

Note to the Reader:

As a *wopila* gift to the people, the *Heartbeat of the Rez* CD honors KILI radio, “The Voice of the Lakota Nation.” The CD is included in the book, *Views from the Reservation*, by John Willis, published by the Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago officially on July 22, 2010. The following text is an updated version of Tom Casey’s original essay, which he wrote in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of KILI on February 23, 2008. No portion of this text (© 2010) or the accompanying CD (© 2010) may be reproduced in any form or media without the written permission of Tom Casey and KILI (www.kiliradio.org).

KILI Radio

The Voice of the Lakota Nation

by Tom Casey, Director of Development, KILI radio (90.1 FM)

KILI radio is an independent, 100,000-watt radio station that is owned and operated by the Oglala Lakota people. It is located at Porcupine Butte on the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota. On the air seven days a week and twenty hours a day, KILI’s broadcast area covers approximately 30,000 square miles, including the Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River, and Rosebud reservations; Rapid City and the southern Black Hills; and the panhandle of Nebraska. KILI’s programming comprises news and information, public affairs broadcasting, sports coverage, cultural celebration, and entertainment with a variety of music formats, including traditional, Indian contemporary, country, rock and roll, rap, blues, and jazz. KILI is a very unique community radio station working hard to meet the needs of individuals and groups throughout its listening area and online.

The 1970s had been a tumultuous decade for residents of the Pine Ridge Reservation with the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, the death of two F.B.I. agents in Oglala in 1976, and a climate of fear on Pine Ridge marked by violence and

death from 1972 to 1976. So, in the fall of 1979, a group of community members and representatives of the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.) met in Porcupine to talk about the needs of the Pine Ridge community, the problems facing those living on the reservation, and what actions could be taken to improve life there.

Communication became the focal point of the discussion, and ideas of how to connect people on the fifty-by-100 mile reservation ended up centering on the possibility of a radio station. Could a strong community radio station help people deal with rural isolation, long distances, a lack of transportation, an absence of telephones, and no current media covering Pine Ridge and the Oglalas as their community other than crime, violence, and car wrecks caused by alcohol or drugs? Could a radio station, owned and operated by Oglala Lakota, distribute news and information important to the community while celebrating Lakota language, culture, history, and tradition? The answer was an emphatic yes; the group decided on an FM radio station.

In the spring of 1980, the radio group organized, started raising funds, decided on Porcupine Butte north of Wounded Knee for the site, arranged for an engineer to do a frequency search, and started researching what it would take to get a station up and going and to keep it on the air. No one took the group seriously. In a meeting with the tribal chairman, the group was told, “Why don’t you just do a gas station?”

No matter what people said or how many roadblocks were put in its way, the group kept moving forward and was soon given a house by the head of the local housing agency to use for the station a quarter mile south of Porcupine Butte. When the owner of the house died of a heart attack a few months later while campaigning for the tribal presidency, the house was no longer an option. Spearheaded by an engineer who worked for a radio station in New York City, funds and building materials were then raised, and in the summer of 1982 a building was constructed on the side of the butte.

Despite all of the roadblocks, lack of initial support, and general disbelief, an independent and community-owned KILI radio went on the air on February 25, 1983. And, in spite of all of the attempts by missionaries and the U.S. Government since the 1800s to assimilate Lakota people into the mainstream of American society, the first DJ, Calvin Two Lance, spoke in Lakota and English when KILI went live on that historic day.

It did not take long for KILI to become a regular part of people's lives. Local community members were the DJs, and honoring songs, shout outs, memorial songs, and news and information about upcoming events and activities brought a lot of information directly into every home on the reservation. Before too long, KILI was taking the station out on the road, broadcasting live from local events, powwows, basketball and football games, and community celebrations from one end of the "rez" to the other. KILI networked with other groups, organizations, and agencies in the area as they connected to local schools, Oglala Lakota College at Kyle, the Chamber of Commerce, tribal government, and community groups. And KILI kept people connected in the face of natural disasters and emergency situations. Whether it was a two-day blizzard followed by extreme cold, a tornado that hit Oglala, or floods that hit several communities, emergency messages went out over the airwaves. Over the years, information on missing loved ones, public affairs programming on a variety of issues, and music from local artists and Indian Country as a whole all found their way over KILI's airwaves.

Before long, there were requests to expand KILI's signal. Through ongoing fundraising and assistance from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Public Telecommunication Facilities Program, KILI added translators in Rapid City and the Rosebud and Cheyenne River reservations. And, although there has been regular support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in Washington, D.C., there has been a never-ending need to fundraise on a regular basis. Over the years, KILI has raised money by operating a local bingo, partnering with an African-American radio station in New York City on an on-air fundraiser one day each year, sponsored benefit concerts, run a national direct-mail campaign, sold merchandise, built an underwriting base, collected donations, and written grant proposals.

"Some days you have trouble rubbing two nickels together, and other days you feel cashy," said a past manager. "There are just over thirty native stations around the country. By far, the majority of them are in rural, isolated areas, and they struggle to maintain a steady level of funding. It takes up a good deal of your time as you look at raising money every day."

As a community station, KILI was not immune from some of the same problems that individuals, families, businesses, and communities deal with regularly. Staff

turnover, a fundraising concert that lost money, political turmoil in the community that spilled over onto the radio station, lightning that took out KILI's antenna, transmission, and transmitter, and unending demands on staff and station time have all presented challenges and problems to the station.

Through the ups and downs, KILI has continued to broadcast each day news and information on treaties; land and water rights; tribal government; racism and discrimination; developing tribal and federal budgets; Lakota language, history, and culture; suicide prevention and awareness; health care information on HIV-AIDS, diabetes, heart disease, West Nile Virus, black mold, cancer, STDs, and smoking cessation; and available services from tribal, state, and federal government agencies.

In February of 2008, KILI celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary as "The Voice of the Lakota Nation." The station has depended on hundreds of people to contribute to that voice, to make it really the VOICE of the Lakota Nation. Even as the station still struggles to make ends meet, through the help of many people it continues. In the spring of 2007, KILI went back on the air with full power after being limited to a low-power version for ten months due to storm damage. The station now has a new analog transmitter, a new digital transmitter, and a new antenna and transmission line. KILI also has its own Website (www.kiliradio.org) and streams its signal over the Internet. In October of 2008, KILI turned on its 65KW wind turbine, which can generate enough wind-generated electricity to cover about two-thirds of the station's electrical needs.

Yes, KILI has survived, but the board members, staff, and volunteers want to do more than just endure. They would like to improve their signal and continue to upgrade the equipment and expand the staff. KILI has really never had the staff to do solid news programming. They would like to do regular news and produce features on a variety of issues that impact the community not only today, but even more so in the future. KILI would also like to improve the Lakota programming by developing more shows that feature the language, culture, history, and traditions of the Lakota people.

KILI depends on the help of so many people, and to move ahead it will need the help of even more people. KILI is located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, which makes up Shannon County, oftentimes the poorest county in the wealthiest nation on Earth: The United States of America. The reservation suffers from unemployment rates

anywhere from fifty to eighty-five per cent. Support to keep KILI on the air and moving forward must come from beyond the reservation's boundaries. Contributions large and small are necessary and always welcome.

In the Lakota language, KILI means "extraordinary, very special," and KILI radio has been just that to many people over its first three decades. The Lakota people and members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe face serious issues in the coming years, and they need to be informed about their life and what's on the horizon while continuing to celebrate being Lakota, celebrating the language, culture, history, and traditions. KILI radio in the years to come plans to continue to be an integral part of the community as the Voice of the Lakota Nation. *Mitakuye Oyasin.*