Rebuilding the Cherokee Nation

by Wilma Mankiller

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Thank you very, very much for choosing to spend a little time with me tonight. I appreciate that. I'd like to introduce my husband, Charlie, who traveled with me from Oklahoma, who's here somewhere. There he is, right there. Some people don't know I'm married because his name is Charlie Soap and my name is Wilma Mankiller, and when we got married we debated whether he should take my name or I should take his name, and we decided we'd both keep our own names, so he kept his maiden name and I kept mine.

Being in this part of the country is really kind of nostalgic, because part of the Old Cherokee Nation took in part of Virginia, and it's really interesting and kind of an emotional experience always to come back to this part of the country. It was interesting, as I met people during the course of the day today, several people asked me how they should address me, and at home I can think of very, very few people who call me "Chief"; most people just call me Wilma, and that's how I ask people to address me here.

But I had a different experience one time when I went to an Eastern college to do a panel on Indian economic development, a named Eastern college. This young man came out to the airport to pick me up at the airport to take me out to do the panel, and he asked me, he said, "Well, since principal Chief is a male term, how should I address you? " And we were driving in the car by then out to the university, and I just looked out the window of the car. Then he said "Well, should we address you as Chiefteness?" So I looked out the window for a little longer. Then he thought he would get real funny and cute, and he asked me if he should address me as "Chiefette," so I looked out the window for a real long time. Then I decided that I should answer him, and so I told him to call me "Ms.-Chief", misChief. So we went out to the university to do our panel and the same young man who picked me up at the airport was one of the people who got to ask the panel his questions, and so his question to me was about the origin of my name. My name is Mankiller, and in the old Cherokee Nation, when we lived here in the Southeast, we lived in semi-autonomous villages, and there was someone who watched over the village, who had the title of mankiller. And I'm not sure what you could equate that to, but it was sort of like a soldier or someone who was responsible for the security of the village, and so anyway this one fellow liked the title mankiller so well that he kept it as his name, and that's who we trace our ancestry back to. But that's not what I told him. When he asked me about the origin of my last name, I told him it was a nickname, and I'd earned it. So I'm sure there's some yuppie somewhere still wondering what I did to earn my last name.
Tonight I wanted to talk to you about rebuilding the Cherokee Nation community by community and person by person, or specifically rebuilding the Cherokee Nation, but I've also been asked by a number of people to talk about myself and my own sort of growth into a leadership position, essentially from first being a rural Cherokee person, one of eleven children and then being relocated to an urban ghetto and spending time in an urban ghetto, and how I evolved as a woman into a leadership position, so I'll try to weave some of that into my story of rebuilding the Cherokee Nation and the process we've been undergoing for the last two decades.

I think first it's important before I start talking about what we're doing today in the 1990's and what we did throughout the eighties or even the seventies in rebuilding our tribe; I think it's really, really important to put our current work and our current issues in a historical context. I can't tell you how many everyday Americans that I've talked with who've visited a tribal community in Oklahoma or in other places, and they've looked around and they saw all the social indicators of decline: high infant mortality, high unemployment, many, many other very serious problems among our people, and they always ask, "What happened to these people? Why do native people have all these problems?", and I think that in order to understand the contemporary issues we're dealing with today and how we plan to dig our way out and how indeed we are digging our way out, you have to understand a little bit about history. Because there are a whole lot of historical factors that have played a part in our being where we are today, and I think that to even to begin to understand our contemporary issues and contemporary problems, you have to understand a little bit about that history. Normally I talk about the nation-to-nation relationship between tribes and the U.S. government, but Orin Lyons is going to cover that subject tomorrow and can do that much more ably than I can, but let me just say about our tribes so you have an understanding of that. The Cherokee Nation has had a government for a long, long time. We had a government in this country long before there was a United States government. We had treaties with England even before we had treaties with the colonies, and then later with the United States. We have a long history of governance. We had a constitution. The constitution doesn't look like the United States Constitution; our constitution was a wampum belt, and the color and the arrangements of the beads represented symbols of governance and principles by which we lived our lives, and so we have a long, long history of governance, and so that for people who find it odd that we today have a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. government should reflect on the fact that we've had that relationship for a long time.

Some people will tell you today, when you hear people as you hear Orin tomorrow talking about treaty rights and treaty issues, some people will tell you that those treaties aren't valid anymore and they should be ignored simply because they're old, and obviously if you listen to Leslie Silko and Scott Momaday today you can understand why that argument makes little sense. There are lots of world documents that are very old and just because they're old and because of their age doesn't mean that they're any less valid. The United States Constitution is very old. There are many other similar documents that are very, very old.
What I'd like to tell you just briefly, and for the historians here, I'd like to touch just briefly on the history of our tribe and what happened under this continual attempt by the United States Government to "solve the Indian problem," and because our story is very similar to the story of many other tribes in this country, not in exact detail, but in net effect. Our tribe, we were kind of farmers and agricultural people, and we lived throughout the Southeast in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, all throughout the Southeast, and we had early European contact, first with DeSoto in the late 1540s and continued to have European contact and eventually were surrounded by our new Southern neighbors. So that by the first part of the last century, we were fairly accustomed to our Southern neighbors that were surrounding us.

There began to be discussion of removal. This is one of a continuing series of policies that the federal government had instituted; there were the Indian wars, there were a number of other policies, and we were by now in the beginning of the relocation/reservation policy; the war era hasn't ended, but we were beginning the reservation/relocation policies of the federal government at that particular time or the United States government at that particular time. There were several reasons why there began to be discussion of removing the Cherokees. President Jefferson conceptualized removal; Jackson gets all the blame for the removal of the Cherokees and the other southeastern tribes, but Jefferson actually conceptualized the removal. Some of the impetus for the removal was economic. Cherokee land was good land for growing cotton, was good land for growing tobacco, and also some gold had been discovered within the Cherokee Nation, and then there were also a number of corporations and individuals who wanted our land, so all those were factors in the pressure for removal. But one of the other factors in the pressure for removal was the fact that Georgia, the state of Georgia, had grown up around the Cherokee Nation, and they did not want a sovereign within the boundaries of the state of Georgia, an argument that we hear even today as states and tribes continue to battle over issues of jurisdiction and states' rights. So we got caught up in a states' rights issue as well as all the other issues that caused people to want to remove the Cherokees.

During this period of time, when removal was being discussed in our tribe, our Chief was a fellow named John Ross, and John Ross believed in the American judicial system, and he felt that the American judicial system was built on beautiful principles, and that was something that should work for the Cherokees. And so both individual people and the tribe took some of our cases for the preservation of the integrity of the Cherokee Nation through the American judicial system and all the way to the United States Supreme Court and won. By then General Jackson, who fancied himself to be a great Indian fighter was President Jackson, and he basically told the United States Supreme Court, when they ruled in favor of the Cherokees, "You've ruled in favor of the Cherokees, now let's see you enforce it", and continued on toward implementing a removal policy.
During this period of time when removal was being discussed, our own people, the Cherokees, became very bitterly divided politically. Part of our people wanted to remain here in the Southeast and throughout the rest of the Southeast and fight to the death for the right to remain in our homeland, and part of our people wanted to go on to Indian Territory, believing that the removal was inevitable, and that we should go on to Indian Territory, what is now Oklahoma, and resettle and rebuild our families and our communities there in Indian Territory. And so there were bitter internal divisions among our people during that period of time, that period of discussion. We had non-Indian friends throughout the South who helped us, who took up our cause and tried to protect the Cherokees and work with us. Some of our friends spent time in jail, who refused to obey the laws of the state of Georgia, which asked them to get special licenses from the state of Georgia to reside within the Cherokee Nation.

So despite our best efforts and the best efforts of our non-Indian friends, the removal did occur. In 1838, President Jackson ordered out U.S. Army federal troops to the homes of Cherokees and rounded up Cherokees, sort of like cattle in a way, I guess, and what they would do is they would take a family, all the members of the family from their home and inventory their property and their farm and that sort of thing and confiscate everything except what they would allow them to take with them, and then they took them to stockades throughout the Southeast and held them in stockades and prepared them for the journey to Indian Territory. This removal was conducted during 1838 and through the spring of 1839. By the time the last contingent of Cherokees arrived in Indian Territory in April of 1839, not really that long ago in the totality of history, a little more than 150 years ago, fully one fourth of our entire tribe was dead. And they had either died while they were being held in the stockades, or during the removal itself. Much of the removal was conducted on foot, and much of it was conducted in winter. This is a story I think that not many of you hear about when you hear about the history of the South and the history of the Southeast.

What's interesting, I think, and what gives me hope and keeps me optimistic about our people, however, is to look and see how our people dealt with that after removal. After removal, we ended up in Indian Territory. Everything we'd ever known had been left behind, that which bound us as a people: the cultural system, the social system, and the political system, everything we'd ever known had been left behind. Many people were dead, families were bitterly divided over the issue of removal itself, and yet almost immediately after removal, our people began to try to come together and rebuild a community and rebuild a tribe. So that by the mid 1840's, not even ten years after we ended up in Indian Territory, we started sort of a revival or rebuilding of the Cherokee Nation there in Indian Territory. We put together a new political system, signed a new constitution in 1839. We began rebuilding; we built beautiful institutions of government which still stand today as some of the oldest buildings in what is now Oklahoma. We built an extensive judicial system. We began printing newspapers in Cherokee and in English. We rebuilt an economic system, and most importantly, I think, we built an educational system.
We built an educational system not only for men, but we built an educational system for women, which was a very radical idea for that particular period of time in that part of the world. Our tribal council had no idea how to run a school for girls, and so they sent a group of emissaries to Mount Holyoke and asked the head of Mount Holyoke to send some teachers back to show us how to put together a school for girls. So we built an educational system and began this process of healing and rebuilding ourselves as a people.

What's interesting to me in looking -- I like history a lot, and looking at old historical documents -- is to see that in the 1840s there was still a significant number, not the majority or anywhere near the majority, but there were a significant number of people in this country that were still questioning whether Indians were human, or whether Indians had souls, when we and many other people like our tribe had been running our own governments for a long, long time. That's very interesting. So the U.S. government had promised the Cherokees that in exchange for all the land in the Southeast and all the lives during the removal, that we could live in Indian Territory forever uninterrupted, and we believed that. And so that's when we began this process of rebuilding, and then the Civil War happened. Part of the Civil War was fought in Arkansas and then over into Indian Territory, which of course divided everyone. And then after the Civil War was over, and the U.S. began to talk about restructuring, they began talking about opening Indian Territory up to white settlement, which they had told us they would never do. And in a way, history, I guess you could say, repeated itself. Because I'm going to skip all the details of how it happened, but by 1907 Oklahoma statehood came into being. Our lands had been opened up for settlement in several land runs by then, and our tribal government, the Cherokee tribal government, was left with just a skeleton. Our schools were closed down, our courts were closed down, we were forbidden from electing our own tribal leaders, and I think most significantly, land we had held in common was divided out in individual allotments of 120-160 acres per family. Of all the things that happened to our people at the turn of the century, I think the individual allotment of land had the most profound effect on the way we view ourselves, and on the social system of our people.

So from 1906 and 1907, when Oklahoma became a state, and until 1971, we didn't elect our own tribal leaders. Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation and some of the other, well they call them Southeastern tribes; by now they were in Indian Territory; our Chiefs were appointed by the President of the United States, and usually for no good purpose. They were appointed so they could sign easements or give away land, or other resources of the tribes. In the forties there began to be a movement among the Cherokees to revitalize the tribal government again, and through a series of enactments in 1971, we were able to elect our Chiefs again, and we began this process of rebuilding.

It's interesting to see how our people began to view leadership during this period of time from 1906-1907 to 1971. They began to see Chiefs of the Cherokees as something external to themselves; a position that only very prominent people who had little connection to the tribe could aspire to or hold. People who would receive Presidential
appointments usually were very prominent people or very wealthy, or they wouldn't catch the attention of a President and receive a Presidential appointment. And so our people began to see those people as the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation. And so that in our first election in 1971 reflects that. In 1971, our first elected Chief was a very prominent Oklahoma businessman and a Cherokee and very politically active. Then our next Chief, who was elected in 1975, was very similar to that in many ways. He was a lawyer and a banker and an Indian Chief and had kind of a similar background, and so now let me interject myself into this because people have asked that.

I came not too long after the Cherokee Nation began this process of revitalizing the Cherokee Nation. I began work for the Cherokee Nation in 1977. When I returned to Oklahoma, having lived in California for a number of years, I swore I'd never work for a tribal government, and that was basically the only place to work, so I got a job there. When I got a job there, there were no female executives. I certainly didn't start to work there with an agenda to become Chief; there was no precedent for that. There'd never been a second Chief or a principal Chief who was female, but I came to the position with absolute faith and confidence in our own people and our own ability to solve our own problems, and I began developing programs that reflected that philosophy. And as I began to develop programs, it increased revenue, and as I increased revenue to the tribe, I began to catch the attention of the hierarchy there and began to move up. And I learned those skills in California.

When my family, as Doctor Hill noted, went to California as part of the BIA relocation program -- yet another attempt to "solve the Indian problem" -- the fellow who conceptualized the relocation program is the very same fellow who thought up the program that interned the Japanese during World War II. And after World War II was over he didn't have a job, and so they ended up making him head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. So the idea was the same in both cases: to break up communities and break up families. And the idea behind the BIA relocation program was to solve the Indian problem by breaking up tribal communities and my family was a part of that. For my father, who had eleven children, too many bills, or too little money and too many mouths to feed, the idea of having a better life for his children was intriguing to him. And so that a better life for us ended up being a housing project in San Francisco, which was sometimes flatteringly called "Harlem West," and much was the same for the other people who went out on relocation programs.

What kept us together, I think, as a family during that period of time was the Indian center, which was a place where many other families like ours, sort of refugees, I guess you could say in the city, gathered at the San Francisco Indian Center and shared our experiences and kind of tried to build a community there. In 1969, a group of students from San Francisco State and UC Berkeley occupied Alcatraz Island, off the bay of San Francisco, and my family became very involved in that movement, and so from that point on, I became very, very interested and I acquired skills because I wanted to help my own people. So I figured out how to organize things. I figured out how to do paralegal work. I was encouraged to go to college. Nobody in my family went to college
-- nobody I knew went to college. Certainly no one in Hunter's Point, the housing project I lived in, went to college. It was conceptually out of our space. And this one woman, a Claremont woman who always thought I had leadership potential and didn't just see a ghetto kid, talked me into going to college. Though then they had something called EOP program, and you could go, and it was a program, I think it was started during, maybe the New Deal, I'm not sure, but it was a social program that helped minorities get into college, and so I started college under that program. Then after Alcatraz, I got interested in helping the Pitt River tribe in northern California regain its ancestral land, and I volunteered for them for seven years. So that time in California prepared me for returning home.

But what I learned from my experience in living in a community of almost all African-American people, and what I learned from my experience in living in my own community in Oklahoma before the relocation is that poor people have a much, much greater capacity for solving their own problems than most people give them credit for. And I can't begin to tell you how many well-meaning social workers I've had come and try to save me during my life. And so anyway there was that idea that we could solve our own problems that I went to the Cherokee Nation with in 1977. So that by 1982, I was director of the Community Development Department, and I'd conceptualized this idea along with my husband of how to rebuild a community. And I'll talk a little bit about that later. So that by 1982, I was directing the Community Development Department and heading that up, and doing these projects in a number of different communities. When our Chief then developed systemic cancer, and he asked me if I would attend some meetings in Washington and do some things that I don't normally do. And when he became well and thought about running for election again in 1983, he asked me if I would run for Deputy Chief with him, and I did.

So then I ran in 1983 for election, which was a real eye-opener for me. I expected people to challenge me because I had an activist background, or challenge me because I was going around talking about something called grass roots democracy, and because my husband and I were organizing these rural communities, and so I thought people would challenge me on my ideas when I began to run for election in 1983, but they didn't. The only thing people wanted to talk about in 1983 was my being a woman. That was the most hurtful experience I've ever been through.

I would go to a community meeting and want to talk about issues related to the tribe. I had a lot of ideas, and by then I had developed a lot of programs, and no one wanted to talk about anything except the fact that I was female. Some people felt that we would be the laughing stock of the all the tribes if we had a woman who was in the second highest position in the tribe, and oh I don't know what all they said; it was an affront to God, that a woman wanted to do this and all kinds of things. And so I did fairly well in debate in both high school and college, and it was really interesting because I was unable to even get in a dialogue with people about this issue. I remember during that period of time, I called a friend at the Ms. Foundation for Women, what was on the board, who was a folklorist and is very witty. So I called her
up and I asked her to tell me some witty things to say so that when people came up and said real hurtful things to me that I could say something witty back to them, and kind of diffuse what they were saying, and I can't repeat to you what she told me to tell them. It wasn't funny. It wasn't witty. But anyway, we did have a nice talk, and I decided that I was going have to somehow get a hold of this and deal with it and move on. I decided, and I guess everybody has different ways of dealing with that kind of reaction, I decided to simply ignore it and continue on, so I saw something on the back of a tea box in 1983 that was just a very simple little saying that helped me get through that election. It says something like "Don't ever argue with a fool, because someone walking by and observing you can't tell which one is the fool." I thought that was very good advice; I continued on, and I thought that the idea that gender had anything to do with leadership, or that leadership had anything to do with gender was foolish, and I could see no point in even beginning to try to debate that non-issue with anybody, so I just continued on.

I remember also during that period of time, just to show you that I really am an optimist, our tribe is very large, we have 140,000 members now. We didn't have that many then, but we still had a significant number of members, and so I decided to have a rally. I didn't know anything about politics, but I knew that one has rallies, and so I had a dinner, like a reception at this house in Tahlequah that has this historic significance to our tribe and had it catered. We put it on radio and put it in the news and I went to a lot of trouble to have this big rally. So I go on the evening of the event, and I'm prepared to answer questions from tribal members and the whole evening only five people showed up, and I think three of them were my relatives. I think it was real clear to me then that things could only go up from that point forward. So simply rather than giving up, I just worked harder. And I knew that I was going to lose the election, and everybody expected me to lose the election. It was a conventional wisdom unless I really did something, and so I went out and spent a lot of time talking with people. I did win that election in 1983.

So that's a little bit of a story of how I evolved into a leadership position. I'm forty-seven and women my age, by and large, were not raised to be leaders. We weren't acculturated to assume leadership positions and had to kind of evolve over a period of time, and my own evolution into a leadership position was born absolutely out of my desire to do something about issues that I thought were important for my own people. I had very low self-esteem. I used to listen to people in meetings, and I didn't have the confidence to speak up. Other people would speak up with ideas, but I didn't have the faith in myself to speak up, and what caused me to have the faith in myself to speak up was that my desire to do something and contribute was stronger than my own fear of speaking up, or my own lack of self-confidence or my own fear of speaking up. So that impetus helped me a lot to assume a leadership position. I've always been, I guess, blessed with a thick skin.

One of the things my parents taught me, and I'll always be grateful is a gift, is to not ever let anybody else define me; that for me to define myself, and so someone could literally come up to me and say "I think you're an SOB or whatever" and that's their deal
and that's their opinion and that's separate from my own view of myself, and I think that helped me a lot in assuming a leadership position.

Just one little brief thing, it was really interesting, we've had a long association with the Choctaws and the Creeks and the Chickasaws and the Seminoles, and the Five tribes have always met together, and we have an old organization in Oklahoma, and we meet every quarter, and when I was elected in 1983, no woman had ever been elected as a Chief or second Chief in this organization. And in the very first meeting after the election, our Chief had to go to Washington, so I assumed his spot in this organization. The Chiefs and the Deputy Chiefs are the executive committee, and when I walked in the room, it was really interesting, because all these fellows had this long table, and they all had chairs there, and when I walked in there was no chair for me. So I thought about it for a minute, and I went and got a chair, and I just pulled it up and I sat down, and I just ignored it and went on about my business using the same thing that I did in the election, which was just to ignore it, do what I needed to do to go on. It was very interesting, three years later, the same group elected me their President, and so that I think that there is something to be said about just ignoring it and continuing to do the right thing, and that relationship will evolve.

The other thing that happened was in 1983, when I was elected -- in our tribe when you're elected Deputy Chief, you also become President of the Tribal Council. Well, the entire Tribal Council had opposed my election in 1983, so you can imagine how thrilled they were when I became their President. So I come to the very first meeting, and the Cherokees are very formal in the way we conduct meetings and according to our oral tradition, we're Iroquoian, and I think the Iroquois also have this formal way of conducting meetings. There's a lot of ceremony and formality. Anyway, I came to conduct my first meeting, and this one fellow on the Tribal Council who just thought it was the worst thing possible for a woman to be conducting this meeting kept interrupting me throughout the entire meeting, and saying I was violating some obscure rule I'd never heard of, or I wasn't following some procedure that I didn't know anything about, and so I decided right then and there that I was going to have to assert myself, or I'd have to put up with that for the next four years. So I had, between the first meeting and the second meeting, I went around and had all the council members microphones changed, and so that the President of the Tribal Council controlled the microphones. So the second time I came to the meeting and this very same fellow started giving me a hard time, I just cut off his microphone; nobody could hear what he was saying. He could talk and nobody heard what he was saying, so after I did that though, we began to understand each other and get along a little bit better, so that's just a little bit about my experiences in getting into a leadership position. Now back to rebuilding. I think that rebuilding a community and rebuilding a tribe; there are all kinds of ways you can do that. When I lived in California, I worked on international treaty issues. The tribe that I worked with didn't recognize the United States government. It wasn't an issue of whether the U.S. recognized this tribe, this tribe didn't recognize the U.S. government. Long before the current discussion of sovereignty and international recognition had traveled to Mexico and traveled to U.N. Representatives and had been working in the
international arena, and my role as a support person was to try to get them there and help them in that way of thinking. Anyway, with that kind of work, I think is very, very important and I think Orin will talk about that kind of work, but for me, I wanted to do something that was a little closer to people, and I could work on those kinds of issues and yet I still saw kids sniffing paint and I still saw so many problems in our communities, that that's the level that I wanted to work on.

And I think many of our people, when we work in our communities; if you take all of the problems we have in their totality, caused by all these historical factors that I talked about earlier, they're almost overwhelming. I approach this a little bit differently. I know all the problems in our communities. I face them every single day. It's a daunting set of problems, but what I focused on, and what Charlie focused on, instead of just focusing on the problems, we focused on what we saw as the positive things in our communities. One of the things that I saw, just as if you look at what happened after the Trail of Tears, you can look at some of the positive things that happened among our people.

What I looked at in our communities is I saw among our people--they had unbelievable tenacity. Our tribe is one of the most acculturated tribes in the country, and yet there are thousands of people who still speak Cherokee. Ceremonies that we've had since the beginning of time are still going on in a tribe as acculturated as ours is. Our people are very tenacious, and it was that tenacity that I saw as a strength we could build on. If you look at history from a native perspective, and I know that's very difficult for you to do, the most powerful, or one of the most powerful countries in the world as a policy first tried to wipe us off the face of the earth. And then, failing that, instituted a number of policies to make sure that we didn't exist in 1993 as a culturally distinct group of people, and yet here we are. Not only do we exist, but we're thriving and we're growing, and we're learning now to trust our own thinking again and dig our way out. So it was that tenacity that I felt we could build on.

Another positive thing that I saw was that kind of attention to culture and history and heritage that I thought was very, very important. Another thing that I saw was great leadership in our communities, and leadership again, it's kind of like the way I talked about looking at government. Our government may have not looked like the U.S. government, but it's a government and the leadership we saw in our communities may not have looked like leadership that you see in the external world, but the leadership existed. You could find the leadership just by seeing who people go to when there's a time of crisis in the community. The other thing that I saw which is, I think, one of the single most important things that we continue to have as native people, and that's a sense of interdependence. I've been very fortunate to be able to travel extensively in this country and abroad, and I can tell you that even though our people are very fragmented today, we still, in the more traditional communities still have a sense of interdependence. I can still motivate people in communities to do something because it helps their neighbor, or helps the person down the road, or helps the community much more than I can motivate people to do something just because it helps themselves. I always tell college recruiters if you're going to go out in the more traditional communities and recruit college students, don't go out and tell them that if they get a college
education, that the college education will help them accumulate great personal wealth, or great personal acclaim, or help them get a BMW or whatever. Tell them that they can use their skills to help rebuild their community, and help their family, and help their tribe and you might get their attention. It's that sense of interdependence, I think, that I'd like to see us hang onto, and that is what we began to build on.

So that the example I'm gonna give you is a small community just not even fifteen miles from where I was raised and where my home is. In that community the people settled disputes with violence. Many, many kids were dropping out of school, income for elders was less than fifteen hundred dollars a year, 25 percent of the people were hauling water, had no indoor plumbing, many of the houses were dilapidated, and so we began working in this community because we absolutely believed that this community and these people would rebuild and revitalize their community. I saw this as a way of rebuilding our tribe, community by community, family by family, and so we began meeting with people and had them sit down in a group and talk about their own vision for the future and their own dreams for the future and then prioritize what it was they wanted to do. We made this deal with them, Charlie and I, and the deal was that if they would stay with us, we would be facilitators. We would bring the resources to them if they would decide how they wanted to rebuild their community and then not only work on the leadership of it but on actually implementing it.

What they decided to do was rehab some of their homes; twenty of their homes, build twenty-five new homes using solar technology, and build a community water system. They agreed to do this building as volunteers. And we agreed to raise the money to bring the technical assistance and the resources there. Now, when we went out and told people about this project and tried to raise money for the technical assistance and the physical resources, people thought we were crazy and told us we shouldn't even be out there by ourselves at night alone, and that people in that community wouldn't even work for a living, much less as volunteers. But we knew better.

One of the most interesting things is that during this period of time, when we were fundraising, a show called "CBS Sunday Morning News" heard about our effort from one of the foundations we approached and they liked to do shows about victims then in the early 80s. So they came out to film this whole process, to film a community that, basically this poor, struggling Cherokee community was trying to get water and housing, and they came to film a failure. So they filmed the very first meetings where people were saying "Aw, nothing's ever changed here, nothing's ever going to change, this isn't gonna work" to them actually saying "Well, what the heck? Let's go ahead and try it," to actually taking training. They were there the first day, and the first day was the toughest for me. Everything I'd ever believed in my life about my own people was banking on people showing up and volunteering to rebuild their community. It wasn't just the physical rebuilding, it was the fact that people would take charge of their own lives and their own future and rebuild ourselves as a people, and so that first day, you know driving around all the curbs to this community and rounding the bend and seeing all the
volunteers showed up and were ready to go to work was the most significant part of my work I've ever done -- far more significant that being elected Chief.

Anyway, people did show up that first day, and the film crew, the CBS film crew, stayed with us through the whole project and actually filmed the completion of the water system. Every family in that community worked on rebuilding their water system, rebuilding their houses, and rebuilding their community, and taking charge of their own future and their own lives again.

We use that CBS film now as a training tape for other communities, so we're really glad that they did come and film it. So that process, I think, that was a little more than ten years ago, it was actually thirteen years ago, and since that time, we've used that same method in dozens of other communities and we see that process as a process of how we began to rebuild ourselves as a people. Some tribal leaders and people in elected leadership positions build institutions, and they see that as a way of rebuilding a nation, and what we're trying to do is rebuild communities and families. We see that as a way of rebuilding our nation. So there are many different approaches to doing that.

Institutionally, when we started out in 1971, electing our own Chiefs again and starting this process, we were bankrupt, and we started in a storefront in Tahlequah. We've grown from that point to today, where we have 1200 regular employees. We run our own primary health care clinics; five primary health care clinics, a fully accredited high school, which is a boarding school, a vocational education school, twenty-four separate Head Start centers, an extensive array of day care centers, adult literacy programs, and many, many other programs, and we run a number of businesses also. We had no special leg up, and we had no marketable natural resources, and I have to tell you -- I'm glad we didn't, because I've never had to face the issue of whether to exploit or not to exploit natural resources. I think that I've had to make a lot of tough decisions, hard decisions, but I'm glad I never had to deal with that issue.

Someone described me as a rabid environmentalist, so I think that might have been a very difficult situation for me. Anyway, we've grown, and the reason we've grown and rebuilt is because of our own hard work and our own determination to have a community, and to have tribe again, and that's where we are today.

If you ask me today about what our most important issue is as a people, most people who know me, my skill is development, and we're doing lots of building and lots of development and that sort of thing, and that's always what I've done best. Other people would say "Well, you know the most important issue is building the clinic they're building in this community or building that facility there or whatever," but that's not the most important issue I think we have as a people. I think the most important issue we have as a people is what we started, and that is to begin to trust our own thinking again and believe in ourselves enough to think that we can articulate our own vision of the future and then work to make sure that that vision becomes a reality.
That's a lot easier to say than it is to do. We've had a couple of hundred years of acculturation, probably the Cherokees more than anybody. We've been acculturated to believe that our religion is pagan, and that our language is archaic and useless, and that our history doesn't even exist, or it's totally distorted when it's told. Our children go to public school systems in Oklahoma, and they see teachers that don't look like them, don't reflect who they are as a people. We've always been acculturated to believe that the BIA or the Indian Health Service or somebody else had better ideas for us that we ourselves had, and so trusting our own thinking, tearing that away from them and getting it back I think is the single most important task we have ahead of us, and we've started that. It's gonna take a long time. We've started that on porches in eastern Oklahoma and in kitchens and in community centers. We've started talking about why we should take our own lives back.

I was interested this morning in listening to Leslie Silko's talk about education, because it's taken me much longer than it took her to understand that the real problem with why we have so much trouble with the educational system is that the real problem is the schools of education in this country. We would have to dismantle all that thinking before we could even begin to resolve our educational issues, and they not only produce non-Indian teachers that teach incorrectly, they are now teaching our Indian teachers that come back and teach incorrectly. It's taken me a long time to reach that conclusion, but all of that is a process of trying to reclaim our sense of self and understand ourselves, and respect who we are as a people.

Finally, and then I'll take some questions -- one of the things that I wanted to just note is that one of the other problems, besides trusting our own thinking, that I think is very important, is that there still continues today in 1993 to be just an incredible array of negative stereotypes about native people. And I'm not sure that all the wonderful people you have at this conference -- and I've never seen an array of native people that I've been more impressed with than the group of people you have on campus here today -- I don't know whether you realize what an extraordinary group of people you have here on campus. If you took all those people working every day of their lives, I'm still not sure that we could turn around so many of the stereotypes we have in this country about native people.

Some of the films that we see in popular culture, I think are headed in the right direction. I liked "Dances with Wolves," some people didn't, and the one thing that was a little confusing that was kind of interesting though is here's Kevin Costner -- he's got all these gorgeous Sioux women around, and what does he do? He chooses the one white woman in the entire territory. I mean, this guy's got to have a problem, but other than that I think that some of those films and things we see in popular culture, I think are helpful. The real fundamental change I think in eliminating stereotypes is going to have to be in the academic community. I think there's got to be a lot of what you're doing today, and what you've done all day and all week, and really listening to people simply tell the truth. I think that'll help turn things around significantly.
We have in this country way too many negative stereotypes about black people, and about Latin people, and all kinds of people; it's just an incredible problem we deal with. Sometimes in Oklahoma, it's really discouraging to sit down with a group of people from different backgrounds and cultures and try to work on a common problem, whether it's education or economic development or whatever the problem is, because everybody's sitting around this table, and they're all looking at each other with stereotypes, and they can't get past that. It's like everybody's sitting there and they have some kind of veil over their face, and they look at each other through this veil that makes them see each other through some stereotypical kind of viewpoint. If we're ever gonna collectively begin to grapple with the problems that we have collectively, we're gonna have to move back the veil and deal with each other on a more human level, so I applaud you for trying to erase some of the negative stereotypes about native people that you have. Finally, I guess I'd like to say I hope my being here and spending a little time with you will help to erase any stereotypes you might have had about what a Chief looks like.

Thank you.