 4-6 leaks, but they never know when and where these leaks will occur. Being a water operator can be a 24-hour job, one that often has you working Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Sometimes, a rural water system is run by just one full- or part-time employee, with help from volunteers who step up to fill important roles.

"We never know day to day what is going to happen," Chris DeWeese, SLWA's Chief Superintendent, explains. "We don't know if it's going to be an early day or late night. It is rarely an early day."

DeWeese's office is responsible for over 350 square miles of pipes and supplies treated water to the towns of Clayton and Nashoba, Pushmataha County Rural Water Districts #1 and #5, and Latimer County Rural Water District #2. DeWeese views all of these organizations as fingers on his hand with SLWA as the palm – if one fails, they all fail.

The water from his treatment plant serves about 5,500 people, including schools, clinics, restaurants, gas stations, senior apartments, daycares and apartments.

His team responds to water leaks, customer calls, county assistance requests and 811 requests to find water lines.

DeWeese starts his day by conducting seven water tests, including testing for pH, alkalinity, hardness, magnesium, iron, clarity and sludge content. The water is tested as it enters the system and as it leaves after treatment.

Treatment methods depend on factors such as weather, season, water source, local environment and surrounding land use. Water quality can change daily or even hourly.

To anticipate water conditions and prevent issues, 25 additional tests are run daily at locations across the service area.

Because water conditions change so much, water operators have to be like chemists, mechanics, investigators, geologists, mathematicians, engineers, electricians, plumbers and carpenters all at once. In rural areas, water operators often lack traditional training; everything is learned on the job and earned the hard way – when issues arise.

DeWeese's dedication to his role in the community represents the Chahta Spirit.

"Chris is always the first in line to help anyone in need, and he never asks for anything in return," said Jeremy McBride, Sustainable Communities Manager for the Choctaw Nation's Office of Water Resource Management (OWRM).

His volunteer work includes providing donated materials and time to help water outages in Pushmataha Rural Water Districts #3 and #5 at no cost to either system, providing leak detection and technical assistance to the town of Arkoma, Haskell County Water Corporation, the SLWA systems that utilize his plant's treated water, and traveling to assist with the water system impacted by the Cherokee County fires in early 2025.

According to DeWeese, his work is a necessity. In roles that are often misunderstood or overlooked, like water treatment, DeWeese believes in helping others and sharing what he knows whenever possible.

"Nothing we do is proprietary; everything should be shared, including knowledge and resources. Operators learn what they can, but more importantly, they help each other," said DeWeese. "If we don't take care of each other, we don't get help."

DeWeese says he truly understood the importance of his role during his time in Cherokee County.

DeWeese, along with Rayna Noah, SLWA's office manager and Hunter Noah SLWA Field Supervisor, went to Pawnee, Okla., to help their water operator after wildfires decimated the area in early 2025. They spent four days in an area so badly burned that water meters had melted.

With limited water to address the catastrophe, Pawnee represented the extreme of a system so instrumental to our quality of life but so underfunded in rural areas.

"It wasn't Sardis and Pawnee, it was all of us together. It gave me a better sense of why we do what we do," said DeWeese.

The Evolution of Sardis Lake Water Authority

When DeWeese took the helm at Sardis Lake Water Authority in 2021, it was one of the worst-run water treatment plants in the state.

The plant is over 20 years old and has been failing rapidly. Underbuilt from the start, it has not been well-maintained over the years. Now, SLWA's positive transformation is the topic of water professionals nationwide.

DeWeese, Noah and their dedicated team have worked tirelessly to ensure the water treatment plant's success.

"The guys I have hired aren't here just for a paycheck. We eat and breathe water management," said DeWeese. "I always say, water people are not born, they are made, and it becomes their life."

In addition to his dedicated team, numerous organizations are working together to create an ironclad partnership that has provided expertise, funding and support.

These include the USDA, the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, the Oklahoma Water Resources Board and the Choctaw Nation.

With these partnerships, SLWA has secured over $20 million in funding for a new water treatment plant, an accomplishment that would not have happened without this teamwork.

Though the new plant is still a few years away, DeWeese and his team have already cut water loss from 50% down to the gold standard of 1-10%. Most water systems lose about 20%.

Even with limited updated materials, equipment and manpower, response time to leaks has been cut in half, saving both the water treatment plant and the customers it serves significant money.

"There is not a water system in the world that doesn't struggle," said DeWeese. However, SLWA represents a cautionary tale that has become a gold-standard operation despite its dated equipment.

Because citizens are central to rural water systems, it's important for everyone to know where their water originates and how it is treated before it reaches their taps. SLWA invites citizens to attend monthly water board meetings, where they share monthly updates on the plant, leaks and finances.

These meetings are a great way to get to know who manages your water and what they do. Meetings are posted at the SLWA's physical office and at sardislake.myruralwater.com.

SLWA also encourages its customers to reach out if they have an issue.

"We can't address the problem unless we know there is one," said Noah.

The Choctaw Nation's Office of Water Resource Management (OWRM) operates under one goal: long-term sustainability of the water resources within the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Reservation.

To support this goal, OWRM is offering free Water Operator Renewal Training for certified water operators in Oklahoma.

The training will offer hands-on instruction focused on the operational, maintenance, and regulatory aspects of water treatment systems and facilities.

Participants will earn the in-person continuing education hours required to renew their Oklahoma water operator licenses.

Chahta Anumpa Aiikhvna
Mach Language Lesson

Choctaw Conversational Responses

Alhika?
Pronounced: A(n)h-thli-ka
Translation: Really?

Keyu sv yimmi!
Pronounced: Ke-yoh sah yim-meh or key-yoh sammi (as in the English short vowel sound in 'hat'.)
Translation: I don't believe so!
In today's usage, it is closer to the English expression, "I don't think so!"

Peh ish maka ho?
Pronounced: Peh ish mah-ka ho(n)?
Translation: Are you just saying that?

Achukma ahni li.
Pronounced: Ah-chohk-ma ah-nih lih.
Translation: I think it is good / I agree.

Aiokpanchi li.
Pronounced: Ah-yohk-pahn-chi lih.
Translation: I like or approve of something or someone).

Aiokpanchi li kiyo.
Pronounced: Ah-yohk-pahn-chi lih ke-yoh.
Translation: I do not like or do not approve of (something or someone).

Vlhpesa chi akinli.
Pronounced: Ahth-pe-sah chi(n) ahk-ihn-lih.
Translation: It is going to be all right / It will be all right.

Vlhpesa akinli.
Pronounced: Ahth-pe-sah ahk-ihn-lih.
Translation: It's okay / It's all right.

choctawnation.com/about/language/

Joey Green, Singer-Songwriter

By Kellie Matherly

Joey Green is a singer-songwriter and country music artist whose journey through music has spanned more than two decades. A proud Texan and member of Choctaw Nation from the small town of Crowley, just south of Fort Worth, Joey crafts songs that bridge country, rock, soul, and blues, blending them into a sound that is entirely his own. His appearance on Season 15 of NBC's The Voice earned him a spot on Team Blake and introduced his unique style to millions of listeners.

Music found Joey early. While his father enjoyed classic country artists like Merle Haggard, Gary Stewart, and Keith Whitley, his brother leaned toward outlaw country and southern rock. From his sister, Joey learned about everything from Radiohead to Michael Bolton, and his mother loved artists like Dwight Yoakam and Vince Gill. As the youngest in the family, Joey soaked in all of those influences, forming an eclectic ear that would later define his songwriting style.

Joey got his first guitar when he was fourteen, but taking formal lessons didn't satisfy his need to play the music that spoke to his soul. After only a couple of lessons, he decided to teach himself, using chord charts and online tabs to learn the songs he loved. He wrote his first song, a praise and worship tune, at fifteen and performed it at church camp, earning a standing ovation and sparking his belief that music could actually become his life's work.

"I think it was one of those things that if I was ever going to have success at it, I had to devote everything to it," said Joey.

In college, Joey realized his passion lay beyond the classroom. He felt called by the stage, the lights, and the crowd. He began playing in bars and clubs as a senior in high school and continued through his freshman year of college, earning enough money and recognition to realize that performing felt more like purpose than work. The decision to chase music full-time set the course for his career.

Joey's songwriting philosophy centers on serving the song. Rather than confining himself to a single genre, he lets the story and melody lead the way. His openness to collaboration and co-writing has shaped his evolution as a songwriter, teaching him that together, artists can create songs with broader emotional reach and mass appeal. Teamwork and collaboration have become guiding principles for him.

"I was just writing all my stuff on my own, and with co-writing, my songs just got better. I mean everything got better," Joey said.

Despite his deep respect for collaboration, however, Joey was raised with a fierce sense of independence. His father owned a family-run auto shop, and his mother quit her job to work there.

"[My dad] was an underdog in a way," said Joey. "He kind of risked everything to support our family and build a business...I think that really inspired me to be my own boss and control my own destiny. It gives me the opportunity to live life every day to where, even when I'm working, I'm just creating."

Choctaw musician Joey Green puts his heart and soul into his songwriting. Green's music is available on major streaming platforms, with videos on Facebook and YouTube.

Choctaw Nation Photos

Joey Green, a Crowley, Texas, native and Choctaw Nation member, has spent more than 20 years fusing country, rock, soul and blues into his unique sound.

His first paying gig came at the Thirsty Armadillo in the Fort Worth Stockyards, where he earned twenty dollars every Tuesday night, enough to fill his Ford Ranger's tank in 2001. From there, his local following grew, fueled by his heartfelt lyrics and the authenticity of his performances.

Fort Worth has always been home base for Joey, even after he moved to Nashville eight years ago. Nashville reminds him of the musical community that raised him. He hasn't limited himself to performing in Nashville, though.

Touring has taken Joey far beyond Texas and Oklahoma. He has performed across the United States and abroad in Ireland, London, Australia, and Qatar for the USO. Each experience has broadened his appreciation for people and places, reinforcing the connection music can forge across cultures.

Aside from music, the concept of togetherness is important in Joey's family life and his Choctaw heritage as well.With five siblings, he has numerous nieces and nephews, and the family gets together often to celebrate or to mourn losses. Playing at the Choctaw Nation's annual Labor Day Festival for the first time also put him in contact with other Choctaw musicians and tribal members, which inspired him to forge a deeper connection with this Choctaw roots.

"It took me 42 years, but I've really leaned into my heritage a lot lately, and it's been a really great thing for me."

Joey's songs are deeply personal, often inspired by his family and the people he meets. One of his most meaningful moments came when he wrote "Battleground" for a fan who was battling breast cancer. Another song, written for his late sister, became his most-streamed track, while a song he penned for his father as a Father's Day gift unexpectedly became a radio hit. His music, rich with emotion and authenticity, reflects a life lived openly and compassionately.

Signed to a publishing deal with Warner Chappell Music, Joey continues to evolve as both artist and storyteller.He advises aspiring musicians to prepare for long hours, rejection, and perseverance, but most importantly, to love the craft. For Joey, music has never been about fame or perfection. It's about connection and telling stories people can feel and relate to.

"I think being able to tell my story through music is just a blessing altogether," Joey said. "I'm not the best communicator, but when I sing a song or write a song, it's like you get it."

Through every song and every stage, Joey Green remains rooted in his Texas upbringing, his Choctaw pride, and belief that music, at its best, brings people together.

Hear Joey Green's music on major streaming outlets, including Spotify, Amazon Music, and Apple Music. He also has music videos on Facebook and YouTube.

See and share more of Green's story by visiting togetherweremore.com.

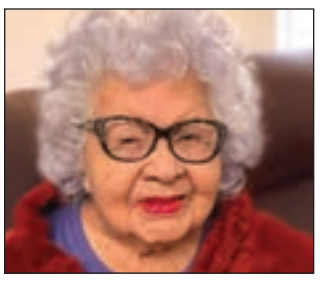
Smith turns 97

Geneva Jane Smith of Fanshawe, Oklahoma, enjoyed celebrating her 97th birthday Dec. 24, 2025.

It was a special day for her and her family, who gathered to sing "Happy Birthday," watch her blow out the candles and open gifts.

Smith is the daughter of Martin and Ethel Duncan. Her mother was an original enrollee of the Choctaw Nation.

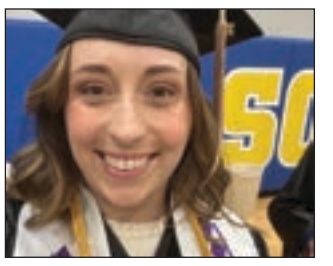
Boman turns 101



Melba Boman "beautiful and aged to perfection," celebrated her 101st birthday with family and friends. Her family would like to express their thanks for the visits, cards, calls and text messages that made her birthday special.

Melba is the daughter of original Choctaw enrollees, Roosevelt T. Bacon and Josie L. Woods Bacon. She retired from I.H.S. and is proud to have resided in the Choctaw Nation her entire life.

Cate earns her master's from SE



Chara Cate has earned her master's degree in organizational management and leadership from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, graduating with honors.

Cate is the daughter of John E. Ross and Anneisa Ross.

She is proud to share this milestone with her family, whose support made this accomplishment possible.

Balu Ravi turns 1

Lyndsi and Ash Ravi's little rock star Balu arrived one year ago.

Always curious, with a big smile and his favorite toy mallet in hand.

Balu shares his birthday with Elvis Presley — so we know this boy was born to shine!

"Happy 1st Birthday, Balu!" - The Ravi & Ishcomer Family

Perkins turns 100

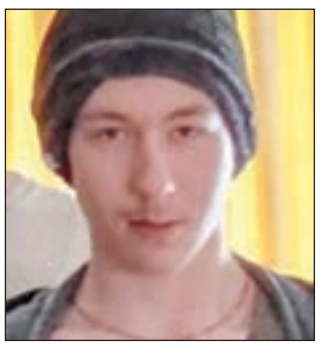
Mary Lee Perkins of Bennington, Oklahoma, celebrated her 100th birthday Jan. 17, 2026, with an Oklahoma Sooners-themed party surrounded by family and friends. A lifelong OU fan, she recalls listening to early Sooners games on the radio and still follows the team, cheering for them at home.

Born Jan. 17, 1926, Perkins is the daughter of the late Nora Lee (Gardner) Pettey and the late Grover Pettey. She is proud of her Choctaw heritage and gives thanks to the Lord for his many blessings.

Perkins enjoys sharing memories from her years as a telephone operator and often recites Psalm 23 from memory.

The family extends thanks to Centric Home Health & Hospice, Hair Designs by Charlotte, Ms. Donna's Pies, and all who helped celebrate this special milestone.

Stevens turns 18



Wesley Aaron Stevens turns 18 on March 17. He is the grandson of Theresa Wesley, great-grandson of Lewain Wallace, and great-great-grandson grandson Wallace.

"We are proud of a fine young Choctaw man." - The Stevens & Wallace Family

Leuschen-Kohl earns Ph.D. from Purdue

Rebecca (BeKa) Leuschen-Kohl earned her Ph.D. in Plant Pathology from Purdue University's College of Agriculture in December 2025.

BeKa holds a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, where she discovered her passion for exploring how soil microbes interact with field crops.

While at Purdue, she was an NSF Graduate Research Fellow and part of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Indigenous Graduate Program. She is currently an NSF Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas.

BeKa extends her heartfelt gratitude to the Choctaw Nation Higher Education Program, the Chahta Foundation, and the Growing Hope program for their support throughout her educational journey. Without their support, her dream of becoming a professor.

Hunt tops 1000

Preslee Hunt, Class of 2026, attends Lone Grove High School and is enrolled at Murray State College. Hunt, a standout, recently topped 1,000 points in high school basketball. She belongs to the National Honor Society, National Society of High School Scholars, Oklahoma Honor Society and the Choctaw STAR program.

Beginning in fall 2026, Hunt plans to attend the University of Oklahoma, where she will major in health and exercise science and pursue a career as an occupational therapist. Hunt is grateful for the Choctaw Nation's Concurrent Assistance and STAR program support, which offer invaluable assistance to students.

French turns 21

Gary French wishes his son, Coen William Cleary French, a happy 21st birthday. Gary and Coen are both tribal members from the Tonihka family. They both live in Florida now.

Choctaw actors help bring Native stories to life on screen

By Shelia Kirven

With major productions like “Landman,” “Yellowstone,” “Reservation Dogs” and “Killers of the Flower Moon,” there has been a greater need for Indigenous actors and background actors. Choctaws are seizing that opportunity and appearing in television productions, movies and commercials.

Biskinik spoke with several of these actors, who shared how they got started and offered advice for anyone interested in getting involved. Below are some of their stories.

Mike Simpson

Mike Simpson grew up in Hugo and is a tribal elder who spent his early years working as a coach and salesman.

Simpson became heavily involved in background acting after the COVID-19 pandemic, when he appeared in “Killers of the Flower Moon.”

From there, he learned about Legacy Casting, Freihofer Casting, Buffalo Casting and a company in Atlanta. He now responds to their casting calls. He has appeared in about 20 commercials, television series and movies.

Simpson enjoys helping others get into the business and has helped 23 others get into a shoot for “Yellowstone.” Simpson believes that his connections and friendliness helped him land a front-and-center scene with lead Kevin Costner.

Simpson said he gets paid more for commercials than for television and movies. He has appeared in commercials for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and for the Choctaw Nation.

He prefers working in movies. “The movies are more fun,” Simpson said.

Simpson has worked on 20+ productions, like “Yellowstone”, “Lawmen: Bass Reeves”, “Echo”, ”Landman”, “1883”, “1923”, “Tulsa King”, “Reservation Dogs” and “Sarah’s Oil.”

He has worked with Lily Gladstone, Leonardo DiCaprio, Martin Scorsese, Kevin Costner, Tim McGraw, Sam Elliott, Graham Greene, Tantoo Cardinal, Kyle Chandler, Lou Diamond Phillips, Kelly Reilly, Cole Hauser, Taylor Sheridan, Gil Birmingham, Moses Brings Plenty, David Oyelowo and Dennis Quaid.

Though he might be considered a tribal “elder” Simpson has chosen not to slow down in this era of his life. He hasn’t retired and doesn’t intend to. He hopes that he and other Native actors and background actors will leave behind a legacy.

“Many times, we background [actors] are nothing but a blur,” said Simpson. “But the movie wouldn’t be a movie without us.”

Monica Brittingham

Monica Brittingham has lived in Boswell her entire life. Her grandmother was a Choctaw tribal councilperson and her grandfather was a preacher at a Choctaw church.

According to Brittingham, her hobby of appearing in commercials and on television basically fell into her lap.

In 2010, Brittingham was asked to be a presenter at the Drum Awards ceremony. She met Wes Studi and Elaine Miles, and the black-tie event gave her a taste of what being an actor could be like.

When “Yellowstone” filmed in Texas, she saw a notice that Native American background actors were needed. She submitted her photos and was chosen.

Since then, she has received great feedback when applying for other background acting jobs. She also appeared in “Landman” and has been in multiple commercials for the Choctaw Nation.

According to Brittingham, she follows casting companies on social media to learn of new opportunities.

When she was cast for “Yellowstone,” she didn’t even know it was a paying job. According to Ward, she went because Kevin Costner was in the production, as she had been a fan of his for years.

“The pay was nothing to write home about,” said Ward. “For background people, I think it’s just to get your name out there, or for me to see the stars.”

The scene she appeared in took 12 hours to shoot, and it was very cold outside, though the shot was supposed to be for warm weather, so no winter wear was allowed. She said it was the longest day ever, and when the director yelled cut after Costner’s last line, everyone in the crowd shouted with relief that it was over.

Her latest job was for “Landman.” She said the company came to Durant, had a contract with the Choctaw Travel Plaza and Billy Bob Thornton was there. They also filmed scenes at the Choctaw Casino.

She has also appeared in “Yellowstone,” “Bass Reeves” and multiple commercials, mostly for the Choctaw casinos and one for the Choctaw Cultural Center. She has also appeared with football player Emmitt Smith and baseball’s Ivan “Pudge” Rodriguez.

Her favorite part of acting is shooting commercials. She said it is usually an all-day job, typically eight to 12 hours.

Brittingham said she plans to continue because she is having a good time.

“As long as I get emails, I’m always going to apply,” said Brittingham. “Because it is fun and a little extra money to put in my savings account to fly my son home.”

Dr. Deana Ward

Dr. Deana Ward is a psychological technician, beadwork artist, mother, grandmother and aspiring screenplay writer. In her spare time, she acts in commercials, television and movies.

Her first acting job was a commercial for the Choctaw Nation. She said a call went out requesting applications, and she responded.

The next opportunities were for Disney’s “Echo” and a Kia commercial. Kia was spotlighting Native American Month and different Native artists throughout the U.S. She said it went nationwide on Kia’s social media. She also appeared in “Landman.”

Ward and her son, Hiloha, were asked to be a part of “Echo” by the Choctaw Language Department, which consulted on the film.

“That was kind of like rock-star treatment,” said Ward. “Everything was paid. Transportation was like a Mercedes-Benz. They chauffeured us to the airport, got us rental cars, it was really lux.”

According to Ward, this isn’t the typical background actor experience, which is usually at your own expense.

“They pay you, but it’s really minimal,” Ward said. “It’s like $150 to be a background player for eight hours of work.”

A special memory of “Echo” was teaching actress Tantoo Cardinal how to make Choctaw diamonds for a scene.

According to Ward, Cardinal remembers her [Ward] to this day and visits with her at Ward’s artistry booth at the Santa Fe Indian Market when she attends.

Following “Echo,” a red-carpet gala was held at the Choctaw Cultural Center, and Ward and her son attended.

“It just felt like the cherry on top,” said Ward.

She prefers working on movies, and her favorite place to shoot is her hometown. As far as a sense of adventure, that was the appearance in “Echo.”

“It felt like I was going somewhere,” said Ward. “I felt like I was a star and part of something big.”

Her advice is to apply, because the worst they can say is no. Ward encourages those interested to get on the sites, wait for the calls, and send in a resume and photos.

Ward said there are things you won’t know until you get there, but remember to treat every opportunity like a learning experience and expand on it.

“I’m going to keep going. I’ve said this about everything I have ever done,” said Ward. “If it’s fun, I’m going to keep doing it.”

Jula Harjo

Jula Harjo grew up in Idabel. She is a model, singer and beadwork artist.

In 2022, Sterlin Harjo personally asked her to appear in “Reservation Dogs,” where she played a hospice nurse.

According to Jula, Sterlin called her one of his favorite hymn singers in an interview.

“That did something to me. That made me feel so good about myself,” she said.

Following “Reservation Dogs,” Harjo traveled to Georgia to appear in Marvel’s “Echo.”

Since then, she has been involved in multiple fashion shoots, including one of the most well-known, SWAIA. She has had opportunities to walk for Jamie Okuma, whose work is featured in the Smithsonian, and Dr. Jessica Moore Harjo, whose line is Weomepe.

She has been in several short films, including “Siren of the Wood,” “Trail of Tears: The Hymn,” “War Angels: Ho’nehe” and “Hunger.” She had to learn Native languages for each role, which she called “both challenging and deeply rewarding.”

Her advice to others who want to be extras in commercials, movies and television is to be consistent.

“Be consistent and don’t be afraid to start small. Sign up with casting agencies, keep updated photos of yourself and always show up on time and ready to work,” Jula said. “Background acting isn’t always glamorous, but it’s an incredible way to learn how sets operate and to build confidence.”

She encourages actors to be respectful to those around them, from other extras to production hands, because relationships matter in the industry.

Most importantly, she advises being proud of who you are and where you come from and not to pretend to be someone you aren’t.

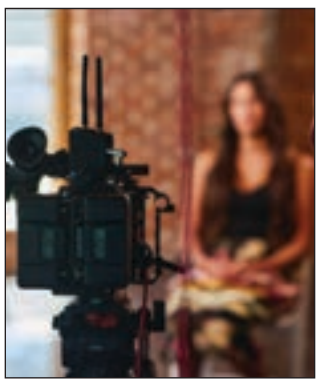
“Our identities and stories are needed in these spaces,” said Jula. “There’s no one better at being yourself than you.”

Jula does what she does for her family, her community and her culture.

“It’s a blessing to represent in a space where we haven’t always been visible,” said Jula. “Even if I’m in the background, I know I’m part of a larger story, and that’s something I carry with a lot of pride.”

She said she finds it comforting that her daughter will grow up in a world where seeing Native Americans on television and in film is normal and commonplace.

“If it weren’t for my ancestors being so strong-willed and strong all around, I wouldn’t be here doing this.”



Choctaw Nation Casting

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma frequently casts for a variety of video, photography and marketing projects and encourages tribal members to apply.

From commercials and cultural features to educational and digital content, the nation is building an on-camera presence that reflects the strength and diversity of the Choctaw people.

Choctaw Nation has created a talent database where Choctaw actors, families, elders, youth and anyone interested in appearing in future productions can submit their information. No experience is required, just a willingness to participate and represent the Tribe with pride. Tribal members can sign up at talent.choctawnation.com and complete a profile.

Joining the database ensures consideration for upcoming shoots and provides a chance to be part of projects that share Choctaw stories with a wider audience.

The Choctaw Nation also posts casting opportunities on its official social media accounts and website. To stay up to date on casting and other Choctaw Nation announcements, visit choctawnation.com and follow the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma on major social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

The 310 Hat Project celebrates 20 years of knitting for Choctaw Head Starts

Submitted by Denise Roach,
CNO Head Start ERSEA Coordinator

A dedicated group of women celebrated a major milestone this year by preparing 378 handmade hats for children enrolled in Choctaw Nation Head Start centers across the reservation, marking the 20th anniversary of their annual knitting effort.

For two decades, the volunteers have gathered needles, yarn, and time to ensure young children stay warm during the colder months.

What began as a small, informal project has grown into a cherished tradition that combines craftsmanship with community service. The effort started as the “310 Hats Project” representing the number of children being served in Head Start at the time.

As Head Start expanded from serving 310 to 378 children, the project name continued, but the number of hats changed. Volunteers tackled the new challenge of adding 68 hats without hesitation.

Organizers say the project is about more than warmth. It represents cultural values of generosity and intergenerational care that are central to Choctaw life.

Volunteers carefully select colors and patterns suitable for young children, ensuring durability and comfort.

Head Start administrators expressed appreciation for the long-standing partnership, noting that the hats often become children’s favorite winter items.

As the project celebrates its 20th year, the organizers say they hope the tradition will continue for generations to come—one hat at a time.

Photos Provided

Choctaw Head Start students show of their hats given to them by the 310 Hat Project.

ITI FABVSSA

Historical map research: Continuing collaborations with the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac

By Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation

Last month, we discussed the research and exhibit collaborations between the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, France.

Throughout this collaboration, we have analyzed historical French maps of the Choctaw homeland. Many of these maps were created in France using records by French explorers, who, in turn, got their information from the Choctaw people. Many of the maps contain information that is useful when doing research on the lifeways of our Choctaw ancestors.

This month, we would like to highlight a couple of maps that we have analyzed and to share an exciting project that came from these collaborations.

The first map we want to discuss is an anonymous map created possibly between 1730 and 1735 titled Carte pour donner unée idee de la position des villages sauvages... which translates to: A map to give an idea of the location of the Indian villages. It is housed at the Defense Historical Service located in Vincennes, France. This early map was created to show the locations of Native villages in the area of early French settlements in what is known as French Lower Louisiana. Figure 1 is a close-up view of a select few Choctaw villages. What makes this map unique is how French cartographers tried to capture information they read in explorers' journals.

What may first draw your attention are the clusters of red dots. These dots represent each Choctaw family hamlet within a Choctaw village.

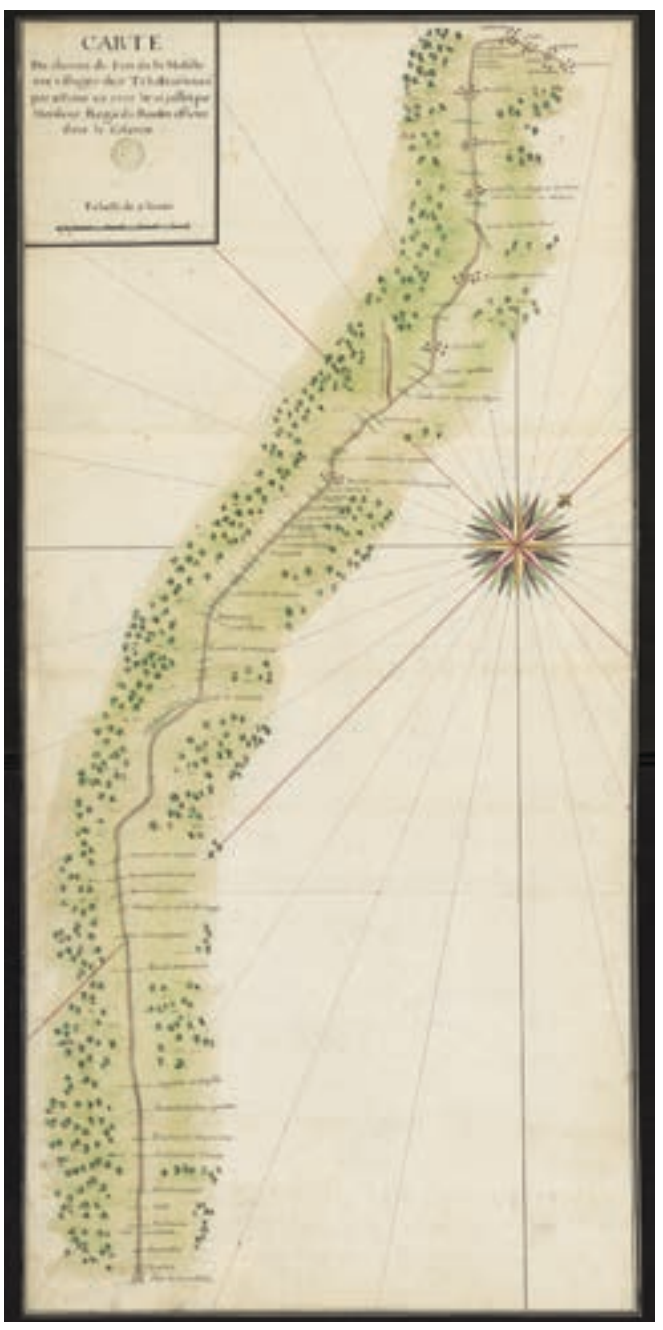


Figure 1. Close-up view of select Choctaw villages in Carte pour donner une idée de la position des villages sauvages.

Figure 2. Carte du chemin du fort de la Mobile aux villages des Tchaktas levée par estime en 1732 by Regis du Rollet.

Traditionally, Choctaw women would build their homes and raise their families near their mothers and grandmothers. Each of these red dots represents these generational hamlets of Choctaw grandmothers.

Also in Figure 1 are hashed lines that can be seen between clusters of villages. These lines represent Choctaw agricultural fields that are shared between these communities. Outside of the villages, in the fertile soils along waterways, there were large fields of corn, beans and squash.

Each family had the responsibility of managing sections of these fields. Sometimes the fields were so large that they were shared between multiple villages. Near the center of each village was the chief's home, which is also represented on these maps.

Also viewable in Figure 1, are the village centers. Traditionally, the Choctaw chief's home is where visitors, like the French explorers, would have stayed during their visits to the community. The homes also acted as community centers with a plaza in front that was utilized for festivities and events. Lastly, this map (not shown in Figure 1) shows just how numerous the Choctaw Nation was. We were the largest ally of the French, which can be seen through the number of villages and how close they are together.

Shown in Figure 2 is another map created in 1732 by Louis Joseph Guillaume de Regis du Rollet, titled Carte du chemin du fort de la Mobile aux villages des Tchaktas levée par estime en 1732, which translates to: Map of the road from Mobile to the Choctaw villages surveyed by estimation in 1732.

Rollet was a French officer who visited the Choctaw homelands and recorded many different Choctaw place names along the Choctaw road from our villages to the French settlement of Mobile.

This map is unique because it was created by Rollet himself , who had traveled through these areas, taking meticulous notes on the information that his Choctaw guides shared with him.

Roullet also had an excellent ear for the Choctaw language and recorded a number of Choctaw place names phonetically in 18th-century French (Musco et al. 2025).

The Historic Preservation Department had known about this map for several years, but we were not able to fully translate the Choctaw place names listed on the map because we didn't know how to pronounce all of the French letters.

During our map research, we worked with a French researcher named Jonas Musco. Jonas was studying Rollet's map and manuscript, and during his visit to Oklahoma, he met with us to discuss some of his findings. As Jonas, a native French speaker, pronounced the French syllables, the Choctaw names recorded by Roullet became perfectly clear. When he spoke the names, it sounded as if he were speaking the Choctaw language!

Additionally, Roullet recorded in his journal the description of each Choctaw place name that was told to him by his Choctaw guides. Choctaw place names are often descriptive and highlight landscape features (Musco et al. 2025).

Some of the names record tidbits of information about how our ancestors interacted with the land in that spot.

Below are a few examples of some of Roullet's place names (these translations have not been fully vetted by the Choctaw Nation's language department).

French recording: Bouk tiak acé tchaba.***Roullet's notes:*** Bayou where the pine tree serves as a beam. ***Choctaw name***: Bok tiak hahchvba or Bok tiak alhchvba. ***English literal translation of Choctaw name:*** Stream of the pine footbridge or Stream bridged by a pine tree.

French recording: Quinta ouba yllié. Roullet's Notes: The place resembles a beaver's foot. ***Choctaw name:*** Kinta holba iyyi. ***English literal translation of Choctaw name:*** "Like a beaver's foot," aka muskrat foot.

French recording: Conchakoué chkché. ***Roullet's notes:*** End of the large switch cane. Choctaw: Kushak wishakchi. ***English literal translation of Choctaw name:*** Tip or outmost end of the switchcane brake.

French recording: Bouk janache founi atcha. ***Roullet's notes:*** Bayou of the buffalo bones. ***Choctaw name***: Bok yvnnvsh foni asha. ***English literal translation of Choctaw name:*** Stream where the buffalo bones are.

Of the 73 Choctaw place names that were recorded by Rollet, there were only seven that our Department could not translate in full.

Through other sources that we have access to, the Historic Preservation Department found that at least 9 of the Choctaw place names recorded by Roulette were still being used by Choctaw people well over a century later. Our research is still ongoing, but our Department has plans to keep working on this project and provide an update in a future Iti Fabvssa article.

We encourage you to view this Iti Fabvssa article online on biskinik.com and choctawnation.com, as it contains online links to additional web content.

References:

- Musco, Jonas, Paz Núñez-Regueiro, Everett Bandy, Ryan Spring et Ian Thompson
- 2025 Back to the Sources. A Collaborative Research Project on the Indigenous Mississippi Valley and Southeast Based on 18th-Century French Maps (Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac and the Choctaw, Miami, Peoria and Quapaw Nations). IdeAs. Idées d'Amériques 26. https://doi.org/10.4000/14v80, accessed February 6th, 2026.

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma awarded nearly $2 Million USDOT SMART Grant

DURANT, Okla. (January 20, 2026)— The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has received a nearly $2 million Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) Grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), marking a major milestone in advancing healthcare logistics and transportation innovation across the reservation.

Chief Gary Batton stated: 'Our people deserve timely, high-quality healthcare no matter where they live. This SMART Grant allows us to harness cutting-edge technology—drones, robotics, and intelligent logistics—to better serve our tribal members across rural and hard-to-reach areas.'

James Grimsley, Executive Director of Advanced Technology Initiatives, said: 'This project is a prime example of innovation meeting a critical need. By reducing dependency on rural highways, we can make healthcare delivery safer and faster."

Stan Caldwell, USDOT SMART Grants Program Director, stated: 'The Choctaw Nation's success with advanced drone integration shows what the SMART program is designed to achieve—technology-driven solutions that improve safety, reliability, and quality of life.'

The initiative positions the Choctaw Nation as a national leader in rural medical drone operations and transportation innovation, aiming to improve diagnostic times, emergency response, and prescription delivery across the reservation.

Photo by Christian Toews

Choctaw Nation receives SMART Grant.

Quick Facts

- Choctaw Nation received nearly $2million to build a drone network for medical deliveries, which federal officials hope will serve as a national model.
- The system will deliver medical supplies and test samples across the tribe's 11,000-square-mile reservation, aiming to boost rural health care access and reduce wait times for Native communities.
- Test flights are already taking place between McAlester and Atoka.
- The project is part of a five-year, $500 million federal technology demonstration aimed at improving transportation safety and efficiency.
- The grant also funds the integration of robotics and AI, as well as the construction of secure, unattended drone hubs.

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MORNING COFFEE

"LOOKING LIKE IT REALLY WILL BE A HAPPY NEW YEAR"

By Dr. Evan Whitley

Halito,

It's hard to believe we have closed the chapter on yet another year. All years should be considered a gift from above, especially if they were witnessed with health and well-being for oneself and their family members. However, for anyone who is intimately tied to agriculture, 2025 will go down as "one for the ages." Sure, there were a few ups and downs, but for the most part, every major box important to success in agriculture was checked. Major cattle markets (calves, yearlings and feds) improved to historic highs of 35%, 21% and 16%, respectively, even considering a significant Q3 correction caused by politics and speculation. Weather conditions in 2025, especially during the growing season months was phenomenal for most parts of Oklahoma and only until October did we start to mention "the D-word."

Commodity prices were in-line with 2024 values and in many cases were lower. We booked our winter feed for about 8% less this year. Cost of gains during the finishing phase hovered just above $1.00 and—in a couple of instances—even dropped under that. Demand for our beef product (although a limited supply caused higher prices) remained strong, even reached new heights in some categories. All in all, it was a very good year. As we reflect upon it, we should do so with positivity and appreciation.

So, the "loaded" question becomes: "Can 2026 be even better?"

Any meaningful attempt to answer this rhetorical question is foolish. It reminds me of the shade advice: "Control what you can control—let everything else work itself out." As anyone in agriculture can and likely will attest, there is so much that is truly out of our control. However, there are some key elements we can plan for. We will try and point some of those out here.

The hard truth is—every year is different, and what is most important is our ability to adapt and persevere. I hope you had a wonderful 2025, and are already well on your way to a blessed, healthy and prosperous 2026!

This column was written by Dr. Evan Whitley, Executive Director of Agriculture and Natural Resources and appeared in the Choctaw Ranches Quarterly Agriculture Newsletter.

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Choctaw Nation OEM coordinates winter storm response

By Chris Jennings

Winter Storm Fern brought ice, snow and dangerously low temperatures to a large portion of the United States from Jan. 23 to Jan. 27, 2026.

The Choctaw Nation Emergency Management team was there for tribal members on the reservation, both during and after the storm. The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) coordinated resources, handling about 30 calls for assistance, including stranded motorists and power outages.

Jeff Hansen, senior director of community protection with Choctaw Nation OEM, said, "What we do is route those calls. If it's something that we can help with directly, we will. If it's tree limbs falling on power lines, we would get our contractors out to clear them. If it's something like a frozen pipe or a septic system that's frozen up, we would refer those over to housing or the Office of Environmental Health, and that department would address those problems."

OEM also teams up with CNO facilities maintenance to clear parking lots and check buildings, monitoring and repairing any problems that might be caused by extreme temperatures.

Being a communications line to senior leadership is also an important role OEM plays, allowing them to decide when to open and close for the safety of tribal members and employees.

"Giving them good data to make decisions on, do we stay open or do we close," said Hansen.

The storm's effects varied across Choctaw Nation's reservation area. While Hansen said it was primarily a sleet event, some areas were hit harder than others.

"The farther south you went along the Red River counties, there was freezing rain that led to roughly about 2000 power outages in McCurtain County," said Hansen.

Hansen stressed the importance of staying weather-aware.

"The biggest thing that people need to do is stay weather aware. Making sure that you've got multiple methods of receiving warnings, with something like a weather radio and you're signed up for a text message service," said Hansen.

Being ready to be self-sufficient for three days is important.

The First 72 on You program offers several tips for preparing for emergencies that can happen at any time of year.

You can find resources on how to prepare for different types of emergencies at choctawnation.com/about/first-72-on-you/.

"We have seen in the past, where somebody will call and they've got a problem, but we can't get to them immediately. The roads can be impassable due to debris or ice, so make sure that you've got that level of preparedness to take care of yourself until we can get there and start addressing the problem," Hansen said.

Taking the time to prepare for an emergency can make a big difference in how you get through it.

Emergency services are already often overwhelmed, and making sure you are prepared can help relieve some of that stress on CNO's emergency departments.

Choctaw Nation Photo

Heavy snow and ice across the reservation forced the closure of tribal offices.

Steps to Prepare

BASIC ESSENTIALS

- Water (at least 3 days supply of water, 1 gallon per person/pet)
- Non-perishable food (at least 3 days)
- Can opener
- Extra cell phone battery or charger
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Prescription medication and glasses
- Important family documents

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

- Multi-purpose tool
- Sanitation and personal hygiene items
- Whistle
- Matches
- Clothing
- Battery operated/Crank radio
- Pet items
- Map of the area
- Items specific to family members

PET SUPPLY LIST

- Food
- Water
- Medicine
- First aid kit
- Collar with ID tag
- Leash
- Travel bag, crate or sturdy carrier
- Sanitation needs (pet litter and litter box)
- A picture of you and your pet (in case you become separated)
- Familiar items (favorite toy, treats or bedding)

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WIC OFFICE LOCATIONS

LOCATION	DAYS	HOURS
Antlers 539.316.5089	Tuesday	8:30 am – 4:00 pm
Atoka 539.316.2050	Daily | Monday – Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Battiest 580.920.7061	1st Tuesday of every month	8:30 am – 4:00 pm
Broken Bow 539.316.3011	Daily | Monday – Friday (Except the 1st Tuesday & 2nd Thursday of the Month)	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Durant 539.316.3517	Daily | Monday – Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Heavener 539.316.4784	Monday, Tuesday, Thursday & Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Hugo 539.316.5089	Monday, Wednesday, Thursday & Friday	8:00 am – 4:00 pm
Idabel 539.316.4313	Daily | Monday – Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
McAlester 539.316.2431	Daily | Monday – Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Poteau 539.316.4606	Daily | Monday – Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Smithville 580.920.7063	1st Thursday of every month	8:30 am – 4:00 pm
Spiro 918.962.5134	Wednesday, Thursday & Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Stigler 918.967.4211	Monday & Tuesday	8:30 am – 4:00 pm
Talihina 539.316.6792	Daily | Monday - Friday	8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Wilburton 580.642.7588	Wednesday	8:30 am – 4:00 pm
Mobile Van 580.745.4330	1st Tuesday – Boswell 3rd Tuesday – Coalgate 4th Tuesday - Clayton	9:00 am – 3:00 pm

Scan to learn more about the program.

Choctaw Nation Health Services

CHOCTAW NATION FOOD DISTRIBUTION

MARKET HOURS
Open 8:30 a.m.- 3:30 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday
Thursday: 9:30 a.m.- 5:30 p.m.

Markets will be closed the last two days of each month for inventory.

March 2026

All markets open weekdays, March 2-27
Closed: March 30 & 31
Nutrition Ed & Food Programs subject to cancellation
Participants can request a calendar at their location.

ANTLERS 400 S.W. "O" ST., 580-298-6443
FOOD DEMO MARCH 13

BROKEN BOW 109 Chahta Rd., 580-584-2842
FOOD DEMO MARCH 11

DURANT 2352 Big Lots Pkwy., 580-924-7773
FOOD DEMO MARCH 17

MCALESTER 3244 Afullota Hina, 918-420-5716
FOOD DEMO MARCH 9

POTEAU 106 B St., 918-649-0431
FOOD DEMO MARCH 5

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

Choctaw Nation Vocational Rehabilitation

March 3	Talihina	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
March 4	Antlers	10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
March 6	Wright City	10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
March 11	Crowder	By Appointment
March 12	Poteau	11:30 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.
March 13	Atoka	9:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.
March 13	Coalgate	12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.
March 17	Broken Bow	10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
March 18	McAlester	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
March 19	Wilburton	10:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
March 24	Idabel	10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
March 25	Stigler	By Appointment

Durant: Monday, Wednesday and Friday
Call 580-640-6007 for an Appointment

CNO tribal member plays key role in NASA mission sending humans back to the Moon

by Chris Jennings

A long time ago, in a galaxy not so far, far away...more precisely, from the 1950s until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. was in a space race with the Soviet Union.

While the Soviet Union was the first to reach several space milestones, the U.S. was the first to put a human on the moon, claiming victory in the space race.

While the U.S. flag planted by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin may have faded over time, like public interest in moon missions, the United States remained the only country to put a flag on the lunar surface—until 2020.

In December 2020, China's Chang'e-5 mission placed a Chinese flag on the moon's surface using its unmanned lander. In 2024, China, using a second unmanned lander, placed another flag on the moon's surface. This flag, however, was made of basalt fiber that could potentially resist fading for thousands of years. If you're keeping count, that's 2-1.

China has made no secret of its intention to put a taikonaut (astronaut) on the moon. With executive orders in 2017 and 2025, along with congressional approval, the United States government has officially said "make it so," setting in motion to return humans to the moon's surface, rekindling the space race.

Choctaw tribal member Chris Sorenson is playing a part in this renewed space race. Sorenson works for Lockheed Martin, the primary contractor to NASA for the Artemis missions. He is an Orion systems integration and test engineer on the Assembly, Test and Launch Operations (ATLO) team.

The ATLO team is responsible for integrating the Orion crew capsule, designed by Lockheed Martin, with the European Service Module (ESM). The ESM provides electricity, water, oxygen, and nitrogen, and keeps the spacecraft at the right temperature and on course.

The Artemis program plans to return humans to the moon, starting with the crewed Artemis II flyby, now scheduled for March 2026. This will be followed by the Artemis III lunar landing no earlier than 2027 or 2028. This timeline puts it two to three years ahead of China's planned manned lunar mission.

Given that the return to the moon by humans is such a milestone for humankind, it is a little surprising that space was not Sorenson's first choice.

"My first career choice coming out of high school was actually to be a professional musician," Sorenson said.

After attending music college and working in the industry for a few years, Sorenson had an "existential crisis" that led him to change direction completely.

"I had a sense of my potential to become an engineer and work on spacecraft, but what I knew for a fact was that I needed to at least try," he said.

Sorenson's mother, Dawn Sorenson, said she knew from an early age that her son was destined to be an engineer and builder. She said he was interested in many things, but technology and music were his main interests.

"He would always take things apart to figure out how they worked," Dawn said. "This included one of the first electric guitars that we bought him, much to our chagrin."

Dawn, who spoke to her son weekly about things going on in their lives, remembers a specific conversation.

"During one of our regular conversations, he said something about missing out on all the great things going on in space advances," she said. "I asked him why he thought he had missed anything. If he wanted to do that, then go do that."

Chris left the music industry (for a little while) and focused full-time on getting his degrees, and then an internship with a major aerospace company.

"And now...now his 'office' is the space capsule that is sending humans back to the moon," said Dawn.

Chris sums it up saying, "I reached a point where I could not stand the idea of being an old man and looking back on what could have been – what I could have contributed to humanity's reach for the stars. From the inception of the idea, my goal never wavered from the simple 'I want to build spaceships.'"

The astronomer and planetary scientist, Carl Sagan, said, "We began as wanderers, and we are wanderers still."

From early trade exploration, like the Silk Road, to Viking ships landing on the North American continent, humans have always had a desire to explore.

Photos Provided

Chris Sorenson shows his "Chahta Pride" at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Sorenson is part of the Artemis II mission, the first U.S. lunar mission in more than five decades.

According to Sorenson, exploration broadens our collective perspective and pushes us to do things we have never done.

"Many of the great advances we have enjoyed on Earth in the past several decades are a direct result of aerospace innovation, and the return-on-investment for these kinds of missions has proven to be one of the best ways that we spend tax dollars," he said.

It's not just the innovation that Chris Sorenson thinks is important. It's the coming together of many nations to accomplish a lofty goal.

As of January 2026, 61 countries have signed the Artemis Accords, a non-binding set of principles guiding sustainable and peaceful space exploration.

"The space industry has grown to be a lush environment for international collaboration. Grand shared goals bring people together on grand scales," Sorenson said.

As one might expect, Dawn Sorenson can't hold back the pride she has in her son.

"I, and his brother, could not be more proud of him. He worked very hard and went through many trials to get where he is," said Dawn Sorenson.

According to Dawn Sorenson, since Chris' start at Lockheed, he has wanted to find a way to share his story, network with others, and, at every opportunity, encourage more Native Americans to reach for the stars with him.

Chris Sorenson echoed this, saying that we need more people with indigenous backgrounds in space engineering.

"Humanity is on the brink of expanding across new frontiers, and if we wish to 'do things the right way' in these new places then we need the kinds of philosophies held by so many Native American tribes," Chris Sorenson said.

He also stressed the need to find harmony with new environments and the importance of respecting resources.

"We need to have the perspective that we are not mere consumers but participants in the great story of life," said Sorenson. "That it is our responsibility to be good stewards to all that we intend our children to inherit."

In Greek mythology, Artemis is known as the Greek goddess of the moon. Her twin brother, Apollo, the namesake of the original NASA lunar missions, is the primary Greek god of music.

It seems that Chris Sorenson's journey to help put humans back on the moon, via a musical career, may have been written in the stars.

Sorenson serves on the ATLO team, integrating the Orion crew capsule with the European Service Module that supplies power, life support and mission guidance.

CHAHTA IN SPACE

- Fichik - Star, Planet
- Shutik - Sky
- Yopisa - Explore
- Hvshi ninak aya – Moon
- Hopaki – Far away, Space
- Hlampko yvt chiba foyukashke - May the force be with you

JP Gauna opens doors for Native actors

By Kellie Matherly

Choctaw actor, Jeremy "JP" Gauna, may not have planned a career in front of the camera, but a chance encounter on his way to work one morning set his trajectory for a life onscreen. Luckily, he was raised with a strong work ethic and the desire to do great things.

As a child, Guana didn't realize his family was struggling, but looking back on his upbringing, he now realizes the incredible amount of diligence and resilience it took to overcome those daily challenges. Gauna's grandfather, Jimmy Lee Barkus, taught him the importance of an honest day's work.

"One thing I can say about my grandfather, that he instilled in me, was that if you got a car, it doesn't matter where your job is. You get to work and you work," said JP.

Before acting, Gauna worked for seven years in marketing and advertising at The Dallas Morning News. Then, during an ordinary walk to work, he passed a television crew filming across the street. A crew member waved him over, handed him a card, and told him to take a photo. Minutes later, he was booked as a background actor on USA Network's "Queen of the South."

That chance encounter opened a door. On set, Indigenous actors encouraged Gauna to take acting classes, recognizing his potential. Balancing work at the newspaper and training, he eventually landed a small speaking role, which led to an agent and new possibilities. When his paid time off ran out, Gauna faced a crossroads.

"The Dallas Morning News wanted me to chase my dream and gave me a severance package," said Gauna. "They were like, 'We want you to go for it. Here. Go. We love you. Good luck.'"

Weeks later, COVID shut the industry down.

Surviving on the severance he got from the newspaper was not ideal.

Thanks to a call from his friend, Willie Molina, Gauna accepted a job as a production assistant on location for "The Chosen," a historical drama that chronicles the life of Jesus. Working on the show became transformative.

Being part of "The Chosen" reaffirmed Gauna's belief in storytelling that confronts difficult truths—stories often left untold or softened to appeal to wider audiences.

"You don't want to deal with it because it's too rough; it's too personal; it's too close to home. Those are the stories that I want to be a part of—the ones that make you feel uncomfortable and make you understand [what really happened]," said Gauna.

Gauna feels called to share narratives rooted in honesty, including those of his grandfather and his Choctaw ancestors. He believes his path is not just his own, but a responsibility. To him, love, understanding, and shared stories are how we grow stronger together.

"I've been fortunate enough to walk and step through that door but then stick a boulder in the door to keep it open for others," Gauna said.

According to IMDB, Gauna has been cast in 13 productions from 2018 to 2025, including the wildly successful "Yellowstone" spinoffs "1883" and "1923."

His most recent role was Kansas in five episodes of "Blue Ridge: The Series."

To follow what is happening in Gauna's career, follow him on Instagram @choctawnativejp.

Photo by Viacom International Inc.

Pictured is Choctaw tribal member, Jeremy "JP" Gauna as Pete Plenty Clouds in season 2 of the hit show "1923."

ARE YOU A YOUNG CHAHTA TVSHKA?

IT'S TIME TO SIGN UP FOR YOUTH STICKBALL IN THE CHOCTAW NATION.

Scan to learn more about the program.

Choctaw Nation Outreach Services

Choctaw–Irish Friendship Continues to Grow

By Kendra Germany-Wall

This year marks the 179th anniversary of the modest donation that forever connected the Choctaw and Irish people. The Choctaw-Irish bond of friendship, rooted in compassion, continues to grow, linking the people of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and Ireland.

In 1847, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, still healing from forced removal from their homelands, raised $170 to help Irish families during the Great Famine. While $170 might seem modest, it would be about $6,900 today.

For the Choctaw and Irish, this gift remains a symbol of solidarity and generosity that connects two nations 4,000 miles apart.

Today, that bond is honoured in both Oklahoma and Ireland through permanent memorials and ongoing cultural partnerships.

In 2024, the Eternal Heart sculpture was unveiled at the Labor Day Festival in Tuskahoma. Created by Choctaw artist Samuel Stitt, the sculpture stands with the heart, representing the Choctaw Nation, facing Ireland. It blends Celtic and Choctaw symbols and was commissioned by the Chahta Foundation and the Irish government. Irish Minister of State Thomas Byrne and other Irish government representatives attended the event.

In 2017, representatives of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma visited the unveiling of the "Kindred Spirits" sculpture created by Irish artist Alex Pentek. This sculpture consists of nine 20-foot stainless steel eagle feathers arranged in a circle, no two identical, forming a bowl shape to represent a gift of food.

One of the most powerful expressions of today's Choctaw–Irish relationship is the Choctaw-Ireland Scholarship programme, administered through the Choctaw Nation's Chahta Foundation and supported by the Irish government and University College Cork (UCC).

Since its conception in 2018, the Choctaw-Ireland Scholarship has allowed 13 Choctaw students the opportunity to pursue master's degrees at UCC.

Bianca Catalán and Cordell Palmer are the most recent recipients of this scholarship. Catalán, a summa cum laude City College of New York graduate with a background in theatre and creative producing, plans to integrate her heritage into original music projects and hopes to share her work with both Cork and the Choctaw Nation. Palmer, a magna cum laude graduate of Southeastern Oklahoma State University, will study international public policy and diplomacy with an eye toward serving his tribal community after graduation.

The Choctaw Cultural Center will again host its annual Choctaw-Irish Friendship Festival, a two-day cultural event.

Attendees can enjoy an art market, traditional crafting demonstrations, storytelling, games and other Choctaw-Irish activities.

For more information on the Choctaw-Irish Friendship Festival, visit choctawculturalcenter.com. Readers can find more examples of the Choctaw-Irish Bond by visiting choctawnation.com/about/history/irish-connection/.

Photos Provided

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma tribal members Bianca Catalán and Cordell Palmer are the Chahta Foundation's 2025 Choctaw-Ireland Scholars.

Photos By Deidre Elrod

Left: A large crowd gathers during the unveiling ceremony of the Kindred Spirits sculpture in Cork, Ireland. Right: Choctaw artist Samuel Stitt stands in front of his Eternal Heart sculpture.

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March (Mach) 2026

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Take a look recent Native representation in film and television.

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Read about Choctaw actor Siena East and her role in FX's "The Lowdown," starring Ethan Hawke.

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Learn how Choctaws and other Natives are finding their way into the spotlight through background acting.

Biskinik Mission Statement: To serve as the source of information for Choctaw Nation tribal members by delivering community news through a variety of communication channels.

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