

SOBOBA RESERVATION: Rosemary Morillo elected new tribal chairwoman



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Rosemary Morillo was elected chairwoman of the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians on March 31.

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BY DIANE A. RHODES
CORRESPONDENT

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Raised on and still residing at the Soboba Indian Reservation, Rosemary Morillo was recently elected to lead her people for the next two years in the role of Tribal Council chairwoman of the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians.

As the first female leader in more than 30 years, Morillo plans to address the challenges of her tribe and Indian Country as a whole.

“Ever since gaming brought Indians into the public eye, it’s an everyday battle to retain sovereignty,” she said. “There are still myths out there. People don’t understand what

our status is. They think we are wards of the federal government because we are identified through our enrollment numbers.”

Programs that could benefit the tribe are not getting funded through community resources because people think the tribe’s needs are funded by the federal government, she said.

“The Soboba Band resides on trust land. We gave up everything to be put on lands chosen for us to live on,” Morillo said. “(Our council) is really no different than local municipalities. We have the same concerns about infrastructure, housing and services needed for a decent quality of life. We just have different titles: we have a chair and vice chair (instead of a mayor and vice mayor).”

Morillo replaces Scott Cozart, who was elected to a two-year term as chairman in 2010.

Born at Riverside General Hospital, Morillo lived with her grandparents in the area known as Indian Canyon, about three miles from where the reservation now sits north of San Jacinto.

She remembers using outhouses and kerosene lamps and walking to the nearby hot springs to wash clothes and bathe. Her family can be traced back to having lived on the property long before treaties were signed in the late 1800s.

Her grandfather built sprinklers to irrigate crops, from corn and beans to melons, chiles and squash. Her grandmother canned everything.

Morillo, 58, has been a tribal council member for most of the past decade. She feels it is her calling, passion and duty to do all she can to serve her people.

“With all my years on the council, this was another accomplishment,” she said. “I wanted to get elected to serve the people and encourage young people, especially females, to be part of tribal government.”

Already lending her voice to the National Congress of American Indians, Morillo said watchdogs are important to make sure funding doesn’t get stopped. The organization “was established in 1944 in response to the termination and assimilation policies the federal government forced upon tribal governments,” according to its website.

“When you look at what they have always fought for since the beginning, you realize the times have changed but the people’s needs have not,” Morillo said. “We might be able to exercise our sovereignty but it’s a constant battle to retain it.”

It took 30 years for appropriation for health services for Native Americans to be reintroduced, this time as part of President Barack Obama's health care bill. She said it is a huge win for her people.

Morillo, mother of nine and grandmother of 25, said the Soboba-sponsored Tribal Customary Adoption bill is a voluntary program that gives relatives the option to adopt a child without terminating parental rights so it doesn't change their name or where they are from.

"But it's about more than enrollment (in a specific tribe). It's about retaining customs — both spiritual and traditional," she said. "Tribal Customary Adoption is one more step on our path to protecting native children."

If you have an idea for an Inland People profile, contact Assistant Metro Editor Nikie Johnson at 951-763-3461 or njohnson@PE.com

INLAND PEOPLE

ROSEMARY MORILLO

AGE: 58

RESIDENCE: Soboba Indian Reservation

NOTABLE: She took power as chairwoman of the local tribe on April 1.