

35 Years and Going Strong: A Perspective from Our CEO

With a nudge toward what his supervisor at the Acoma Housing Authority described as a great opportunity, Derek Valdo took a leap of faith in the fall of 2000 and applied for a position at AMERIND.

Soon after, the talented, young member of the Pueblo of Acoma Tribe became an AMERIND Safety Services Specialist, then Director of Safety Services, and, in 2012, he was named CEO.

The staff of 12 in Valdo's early years has grown to more than 50, but one hallmark of the way AMERIND does business has not changed. "Customers first" guides every interaction between employees and members.

"One of the things I find most rewarding about working for AMERIND is the opportunity to build and foster relationships. Our members are not just policy numbers," Valdo said.

"I've visited more than 200 tribal communities in about 30 states, many when I was doing safety inspections, and the Indian Housing Block Grant Program was our only line of business. I made a lot of friends, and people still remember those days. They pick up the phone and call me when they have questions. It's important to me to hear what's on their minds," he said.

Reflecting on the company's 35th anniversary, Valdo responded to questions about his career at AMERIND and the company's future.

WHAT DID IT MEAN TO BE NAMED AMERIND'S FIRST NATIVE AMERICAN CEO?

Nine years ago, our board took a big chance when they promoted a young Native American to CEO. It is an honor and privilege to lead this organization. It is a huge responsibility and a tremendous opportunity.

When the board promoted me, I promised them I would leave AMERIND better than I received it. My decision-making process is guided by that promise and my commitment to the 420 tribes we serve.

WHAT SHOULD MEMBERS KNOW ABOUT YOUR STAFF?

Every member of our team is aligned with the AMERIND mission. That goes a long way toward explaining our success.

When I started, 30 percent of our employees were Native; today, that number is 57 percent. Keeping talent in Indian Country is integral to our future. I've surrounded myself with smart people, including two lawyers and five MBAs. 75 percent of our staff members have at least associate degrees, and 60 percent have bachelor's degrees. I see myself as the head janitor – clearing obstacles and roadblocks out of their way.

AMERIND hires people who have good business sense and vision, as well as passion and commitment. Together, we have more than 400 years of experience in the insurance industry.

When people understand the impact of their decisions and know they are valued, they are highly productive.



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES AMERIND HAS ENCOUNTERED AND OVERCOME?

What traditional insurance providers saw as an obstacle created a huge opportunity for Indian Country. AMERIND was founded when visionary Native American leaders created their own risk pool and a self-funded insurance company. But look at us now! We are bigger, better and still growing.

Each of the insurance products added over time is the result of a demonstrated need among tribal governments and tribal communities – needs that weren't being met by traditional insurance companies. And in each of these situations, AMERIND conquered obstacles and developed insurance products that are fiscally sound and responsive to the needs of our members and customers.

I commend our board for their leadership. They've taken many leaps of faith when adding products and services. AMERIND's success comes from passion and a vision aligned with our values.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MOST IMPORTANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING YOUR TIME AS CEO?

We are fulfilling the mission and vision established for our company 35 years ago. That is a huge accomplishment by our board of directors.

Reaching the point where we sought an AM Best rating was a monumental step in our evolution as a company. Then receiving an A- (Excellent) rating was one of the proudest moments in my career because of the credibility and stability this high rating represents.

When the AMERIND Critical Infrastructure Division was formed in 2016, our goal was to provide high-speed internet access to tribal communities. No one could have anticipated COVID-19, but the positive impact of ACI on our members and customers during this pandemic is a source of tremendous pride for all of us at AMERIND.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR AMERIND? WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH NEXT?

I see AMERIND as the "the little Indian company that could." We now are doing our due diligence on creating increased diversification and alignment with financial services companies like AMERIND, and we have the assets to do so.

When we depend on federal funding, it takes too long for Native Americans to secure financing. For example, mortgages on reservations take 18 to 24 months. Entrepreneurs put their dreams on hold. Having our own financial services company will allow us to operate like a tribe and provide financial resources guided by good business sense.

AMERIND, the Board of Directors and our employees – collectively, we look at our obligations to members and ask ourselves the question they may be asking of us, "What have you done for me lately?" Big decisions lie ahead, and success breeds success. I am confident the servant-leadership model put in place by our founders 35 years ago will serve many generations of Tribal Nations and move us further down the path toward tribal sovereignty and financial self-determination.

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