

# Meet Laurie Hand

## Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development Department

Tahlequah, Oklahoma

*It is 9:00 a.m. Suzanne is playing with Laney in a tub of water to help her relax and enjoy the experience of water. Tiffany and McKenzie are reading quietly while a group of two year olds are experimenting with bubbles in the warm Oklahoma sun. We have just caught a glimpse into the world of children at U Ni Wi Sa NV, (translated in English as "a place to grow") Cherokee Nation's child development program in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the capital of the tribal government.*

Cherokee Nation, along with 257 grantees, representing more than 500 Indian Tribes, Alaskan Native Villages, and Native Hawaiian Organizations, receives federal block grant funds to improve child care for Indian children. Funding ranges from less than 25,000 for small tribes to more than 9 million annually. As the second largest tribe in the U.S., with more than 260,000 tribal members, Cherokee Nation is able to provide a wide range of services.

A key factor in the success of Cherokee Nation Child Care and Development Department is built upon the Cherokee word *Ga Du-gi*, "working together" in a community sense. Historically, the word meant working together towards a common goal which would benefit all of the Cherokee People, and it has become the mission of the current tribal administration. *Ga Du Gi* is evident in relation-

ships between staff, with children, parents, caregivers. On a broader level, *Ga Du Gi* is also found in relationships with other Cherokee Nation programs, other tribes, and the state of Oklahoma.

We observe one such relationship between programs as we move down the hall to the preschool/school-age wing. As we open a door which displays a sign reading "Cherokee only spoken here," 30 excited three- and four-year-old preschoolers interrupt

their language lesson to greet us with "O si yo! To hi tsu?" (Hello! How are you?) This language immersion class is a program of the Cherokee Nation Education Group. The child care department partners with the program to provide classroom facilities and early childhood teacher training. In order to produce fluent speakers, beginning at age three the children learn to read, write, and speak in Cherokee by being completely immersed in the language. Once the children enter the class, no



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English is spoken. The tribe plans to add a grade to the immersion program each year through high school.

“Cherokee people may be only one or two generations from losing the language and language defines the Cherokee culture” (quote from Principal Chief Chad Smith). The tribe is engaged in strategic efforts to revitalize the Cherokee language and preserve culture. Recently the Tribal Government, utilizing business enterprise funds, awarded the child development center funds to begin a language revitalization project in which fluent Cherokee speakers will be placed in all classrooms to speak, sing, and read to the children in their native tongue.

As we move to the school-age room, the children are outside playing before the temperature climbs to 100. Today they are engrossed in observing new developments with the birds and nests that the birds built on the porch. We are looking forward to expanding outdoor experiences through a relationship with the environmental staff at Cherokee Nation for the development of our outdoor classroom. We have drafted plans for a natural playground and plan to add an area outside the playground to include a walking trail through a wetland and meadow. We have begun identifying native plants that are already growing in the area (including pecan trees, wildflowers, blackberries, and buck brush for traditional Cherokee basket making) and have plans for a group activity area under a 150-year-old oak tree. We have approached Head Start and the tribal high school about becoming involved in the project.

U Ni Wi Sa NV is also the home to the tribe’s child care resource center, licensing unit, and subsidy program. As we enter the office wing, Marilyn is packing toys, books, and activities to take to grandparents and homes of other relatives who are caring for children;

Debbie is planning a new class on music and movement for the vocational education/child care occupations class. At Cherokee Nation, one-third of the parents receiving financial assistance for care choose relatives as caregivers. It is important for us to support caregivers at all ends of the child care continuum from relatives, to those who have chosen child care as a profession. We offer home visiting programs, short seminars, and more comprehensive formal training such as the year long vocational education program in cooperation with Cherokee Nation Career services group.

In keeping with the initiative of the tribe to preserve culture and language, Gaynia is reviewing materials for a new effort to provide resources infused with the Cherokee language and culture to child care centers across 14 counties in northeast Oklahoma. Tribes have the unique opportunity and responsibility to provide services within the cultural context of the tribe. Children should first understand and appreciate their own cultural identity and be provided with meaningful learning experiences in the context of the community’s traditions and cultural knowledge. Part of our responsibility is to pass on the wisdom through instruction in tribal language, history, traditions, arts, and games.

Further down the hall Tina is counseling a parent in need of odd hour care for her two year old, while Maggie assists a parent with applications for financial assistance and school clothing vouchers. Lisa and Steve are leaving with their state licensing counterpart to monitor a child care facility for compliance with regulations, to insure that the Cherokee children in their care are in a healthy and safe environment. We have entered into a partnership with the state of Oklahoma through a reciprocal licensing agreement and to provide resource and referral services in northeast

Oklahoma. It’s a win-win situation: we can share information and resources to improve services for families and caregivers in our part of the state.

A bit about me. I was born and raised in Brockton, Massachusetts, and graduated with a degree in Child Development with the intention of teaching early elementary grades. I moved to Oklahoma and began working for the tribe 28 years ago in social service programs. In 1992, I transferred to a position in the newly formed Child Development program to plan and oversee the tribe’s new child care center, becoming Department Director about a year later. In 1992 Cherokee Nation operated the center and a combined subsidy, licensing, and resource information program with 27 full time staff. The program now has two child development centers, comprehensive licensing, subsidy, and resource and referral programs with more than 70 staff serving approximately 4,000 children and 800 child care facilities.

My job is to lead the staff, particularly the management team, in setting direction. I use a hands-on approach. I want to know the children, caregivers, and parents with whom we are working. If not, I lose touch with what we are doing and why. We can always make improvements in what we do and it is my job to help the staff discover how.

It is also important to develop relationships with others in the early childhood community. Working with other tribes across Oklahoma through the Oklahoma Tribal Child Care Association, I share resources and information. To maintain a national presence and advocate for Indian children, I am on the board of the National Indian Child Care Association. Working with other tribes has taught me to value the work we can do collectively if we share information, resources, and most of all to listen, to appreciate, and to celebrate the experiences of others. We can accomplish great things for children.