

# ForumJournal

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## Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020

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**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# *Haakú, Híya'stíni, ee Síu'namasti:* Pueblo of Acoma Concepts of Resilience and Promise

GOVERNOR BRIAN D. VALLO

It's really good to be here with all of you today. I want to express my appreciation to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for this wonderful opportunity to share some thoughts with all of you who have come together for this year's PastForward conference. For those of you who are attending for the very first time, I guarantee you will be hooked on these convenings. They are always innovative, informative, and inspirational, fostering collaborative and meaningful impact on all of us who are engaged in the preservation movement. I attended my very first National Trust conference in 1997 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and it got me hooked, it motivated me, and it reassured me that the work that lay ahead of me in my new role as the pueblo's very first director of historic preservation would be both rewarding and challenging. I had the privilege of meeting so many others at this conference who were doing same work that I was to embark upon. It has had a very long-lasting impact on my work, and also for my [pueblo of Acoma](#) here in New Mexico.

**Aerial photograph of Acoma in 1928**

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I am currently the governor of the pueblo of Acoma. I'm serving a second term and these terms are annual terms. We are appointed by the hierarchy of our clan system and so it's a great privilege, a great honor, and a very humbling experience to serve my Acoma people. I joined many other governors of the past including some from my own family. My father, Fred Vallo, Sr., served four different terms as governor of our pueblo. There are many who have been mentors and many who have guided my own work both for the pueblo and outside of the community.

I want to explain the title of my presentation, "*Haakú, Híya'stíni, ee Síu'namasti: Concepts of Resilience and Promise.*" I felt it was an appropriate title during this challenging time in our collective living history. As a tribal leader these words have helped me make sense of the pandemic. It's helped me to even gain a greater hold on my own resilience as a Native American, an Acoma person, but it's also helped me to fully understand how, then, I fulfill my inherent responsibility to mobilize, to respond, and to prepare so that my Acoma people, and really all of humanity, is safe, that we are protected during this difficult time. Equally important in this process is working towards arriving at some balance—balance with our earth mother and all of those forces that are so much greater than us.

I want to define for you these words in the Acoma language. While they might have a singular meaning, there are concepts embedded within those words that are sacred, that are ancient, and that are foundational to the Acoma people and the way in which we view the world, the way in which we live in this time, and the ways in which we think about the future.

The word *haakú* means to prepare. It is also our place name at the time of emergence. Our ancestors were informed of this place called *haakú*. It was a place prepared for our eternal occupancy, and all that we needed spiritually was there at the special place. But the word *haakú* also means to actually prepare—to be thinking about what lies ahead and to have a plan.

*Híya'stíni* is a reference to illness or virus or a pandemic, and we learn this word when we hear the stories of emergence and migration. We hear about this term when traditional knowledge is

passed on from one generation to the next, when we learn about the prophecies of our Acoma people. We hear that there would be times in our future when the Creator would present us with a challenge, such as this pandemic, and that we had to respect the virus, respect the pandemic, as it is a living being.

And then there's this concept *namasti*, that in light of these challenges—whether it be this pandemic or any other challenges of our people—that at the end of all that there is hope, there is promise, there are better days ahead, and there will be positive outcomes.

These three terms combined have a profound meaning, then, on the ways in which we carry on our lives during this pandemic, and the ways in which we will carry on life at Acoma during the recovery, whatever that might be.

I want you to also know a little bit about Brian, a little bit about Governor Vallo. My name is Phra'kai'seewa after a very large mesa on our landscape that has significant meaning. It's a place that I have strong connection to spiritually and physically by having the opportunity to be with my paternal grandfather during my youth herding sheep in and around that area of the mesa. My paternal great-great grandfather was also Phra'kai'seewa, so I inherited his name. I did not know the man, but I have learned much about him and his role here in the community as a cultural leader.

I'm also of the Sun Clan, and my small clan, my paternal clan, is Eagle. And within my family of elders I am now the second in line in my family and clan, so I have a leadership role in that that capacity as well. But I am also other names that I have been gifted as I've become a man, as I have experienced and have been welcomed into societies within my own community. Those also come with great responsibilities.

I have had many teachers. I'm fortunate that I come from a family rooted in very strong traditions and ties to our community and to our culture. My great-grandfather Joe Chino lived to be 101 years old and served 73 of his years in tribal government—a great teacher, a great storyteller, a man of resilience. And his teachings have been relevant to my work in historic preservation. My great-uncles, clan uncles, my paternal grandfather (unfortunately I did not know my maternal grandfather), but I also have wonderful



**“Phra’gaiya”, or Black Mesa.**

PHOTO COURTESY BRIAN VALLO

parents—all who have taught me and continue to teach me. And I have a great community from which I come—many leaders who have informed my work, who have offered guidance, will offer protection during challenging times.

I talk about this often: There was great influence by elders on my life and on my career even today. I always look to the elders. There is a brain trust, a great knowledge within our elders that is so critical, especially in times like this, and we all need to harness that knowledge. I always credit the elders who have always been willing to share information, always willing to have conversations, and who have joined the preservation movement here at Acoma in different ways, ways that were comfortable for them, ways that were meaningful to them. And even today we have community elders who continue to advise us in this work, among other things of course.

I come from a culture that is rich, that is strong, and that is sacred, really foundationally. And we work hard every single day to preserve and protect our culture and our language. This culture, the sacred culture that runs through our veins, as Acoma people, native people, and indigenous people is so powerful. All those teachings, all of the influence, in fact, inform my work. It also helps me to be influential in the messaging, in the education, in the advocacy, in the lobbying, and everything else that consumes my time as governor. I’m really grateful that I’ve had so many role models, really extraordinary individuals, many of whom are from the National Trust family.

## **THE CONCEPT OF PRESERVATION FOR ACOMA PUEBLO**

Acoma Pueblo, if you're not familiar with it, is located about one hour's drive west of Albuquerque. The old village is situated on a mesa top, a sandstone mesa that rises almost 400 feet above the valley floor. Archaeologists will tell you that we settled Acoma around 1150 A.D. Our ancestors also settled Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde and other places within the Four Corners region of the country. We have a place of emergence that is sacred to us. We have an oral history that is very sacred to us. And we live on this rock, as I sometimes refer to it, this ancient homeland that now has finally grown back to just over one million acres of land. And we thrive on this land. Our tribal membership at this point is about 5,000 people, and we are part of mainstream society. We contribute to the greater society, and I would say that we have contributed in significant ways to this preservation movement. And I trust that we will continue to be involved and engaged in the important work that lies ahead.

Throughout our history, my humble pueblo of Acoma has been a trailblazer on many issues that have shaped the ways in which we, the 19 pueblo tribes in New Mexico, have established a presence here in the United States. Over time, we've also been able to influence policy set forth by the federal government. But there's so much work to do in this area where historic preservation is concerned, as many of you know. We are constantly thinking about the ways in which we achieve a voice, achieve a place within the federal system, within the nonprofit or private sector. And so, we're constantly preparing. There's always hope that's happening. Sometimes the progress is very slow moving, but that is okay. The important thing is that we are committed to this process.

I want to share a little bit about how this process works within the Pueblo of Acoma and throughout many indigenous communities, how traditional knowledge—traditional concepts, indigenous concepts, ancient concepts, however you want to refer to them— influence and guide this work for us as native people. This term, this concept, of “preservation” is not ours; we have other terms that we use that address the issues of taking care of things, of placing value on things—on everything really—and then the acts of doing repairs, doing construction, or sharing information with



**“Waphrbashuka”,  
Pueblo Bonito,  
Chaco Canyon, NM.**

PHOTO COURTESY BRIAN VALLO

others. The longer-term preservation and protection of these places or materials does happen. Like I said, it's always a slow process, but we do all that we can to prepare for all of that.

I have also been directly involved in the work around the protection of cultural resources, including the archaeological resources, in [Chaco Canyon](#) (or *Waphr'ba'shuka* in our language) and other historic places and cultural landscapes in the Four Corners region, in Mesa Verde, and now [Bears Ears](#) that has emerged as another area that requires protection.

But I want to concentrate on Acoma. The preparation for my work and the work in which Acoma has been engaged is really rooted in a very long history. I want to explain a little bit about what Acoma is doing currently, and what has been fueling this work and the work that lies ahead.

Historic preservation for Acoma is very wide in scope at this point. It isn't only about restoring historic buildings and it isn't only about the protection of sacred sites and other cultural resources. It's also about the people and the ways in which we ensure that, while we are protecting and preserving structures and landscapes and sites, that the people must also be preserved, that community and social systems and structure also need to be preserved, so that

we have the understanding moving forward. So that we know why these places are important, we know how to use them, and that our great-grandchildren and their great-grandchildren will know why. And so, there is a critical piece to all this: That preservation for us is thinking about that future that far ahead and doing all that we can in this time to inform and educate ourselves, just as our ancestors did for us.

### **FEDERAL POLICY EFFORTS**

Twenty-nine years ago, I served as a tribal official and as the first lieutenant governor for the pueblo. This was the time when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act became law. I was designated to be involved in meetings and other gatherings associated with the development of the last phase of the law, advocating and offering testimony in the halls of Congress where this new law was concerned. All this took me back to a place and a time in my youth when I heard about *Waphr'ba'shuka* or Chaco, for the first time. I must have been 9 or 10 years old when I heard a reference made to human remains and the removal of human remains from Chaco Canyon. It was a discussion that was being held with my great-grandfather and some men who were gathered in the two-room house where he lived. That experience back then triggered all these thoughts within me as NAGPRA was coming to life, that maybe this opportunity was presenting itself to locate those human remains that my great-grandfather was talking about. I learned also that there were also many cultural resources on that Chaco landscape that connect us. And so, our work is based as well on those connections. Sometimes we are put in a situation where we have the burden of proving these connections, when we're asked to reveal sacred information for the sake of substantiating our claims for these sacred places and sacred sites. That process is very problematic.

We have identified many flaws in that law, and there are other federal policies including ARPA where we have great concern. We believe it's also time for some preparation to see some change in these laws, based on our recent experiences working with the



federal government and federal agencies and also the private sector. This work at Chaco has evolved over the course of the last 30 years in a very profound way.

Here at Acoma we have been at the forefront on all issues that impact this cultural landscape, and we have worked very hard and invested resources to ensure that the Chaco Culture National Historical Park remains protected, that we continue to be granted access for cultural practices, and that we are at the table any time that issues are discussed about any modifications, any potential threats to the park proper, and also to the landscape beyond the park. We have been very much involved in the development of proposed legislation.

There is a pending bill sponsored by Sen. Martin Heinrich and Sen. Tom Udall of New Mexico, a Chaco protection bill which would ensure there is a 10-mile buffer around federal lands so they are protected from any development, namely oil and gas development. This has been a great fight. It remains a great fight not only for Acoma but for many tribes. We have protested the lease and sale of lands by the federal government for oil and gas development. It's really exhausting, but we are committed to this process. And I've found that our commitment to this has given us the opportunity to have a voice within this federal process.

We are at a point now, after almost three years of lobbying, that we secured some funding to complete a comprehensive ethnographic study of that greater Chaco landscape, not only for Acoma but for other tribes who have cultural affinity, including the Hopi tribe in New Mexico and Arizona. There's a tremendous amount of work that lies ahead, but there is a great commitment on the part of all of us. We just recently established the Chaco Heritage Tribal Association. This group of individuals from six core tribes will lead the study in the coming year. We hope it will become the document that is recognized by the federal government and its agencies as they carry out their work in the future, and we hope that we will then build upon this ethnographic report as this work continues to protect and preserve the sacred place and the sacred landscape of Chaco.

As you know, when these types of projects and initiatives come to the public's attention, we then gain additional resources in terms of advocacy and sometimes in terms of funding. We've looked to non-native professionals and academics—scholars and organizations and individuals—to assist us. And we appreciate that the National Trust has also stepped forward to help the pueblos in this important work. We are not done. There is so much more to do, but we will continue in this fight, and I hope that our children and grandchildren, not looking too far into the future, will realize the benefit then of this work in this time to protect that landscape.

### **OTHER CONCERNS**

There are other topics that consume my time and that of other tribal leaders throughout the country. We hear in the news of the pipelines and other development that encroach upon our own tribal lands and on our cultural resources that exist beyond our tribal boundaries, and this, unfortunately, is going to be a continuous fight for Native America. But we are in the fight, and we are doing what we can to protect on our own tribal lands. This is where I think the Western concepts of preservation come into play in a profound way, and I'm grateful that it has because now we are thinking more critically about the ways in which we engage in preservation and the protection of our buildings.

We are also very much engaged, and I personally have been engaged in for quite some time, in the movement that's occurring within museums to have more engagement with source communities, to learn more about the collections that they steward, to be more active in repatriation of ancestral remains, associated funerary objects, and cultural patrimony. There's a great movement that's happening in all of these areas. It's also great to see that there are so many more Native Americans who are working in these professions and who are really helping to shift those paradigms and force a new narrative, a more accurate narrative of the history and cultures of our people.



**San Esteban del Rey Mission.**

PHOTO BY [MACKATZ64](#) LICENSED UNDER [CC BY NC-ND 2.0](#).

## **FROM AN ANCIENT PAST TO GENERATIONS TO COME**

We come from places that have a long history. Many of our structures, our sacred sites, and other cultural resources are very old. The houses that some of us live in today are hundreds of years old. I always tell people when they come to our home at the old village, “You realize you are in a home that was constructed probably around 1200, 1250 A.D.” And it’s always such a shock to them.

We are engaged in the preservation of those structures, but we are also engaged in preservation of other things. There are buildings and structures that were introduced to us here at Acoma, including San Esteban del Rey Church, the old mission church that sits atop old Acoma, built in 1629. It’s one of the largest examples of earthen architecture in North America. It is something that is important to the Acoma people and so, although it is a great challenge for us, we are very much engaged in the preservation of that structure as it is a part of our living culture.

We also are engaged in a number of other preservation initiatives around language and culture. [Language is threatened in every indigenous community](#) and Acoma certainly is not immune. To that

we have invested many resources. We just held a virtual symposium at the pueblo to rethink and recharge our efforts around language revitalization at the pueblo.

So, like I said, these initiatives are all rooted back in the people. It isn't just about preserving something just to do it. There has to be meaning there and it has to be relevant to the people, it has to be relevant to the time and circumstances. This is a little bit about what we're doing at Acoma and the ways in which we're approaching this work. And we realize that there are many unknowns as we move forward.

I think that this pandemic that we are in has really given us an opportunity, as families and as a community. Even while we are segregated as a result of executive orders and mandates that prohibit gatherings, the isolation has given us the opportunity to do some critical thinking, some careful thinking about the real, the true essence of who we are as Acoma people and what we all need to be doing to ensure that we are preserving all of that. One of the things that we are struggling with right now is the fact that the pandemic has had such a great impact on our own community, with the separation and isolation of families, the cancellation of ceremony. The fact that we cannot be who we are, true Acoma, during this time has had a tremendous impact on us.

There will be some healing ahead, there will be that recovery ahead, and we will pursue that with that concept of *Síu'namasti*, that there is hope. There will be a time that's not going to be back or the same as what we knew life to be, but it can be better. It will be better than what we left behind as a result of this pandemic, because I think we also then realize and acknowledge that we have not been the best stewards of our lands and our resources and of the people, and so we have to proceed. And there will be a long process, I believe, but a process that has to be strategic and also very thoughtful as we think about the future during this time.

Of course, we are also seeing the great tension that results among humanity—the injustices, the racial social justice movements. We are also a part of those, and we are also committed to remain a part of those discussions and actions because it is important.

We've worked hard to have a seat at the table. We've worked very hard to have a voice and to have influence, and we cannot allow this to be threatened by the federal government and others. That work also continues.

Preservation is one of those heavy issues for us, but it's also one that is very important. And the best way we can pursue this work here at Acoma is through those concepts I've talked about and understanding why those concepts are important in this work. My hope is that those great-great-great-grandchildren will also do the same work, and even better work on behalf of their own grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and that places like Chaco and Acoma remain closely tied and that those ancestral ties help them to shape their future so that the people can continue.

So with that, I thank you for your attention, I wish you all a very productive conference, and I wish you safety and good health. **FJ**

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BRIAN D. VALLO is the Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma.



### RESOURCE

Preserving Native American Places



### INTERVIEW

Bears Ears and Working with Native American Communities



### FORUM JOURNAL

Intangible Heritage



### FORUM JOURNAL

Heritage in the Landscape