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Traditions Applied: President Charles Colombe, businessman, tribal leader, cowboy

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He started his working life on a ranch and on the back of a rodeo horse that tried to throw him to the ground. If he stayed on for eight seconds he would win.

Charles Colombe rode bucking broncos and bulls for a living in his youth. He made a living at something many people aren't able to. He now heads the Rosebud Sioux Tribe as president, not a far stretch from the rodeo arena. The bucks and spins of a bucking horse or bull are much the same as life as a tribal president. The difference: Colombe has to hang on for two years, not eight seconds.

And as in rodeo, when dealing with tribal government the goal is, as Colombe expressed, you have to turn obstacles into positives.

"I went to work my senior year. I quit school. Work was easier to get 50 years ago. I always worked," Colombe said.

Colombe was good enough at rodeo to make a living. He reminisced for a moment about his time in the Astrodome rodeo arena the first year it opened, and he watched as it closed this year.

In 1958 the Relocation Act landed Colombe in Dallas. He went to barber school, but he was still a rodeo cowboy. He joined the military in 1961, was assigned to Korea and upon returning to Rosebud, he continued ranching. Colombe still ranches today.

Colombe learned the skill of business the hard way - by doing it. With a lack of credit he figured out how to borrow money and with three backers he went into the cattle business. "It was a good start. I learned working with bankers, learned about cash flow, negative risk, loan applications, balance sheets, P and L statements - that was my education," he said.

Colombe admitted that he was good at the cattle business and ranching. "I made a lot of money at that."

In 1971 he thought of selling out and entering college. But he was drafted to run for tribal council and he served for eight years.

Colombe acquired a knowledge and interest in government policy, treaties and land issues, regulatory process while on the council, that lead to his business success.

In 1979 he worked for South Dakota Legal Services co-directing the 2,415 claims process for the Aberdeen Area.

He moved into bidding government contracts for Indian land title. While on the council he was involved with land consolidation process using Farmers Home Administration Funds to buy land for the tribe. "In one year we bought \$3 million worth of land at \$52 an acre.

"Today that land is probably worth \$200 an acre."

He then contracted with the government for land title and records work. "I did all of the trust land title examination; judges orders and administrative modifications, and computerized all the land in the Great Lakes, Minneapolis area; Aberdeen area; Billings area; the Portland area and then did all the title work for California, and essentially created the database for the title plant that was set up in Sacramento [Calif.] in 1993."

His office in Albuquerque, N.M. also performed title examination for 11 of the 19 pueblos.

At the same time Colombe owned a general construction company, all while he continued ranching. He said he will be a cowboy forever.

In 1993 Colombe returned to Rosebud to develop the Rosebud Casino. "It took four years and was really a fun thing to do. Dealing with tribal government was a monthly issue, and tribal government is usually looking for someone to vent their anger on, and I was it - five years non-stop. Very few compliments, no matter what you did.

"It was a fun deal, I never took it personal. I knew going in what I was getting into. I call it poverty politics, there is never enough to go around, somebody has to be the dart board, if you will, or wear the arrow shirt.

"I was very happy with what we accomplished there. We had about 95 percent Native American employment, all of our managers but one were Native American after the second year. We had a 44 percent net profit after debt service for the full five years. We had a limited market and limited amount of slot machines. All the time I was there we never had over 160 slot machines."

When Colombe left the casino he said it was doing about \$8 million in gross slot revenue, which translated into \$280 net win per machine. He said the casino served more than 75,000 pounds of prime rib annually. Beef that came out of the heartland of Nebraska, which earned a lot of support from the ranching country in the Nebraska sand hills.

He said the casino was not marketed on the reservation because it would just recycle poverty dollars. "That does no good for anyone."

Colombe ran for chairman once and lost, another time for vice chairman and lost. "I've always had a number of people who have asked me to serve in tribal government. You don't run because you want to run, you run because you are asked."

He has served for six months in the President's office to date. "The most interesting six months of my life. I likened it to drinking from a fire hose. Very soon you forget you were thirsty."

And now, as in the past, how can the Rosebud tribe rise to the challenge of creating jobs, improving the quality of life and preserving a cultural future for the young and a good life for the elderly?

"My view right now of economic development is that we have to look within for starters. What jobs can we create with what we currently have? How do we leverage those federal funds and turn them into more jobs is the question."

"We haven't been getting that done. We spent roughly \$40 million in housing funds and probably out of that, haven't built 100 new homes on the Rosebud in the last six or seven years."

The tribe has renovated some homes that came from airbases while creating employment, but Colombe said they haven't leveraged the housing funds, nor has the tribe been able to because of audits.

"Until such time as we get an independent court system and a uniform commercial code that meets the requirements of the lender and the ability to garnish and collect on debts we are not going to have a business development in our own private sector. We essentially do not have a private sector."

Colombe said he received a report that showed eight out of 10 people on the Rosebud had a negative credit rating. "That is a phenomenal disadvantage. I think this report is reflective of what our problem is."

However bleak the past may appear to be, the future may take on a different look if Colombe's wish list

is accomplished.

The Rosebud per capita income is \$4,100 while the rest of the nation is five or six times that level.

So what can be done?

"It must be something we want to be successful. In the past we changed ourselves to meet the needs of federal programs. We need to impress upon Congress that we can change the federal program to meet our need."

Historically almost every business deal has ended up in a lawsuit. The tribal council filed a lawsuit against Colombe's company while he managed the casino in the first five years. The tribe spent \$200,000 in attorney fees and they have won about \$1,024.

A large hog farm operated and owned by Bell Farms has created a lawsuit against the tribe for \$45 million for tribal interference with the contract. Colombe said that was a great concern to him.

"The biggest challenge is not creating jobs or businesses. It's to get our people to believe that we can have real jobs and real business. The mode that we are in has created a situation where people have a great deal of distrust in any change or any venture. And consequently, the task is getting our people to believe that we are smart enough to do a business deal that doesn't end up in court and that can create an opportunity for our own people.

"That's the big challenge. Bringing good people to the table with good projects and good ideas and good financing - is the thing I know how to do."

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