Candidate for Chairwoman

A MESSAGE TO THE MEMBERSHIP

Tisha Gonzalez

Before deciding to run for another term, I really wanted to take some time to reflect on the last four years. I didn't want to just focus on the things that we have accomplished, but on my leadership and whether I truly made a difference for our Tribe and our people.

When I first became Chairwoman, I was overwhelmed with the amount of work we had ahead of us. There were financial and compliance issues that needed immediate attention, projects that had stalled, funding that needed to be protected, and systems that needed to be rebuilt. More than anything, we needed a solid foundation to grow from.

There were times in the beginning when it felt like we were constantly putting out fires. As soon as we handled one thing, there was something else that needed our attention. We had to deal with what was in front of us while also trying to figure out how we were going to move the Tribe forward.

I also knew pretty early on that I didn't want to be the type of leader who was going to do something just because "that's how we've always done it." So I started asking questions, questioning things that didn't make sense, and having the courage to change the things that weren't working.

That didn't always make me popular, but being popular was never the reason I took this position. My responsibility was to do what I believed was best for our Tribe.

My duties as Tribal Chairwoman are community-centered. I am here to serve my people and lead our community toward prosperity, self-sufficiency, future opportunities, and growth. When I stepped into this position, I understood that the decisions I make impact real families, our elders, our youth, and future generations.

This work is not just about meeting deadlines or fulfilling a job description. It is about responsibility. Our Tribal government is built around our culture, sovereignty, and self-determination. That means relationships matter. Trust matters. How you show up matters.

Being the Tribal Chairperson is not an 8-to-5, Monday-through-Friday job. You don't get to turn the responsibility off at the end of the day. When you serve a Tribal community, you are a steward of community resources, responsibilities, and values. Part of my goal as a leader has always been to provide information, guidance, and opportunities that help our people succeed and become the best versions of themselves. I also believe one of the most important responsibilities of leadership is making yourself available to your people. You cannot only show up when the conversations are easy or when people agree with you. Sometimes the hardest conversations are the ones that matter the most.

That is why throughout my term, I have made myself available to our members, even when the issue was difficult, the conversation was uncomfortable, or I knew someone might not agree with my answer. Our members deserve leadership they can reach, leadership that will listen, and leadership that is willing to have the hard conversations. I may not always have the answer someone wants to hear, and we may not always agree, but I will show up, I will listen, and I will be honest about where I stand.

Leadership isn't about being present only when things are going well. It's about being present when things are hard.

Looking back, getting through those challenges and making difficult decisions taught me a lot about what it really means to lead. Leadership isn't always making the popular decision. Sometimes it means

saying no. Sometimes it means asking questions people don't want asked. Sometimes it means standing alone. And sometimes it means taking the criticism and continuing to do the work anyway.

Being Chairwoman has also taught me that leadership requires putting personal feelings and relationships aside. Every decision must come back to what is fair, responsible, and in the best interest of the entire Tribe.

I have endured many roadblocks throughout my term, but I have always believed that you cannot block someone who moves with clarity, consistency, and purpose. Every obstacle and every struggle has helped shape the leader I am today. I have learned to let adversity fuel me rather than defeat me—to stay grounded, stay focused, accept accountability, and continue moving forward with integrity.

I haven't done everything perfectly, and I would never pretend that I have. I've made mistakes, I've learned a lot, and there are definitely things I would do differently today because of what these four years have taught me.

But I can tell you this: I showed up. I did the work. I fought for our Tribe. And I never stopped believing that our people deserved better.

That approach to leadership wasn't always easy, but it produced results. Over time, we started getting things back on track. We strengthened our financial operations, addressed compliance issues, protected our funding, and secured and managed millions of dollars in grants.

We also worked to bring more accountability and transparency into how we operate and how we manage the Tribe's resources. That has meant providing financial information to our membership, sharing information about funding and grant awards, and making sure our members know about opportunities and resources that are available to them.

Part of that also meant finding more efficient ways to streamline our processes and opening new lines of communication with our members. We created a Tribal website, maintained active social media pages, and implemented a text notification system so members have more ways to receive important information, updates, opportunities, and announcements from their Tribe. To me, transparency is about more than providing financial information. It's about keeping our members informed, making information easier to access, and giving our people more ways to stay connected to what is happening within their Tribe.

As we strengthened those systems and got things back on track, we were able to put more time and resources into things our community actually needed.

We improved our water systems, built two new parks, invested in our Tribal facilities and Roundhouse, cleaned up our Tribal lands, moved our roads onto the Tribal inventory so they could be properly maintained, invested in replacement homes, and housed members in tiny homes. We also started addressing infrastructure that had been neglected for far too long while looking for opportunities that could help our Tribe become more self-sufficient.

There is still a lot left to do, but when I look at where we started compared to where we are today, I know we are moving forward.

And when I think about what I am most proud of over these last four years, it isn't a park, a building, or a project. It's what we were able to do for our people.

One thing I felt strongly about from the beginning was that assistance and opportunities should be available to our entire membership. Where you live shouldn't determine whether you receive support, and neither should who you are related to or where you grew up.

When I say our people, I mean all of our people. Our responsibility is to serve our entire membership.

That is why we expanded services beyond Mendocino, Lake, and Sonoma counties to members throughout California and beyond. That is also why we put policies in place that gave more of our people access to services and opportunities that weren't always available to them before.

Over the past four years, we assisted members with housing, rent, move-in costs, utilities, food, education, sports, emergency shelter, homeless prevention, burial expenses, and other needs.

We issued 1,645 food cards, provided 545 back-to-school gift cards, recognized 94 graduates, helped 35 members with education expenses, assisted 209 households with utility expenses, helped 51 kids with sports fees, and assisted 101 members with housing-related needs.

Those numbers are important, but to me they are more than numbers. Those are our members. They are families who needed help keeping their lights on or paying their rent, food for their refrigerator, kids who needed clothes and supplies for school, students trying to further their education, families who lost someone they loved, and members who were going through a hard time and needed help. That's what matters the most.

We invested in our kids by supporting our Head Start programs and schools, busing Rancheria kids to school, providing youth programs and transportation to events, and sending our youth to UNITY.

We held summer parties and cultural and holiday events because those things are important too. Our kids should be able to have fun. Our families should have opportunities to come together. We should be able to enjoy our community, celebrate our culture, and make good memories together.

While a lot of our work has focused on what we can do within our own community, another important part of being Chairwoman has been making sure MPA has a voice outside of it. I have represented and advocated for our Tribe with government agencies, other Tribal organizations, healthcare providers, funding partners, and others whose decisions can directly impact our people.

That advocacy has included pushing for better healthcare services for our members and the surrounding Native community, including behavioral health, preventive care, rehabilitation and substance abuse treatment, optometry, and expanded health services. It has also meant advocating for more funding to support our operations, our community, housing, infrastructure, and the other needs of our people.

I believe those relationships matter. We should have a seat at the table when decisions affect our Tribe, and I will continue making sure MPA's interests and the needs of our people are represented.

And somewhere in the middle of all of this, I also ended up taking on the Garcia River Casino. That definitely wasn't something I planned on doing.

When I stepped in, the Casino had serious financial, compliance, and operational problems. There were past-due obligations, compliance issues, and honestly, just a lot that needed to be fixed.

Today, the Casino audits are current, compliance has been restored, past-due obligations have been addressed, and operations have improved. We have worked on our policies and processes, entertainment, gaming experience, customer service, and most importantly, taking care of our employees and facility and making it a place people actually want to visit.

Is it where I want it to be? No. There is still a lot of work to do, but I know where we started and I know how far we have come. I believe the Casino has the potential to become a much stronger economic resource for our Tribe.

And that brings me back to the question I asked myself when I started thinking about whether I wanted to do this for another four years.

Did my leadership make a difference?

When I look at where we started and where we are today, I believe the answer is yes. We have made progress, but there is still so much I want to see happen for our people.

I want us to continue building a Tribe that is financially stronger and more self-sufficient. I want our members to have access to housing, opportunities, and support. I want our kids to grow up knowing that their Tribe believes in them and knowing that they are part of something bigger than themselves. I want us to continue protecting and improving our lands and infrastructure, strengthening our relationships, and creating opportunities that will benefit not only our members today, but the generations that come after us.

I also want us to continue building a Tribe where every member knows they matter. Whether you live on the Rancheria, somewhere else in California, or farther away, whether we agree on everything or not, we are still one Tribe. I believe leadership has a responsibility to represent all of our people.

I want to continue building the Casino into something that can truly benefit our Tribe and become a stronger economic resource for our future.

Four years ago, we had a lot to rebuild. Today, we finally have a foundation to grow from.

There are things we've started that I want to finish. There are things I still want to change. And there are still doors I want to open for our members. That is why I have decided to run for another term.

It has been an honor to serve as your Chairwoman for the past four years. I don't take the responsibility of this position lightly. I know what it requires. I know the sacrifices that come with it. And I know that leadership is not always easy.

But through everything these last four years have brought, I have shown up.

I have shown up when things were going well, and I have shown up when they weren't. I have shown up for the easy conversations and the difficult ones. I have shown up when people agreed with me and when they didn't.

And if given the opportunity to serve another four years, I will continue to show up.

I will continue asking questions. I will continue holding myself and our government accountable. I will continue fighting for opportunities for our members. I will continue protecting our resources, advocating for our sovereignty, strengthening our community, and working toward a future where our Tribe is stronger and more self-sufficient.

Most importantly, I will continue to be available to our people and serve our entire membership.

I am asking for the opportunity to continue that work and to continue serving as your Chairwoman for another four years.

Thank you,

Tisha Gonzalez