By Levi Rickert

While walking through The Mirage in Las Vegas with Geoff Blackwell, during the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development’s National Reservation Economic Summit (RES), it becomes apparent he is well-known and respected in Indian Country. Blackwell (Chickasaw, Choctaw, Omaha, Muscogee Creek) is recognized as a legal eagle and cyber warrior. He works as AMERIND Risk’s Chief Strategy Officer and General Counsel. At AMERIND, Blackwell oversees the Finance, IT, HR, Communications and AMERIND Critical Infrastructure teams.

RES, Indian Country’s largest conference devoted to economic development, attracts American Indians and Alaska Natives from throughout the country. Blackwell attended RES with other AMERIND Risk executives to create more business opportunities for the only 100 percent Tribally owned and operated insurance provider committed to Indian Country. Blackwell is from Oklahoma and New Mexico, and is a graduate of Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia School of Law. He brings a wealth of knowledge to AMERIND Risk from his private practice experiences in corporate litigation in Boston, previous employment at Chickasaw Nation Industries, Inc., and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), where he worked twice.

In 2000, Blackwell became the first Tribal member to work at the FCC, where he was involved in groundbreaking efforts to bridge the digital divide. From 2005 to 2010, Blackwell helped lead Chickasaw Nation Industries, Inc., as a Director of Corporate Development and Strategic Relations. Blackwell returned to the FCC in 2010, when he helped the FCC establish its Office of Native Affairs and Policy. He served as the founding Chief of the Office. He directed the FCC’s efforts to further incentivize and drive the deployment of broadband and communications technologies across Indian Country. In October of 2015, Blackwell joined AMERIND Risk.

AMERIND Risk has created affordable and sustainable insurance products and services for Indian Country since 1986, largely in response to the lack of these services being available to many Tribal
communities. Through AMERIND Risk, Blackwell helps Tribes protect their homes, businesses and workforces, and acquire broadband technologies. AMERIND provides property, liability, and workers’ compensation insurance for Tribes, Tribal governments and Tribal businesses, as well as individual property coverage and employee benefits.

In 2016, AMERIND created AMERIND Critical Infrastructure (ACI), a business line that helps Tribes develop broadband networks. In the 21st Century, broadband has become as necessary as clean water, reliable energy, and good roads. Given Blackwell’s FCC background, he was integral in helping AMERIND aim to empower Indian Country with better internet networks. “It is shocking to see Indian students sitting in the parking lots of schools and Tribal offices to use Wi-Fi so they can do their school work. Access to broadband is a civil right. The largest marketplace of anything in the world is the worldwide web, and Indian Country deserves to have access to it,” Blackwell said. “Our board astutely knew AMERIND had an opportunity to help make Indian Country a better place regarding critical broadband needs in our Tribal communities. The challenges of getting broadband to Indian Country are age-old problems, including a lack of technical capacity to plan and undertake broadband deployment projects. This is where ACI’s capacities come into the picture.”

ACI is doing business in four technologically different regions of Indian Country, from the Southwest to Alaska to the Plains. Last year, ACI assisted two New Mexico Tribal consortium applications, involving six Pueblos, that secured nearly $8 million in federal funding to bring fiber broadband to their Tribal schools and libraries. Both networks will be operational by the early summer of 2018. ACI’s efforts have not gone unnoticed. From Capitol Hill to Indian Country, ACI is recognized for helping Tribes understand the rules and regulations, plan strategically, own their broadband networks, and access federal dollars to support the effort.

Blackwell, an approachable fellow, sat down with TBJ for an interview over lunch at RES to discuss his role at AMERIND. Blackwell expressed his enthusiasm to work for the company’s vision and mission. “The heart and spirit of our company is protecting Tribal families and communities,” Blackwell emphasized.

**What is AMERIND Risk’s current reach in Indian Country?**

All throughout Indian Country, AMERIND does business in 36 states and insures many billions worth of properties in Indian Country. More than 150 Tribes and Tribal entities insure their employees through our Tribal Workers Comp program.

AMERIND also has a very high retention rate throughout the country. We have Tribes that have been with AMERIND continuously since it was founded in 1986. More keep coming. Even Tribes that left for a while have come back to AMERIND’s services. That’s a good thing to point out.

**What challenges does Indian Country face in the insurance industry?**

There is a lot of competition in the marketplace. It is important for Tribes to understand how risk management and insurance actually work, and be familiar with how their own policy will work. One of the most fundamental priorities for indigenous peoples is trust. That’s the truth with any relationship, and it certainly is true in the Tribal business world when it comes to insurance. AMERIND has a good history of maintaining trust between our company and Tribes.

I think a good question for Tribes to ask themselves is: Are there Tribal employees at this company? In a lot of different business marketplaces, there appear to be multiple Tribal entities. Any business could appear to be Tribally owned or Tribally operated, but they might have very few Tribal employees, especially at the decision-making levels. This shows they really aren’t putting forth an effort to improve relations with Tribes. You have to ask: What are their motivations?

**AMERIND Risk has a working alliance with the National American Indian Housing Council (NAIHC). Tell TBJ readers why that relationship is important and why it has been successful.**

AMERIND and NAIHC share many of the same core values. Both believe in protecting Tribal communities by building and protecting Tribal homes. We partner with the NAIHC to host an annual meeting for training in housing and risk management. Lots of folks come from all over.

Protecting Tribal housing is the genesis chapter of AMERIND’s Charter. There is no more important infrastructure than a home. Soup to nuts, at AMERIND we are helping Indian Country protect the oldest necessary infrastructure – a home – while also helping Indian Country build the newest necessary infrastructure – broadband.

**The Trump administration has been in office for almost a year and a half now. Has the new administration been good for Indian Country? Please explain.**

Little changes in Washington can have huge ripple effects in Indian Country. So, you can imagine what happens with big changes. There has been a huge shift in Tribal consultation. There are a lot of people who feel disengaged. There is a lot of concern that Tribal Nations are not being included in federal policy making. I know we have horsepower and knowledge to add value when engaged. We share the obligations of consultation. We should be involved in the conversation. I am optimistic, but I know we need healthy engagement.