

An Unrelenting Servant Leader



PHOTO BY WAYDE CARROLL, COURTESY OF CITC

Gloria O'Neill, LA1 alumna and President and CEO of CITC, reflects on leadership, community, and collaboration

by Lila Hobbs

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO, Gloria O'Neill joined the first-ever cohort of Leadership Anchorage (LA). Without knowing it at the time, her LA experience would prepare O'Neill for a critical role she didn't know was coming. One year after the cohort concluded, O'Neill became the President and CEO of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) at the age of 28. While she may have been surprised by the opportunity to step into the position of CEO, her ability to take on the challenge and flourish shocked no one. Known for her determination, authenticity, and humility, O'Neill exemplifies servant leadership; she is this year's recipient of the Leadership Anchorage Alumni Award.

PERSPECTIVE PAVES THE WAY

The daughter of Raymond and Bobbie O'Neill, O'Neill's Scots-Irish, Yup'ik, and Sáami background provided a unique lens for her to see the world. Her father grew up in the village of Levelock in Southwest Alaska, and her mother came to the state in the 1950s. Later, her father's family moved to Soldotna, and it was there that he met her mother. Growing up, O'Neill spent her winters attending school on the Kenai Peninsula and her summers fishing in Bristol Bay. She understood the value of belonging to a community as well as the intentionality and tenacity necessitated by life in Alaska. Reflecting on her summers in Bristol Bay, O'Neill said, "My experience on the back of a commercial fishing boat is where I first learned to be relentless." Now, decades later, she elaborates, "I am relentless about how we move our community forward in a positive way." That unrelenting spirit would prove to be her most celebrated quality and an effective leadership tool as CEO of CITC.

O'Neill's early experiences gave her a unique perspective on how Alaska's distinctive people, communities, and landscapes coalesce together. "It helped form how I see the world and understand its people," she explained. "Alaska is so incredibly diverse. Many of us came from another place—like my mother's family. They worked to make Alaska their home. Then there are those of us who are also in the Indigenous community and whose ancestors have been here for over 10,000 years. My experience gave me the ability to see many perspectives and, as a result, built my pragmatic approach to life."

EMERGING LEADER

While in her early twenties, O'Neill came to CITC and was instantly drawn to the organization's mission: "To work in partnership with Our People to develop opportunities that fulfill Our endless potential." Immediately, she knew that she would be fulfilling her life's purpose and passion when she joined the organization. Her experience in the first cohort of Leadership Anchorage supplied the confidence and support needed to find her voice in her forthcoming role as CEO.

"During that time, I felt very uncomfortable calling myself a leader," O'Neill shared. "I looked at other people around me—people who dedicated their lives to service, board members, elders in our community—as the leaders. I felt like an apprentice in training." Reflecting on her journey as CEO, O'Neill notes that she has learned an immeasurable amount from tribal communities, "It's the tribal leaders who have taught me the most about leadership. It is at the heart of our values and everything that we do at CITC."

**THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP:
CULTIVATING A LEADER**

O'Neill credits Leadership Anchorage with fostering opportunities for her to talk with others about leadership and to hear their diverse perspectives at a crucial moment in her career. These seminal conversations also expanded her knowledge and understanding of leadership and extended her network community-wide. Realizing that mentors would be key to her growth, she devoted herself to listening and learning from them.

During Leadership Anchorage, O'Neill was paired with mentor Fran Ulmer, the first woman elected to statewide office in Alaska, serving as Lieutenant Governor from 1994-2002. "When I received the phone call asking me to be a mentor to Gloria, many years ago, I said yes, not knowing exactly what was expected," Ulmer recalled. "I'd mentored students before, but to be able to get to know a young professional woman finding her way in the world seemed likely a fun and interesting opportunity. It has turned out to

"I come to leadership as moving the whole forward. It's about leading with a community approach rather than an individual mindset."

be so much more... a friendship that has lasted for more than twenty years!"

Besides the unexpected joy of a long friendship, Ulmer elaborated on her observations of O'Neill's evolution as a leader. "I've watched Gloria develop remarkable leadership skills. Her unquenchable optimism and encouragement for others to reach their full potential has created an environment of positive energy enabling CITC to evolve, expand, and succeed in many new ventures. A large part of that success is Gloria's commitment to the mission and her willingness to share credit; she knows that true leadership is a team sport, not a solo performance. I feel very fortunate that I received that phone call, and that I've had the opportunity to share time with Gloria."

What instilled this drive to elevate and propel others? "My grandmother's story really inspired me to serve," O'Neill reflects. "She traveled the long path from a traditional subsistence lifestyle to the 20th century." In addition to commercial fishing in Bristol Bay in her youth, O'Neill worked in the canneries with her grandmother. "She taught me the value of hard work and she didn't

THE LEADERSHIP ANCHORAGE Alumni Advisory Board is led by LA alumni who volunteer to help host social events, develop opportunities for continued learning, and deepen connections across the greater alumni network. Meet the team!



Nancy King, LA18
Educational Therapist
Favorite hobby: Doing the work I love
What leadership means to me: Listening to learn, supporting others, giving successes away.



Marissa Palmer, LA21
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Program Coordinator
Favorite hobby: Baking
What leadership means to me: To me, leadership means creating an environment where everyone feels empowered to share ideas, ask questions, and take risks.



Joe Sonnier, LA21
Axiom Data Science, Grants and Contracts Manager
Favorite hobby: Climbing mountains, hosting dinners, gardening
What leadership means to me: The basis of leadership is compassion or empathy in action. The leaders I look up to are masters of relationships. They inspire others to be the best versions of themselves while learning along the way.



Diego Perez, LA21
Mosaic Media, Media Lead
What leadership means to me: Leadership in the workforce to me means being inspired and motivated to bring a vision to life while motivating a group of individuals in a way that they want to, rather than have to. A leader in the community to me means someone who is inspired to bring positive change to their community while not doing it for praise or status, or wanting recognition—doing it from the heart.



Tiana Walters, LA22
CPA turned elementary teacher, currently working on my teaching license at UAF
Favorite hobby: Baking
What leadership means to me: I believe that leadership is constantly evolving and may look different depending on your "season of life". But ultimately it is about being true to yourself, showing up for the tough conversations, and being brave to use your voice.



Leo Medal, LA19
University of Alaska Anchorage, Student Success Coordinator
Favorite hobby: Going to the movies, traveling the world
What leadership means to me: LA means to me personal and professional growth, and an opportunity to serve and bring change to the community



Kris Palmatier, LA20
Rasmuson Foundation,
Director of Finance
Favorite hobby: Dance,
video games, dinner
parties
*What leadership means
to me:* When I think of
leadership, compassion
comes to mind. It is
not the leading that
is important, but it is
the impact you leave
on others. If you are in
leadership, you have
followers looking up to
you as a role model and
mentor. It is important
to turn to them with
compassion and assist
them on their journey of
leadership.



**Marilyn Alvarenga-
Gaxiola**, LA20
Northern Compass
Group, Marketing
Director & Associate
Consultant
Favorite hobby:
Watching and critiquing
films
*What leadership means
to me:* Leadership to me
means listening to those
around you, working with
your team and actively
taking action to better
your environment or
community.



Joshua J. Franks,
LA22
Cook Inlet Tribal Council,
Inc. (CITC),
Chief of Staff
Favorite hobby: Traveling
to new and old places
*What leadership means
to me:* Leadership is
about service to others,
our community, and our
world. Lifting them all up
to ensure they have what
is needed to reach their
potential.

SAVE THE DATE!

Celebrating Leadership in Alaska

May 26, 6 p.m. on Facebook Live
@AlaskaHumanitiesForum

Join us for this online celebration honoring
Gloria O’Neill with the 2021 Leadership
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Rasmuson Foundation.

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treat me differently than anyone else. I felt her spirit connect me so deeply to the mission of advancing our people and to be part of how we continue to create opportunities so that our people can advance in today’s modern world. I believe my grandmother’s spirit lives in me... she was relentless, fierce, and bold, and she worked to make life better for others.”

EFFECTING CHANGE THROUGH COLLABORATION

To celebrate O’Neill’s tenth anniversary as CEO of CITC in 2008, the Board wrote a resolution honoring her contributions, using the word “unrelenting” eight times to describe her unparalleled drive, energy, and altruistic enterprise. And O’Neill is proud to acknowledge the praise, “I’ve connected my relentlessness to a desire to serve our community and to serve others, and I’ve also connected it with what I’ve been blessed to do in my role, to be creative and innovative. I’ve been able to be relentless as a social entrepreneur who makes an impact for our people and community.”

Since taking the helm of CITC, one of the nation’s leading culturally responsive service organizations, O’Neill’s leadership has helped the organization grow from a staff of 60 with an annual budget of \$8 million to a staff of approximately 400 and an annual budget of \$120 million (the total includes all of CITC’s for-profit investments and the acquisition of the Alaska Native Justice Center, the Clare Swan Early Learning Center, and Get Out The Native Vote).

While she is exceptionally proud of CITC’s growth, she says that she does not take full responsibility for it, “I am really proud to work with such incredible, committed, and smart people whose hearts are with our mission. I am proud of the community and how we move and work together to get things done.” This ethos of collaboration and servant leadership captures the essence of her success in fulfilling CITC’s mission through the power of teamwork.

“With the growth and evolution of CITC, I’ve also grown and changed. Being in leadership has connected me to my community in a much deeper way and showed me how resiliency is so very important; it is one of those threads that moves through everything that we do. I believe my role has made me a better person. It has taught me how to become a better listener: to hear people where they are, both their joy and triumph, and stand with them in their challenges and pain.” She has learned the power of mentorship and feels she has a duty to give back and offer her own experience to those around her, noting, “I’m just part of a continuum.”

O’Neill has made an undeniable impact on CITC and her community. CITC Board of Directors Chair Ivan Encelewski says, “Ms. O’Neill is a once in a lifetime leader, rising far above anyone in her class. She shines above the rest by embracing

new thinking, building people up, concentrating on relationships not just transactions, unifying and inspiring the team to collectively achieve their goals, and celebrating in the successes of all those around her. There is absolutely no goal or task that Gloria can’t achieve when she sets her mind to it. When the CITC Board dreams, Gloria makes it happen.” ■

Lila Hobbs works throughout Dena’ina Elnena and is the founder of Wild Voices, which supports filmmakers and podcasters in utilizing storytelling as a medium to build community and inspire activism.