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American Indian Business Leaders: Entrepreneurial inspiration
By JODI RAVE of the Missoulian



Vina Little Owl performs a fancy shell dance at the American Indian Business Leaders luncheon in Missoula on Thursday. Little Owl told the crowd at the annual fundraiser how AIBL, which aims to develop the entrepreneurial spirit in students across the country, inspired her to earn a bachelor's degree in accounting and move back home to the Fort Belknap Reservation to work as an auditor and board member for tribal business investments.

Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Vina Little Owl took center stage Thursday during the American Indian Business Leaders annual fundraising luncheon where she stood - and later danced - as a shining example of how business education and tribal culture can be used for the economic good of the community.

"With a new generation of hybrid Indians who merge education with tradition, I believe change for the better is now a viable option in the foreseeable future," said Little Owl, who joined AIBL, a Missoula-based national nonprofit organization, while she was a student at the University of Montana.

Dressed in traditional dance regalia, Little Owl spoke before a business-minded crowd of 240 people during the organization's fifth annual fundraiser. The young woman shared her story of how AIBL leaders inspired her to earn a bachelor's degree in accounting. Her education and business ventures with AIBL helped her land a corporate auditor's job with Nike Inc. in Oregon

"This is an example of what AIBL can do," said Dave Archambault of Sitting Bull College in Fort Yates, N.D., AIBL's board president. "Now she can go back to her reservation and make a difference."

That's exactly what Little Owl, who is from the Fort Belknap Reservation, is doing. She moved back home where she works as an auditor and serves as a board member for tribal business investments.

AIBL aims to develop the entrepreneurial spirit in young people across the country. Today there are more than 50 AIBL active chapters in high schools, tribal colleges and universities, ranging from Big Sky High School in Missoula to Sitting Bull College in North Dakota to Harvard University. The fastest growth segment is coming from kindergarten to 12th-grade students.

"I'm really happy to be here," said Robert Hunter, a 17-year-old AIBL member who attends Hellgate High School in Missoula. "It makes me feel connected to my people. I wanted to learn about our traditional ways. Being here today is really inspiring."

Hunter said the AIBL chapter at Hellgate has created T-shirt designs using symbols and traditional themes from tribal cultures. The organization focuses on four core areas: education, experience, leadership development and culture.

Little Owl, who did a "fancy dance" exhibition for the luncheon guests, said her culture and spirituality keep her grounded in all her business endeavors. And it's also a central commitment of AIBL, which teaches students that the cultural, social and political survival of Native people depends



on strong tribal economies.

Tina Begay, AIBL executive director, described Thursday's fundraiser as a success, considering it will cover about half of the organization's daily operating costs. She was initially worried the downturn in the national economy might keep people from the luncheon. But the event broke all records and attendance was double compared to five years ago.

Greg Stahl, AIBL board member, said one of the greatest successes of the organization can be attributed to soaring business interest from high school students and the development of the AIBL Youth Initiative. The K-12 chapters have grown 20 percent in the last two years. Youth interest has allowed AIBL to double its full-time staff within the last six months.

Rhonda Whiting, a former Clinton-appointed Small Business Administration coordinator, said AIBL's financial literacy programs for K-12 students are one of the greatest tools offered by the organization. She said she has seen one AIBL student turn a \$2,000 jewelry investment into a \$90,000 gain.

"The entrepreneur-ship and leadership is great," said Whiting. "It's not just being taught from a theoretical perspective. It's from a practical perspective. It's important to teach that type of career training to reach financial independence."

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