

## RICK HILL

*Indian Gaming Magazine* is honored to award Rick Hill the 2012 *Eagle Visionary Award* and to induct him into the INDIAN GAMING HALL OF FAME. Hill brings his vast knowledge of Indian gaming issues, national leadership roles and front line Washington, D.C. political experience to his current role as Tribal Financial Advisors (TFA) Chairman of the Board. TFA's Board is a noteworthy group of tribal leaders who are national proponents of tribal economic sovereignty and tribal organizational leadership from across the country.

Prior to joining TFA in 2011, Hill served two terms as the Chairman of the Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin, the first being from 1990-1993, and most recently from 2008-2011. His 13 years of tribal government service also included serving as Councilman and Vice Chairman. Under Hill's first term of leadership, the Oneida Tribe was the first tribe to enter into a gaming compact with the State of Wisconsin in 1991. Also during his first term, Hill simultaneously served as chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA). Under his leadership, NIGA became a nationally recognized voice on Indian gaming issues and established regulatory standards and policies for tribal governmental gaming nation-wide. In 2001, he formed The Hill Group (THG), an Indian owned business that specializes in meeting the commercial needs of Indian tribes and minority businesses.

Beginning in 2002, Hill became a shareholder in RHG, an Indian-owned company established to assist in and develop real estate, both on and off reservations. Through his role in RHG, Hill has served as promoter and advisor for the development of the first ever off reservation, tribal consortium hotel investment located in Washington, D.C. RHG successfully identified and negotiated the \$12 million tribal equity participation in a \$42 million extended stay hotel project commonly referred to as the "The Four Fires."

We sat down with Rick Hill to find out more about his life's journey and what shaped him into the steadfast leader he is today...

**EARLY YEARS:** Many Indians were relocated to major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago in the '50s. My dad ended up in Detroit, so he left the homestead to get a job and raise his family. Then in the '60s we moved back to the reservation in Wisconsin. So, to go from being an urban kid in fourth grade to moving to the rez was quite interesting because there was no running water, outdoor outhouses and no economic development, so we really just played sports. My dad was always involved in the community. My grandmother was the second American Indian woman doctor in the country. Early on they called my dad "chief" as a nickname in grade school. He was always a leader. I was always around him because he would work all day as a machinist, the livelihood and the trade he learned in Michigan. He coached baseball and belonged to every civic organization known to mankind and was involved in tribal politics. Even when we lived in Michigan, he would always drive back to the annual meeting in July and he was always involved in trying to develop the community and the government here. My dad always said 'you need



Rick Hill and Monica Quigley.

## 2012 EAGLE VISIONARY AWARD WINNER

a strong tribal government,' so early on he instilled that into us. We got a lot by osmosis. My mom was a Cree Indian and she's from Alberta, Canada and was an RN at the hospital. They were very influential in how they shaped my life, and gave me encouragement and opportunities – they were wonderful parents. I was around tribal meetings and I'd always travel with my dad to different meetings when I was younger. There was a group called the Great Lakes Intertribal Council, which was a consortium of Indian Nations here in Wisconsin, and it was a political unit similar to NCAI for political purposes. So I used to go to those meetings and tag along with my dad. When I was 23, I ran the Boys & Girls Club here in Wisconsin. We built a community center and there was a gentleman named Sonny King who was a big influence on my life, and who ran the civic center. We got a grant for \$20,000 and started the first club. I was the Executive Director and the Program Director here in Oneida. That was a good experience, but my dad encouraged me to run for the tribal council. So I ran for the council when I was 23, and somehow I got elected, which allowed me to be around my elders Purcell Powless, Irene Moore, Amelie Cornelius, Bob Thomas, Joe Ninham, Loretta Metoxen and a host of others. I listened to their wisdom because I was the youngest person in the room. But, to be around all those people early on in my political career was very influential and very informative.

**INSPIRATION:** Of course my mom and my dad were inspirational, and the great council people here at Oneida. As I got onto the state stage, there were the leaders up north like Gaiashkibos, Phil Wildcat and Tom Maulson. Then I got on the national stage and was surrounded by the likes of Tim Wapato and Gay Kingman, and then I married a woman by the name of Donsia Strong Hill. Also, my older brothers and sisters and other friends – all of these people really shaped me. I also saw the likes of Wendell Chino and Roger Jourdain, and you'd have to be pretty slow on the take if their message didn't resonate with you in terms of sovereignty and the protection of sovereignty and throwing down the gauntlet and not get pushed around anymore. So, I was lucky to be around those individuals along with our Chairman Purcell Powless and Kathy Hughes and Amelie Cornelius and Loretta Metoxen. There were some really talented people that I was lucky enough just to hang out with. With that foundation, that's what really motivated me to try to help those other tribes that didn't have the experience that Oneida had. Also, there were other good people like Sheila Morago, Jake Coin, Tom Rodgers, John Tahsuda, and Chuck Robertson. Ernie Stevens Sr. sat on the council when I was Chairman and Vice



Chairman and Ernie, with his knowledge and his ability to write, gave me words of encouragement and all those kinds of things; Ernie's dad was very influential in my life – another guy that was really top-notch. I worked early on with a great gaming attorney named Sharon House; I was assisted by another great woman named Dawn Ryder who always encouraged me. But as I mentioned, I grew up with my father Norbert Hill who they named the largest facility on the reservation after – the Norbert Hill Center – because of all of his good work throughout his lifetime and being on the council – probably thirty some odd years. So, just being around that, and my dad always pushed building strong tribal government.

**ADVICE TO FACILITATE CHANGE:** The prayers are really important. We walked on our prayers with our task force at NIGA all those years. You have to have a cultural foundation, because a lot of the answers when we have tribal conflicts can be resolved more readily if tribes go back to their culture. I think everybody really wants the same goal but there are different paths for getting there. Sometimes there's a lot of conflict in Indian Country where you're taking two different roads, and you can't get there. The art of compromise is important and being civil and identifying goals that will build your nation and find a good way to communicate with each other. Because it's such a complicated world now and so competitive, you really need to seek out good experienced advice, whether you're doing a financial transaction or you're going to a different business. Most of us are just lay people coming in and we may not have business acumen or banking

# INDIAN GAMING HALL OF FAME



Rick Hill meeting with President Obama.

experiences or economic development experiences, political experiences, communication tools and methodologies to communicate with all the levels of people that we need to communicate with both internally and externally. Whether it's just the community at large or whether it's explaining a project to the larger community – then you've got your national stage and your local stages in terms of testimony and building records. So, you need to have quality people that have good skill sets to help communicate your nation's message. Frank Farenkoff, remember that guy? He always told us that we had the better story to tell and we sure do, as we're not commercial gaming, we're Indian governmental gaming building communities and building nations and building infrastructure. Because of that, the blessing was that all these tribes had to come together for a common goal and a common purpose. I chaired with Gaiashkibos, Sue Matson and Ron Allen and whoever was the head of NCAI during those twelve years, and we collectively, with the cooperation of all the tribes, made things happen.

**POLITICS:** Well, it's kind of a nasty word but it's a necessary evil. It's important to have an interest in how your community or nation develops and make sure that there are fair policies. Make sure you have good-hearted people in leadership and trust them. Then, your job as community members is the oversight responsibility and to make sure the people that are expected to know all the details have an appreciation and respect for those leaders that face all these challenges as a nation is built. In this political game, you're not always going to get what you want, but you want to make sure things are fair, and if things aren't fair, then there needs to be some kind of review process. You have to have a good heart and a good mind about doing things together for the greater good. A lot of times people will

personalize stuff and have vendettas and you really don't have time for that. We need to just get our arms around what the goals and objectives are of the nation and, in some cases, make sure it aligns with your budgets so that you can have an aggressive approach because a lot of times you'll have unfunded mandates and you can't get certain things done. I know there are competing priorities within each tribe, but somehow leadership has to really boil it down on their watch to what they're going to do during their term. It's kind of idealistic because, in my case, I wasn't able to get that done to the level that I wanted to. If you can, you need to have that foundation. It's kind of like playing on a basketball team. My orientation is sports – it's being on good teams and winning teams and sharing the ball and supporting your best guys and doing it on a collective basis because everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. You really need to have civil conversations to formulate a plan. You've got to have a plan that's measurable, that you can show yourself and the community for what the objective is.

**BENEFITS OF INDIAN GAMING:** Well, for one, everyone always talks about this four-letter word called 'jobs.' Basic needs are being met, like buying buses for elders so they can get to their appointments and improved health care. Education and educational scholarships, the ability to build homes, buy homes, social services programs, the ability to buy our land back, build parks, roads, start new businesses and pursue joint ventures. When the demographics are good, gaming has been successful. There are still a lot of tribes that weren't able to leverage that to something substantial because of their locations. They don't have any players. So, in some instances, gaming was very successful for tribes to create all these things. It just depends, but those are the benefits for the tribes that were able to maximize the principals of IGRA. I think the one thing that we haven't done very well is to build our own private sector to build sustainable economies. The 'buy Indian' thing is still not to the level that it should be. There should be more tribes that step up and say, 'this is our policy to buy from Indian vendors locally or nationally – we are buying Indian and here are the vendors.' I haven't seen anybody being that aggressive yet and hopefully some day we'll see that. But, there's a lot of leadership from Jamie Fulmer and other people that are continually trying to promote that, but we're not there yet. So, that's part of our job – to have sustainable economies. All the goods and services are currently bought off the reservation. So this could be brand new business for the tribes and there should be strategies that could be put in place to do that. I know some tribes are starting to do this. There are a lot of brilliant Indian business people that have businesses or they have joint ventures.