

THE GOOD LANDS

It is an honor to be here today to deliver the 2050 Commencement address at Little Priest University. I am Yvonne SeesTheFuture, a proud alum, class of 2010. As I drove back today, I realized how significantly things have changed since my graduation day when Little Priest was a small tribal college. Seeing such a diverse group of graduates is a testament to the importance of Little Priest University to the future of our region. I am still struck by the beauty of this place and its people. It has been an amazing and transformative 40 years and I would like to take this opportunity to honor the people who were instrumental in shepherding this change. I am honored to be counted among them. By telling our stories it is my hope that the gifts of the past will help prepare you as the guardians of the future.

I left my home on the Rosebud reservation in 2007. I was just 21, young and full of hope. I traveled here to Winnebago, Nebraska to study business. My dream was to help Rosebud people start their own businesses. A pretty ambitious goal at that time, since things in the western part of our region and in our tribe weren't looking very good. On the reservations poverty and unemployment levels were high, people were in poor health. Suicide rates were high and overall despair existed. The rural western white communities weren't doing so well either. Many of the young people had moved out and the small town way of life was dying along with the aging population. The northern Great Plains had become divided. The eastern parts of the region had flourishing rural communities and big cities, while those of us living west of the Missouri River struggled to survive.

Globally, we finally ended our involvement in Iraq in the summer of 2010. But, we were left with damaged relationships with many countries around the world. When Russia announced in January 2011 that by 2015 they would sell oil exclusively to China, we were shocked. Energy independence became the key issue for US citizens and we demanded our government take action. Congress passed the Energy Independence Act of 2012, which mandated that the US become energy independent by 2025. The law allocated all energy research and development funds to three strategic areas: renewable fuel development, energy transmission and storage, and high efficiency technologies. Each strategic area set impressive, almost unimaginable goals.

This national commitment spurred an energy research boom across the five states of the northern Great Plains that continues to this day. Scientific discoveries became a big part of our region's activities. Renewable energy research expanded quickly by building on existing expertise at South Dakota State University, the Energy & Environmental Research Center in Grand Forks, and Iowa State University. The region's five land grant universities partnered with the western tribal colleges, Montana State University and the University of Wyoming to form the Grasslands Research Consortium. That partnership was the beginning of the renewable energy and land conservation management programs that exist at Little Priest today. The new technologies developed by this consortium made it cheaper to store and

transmit electricity produced by wind power and to use any cellulose in biofuels production, making our grasslands even more valuable.

This brings me to the first gift from the past that I offer to you. Citizen action combined with strong federal policies can lead to results that may seem unimaginable.

No one could have imagined the impact the Energy Independence Act would have on who we are today. At that time in the West we were focused on youth out migration, drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment, dwindling services and increases in poverty. The rural population was declining rapidly as young people left, the elders died and no one was moving in. So again talk started of the federal government abandoning this region to become a Buffalo Commons. This just made people angry and many rural communities tried even harder to survive. But with headlines like “SD loses record 25 municipalities in 2012,” it seemed an impossible task. The situation only got worse when the US Postal Service announced in 2014 that it was no longer cost effective to operate post offices in towns with fewer than 5,000 people, leaving many wondering how they could communicate with the world as they faced the challenge of no mail service and limited Internet access.

Around this same time, climate change started to really impact us in the West. Every year we got less and less rainfall. Farmers quit farming and ranching was extremely difficult, so people were just giving up and selling their land cheap. Since land isn't something you can just make more of, wealthy business people started buying the land as an investment. When, in 2016, the George Soros Trust purchased 1,000,000 acres of grasslands in the Dakotas and Montana and Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo, purchased 500,000 acres in 2017, the trend had started. In 2020, 10 female executives purchased another 500,000 acres to jointly develop public access space. Let's just say the tipping point had been reached.

In 2021 Congress finally passed the Land Conservation Act which established a national program of land conservation carbon credits. This not only spurred huge interest in investing in carbon reduction, but also helped develop a new land ethic that valued it for environmental uses as well as productive capacity. In response, the Gates Foundation bought 5,000,000 acres of grassland for carbon reduction as part of its investment portfolio, further catalyzing the economic interest in this growing financial sector. The Act led to a windfall for the tribes. We were able to sell our carbon credits to companies who needed them and use the profits to invest in improving life on the reservation. By 2030 nearly 40 million acres of western land was held by about 100 private individuals, conservation organizations and tribal nations.

This leads us to gift number two. Treating the earth with respect and building partnerships for the common good can bring unimagined benefits.

In the spring of 2024, I was elected Chair of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. I was only 35 and elected in good part because the young people on the reservation wanted someone who could bring change and who would respect traditional values and culture, while focusing on the economic and political power imbalances between the whites and Indians. I worked with the Tribal Council to focus our efforts on education and entrepreneurship. Culturally rich education programs connected learning to entrepreneurial business initiatives helped us

develop the skills we needed to be part of the growing renewable energy and ecotourism opportunities in the region. With measured successes along the way, I was re-elected Tribal Chair two more times.

In 2030 Congress eliminated the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs), and turned over the title of reservation land to the individual owners in the tribes. Initially we thought it was another way for the government to force us to adapt to non-Indian cultures and norms. But the young people in the tribes stepped forward and decided that this was an opportunity to determine our own future. With help from people at the White Earth Land Recovery Project, all of the tribes developed programs to purchase any land within the reservation that was put up for sale. With the support of young people we adopted a Universal Commercial Code at Rosebud that would be honored by the tribe regardless of who served in the Tribal Council. The Commercial Code sparked new business growth. This was an initiative many other tribes around the nation adopted and implemented.

In 2032 the tribal nations of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana and Wyoming formed the White Buffalo Compact to collaborate on renewable energy, especially wind, and tourism development. The Compact became well known for its excellent, creative management of the grasslands and was hired by the Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund to manage their land in the region. This brought more opportunities, not just for Indian people, but for all people of the region. The Compact also helped establish a partnership between tribal colleges and the land grant universities to build conservation and nature programs at their institutions. The spirit and success of these collaborations began to change how state and local governments viewed tribal nations.

In 2034 I was elected the first Native American Governor of South Dakota. During my eight years as governor, our state built regional partnerships and, in 2036, the governors and tribal chairs from west of the Missouri River convened to work on creating a western regional identity and place, which today, you know as 'The Good Lands.' Our goal was to create a place where all species thrived and created eco-tourism experiences, where artists would come to write, paint and retreat, where human cultures were celebrated, where wind energy production provided jobs, and where people everywhere could come and connect personally and spiritually with the land. We wanted it to be viewed internationally as on par with the Amazon Basin or the African Serengeti.

The next year the Good Lands Development Corporation was founded to oversee and direct renewable energy development in the region. The GLDC accomplished many things, including, the creation of the Good Lands Strategic Energy Reserve, built several wind farms and established a cooperative regional carbon reduction revenue system. With its energy revenues, the GLDC helped build the world renowned Prairie School of the Arts by supporting many young, emerging artists. In fact, the GLDC partially funded the Academy Award winning film, "Crazy Horse" which featured Native Americans from around the region.

Together, we created new 'public access' provisions under each state's philanthropy tax codes that provided tax incentives for property owners to allow public access to lands when not in

private use by the landowner. We successfully lobbied Congress to pass a series of tax laws encouraging cooperation between property owners, NGOs and state and local governments. As a result, the eco-tourism industry has become a big part of our region's economy. The Good Lands Bison herd surpassed one million in 2030. Animals like the Big Horn sheep, wolves, grizzlies, elk and lynx have returned. In 2032 Bison meat surpassed beef sales in restaurants and Bison leather became the "choice" leather for fashionistas. Eco-tourism also made way for 20 "green" resorts and spiritual retreat centers to locate within The Good Lands. And many of the remaining ranchers shifted their business model to tourism and started forming tourism cooperatives as a way of earning income.

The Good Lands continues to be a major producer of biofuels and wind energy. Due to the accumulation of carbon sequestration credits, the GLDC issued its first energy dividend in 2034. It was \$25,000 which seemed huge at the time, now we know it's much higher. Just five years ago, The Good Lands was recognized by the United Nations as a world leader in renewable fuels research and development. And in 2047 a Nobel Prize in Science was awarded jointly to two scientists in the region. One award was to a physicist for the development of a new system of electric energy cells that can store six months production from one wind tower and be transported via truck to any location. The other was to a wildlife biologist for her work to protect migratory birds from harm caused by wind towers and blades.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was an initiative to change South and North Dakota into West Dakota and East Dakota. The success of The Good Lands led many in the West to suggest this change. I kind of liked the idea but felt that the issue would be so divisive that we could risk undoing all that we had accomplished. The tribes really stepped forward during this time to talk about healing and cooperation instead of division and competition. This was especially rewarding for me to see the tribes in such a strong leadership role. I honestly don't think we could have done as much in the West as we did if the tribes hadn't provided the states an example of how to work together and how to try new things.

That brings me to gift number three. Working to do what is best for the land and all people will bring the greatest benefits to your people and to the region - they are one and the same.

Your ancestors and elders have seen and accomplished much in the past 40 years that people said could never be done. We have worked hard to give you this place. This place where all voices are heard; where nature and spirituality are embedded in daily lives; where comprehensive education matters; where health care is based on wellness; where good government means collaboration; and where the land and the people are healing.

The future is in your hands. You must continue the journey forward and consider and learn from the gifts of the past. Class of 2050, as you step forward, may your wisdom grow to meet the challenges that face you and the next seven generations to come. Pilamiya.